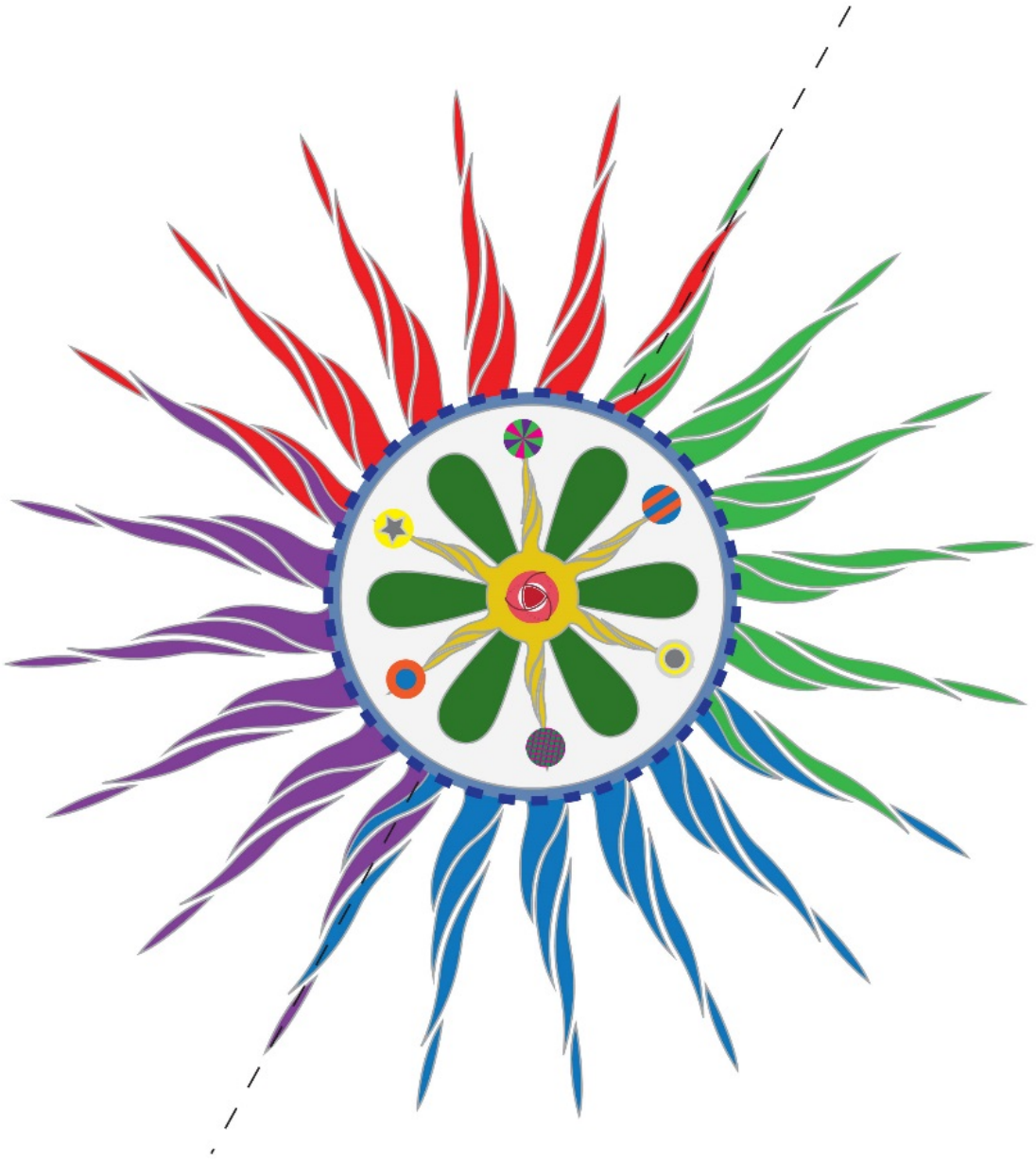
A transition toward a

Learner-centred Environment

A concept for all schools



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Traditional teaching methods, still prevalent today, represent a fundamentally unsuitable scaffold for learning. Take English Language Learning and Teaching (ELL) / (ELT) as an example; language learning is much more complex than most would suppose and language is a central prerequisite for success in life and in the workplace. Traditional and prescribed methodology methods induce a teacher-fronted classroom milieu, the very *opposite* of a learner-centred environment, according to Dr. Stephen Bax of New Zealand, Professor Martha Cummings of the United States, and others.

