

Learners at the center.

The background of the page is decorated with several thick, dark grey diagonal lines and five solid-colored circles in various colors: cyan, red, purple, teal, and orange. The text is centered within this abstract composition.

Practitioner's Lexicon

What is meant by key terminology.

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Updated: June 2021 • This document was originally generated by the 28 signatories of *A Transformational Vision for Education in the US*. The Practitioner’s Lexicon is a living document and continues to be updated and refined by practitioners, as learnings emerge from the field.

INTRODUCTION

Leaders across the country are envisioning a future for an equitable education system that honors the uniqueness of each child, family, and community; values each child's life goals and contexts; and prepares them to provide for themselves and their families. This future will require an education system that organizes, supports, and credentials learning in fundamentally different ways for a fundamentally different purpose—to support each and every child to discover their gifts, passions, and talents and to lead a meaningful and fulfilling life.

Those with this shared vision are operating in a paradigm distinct from the current one in education; they are advancing a “learner-centered paradigm for learning” as laid out in [*A Transformational Vision for Education in the US*](#):

The learner-centered paradigm for learning functions like a pair of lenses that offers a new way to look at, think about, talk about, and act on education. It constitutes a shift of perspective that places every learner at its center, structures the system to build appropriate supports around them, and acknowledges the need to adapt and alter to meet the needs of all children.

The learner-centered paradigm changes our very view of learners themselves. Learners are seen and known as wondrous, curious individuals with vast capabilities and limitless potential. This paradigm recognizes that learning is a lifelong pursuit and that our natural excitement and eagerness to discover and learn should be fostered throughout our lives, particularly in our earliest years. Thus, in this paradigm, learners are active participants in their learning as they gradually become owners of it, and learning itself is seen as an engaging and exciting process. Each child's interests, passions, dreams, skills, and needs shape their learning experience and drive the commitments and actions of the adults and communities supporting them.

(“A Transformational Vision for Education in the US” (2015). Education Reimagined. page 5)

Operating in this paradigm, these learner-centered leaders constitute a movement committed to transforming education in the United States.

The work this movement is undertaking is that of transforming a major American institution such that it can equitably and powerfully serve each and every child and young person in this country. This requires that we directly address the inequities and biases that pervade our society. In particular, it necessitates explicitly and intentionally addressing systemic, institutional, and individual racism. Only when social inequity and racism are directly confronted in the work of inventing and bringing to life a new system of education will the learner-centered movement fulfill its vision and commitment to truly serving each and every child.

Accordingly, leaders in the learner-centered movement hold as central the commitment to directly addressing the barriers and social inequities that persist as determining factors of success, AND to continually confronting and eliminating racism at every level within education. They are engaged collectively in the ongoing effort to ensure the education system itself does not perpetuate racial or other inequities, to seek to remedy the disadvantages stemming from past inequities within it, and to mitigate against those inequities resulting from broader social conditions.

If this work is done with integrity and fidelity, a transformed learner-centered education system offers the possibility of a breakthrough in creating an inclusive and just society beyond what could be possible from iterations on the current design of education.

Why a Practitioner’s Lexicon?

To support the work of realizing the promise of an equitable, learner-centered education system, this technical document seeks to clarify key terms of the learner-centered education movement, as found in *A Transformational Vision for Education in the US*. Its purpose is to enable a shared practitioner language such that those supporting the growth and development of children in a learner-centered way can communicate and share learnings across various environments, disciplines, and perspectives. By carefully and intentionally distinguishing what is meant by each term, this lexicon creates a “Rosetta Stone” for translating the myriad of conversations going on across the nation and around the world.

Moreover, it is a living document that is updated and adjusted over time to reflect the current conversation in the learner-centered space, as informed by practitioners and advocates working in communities across the country.

What follows is a term-by-term discussion that begins with the Learner-Centered Paradigm itself, follows with a clarification of the shift from a School-Centered to a Learner-Centered Paradigm, and continues with three terms key to ensuring learner-centered education is pursued equitably:

- **Diversity**
- **Inclusion**
- **Equity**

We acknowledge the terms diversity, inclusion, and equity exist beyond the learner-centered paradigm for education and are used in different ways for different contexts. They also exist within and are core to the paradigm itself. Thus, this lexicon aims to distinguish these three terms as they are relevant to the learner-centered paradigm and for those whose work and focus is on the growth and development of children and young people.

