

Preface

Our purpose in this book is to remind you of what you already know and then tell you about the research evidence that supports your knowledge. We hope this “reminder” will empower you to utilize the experiential, intuitive knowledge you already have in ways that can make a positive difference for your students and yourself. We know from hundreds of teachers we have worked with that giving yourself permission to do what you know is best will help you regain the sense of hope and optimism you had when you first entered the teaching profession (minus the fear that you probably felt the first day you entered your own classroom).

You already know that, when people—students, teachers, administrators, parents—are actively engaged in learning that taps into their creativity and curiosity, they are engaged in changing. Viewed in this way, change is synonymous with learning and learning with change. Learning and change need not be mandated or resisted; rather, they are irresistible because they are natural consequences of being alive. Your job as a teacher and a learner is to figure out how best to support the natural processes of learning and change in teaching and learning. You will rediscover that both learning and change are part of a continuous journey—the journey to lifelong learning, continuous change, and improvement.

The ideas and tools we describe in this book are also meant to support you in maintaining or regaining your equilibrium as a teacher of students. The tools we offer will validate you as a learner-teacher, confirm what you already know, and provide you with the means to withstand the effects of poorly designed educational policies, environments, or paradigms.

Moving From Fear to Optimism

The best teachers throughout human history have understood the value of learning. They have also understood that people differ in how they learn, what they learn, and what motivates them to learn. These teachers have also known that the most effective way to teach is to

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focus on individual learners—their needs, interests, and particular talents or learning capacities. These special teachers have known how to challenge learners to achieve at their highest levels and how to provide the caring, mentoring, and modeling needed for learners to continue to push their limits and learning potentials.

Some of these early special teachers (e.g., Socrates, Plato, Confucius) and their teaching methods (e.g., questioning, analogies, parables) have been recorded in historical accounts. However, only recently has the scientific basis for particular teaching philosophies and methods been documented. This base of scientific evidence is particularly necessary in the twenty-first century, as educational policy has so far been dominated by demands for accountability, increased student achievement, teacher quality, and evidence-based best practices stemming from rigorous scientific research.

On the down side, however, the current policies surrounding educational reform have, for many students, families, and teachers, produced a climate of fear. Large numbers of teachers and students are experiencing feelings of failure, demoralization, alienation, and fear. Many quality teachers are leaving their chosen profession, and high numbers of able students are dropping out of school because of the negative environments created in many schools and classrooms by an educational agenda focused primarily on testing and accountability.

This book is intended to counteract and help balance the current negative agenda and to provide you with a sense of hope and reconnection with the ways you can make a difference with the students you teach. It will also help you achieve a necessary balance between (a) high standards and a focus on content and (b) research-validated principles and practices that focus on learners and learning.

In this book, we present evidence of positive, practical, research-based options for meeting current national and state demands for high learning standards and increased teacher and school accountability. We will show you how it is possible for students to reach high levels of achievement without being subjected to fear-based, punitive methods. We describe how you and your students can meet the rigorous academic curricula and testing requirements in core subject areas without losing the joy of learning and teaching. We also focus on how the Learner-Centered Psychological Principles (LCPs) can be used to redesign educational practices in your classroom, school, and district. We use a variety of examples to highlight how to implement the LCPs, and we share success stories to illustrate the use of the LCPs in classrooms and schools in the United States and other countries around the world.

Evidence-Based Practices

We have written this book to help teachers at all levels of the educational system—from preschool through postsecondary—understand the evidence base for effective teaching strategies that can reach all learners. The evidence is clear: These learner-centered strategies inspire students' natural motivation for lifelong learning and for reaching their highest achievement levels.

Throughout this book we'll show you the evidence demonstrating positive outcomes—both academic and nonacademic—that have been achieved through using learner-centered practices. The illustrations we use throughout this book showing the efficacy of learner-centered practices are based on research that applies not only to increased learning and academic achievement, but also to the development of social and emotional learning skills, including skills for lifelong learning. Validated by thorough and systematic research over an extended period of time, a set of psychological principles, the LCPs, has emerged. These principles, which underlie learner-centered teaching, are best understood as operating on two levels.

1. They define the nature of learning, as well as the various cognitive, metacognitive, affective, motivational, and social processes that support learning.
2. They incorporate the developmental and other individual differences that define unique learner needs and learning experiences.

Because of the strong research evidence supporting the Learner-Centered Psychological Principles (LCPs), the American Psychological Association (APA) in 1997 adopted them as a framework for redesigning K–20 education. These principles, representing over a century of research, have been advocated by many well-known educators who have emphasized various aspects of the principles. Many of you will recognize the LCPs in the educational reform ideas of educators such as John Dewey, Jerome Bruner, and Joseph Schwab, among others. These educators recognized, like many of the ancient teachers, that learning and motivation are natural processes and that learners must be the focus of the learning process in order for them to be fully engaged in the learning process. Similarly, learners must see that what is being learned is meaningful and relevant to their personal and life interests, which results in a natural motivation to learn. It is our hope that you will find the content of our book meaningful, relevant, and motivating as well, and we welcome you on your journey!