A transition toward a learner-centred environment cannot be considered in an abstract or random fashion; one has to examine emerging trends, re-evaluate methodology, education management issues, and anticipate the challenges that will arise because of them.

End Focus Will Determine End Outcomes.

EFWDEO is a general rule that suggests that what one focuses on, is what one will move towards. However, one must be able to assess and measure both outcomes and processes if one is to successfully manage resources and attain goals. (1)
Constructive assessment also, is critical to the proper functioning of schools - it may serve as a motivator for learner performance, serve the purpose of feedback to practitioners, and convey to learners, parents and others what has been learnt.

The US Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills 1991, SCANS, provided a start toward identifying knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary for the twenty-first century. A report was developed by a group of leaders from industry, business, government and education sectors under the guidance of the US Secretary of Labour.
The report outlined skills in two broad categories:

- **Foundational skills**
- **Competencies**

Foundational skills included the basic skills with which the public is largely familiar. It also includes factors such as critical thinking and personal qualities such as integrity, diligence, responsibility, respect, and ethics.
Competencies included such factors as the ability to utilise resources and technology; a critique of the SCANS report identified important outcome measurements not in evidence, such as self-regulation, self-efficacy, social and emotional values, optimism, to mention a few - all considered important in the workplace then and today, twenty-five years on.
These aspects cannot viably be tested in typical school standardised short-answer testing milieus. Rather, they need be ***connected*** with the community.

An accountability system needs to be established between schools and the community as the means to convey this information; it will not suffice to merely rely on media reports publishing examination scores once, twice a year. It should be realised that education is a team-effort, and schools are merely an influence on the development of youth, albeit an important one. School related attitudes and behavior are benefited when the three components of **School – Home – Community** are connected and working toward the same goal of helping learners succeed at home, at school, and in life.

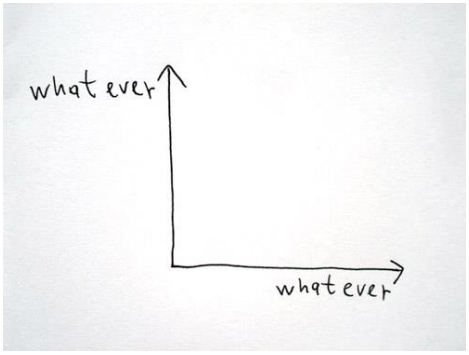
Learners need strong, flexibly structured programmes by the three-member partnership in order for schools to better coordinate and combine resources, thus to provide learners with the **support** they **NEED**. This is particularly the case at secondary school level, where learners should develop - in earnest - the five important mental dispositions in the formulation of a Mental Constitution with a dialectic perspective. This stage is important, because learners begin to learn and test how they 'fit in' their society and the world at large.

Reform

Researchers readily acknowledge that family, schools and communities are primary influences on human development; Robert Epstein identified six types of involvement essential for a comprehensive programme partnership:

- **Parenting** – a partnership helping parents and families establish home environments which help learners,
- **Communication** – a partnership in designing and conducting effective forms of communication about programmes and learners' progress, such as tutoring/mentoring, and class-parent-evenings.
- **Volunteering** – a partnership recruiting and organising expertise in fostering learner 'mind-space' wellbeing, school functions, including guest speakers.
- **Study programmes** – a partnership, school driven, providing the amenities and making resources available to help learners with schoolwork and school related activities. Polar-in-Unity of Opposites learner grouping at school can play an important role in study at school and at home. Most learners spend much time attending to school work after hours in complete isolation. This, linked with a teacher-centred milieu at schools, a subject-matter only culture, modes of conveyance, overcrowded classrooms, and learner pressure to succeed, all make for a system that is likely to cause dire consequences.
- **Decision making** – a partnership where parents are involved as primary educators, rather than merely connect when either/or the school/parents are not happy. In making decisions, one ought to be mindful that education begins with the learner, and that the learner is central to it, not merely a vassal into which 'knowledge' is poured. In decision making, one should always be mindful of two aspects that tend to work hand in hand with many, **Deficiency** and **Apathy** – both negative.
- **Collaboration with the Community** – a partnership to help identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programmes, family practices, individual learning / development - making them relevant to today's needs and so arrest the growing disconnect between what is learnt in the classroom and the outside world.