The document then concludes with the five elements of a learning environment that naturally emerge from looking at education through a learner-centered lens:

- **Learner Agency**
- **Socially Embedded**
- **Personalized, Relevant, and Contextualized**
- **Open-Walled**
- **Competency-Based**

In engaging with the Lexicon, it is important to keep in mind that the elements should be understood to be interrelated in practice, with every element empowering and advancing what is possible for the other elements. And, that in the absence of the Learner-Centered Paradigm, any of the five elements become a mere adjustment or addition to conventional practice.

Finally, what follows is not a rigid blueprint or set of “how-to” specifications. Rather than providing definitions that describe “typical” or “average”—or even “ideal”—examples of each element, what follows are distinctions that clarify the full domain of possible examples represented by each term.

DISTINGUISHING A “LEARNER-CENTERED PARADIGM FOR EDUCATION”

Let’s begin by stating specifically what we mean when we use the term “paradigm.” In his groundbreaking book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn uses the term “paradigm” to mean a coherent and closed set of foundational assumptions, premises, or theories that are well accepted in a practitioner community. This set of foundational premises shape and constrain almost every practice but are themselves mostly unexamined and accepted without question.

According to Kuhn, when a practitioner is working on something, for example on improving or reforming a particular practice, they do so inside their closed set of assumptions and premises. It is the closed nature of that set which makes a paradigm difficult to penetrate or change. The set is closed in the sense that each premise or assumption refers back to the others—reinforcing each other and leaving little to no room for a different way to look at things. In fact, practitioners will go to great lengths to explain away data that challenges any aspect of their paradigm, rather than using that data to question their paradigm. In most cases, they are not even aware of the paradigm in which they are operating because it is just how they see the world—all of the assumptions, premises, and theories that make up their paradigm are operating in the background.

A paradigm, sometimes called a “worldview,” can be thought of as the particular lens through which a community of practitioners (and those in the broader community who are influenced by those practitioners) look at the world. Looking through any particular lens, some of what is being examined may appear more significant and some things may appear less significant—or their significance may even disappear entirely. Other things can be distorted by the lens, giving a practitioner a false impression regarding what is right in front of them. But, the practitioner is generally unaware of these limitations and distortions because they rarely look at the lens; rather, they look right through the lens.

In this discussion, we are interested in the particular paradigm or lens through which those supporting the growth and development of children and young people look. What do they see when they look at a child or young person or at the various methods for supporting a child or young person’s learning journey and well-being? Given their paradigm, how do they then think about providing the structures and conditions for broad populations of children and young people to learn and grow? We are specifically interested here in that particular paradigm for education we refer to as “Learner-Centered.” We are interested in: 1) the set of background theories and assumptions that are generally accepted by the community of learner-centered practitioners today; and 2) the shift from the conventional School-Centered Paradigm to the Learner-Centered Paradigm.

The Learner-Centered Paradigm for Education has as its fundamental assumption that each child is unique in meaningful and valuable ways—they have their own backgrounds, circumstances, interests, needs, and aspirations. By contrast, whenever an education system seeks to define and aim education at the “average” or “typical” child, the uniqueness and humanity of every child is not seen as something that needs to be directly dealt with.

In Learner-Centered Education, the aim is to nurture and support the development of whole human beings within caring communities where each learner is known, accepted for who they are, and supported to learn and thrive now and into the future. Education itself is seen as a partnership amongst young learners, their peers, and adults. Emphasis is placed on developing

each learner’s own agency—growing their capacity to act independently and to effectively make meaningful choices regarding their learning, so that they are able to follow their own interests and pursue their own aspirations.