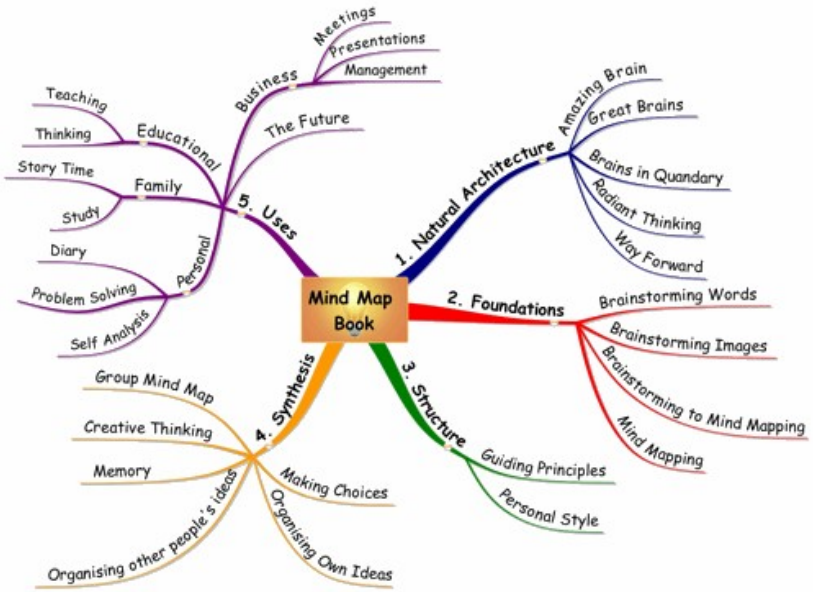
Important is that reform focus on schools as 'Learning Organisations', rather than focus on practitioner and teaching tasks alone. Although practitioner attitude is important and does impact learner achievement, it nonetheless represents a *necessity* and not sufficient a *condition* for successful learning. Schooling is a team effort, not an individual activity on the part of practitioners alone.



The prevalent message of more recent organisational literature is that the long term success of *any* enterprise depends on its ability to function as a 'Learning Organisation'. Peter Senge suggests that educators should strive to develop schools for faculty as well as learners, thereby making use of a more dynamic model of learning for both categories.

(2)

Systems' thinking – this aspect represents the cornerstone of the Learning Organization. System's theory is the skill to understand and address the whole. The ability to examine the interrelationships between the parts in order to provide the encouragement and the means to integrate all disciplines. As the systems viewpoint is generally oriented toward the mid-to-long term view, feedback loops, refinement and continual improvement, assessment and re-assessment are both necessary and important. The use of systems maps is advocated – diagrams that show the key elements of the system and how they connect and interrelate.



Failure to understand system dynamics can lead to cycles of blaming others, situations in self-defense. Alongside systems' thinking stand **four-component attributes**, which may be approached at one of **three levels**:

Practices – ***what one does,***
Principles – ***guiding ideas, insights,***
Essences – ***the state of those with high levels of mastery in the discipline.***

Personal mastery – organisations only learn through individuals who learn. Individual learning, however, does not guarantee organisational learning, but without individuals learning, the latter is unlikely to happen. Mastery is seen as a special kind of proficiency – it is not about dominance, but rather about *vocation.*

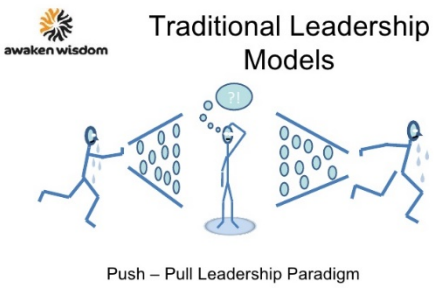
Mental models – these are deeply ingrained assumptions, generalisations, mind-pictures that influence how one understands the world and one's Active Behaviour – one's *Organisational Style.* The discipline of a mental model commences by one turning the mirror inwards, then learning one's internal images of the world and of others, then bringing these images up and holding them to rigorous scrutiny. This discipline also includes the ability to partake in insightful discussions that can balance inquiry and advocacy, when one may expose one's own thinking, and so make one open to the influence of others.