Before going any further in clarifying this paradigm, we will first head off a few common misconceptions by briefly discussing what the Learner-Centered Paradigm for Education is **not**:

1. **The Learner-Centered Paradigm is not about caring more for the learners.** Everyone involved in education cares deeply for learners, regardless of which Paradigm is operating in the background of their thinking.
2. **The Learner-Centered Paradigm is not about letting learners do whatever they feel like doing, whenever they feel like doing it.** While the learner’s role in co-creating their learning journey will be critical, this is not about giving up our commitment that each young person is supported to develop themselves to their full potential and to contribute meaningfully to their families, community, and world.
3. **The Learner-Centered Paradigm is not about individual learners working in isolation without supportive learning communities.** In the Learner-Centered Paradigm, learning is seen as a social process, and healthy learner relationships with both peers and adults are essential.
4. **The Learner-Centered Paradigm is not about children learning different things, in different ways, or at different paces as a means for higher achievement on standardized tests.** Rather, this approach to education is about setting learning goals with each learner that reflect community standards and honor who each young person is, their lived experiences, how they learn, and their aspirations for their futures.
5. **The Learner-Centered Paradigm is not about providing an alternative only for those children and young people who cannot or will not fit inside a standardized system.** Learner-centered environments are designed to flexibly provide what each and every learner needs to pursue their unique life goals. The task is to partner with each learner to shape and create a learning journey that enables them to discover interests, develop aspirations, and navigate their circumstances effectively. All learners, without exception, are supported to pursue different arenas of learning, different ways of learning, and different ways of demonstrating that learning.

What, then, is the Learner-Centered Paradigm?

As with any Paradigm, the Learner-Centered Paradigm is constituted by a coherent and closed set of fundamental assumptions or premises which create a lens through which we look at education. These assumptions are about:

- Who the learner is and what role they play in their own education;
- What role adults play in a young learner’s education;
- What is required to make a learning environment equitable for all children;
- How education systems are best organized; and
- What learning actually is.

Who the learner is and what role they play in their own education

The Learner-Centered Paradigm is built around a small set of fundamental assumptions about the young learners themselves. First, each learner is related to as unique in meaningful ways—there are no “typical” or “average” learners. They have unique backgrounds and circumstances, individual strengths and challenges, and their own interests and aspirations. Second, each learner is seen as having inexhaustible potential—potential that will unfold in different ways for

different learners. Third, each learner has an innate desire to learn and grow. Every single learner can be supported in being extraordinary in their own way. Fourth, only when learners co-create their educational goals and pathways for reaching those goals will they be at the center of their own education.

What role adults play in a young learner's education

There is also a small set of fundamental learner-centered assumptions regarding the role that adults play in a learner's education. First, the role of the adults is to be a partner with young learners in creating and navigating their learning journeys. To be partners, adults work with learners and their families to set goals and navigate the child's learning journey. To do this well, they must respect and cultivate the initiative and agency of the young learner, allowing their uniqueness to be revealed and truly honored. Second, because the desire to learn is innate in all human beings, the role of the adult is to encourage and support that natural desire so that it has the space to flourish. Third, adults play the role of being a resource to a learner's journey, at times facilitating and at other times providing expertise with regard to the learning challenge at hand. And finally, adults play a mentoring role: setting a positive example, believing in the inexhaustible potential of the learner, encouraging the exploration of new learning opportunities, and helping remove obstacles that may arise along the learner's journey.

What is required to make a learning environment equitable for all children

A foundational premise held by those operating with a learner-centered worldview is that in order to support all children, we must confront and address social inequity and racism explicitly and intentionally. Under this premise, intentional focus is placed on: 1) ensuring the education system itself ends inequities connected to such factors as race, cognitive and physical difference, gender, native language, culture, religion and religious expression, and sexuality in its own operations, and recognizes and seeks to remedy the disadvantages stemming from past inequities within it; 2) mitigating the negative impacts of racism and other biases coming from other institutions and systems; and 3) increasing the awareness of conscious and unconscious racism and bias in each individual in the system and enabling them to do the work to eliminate it.

How education systems are best organized

The Learner-Centered Paradigm also includes a set of background assumptions regarding how education systems are best organized. The first assumption involves the goal of education. In the Learner-Centered Paradigm, the goal is to develop the enduring capabilities needed to enable lifelong learning and to support the pursuit of a great life. For learner-centered practitioners, these capabilities go beyond the retention of knowledge in academic subjects to include competencies in such areas as:

- **Self-Knowledge & Identity** (The ability to know, value, and develop oneself)
- **Relatedness & Belonging** (The ability to know, value, and develop relationships with others)
- **Self-Direction & Agency** (The ability to set one's own goals and confidently pursue them)
- **Essential Human Literacies** (The ability to access, navigate, and make meaning of the world around them)
- **Lifelong Love of Learning** (The ability to engage the world with curiosity and pursue those curiosities with a learning mindset)

The second assumption about how education systems are best organized is that the central work performed in developing these capabilities is the work of learning itself, and therefore, the central worker is the learner. Those who are involved in a learner's journey—including educators and youth development workers, families and friends, and participating community members—are supporting learners to make meaning of their learning and navigate their learning journey. It follows that the education system must then be structured to support and respond appropriately to each unique learner's agency and circumstances. Learner-centered education systems—including the approaches to assessment, credentialing of learning, accountability, funding, roles of adults, and governance—must be built to adapt to the needs, strengths, interests, circumstances, and aspirations of the learners and to enable learners to pursue and demonstrate learning in meaningful, myriad ways.

What learning actually is

Finally, the Learner-Centered Paradigm includes assumptions about what learning is and can be. Learning is understood to be the exercising of our innate capacity to wonder, discover, and make sense of the world around us. It is a natural process going on all the time, beginning when we are born and continuing throughout our lifetimes. We know learning has happened when we are able to interact with the world in new and effective ways. In this paradigm, the most critical form of learning is learning to take ownership of and responsibility for our own learning journey—a journey that will last a lifetime.

CLARIFYING THE PARADIGM SHIFT: FROM SCHOOL-CENTERED TO LEARNER-CENTERED

When people first hear the term “Learner-Centered,” they may initially think, “How else can someone look at the challenge of education? Doesn’t everyone take a learner-centered perspective?” In our way of distinguishing “Learner-Centered,” the answer to that question is “no.” Of course, everyone involved in education cares deeply about the learner, but that does not make them Learner-Centered.

Learner-Centered thinking overturns the dominant, School-Centered worldview with its fundamental assumptions about who the learner is and what role they play in their own education; what role adults play in a young learner’s education; what is required to make a learning environment equitable for all children; how education systems are best organized; and what learning actually is. Because these fundamental assumptions are generally left unexamined to operate in the background, they can be difficult to see at first. And, because School-Centered assumptions about education are so pervasive in the United States, it can be startling the first time someone escapes them.

The School-Centered Paradigm for Education emerged in the late 1800s and early 1900s, during the early stages of the industrial revolution. It was a time when European colonialism was at its zenith and when the European economies were shifting from an agrarian labor force to an industrial one. European colonialism had normalized the idea that one group of people can dominate and exploit another. This destructive practice sought to rob nations of their resources, while simultaneously eradicating their native culture and ways of being. The education system was a significant mechanism for achieving that latter aim. Although society does not openly subscribe to this belief currently, many of the systems and structures that were created in the initial design still result in that outcome.

Moreover, at the time, industrialization had brought about the new challenge of preparing a labor force for their new industrial jobs, and mass production—with its efficient assembly lines—was enabling rapid growth in one industry after another. So, an education system was built that would sort people according to what role they would play in the industrial economy (largely segregated along lines of race, gender, and socio-economic status) and then prepare them to play that role. Applying the industrial approach to make education more universally available, we created standardized schools that looked a lot like factories and a standard progression from kindergarten through 12th grade that looked a lot like assembly lines. Learners could be seen as unfinished works in progress, as vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge in subject after subject as they moved down the assembly line.

The system was designed to move learners, grouped by age, at an average pace through a standard curriculum and to sort them according to who the system deemed had the innate potential to play different roles in the economy—some would be managers and professionals, others would be workers and technicians. Learning was assumed to be about teaching students a standard set of knowledge deemed appropriate for that age and then assessing what was retained so students could be sorted according to their potentials. The sooner we can sort above average, from average, and below average, the more efficiently we can make the assembly lines work.

The assessments of learning had their own biases built into them. The largely white, neurotypical, male European academics who created the tests favored methods and topics which they themselves excelled at. The sorting and sifting of students would perpetuate a colonial order for another century.