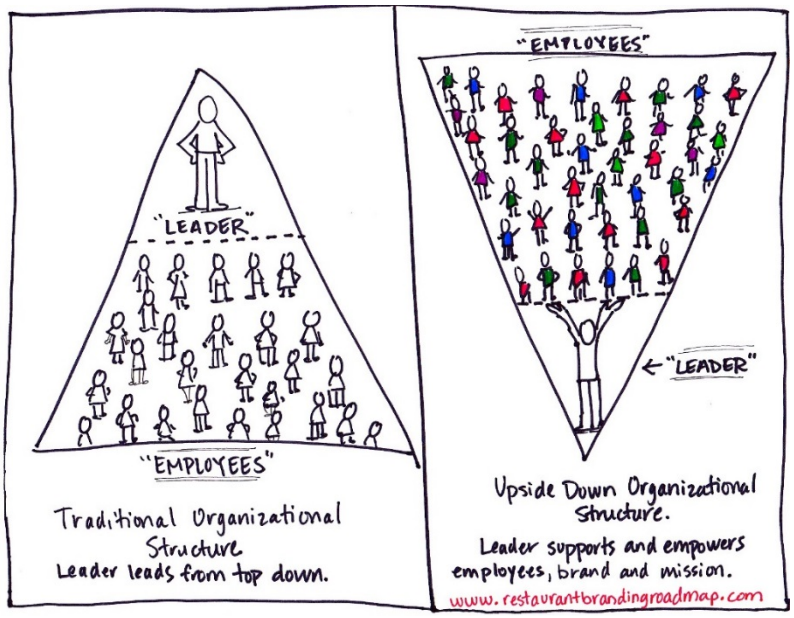
Building 'shared vision' – this discipline is about the capacity to hold a shared picture of the future that one seeks to create. Such picture has the capacity to be uplifting, to encourage experimentation and innovation. Importantly, it may foster a sense of the mid-to-long term, a notion that is fundamental to the Fifth Discipline. The practice of shared vision involves skills of unearthing shared pictures that can foster commitment, enrolment rather than mere compliance. Clarity, enthusiasm, and commitment are infectious in any environment, including schools.

Team leading – this discipline represents the process of aligning and developing the capacities of a team, so to create the results of group members' desires. It builds on personal mastery and shared vision, but team members *do* need to work in collaboration. This can deliver enhanced results and team members are likely to grow more rapidly than would otherwise occur. The discipline of a team commences with open dialogue, with a tendency of team members to form assumptions about one another… This tendency should be dispensed with – more important is an agenda for clear, dialectic thinking and interaction, collaboration. (3)

Greek for dialogue, *dia-logos*, means free flowing and - if through a group - will allow the group to discover thoughts not always available to the individual.
It also involves learning how to recognize the patterns of interaction, behaviours of members, and those patterns that could hinder learning. It is a matter of seeing past behavior, expression, culture, and seeing the individual and how he/she thinks, feels that might be revealed.
Where a group is open to the flow of a larger collective, collaborative intelligence / thinking, and where perceptions are approached as a ***group phenomenon***, there is the possibility of creating a communication exchange more suited for tackling complexity, for tackling deep-seated structural issues and forces.
This approach may also avoid disruptive diversions by aspects of personality, temperament, and reactive individual styles within the group that may emanate from 'right perceptions but wrong assumptions'.

Educational leadership too, is a matter that requires refinement to contend with ever more complex matters. Schools need to adopt a new and fresh view of leadership, one that will be more responsible for building schools where staff and learners continually expand their capabilities beyond standard curriculum to understand complexity through afforded opportunities to experience, clarify vision and improve shared mental schemas. Leadership must take ownership for learning, inspiring the vision of the school as a Learning Organisation in the information / concept age.
This, in contrast to the more traditional view of leadership, where the view holds that only 'special' people set direction, make decisions and energise staff. This traditional leadership view derives from a deeply individualistic, non-systemic worldview. (4)

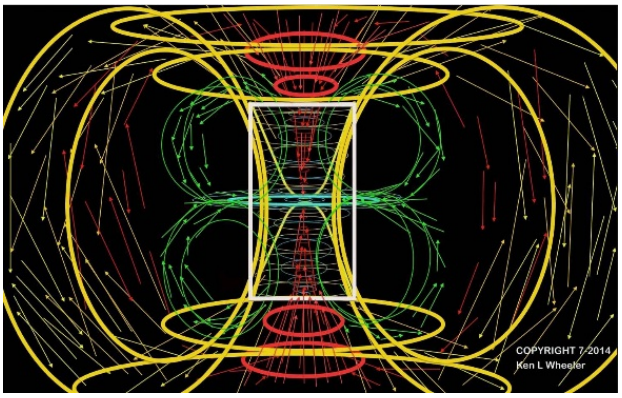


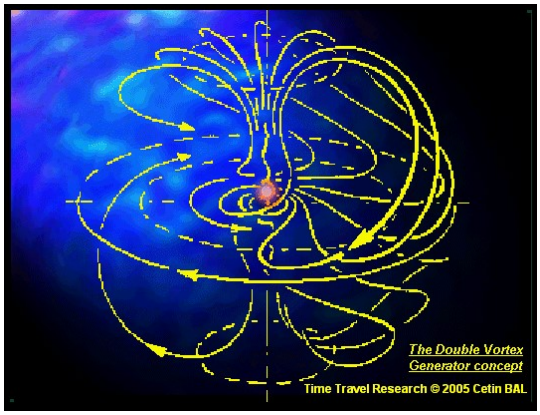


At its core, the traditional view of leadership is based on assumptions of staff powerlessness, their lack of personal vision, and the inability to master forces of change, representing deficits which can be remedied by only a few individuals. What Peter Senge interprets as inspirational approach, can be construed as a persuasively creative approach and, according to Richard Roest, the following three aspects of educational leadership identify this approach:

Designer leadership – the functions of design are not always visible, yet the designer can have a sweeping influence. The school's policies, strategies and systems are key areas for design. ***Leadership***, however, transcends beyond this. The integration of the four-component attributes is fundamental and the premier task entails designing the governing ideas - namely the purpose, vision, and core values of education.
Building a shared vision ***early***, as principal of a school, is crucial because it tends to foster a mid-to-long term orientation, and constitutes an imperative for learning. Other disciplines are also important; how they are approached would depend on the situation faced. Essentially, the leadership task is designing the processes whereby staff throughout the school can deal effectively with issues and manage their mastery in the learning disciplines.

Leadership as a Steward - 'purpose stories' about the school are of value as they are much more than mere stories. They constitute overarching explanations of why things are done the way they are, how the school needs to evolve and how that evolution is part of something larger and ongoing, in nature not unlike Viktor Schauberger's theory on Original Energy & Motion. (5)





Original Energy & Motion

Purpose-stories provide a single set of integrating ideas that give meaning to aspects of the principal's work. Not unexpectedly, the principal is likely to develop a closer relationship with his/her staff's own visions.

Stewardship involves a commitment to and a responsibility for the vision, not necessarily ownership; the task is to **manage vision for others** in building the school.
Purpose-stories evolve as they are being told, the result of being told.

Principals, leaders must see their vision as part of something larger; therefore they need to listen to others and change their own where necessary. Telling the story in this fashion will allow others to become and remain involved – it helps to develop a vision that is both individual and shared. (6)

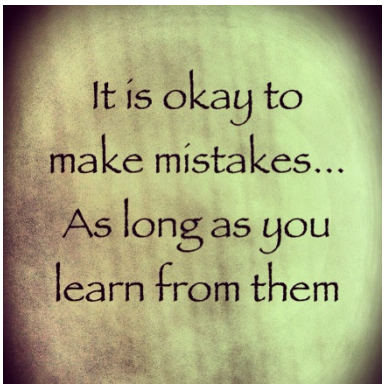
Partner leadership - the first responsibility of the principal is to define reality.
While inspiration and spiritual reserves may be drawn from a sense of stewardship, much of the leverage the principal can actually exert lies in helping staff achieve more delegated views of reality. Building an existing hierarchy of explanations, principals/ leaders can influence the views of others in relation to reality at four levels: **events / patterns of behavior / systemic structures / purpose-stories.**
Most principals tend to focus on the first two of these levels. All four should be attended to, but with a predominant focus on purpose and systemic structure. A principal is not necessarily limited to showing others how to achieve their visions; it is in essence about fostering learning for staff and students, helping others to develop systemic understanding. Thus individual growth should be deemed as a necessity, not merely a condition sufficient for organisational growth.