While some students were able to move effectively through this new education system, it did not and does not serve anyone particularly well. The concept of “average” is a single dimensional mathematical construct, which does not actually apply to multi-dimensional human beings. There is no “average human being,” and there is no “average learner.” So, when learning experiences are designed for this “average learner,” they are designed for no one in particular. Every learner in these school-centered environments, regardless of the ways in which they are unique or extraordinary, is expected to adapt and conform to the standardized system.

Learners who performed well on standard tests in these standard subjects are deemed more capable (not surprisingly, these are most commonly the learners who are most like the people creating the tests). Separate lines, or tracks, are created to respond to the perceived differences in capability. For nearly 150 years, this School-Centered Paradigm for Education has dominated our thinking in the modern world. It seems normal.

What happens when we seek to improve this education system? In a School-Centered Paradigm, the assumption is that education happens in a school. So, when we improve the school, we improve education. The basic question from a School-Centered perspective is: What will make this school more efficient and effective in the task of teaching our young people? Follow-up questions include: How should a school be organized? How do we ensure this school is meeting its goals? How come some schools do better than others? How do we fix “failing schools”? How do teachers increase their control of student behavior? How can we close the standardized test score gap between white students and students of color? How can we increase student engagement with the content in the classroom? What do we do with “failing students”? In a School-Centered Paradigm, the industrial school is placed at the center of our thinking as the obvious place to get to work.

By contrast, in a Learner-Centered Paradigm, the unique learner is placed at the center. And, no longer do we narrowly think of learners as above average, average, and below average. Instead, we start by seeing each learner as being unique in meaningful ways, and every learner is seen as having inexhaustible potential. When you put the learner at the center of every decision and make those decisions with the learner, rather than for the learner, you are in a different world. The basic questions from a Learner-Centered perspective are: Who is this learner? What and who will support each learner to develop their own agency; discover their gifts, interests, and talents; and develop the skills to pursue their goals? What are this child’s aspirations for their life and for their community? Are we ensuring race, zip code, socio-economic status, and learning differences are not predictable indicators of a learner’s success in life?

Follow-up questions in the Learner-Centered Paradigm include: Are we supporting each learner to know, value, and develop themselves and to build healthy relationships with others? Are we nurturing each learner’s ability to set and confidently pursue their own goals? Does every learner equitably have the opportunities, supports, and resources they uniquely need to learn and thrive, particularly those who are most marginalized in our society? How do we best support learners to explore their interests and meaningfully contribute to their communities now and in the future? Are we effectively including all of the local community and global resources in learners’ journeys? Are we equitably providing opportunities, supports, and resources appropriate to each unique child’s needs, regardless of their race, socioeconomic status, learning differences, or zip code?

The Learner-Centered Paradigm for Education asks us to transform our way of thinking about education. It requires us to make a shift from School-Centered thinking to Learner-Centered thinking. The following chart outlines this shift.

FROM: SCHOOL-CENTERED	TO: LEARNER-CENTERED
Students arrive not yet ready for life and work. They must be prepared with an appropriate standardized base of knowledge and, based on their performance, sorted according to their potential.	Learners arrive as whole human beings whose context, lived experience, interests, and aspirations should inform and guide their learning and human development. They are living life now and their potential has no limit.
Students are known by how they compare to their class averages on standardized assessments.	Learners are known as individuals—each with their own lived experiences, interests, goals, aspirations, and ways of contributing to others and their communities.
Equity in education is a commitment to students reaching their full potential through high expectations and closing achievement gaps.	Equity in education is a commitment to every learner having access to what they need to live fulfilling lives, and to each person in diverse and inclusive groups being supported to attain all relevant outcomes.
Education is done to the students.	Education is done with and by the learner.
Learning happens in schools during a school day.	Learning happens whenever and wherever the learner is.
Learning happens best when students are focused on the teacher and content, compliant with institutional expectations, and competing against one another for the best test score.	Learning happens best in environments that foster joy in learning, vulnerability amongst adults and learners alike, and mutualism—a reciprocal partnership among learners and adults.
All students follow standard paths within age-based, rank-and-sorted cohorts. Students work within standardized timeframes, demonstrating their knowledge retention and skill development in standardized ways, absent of meaningful context.	Learners are deemed to be successful when they have developed what they need to lead meaningful, fulfilling lives of their own choosing.