A learner-centred environment places the learner at *the centre of education.* Education begins with understanding the educational contexts from a learner's perspective. It continues with the practitioner evaluating the learner's progress towards learning goals. By assisting the learner in acquiring the basic skills to learn, it ultimately hopes to provide the basis for learning throughout life. It places the responsibility for learning on the learner, while the school, practitioners, parents and the community assume the responsibility for facilitating the learner's education. This approach strives to be flexible, competency based, varied in modes of conveyance, and not always constrained by time or place. (7) That is, practices that address the personal domain, so often ignored in the conventional approach. Changes in society necessitate a change in the role and function of schools so that they better meet the needs of the learner as a whole person, whether that individual be a student, practitioner, administrator, or parent. Change itself requires transformation in thinking, and as a consequence the process of learning. This transformation can be realized with an understanding of the psychological principles pertaining to the learner and the learning process. (8)

The twelve principles of educational psychology pertaining to the learner and the learning process reflect the learner-centred education mode. Development of these principles may offer a unique contribution to the betterment of classroom practices as they focus on factors that are primarily learner-centred with emphasis on learner internalisation, and learning/teaching processes employing a learner grouping strategy in dialectic unity.

The twelve psychological principles attempt to deal holistically with learners in the context of real-world learning situations and should be understood as an organized set of guidelines, and not be treated in isolation. The first ten subdivide into principles and refer to meta-cognitive and cognitive, affective, developmental and social factors, whereas the two final principles focus on individual differences. They apply to all learners worldwide, irrespective of race, culture, beginning with pre-school, through to primary and secondary level school years, extending to post-secondary level.
The application of these principles for those preparing to instruct, two dimensions need be considered. One dimension is the substantive content – the other refers to the actual learning processes pre-service practitioners themselves go through.
If schools expect those preparing to manage classroom reform to follow these learner-centred guidelines, then practitioners need to experience these principles for themselves. This may entail rethinking the way teacher education programmes and classes are structured. These principles integrate research and practice of areas within and outside psychology including clinical, developmental, experimental, social, organizational, community, educational, as well as sociological, anthropological and philosophical elements according to Professor A. K. Najak. (9)

The provision of these principles may provide clearer guidelines to realise educational reform efforts when adapted to local situations. They may also contribute to a community committed to lifelong learning, healthy development and productivity. (10)



'I am *still* learning, every day!'

Richard Roest (age 65)

The twelve psychological principles pertaining to the learner and the learning process (11)

Meta-cognitive and cognitive factors

Principle One – The nature of the learning process

Learning is a process of discovering and constructing personal and shared meaning from information and experience, filtered through each individual's uniquely different perceptions, thoughts and feelings as well as through discussion with others. Learners have a natural inclination to pursue personally relevant learning goals and are capable of assuming personal responsibility for learning, monitoring, and understanding, thus can become active, self-directed learners. During the learning process learners construct their own meaning and interpretations on the basis of previously existing understandings and beliefs.

Principle Two - Goals of the learning process

The learner seeks to create meaningful, coherent representations of knowledge regardless of the quantity and quality of the information available. Learners produce representations and explanations for even poorly understood facts, concepts, principles and theories. Learning processes operate holistically in the sense that internally consistent understandings emerge that may or may not be valid from an objective, externally-oriented perspective. During the learning process understandings are discussed with others and conceptions are refined by filling gaps, thus resolving inconsistencies.

Principle Three - The construction of knowledge

The learner tends to link new information with existing and future-oriented knowledge in meaningful ways. Learners tend to differ markedly due to different learner backgrounds, experiences and given the way the mind works, learners tend to interpret information in ways that are uniquely meaningful to the individual. A goal in educating youth is to develop understanding of concepts in relation to fundamental knowledge, and develop the skills and strategies that define and lead to valued learning outcomes.