Looking at education through a Learner-Centered Paradigm brings us to a very different place when it comes to designing an education system and learning experiences. The result of a Learner-Centered focus will invariably be an entirely different way to educate our children and an entirely different approach for ensuring that a great education is made available to each learner—including an unwavering stand for equity, diversity, and inclusion. We will design systems, learning environments, and experiences with the learner at the center of our thinking.

What do such learning environments and experiences look like when fully expressed? They are grounded in a shared commitment to doing what it takes to serve each and every child equitably and powerfully. This requires facility with three key terms, which are distinguished in the remainder of this document:

- **Diversity**
- **Inclusion**
- **Equity**

Further, these learner-centered environments and experiences are constituted by the following five elements, each of which is also distinguished in this lexicon:



When these components are present and equitably expressed, they interact to create a learner-centered experience for each and every learner. Each learner is prepared for the future of their lives—for a life of learning and being engaged participants in their communities and in the economy.

DISTINGUISHING “DIVERSITY”

We distinguish “Diversity” as a group characteristic referring to the presence of differences among the people in that group. The more differences that are present, the more diverse we consider the group to be. In discussions of Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity, the particular differences of concern are those differences which can result in people being disadvantaged or marginalized and which may be underrepresented in the group. In the United States, these differences most often include such factors as: race, gender expression, sexual orientation, marital status, religion, ethnicity, cultural background, language, immigration status or background, socio-economic status or background, family status, life experience, geography, education level, veteran status, political perspective, neurodiversity, physical abilities, physical appearance, mental or physical health status, and age.

In the learner-centered movement, we are committed to ensuring that young learners who are most marginalized or undervalued, in particular Black, Brown, and Indigenous youth, have the same opportunity to participate in learner-centered environments as any other young learner. This means confronting and mitigating the structural, systemic, and individual impediments to access and where possible, eliminating them entirely.

Furthermore, diversity itself is valued as an asset within learner-centered environments. The aim is to respond to and support the uniqueness of each child with unique pathways for learning. In standardized, one-size-fits-all education systems, the differences between learners can be seen as a problem; by contrast, in the learner-centered system, differences are welcomed as opportunities to create more meaningful and relevant learning experiences for each learner. The presence of differences is recognized as an opportunity to draw on and enrich the learning with different perspectives, different lived experiences, and different concerns. Likewise, the differences between adults and community members are welcomed and valued as contributing to a rich learning experience for children.

DISTINGUISHING “INCLUSION”

We distinguish “Inclusion” as the practice of ensuring that every group member—especially those who have been historically and are presently marginalized or excluded—be able to be their whole selves; be valued, embraced, and supported; and, be able to fully contribute their gifts. Inclusion goes beyond the mere presence of difference to the honoring of that difference. Each member of an inclusive group can be present as their whole selves, with their uniqueness acknowledged and included.

Inclusive groups strive to ensure that each group member: feels welcomed, experiences their voice being heard and valued, participates meaningfully and appropriately in decision making, has access to needed resources and opportunities, sees the clear opportunity to make their own unique contribution and to make a meaningful difference in group values and direction, and experiences an authentic sense of safety and belonging within the group.

In the learner-centered movement, we see such learner-centered structures as individualized pathways, the cultivation of learner agency, and the fostering of a healthy learning community as supportive of our efforts to include every individual learner. We see Inclusion as the shared responsibility of every member of a learning community. Inclusion is achieved when everyone sees their own role in the inclusion of oneself and of others; takes decisive action to elevate, honor, and amplify the voices of those who have been historically and are presently marginalized or excluded; and attends to all dimensions of inclusion: mental, emotional, physical, social, and spiritual. In particular, for authentic inclusion to occur, concerns of equity and justice must be recognized and shared as the concerns of all.

DISTINGUISHING “EQUITY”

We distinguish “Equity” as an ideal group state where every group member is supported in attaining all relevant outcomes—compensating for unfair advantages and disadvantages, including those caused by the cumulative impact of historically persistent inequities. Where there is a lack of equity, individual success will correlate to attributes or characteristics which should not impact one’s potential to be successful. For example, a person’s level of practice should correlate with improved outcomes, but a person’s race should not. When equity is present, the predictability of outcomes based on such attributes as race is eliminated.