Principle Four - Higher-order thinking

'Thinking about thinking' and learning for overseeing and monitoring mental operations; this process facilitates creative, critical and disciplined thinking, enhancing the development of expertise. During early to middle childhood, learners become capable of executive level

thinking about their own thinking - self-awareness, self-enquiry, self-monitoring, self-regulation, contents of thought, knowledge and memories.

This awareness of the individual's personal agency promotes higher levels of commitment, persistence and personal involvement in learning.

Affective factors

Principle Five - Motivational influences on learning

The depth and breadth of understandings constructed and how much is remembered are influenced by self-awareness and beliefs regarding personal control, competence, clarity of personal and social values, interests, needs, goals, personal expectations in relation to success and failure, emotion, feelings, and general states of mind. The relationship of thought, moods, needs being met, feelings underlie the individual's psychological health, approach and ability to learn. Interpretations of reality can enhance or hinder positive motivation, learning and performance. Positive learning experiences therefore assist to reverse negative thoughts, feelings, reactive and behavior all contribute to active, positive motivation to learn.

Principle Six - Intrinsic motivation to learn

Individuals are naturally curious and are generally inclined to enjoy learning; however, negative cognitions thwart this enthusiasm. Reactive emotions such as pressure anxiety, insecurity, self-consciousness, fear of failure, punishment, ridicule, stigmatized labeling.

Principle Seven - Characteristics of motivation

Curiosity, creativity and higher-order thinking are roused by relevant authentic learning tasks of optimal difficulty, challenge and novelty. Positive-affect, creativity flexible and insightful thinking are enhanced when in contexts that learners perceive as meaningful and personally relevant. Learners need to make opportunities to make choices in relation to their interests and to have the freedom to alter and refine the course of learning in the light of self-awareness, discovery and insights.

Developmental factors

Principle Eight - Developmental constraints and opportunities

Learners progress through different stages of physical, intellectual, emotional and social development that are a function of unique genetic and environment factors. Material should be appropriate to learner developmental levels and should be presented in an engaging and interesting fashion, while challenging intellectual, emotional and social

development. Environmental factors can influence learner social development, cognitive, emotional, and how learners interpret life experiences.

Factors, such as the quality of language interactions between adult and child, parental involvement in relation to schooling, cultural background and setting, for example. An overemphasis on developmental readiness may preclude learners from demonstrating true capacity. Awareness and understanding of the developmental differences in learners is essential; special emotional, physical or intellectual disabilities as well as special abilities can markedly facilitate efforts to create optimal contexts for learning.

Personal and social factors

Principle Nine - Social and cultural diversity

Learning is enhanced by social interactions and dialogue with others in flexible, diverse and open, adaptive instructional settings. Learning is further facilitated when the learner has an opportunity to interact and collaborate with a variety of other students representing different cultural, family backgrounds, interests, values and potentials not necessarily based on ranked ability criteria, but on unique personal learning style dimensional level. Settings that allow for social interactions and that respect diversity, encourage flexible thinking, social competence as well as moral development. In these circumstances individuals are provided an opportunity for perspective-taking and reflective thinking, leading to insights and new knowledge.

Principle Ten - Social acceptance, self-esteem and learning

Learning and self-esteem are enhanced when learners are in respecting and caring relationships with others in their learning environment, and in those who see their personal contribution and appreciate their inclinations. Quality relationships give the individual access to higher-order thinking, and healthier thinking, levels of feeling resulting in active behaviours. Self-esteem and learning are mutually reinforcing; in tandem they promote the less self-conscious, insecure, irrational and self-depreciating individual.

Individual differences' factor

Principle Eleven - Individual and cultural differences in learning

Although the basic principles of learning, motivation, effective instruction may apply to all learners, learners do have different capabilities and preferences for learning modes and strategies. These differences are a function of environment, heredity and experience; individuals are born with and develop unique capabilities, potentials acquired through

learning, experiences and social acculturations of different preferences for how they like to learn and importantly, the pace at which they learn.

Learner differences, curricular, experiences and environmental conditions are factors that affect learning outcomes. Understanding and valuing cultural differences, cultural contexts in which learners develop enhance possibilities for designing and implementing learning environments that are optimal for all learners.

Principle Twelve - Cognitive and social filters

Personal thoughts, beliefs and understandings from prior learning and perceptions become the basis for constructing reality and interpreting life experiences. Unique cognitive and social constructions form the basis for beliefs and attitudes toward others. Individuals then make assumptions on these perceptions, these isolated realities, as if they were true for everyone. They often lead to misunderstandings and conflict. It is through interactions with others that learners increase their awareness and understanding of this phenomenon and the value of multiple perspectives. Greater understanding allows the individual greater choice in what one believes and more control over the degree to which one's beliefs influence one's actions, reactions to alternative or differing viewpoints.

The twelve principles have implications for educational practice in the spheres of instruction, curriculum, assessment, instructional management, learning environments and practitioner training. This applies particularly to those schools and practitioners who subscribe to teacher-oriented educational philosophies. As with the principles themselves, the implications for practitioner training functions at two levels:

- Practitioners and those preparing to teach, should understand the importance of these principles when designing lesson plans, implementing instruction and assessing
- Schools and practitioners should consider implementing these principles for **a transition towards a learner-centred environment** and enhanced learning outcomes.

The Conventional Approach -v- The Learner-centred Approach

(12)

Mission and Purpose	Mission and Purpose
Provide and deliver instruction,	Produce learning,
Transfer information from faculty to students,	Elicit learner discovery and construction of knowledge,
Offer courses and programmes,	Create energetic, cooperative learning environments,
Improve the quality of instruction,	Improve the quality of learning,
Achieve success for diverse students.	Achieve success for diverse learners.
Teaching and Learning Structures	**Teaching and Learning Structures**
Atomistic – the parts prior to the whole,	Holistic – the whole before the parts,
Time held constant – learning varies,	Learning held constant – time varies,
45-minute lectures, 2 or 3 unit courses,	Learning environments,
Classes start and end at the same time,	Environment ready when the learner is ready, whatever learning experience is effective,
One teacher – one classroom.	Cross-discipline and collaboration.
Independent disciplines, departments,	Specific learning results,
Covering material,	Covering material,
End-of-course examinations	Pre / during / post assessment by assignments and examinations,
Grading of classes by teachers,	Public assessments,
Qualification equal accumulated credit hours / work.	Qualifications equal demonstrated knowledge and skills.

Learning Theory	Learning Theory
Knowledge exists out there,	The capacity for knowledge exists in each person's mind and is shaped by individual experiences,
Knowledge comes in chunks and bits delivered by practitioners,	Knowledge is constructed, created and derived,
Learning is cumulative and linear,	Learning is a nesting and an interaction of frameworks,
Fits the storehouse of knowledge metaphor,	Fits 'learning how to ride a bicycle' metaphor,
Learning is teacher-centred and controlled,	Learning is learner-centred and controlled,
Live practitioner required,	Active, engaging learner required, live teacher secondary,
The classroom and learning are competitive and individualistic,	Learning environments and learning are cooperative, collaborative and supportive,
Talent and ability are uncommon.	Talent and ability are abundant and varied.
Orientation	**Orientation**
Relationships are hierarchical, blaming and controlling.	**Relationships** are more caring and promote challenging, comprehensive and include multiple perspectives.
Curriculum is fragmented, non-experimental, limited and exclusive of multiple perspectives.	**Curriculum** is thematic, experimental, challenging, comprehensive and inclusive of multiple perspectives.
Instruction focuses on a narrow range of learning styles, builds from perceptions of learner deficits and is authoritarian.	**Instruction** focuses on a broad range of learning styles and dimensions, builds from perceptions of learner strengths, interests and experiences – participatory and facilitative.
Grouping is tracked by perceptions of ability and promotes individual competition and a sense of devaluation, alienation of those not at the top of the class in ranking.	**Grouping** is not tracked by perceptions of ability, rather by the pairing of opposites in groups of six. This promotes cooperation, shared responsibility, negations and a sense of belonging.
Evaluation focuses on a limited range of intelligences, utilizes only standardized test formats and assumes only one correct answer.	**Evaluation** focuses on Multiple Intelligences, utilizes authentic assessments and fosters self-regulation development and self-efficacy beliefs realization.

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