Striving for equity requires the presence of diversity and inclusion, and goes beyond diversity and inclusion by dealing with and addressing the unwanted disadvantages that are negatively impacting real lives, right now. This involves attending to the background structures, systems, and biases which create, magnify, and/or perpetuate unfair advantages and disadvantages, especially those structures, systems, and biases that perpetuate racial injustice. Working toward equity is not about treating everyone exactly the same but, rather, is about treating each individual with the same level of respect and commitment to their success. This will require the dismantling of the systems and structures that continue to disadvantage, marginalize, and exclude groups; and inventing new ones that honor and respond to the unique circumstances, needs, and aspirations of each individual.

At its core, learner-centered education honors and values the humanity and dignity of each child—seeing them as unique, curious, wondrous, capable, and deserving. From this perspective, it is intolerable to value and advantage some children, while devaluing and disadvantaging others. As a movement to transform education, we are standing for social and racial justice and youth empowerment.

Ensuring equity for each young learner requires that we actively combat the barriers and challenges in our society, culture, and education system that operate knowingly or unknowingly for people and unduly impact children of color and other marginalized children. We must 1) provide an environment that is sensitive to different cultures, identities, and backgrounds; that allows for different ways of learning and of demonstrating that learning; and that responds effectively to the different needs and aspirations of individual learners; 2) set individual outcomes that are aimed at each learner reaching their full and unique potential as whole human beings; and 3) mobilize needed resources, provide needed pathways, and empower learner agency appropriately for each learner as they pursue those outcomes.

Given this, learner-centered education offers the possibility of true liberation and equity in education. Thus, in the learner-centered movement, we see an opportunity for a breakthrough in creating equity within our education systems and in mitigating the inequities coming from outside the education system. Realizing that possibility will take our unwavering commitment to diversity, inclusion, and equity.

DISTINGUISHING “LEARNER AGENCY”

What do we mean when we say “Learner Agency?”

Let’s start with the term “agency.” By “agency,” we mean an individual’s capacity to take purposeful initiative in shaping themselves, their relationships with others, and their circumstances. Agency is the opposite of resignation, passive compliance, and helplessness.

What, then, does it mean for a learner to have agency? Learner Agency is a learner’s capacity to take purposeful initiative in the matter of their own learning journey. In other words, Learner Agency is the learner’s capacity to generate their own ambitions and effectively exercise their own choices regarding who they are as a learner and a person, how they relate to others in their learning community, and which kinds of learning experiences will best carry them to their learning goals. This capacity depends on the learner being supported by the learning environment to develop the self-confidence to guide themselves and the wherewithal to make informed and responsible choices about their learning and their lives. This requires the structures, systems, and trust from others to enable learners to make meaningful choices about what, when, where, with whom, and how to pursue learning goals, as well as the support to learn from those choices.

In the learner-centered vision, the term Learner Agency does not merely refer to a capacity found in each unique learner; it also refers to a key element of the learner-centered environment itself. A learner-centered environment is intentionally designed with structures and practices that provide the freedom for learners to exert agency over their learning, including what, when, where, with whom, and how they are learning. When this element is strongly expressed, there is a pervasive commitment to the systematic development of each learner’s agency and to the maintenance of conditions across the learning environment that encourages that agency. The aim is for every learner to develop into responsible owners of their own learning and empowered actors in their own lives.

To achieve this aim, learner-centered environments are organized and structured to actively create and maintain the necessary conditions that support agency for each and every learner. These conditions include a community-wide commitment to:

- recognizing the full humanity and potential of all young learners;
- seeing every child and young person as the primary driver of their learning and a fully capable partner in designing and managing their own learning journeys;
- doing the work necessary to eliminate each individual’s conscious and unconscious biases related to such factors connected to a learner’s identity as race, gender expression, age, socioeconomic status, neurodiversity, mental capacity, language, physical appearance, culture, religion and religious expression, interests, and self-expression;
- actively working to offset any limitations on opportunity stemming from structural racism; and
- trusting each learner to develop their self-awareness of and advocate for their learning needs and to play an active role in setting their own learning goals.

With these conditions in place, all adults playing roles in a child’s learning journey participate in the systematic development of agency in each young learner. Collectively, they ensure that for each learner there is: an intentional introduction of more and more opportunity to express agency; a focus on developing the wherewithal to both shape and make learning and life choices

effectively; the cultivation of personal responsibility for the consequences of their choices and actions on others; and the development of the self-knowledge and insight needed to grasp the importance of owning their own learning.

In learning environments that do not include a strong element of Learner Agency, the learner is challenged to figure out what the adults want from them, rather than being supported to understand and act on their own learning needs. An emphasis on learner compliance with assigned learning has learners be passive receivers of education, dependent on others for their learning. Said another way, in learning environments that are not learner-centered, learners are backseat passengers to their own learning.

By contrast, in learner-centered environments where Learner Agency is consistently emphasized, learners are in the front seat of their learning journey and supported to become drivers of it. They increasingly take responsibility for setting learning goals that are a match for their life aspirations and adjusting their learning plans based on feedback, lessons learned, and new insights. They take increasing responsibility for the impact of their choices on others who they interact with in their learning journey. And, they grow more and more effective in shaping their identities, their relationships with others, and their circumstances.

When Learner Agency is methodologically developed in each learner and when the conditions for encouraging Learner Agency are fully present, we would expect to see each and every learner developing:

1. The capacity to articulate their own learning needs and goals with insight into how they learn best and what they need to support their own learning and development;
2. A sense of ownership regarding their learning, including a love of learning, an ability to both shape their learning experiences and assess their outcomes, and an interest in continually deepening their learning and improving their learning experiences;
3. The adaptability, resourcefulness, and resilience needed to handle increasing responsibility for their own learning and the learning of those around them, informed by both successful and unsuccessful learning experiences and adult feedback;
4. A growing self-assuredness and self-confidence with regard to their capacity to manage their own learning and to create and structure their own learning experiences; and
5. A growing sense of self-worth that enables them to fully express both their strengths and their vulnerabilities.

Learner Agency thrives when learners know themselves, discover their own gifts, and develop themselves as self-confident, lifelong learners.

DISTINGUISHING “SOCIALLY EMBEDDED”

We use the term “Socially Embedded” to refer to a learning environment that fosters relationships between and among the members of its learning community as central to each learner’s journey. In learning environments with the Socially Embedded element in place, we find:

1. a learning community that has been intentionally created to provide every member with a place to be known and a place to belong;
2. a focus on the social nature of learning being consistently enabled and consistently emphasized; and
3. learners being encouraged and supported in building their own social capital.

For the purposes of this discussion, we distinguish a “learning community” as a group of people who share a common commitment to supporting one another’s learning. Within that learning community, each learner forms a web of stable, social relationships with people directly supporting their particular learning journey; this includes family members / guardians, other young people, educators, youth development specialists, and mentors from across the broader community. While learners will interact with many others throughout their learning journey, not everyone is necessarily part of their “learning community.”

In learning environments with advanced expressions of Social Embeddedness, each and every learner experiences an authentic sense of belonging in their learning community; they are welcomed by others for who they are and for what they contribute. This means each member of the learning community is known as a whole person with a full range of unique interests, aspirations, characteristics, lived experiences, and background circumstances. As such, every learning community member is welcomed as a whole person, able to bring forth all aspects of themselves. Because of this, within their learning community, learners experience belonging, acceptance, friendship, and guidance.

Like all healthy communities, a healthy learning community focuses attention on building trusting relationships, expanding inclusiveness, and ensuring opportunities for everyone to be involved and to contribute. This necessarily includes a strong commitment to assess and deal with conscious and unconscious bias and racism within each member of the learning community and to have the concerns of equity and justice be shared by everyone. Time and space is set aside to ensure that each member of the community has the opportunity to contribute their unique gifts and to express their unique selves. Each community member has the space to speak for themselves, without obligation to speak on behalf of an underrepresented group that they may belong to. Social norms and mechanisms are established and maintained to ensure that the community remains a safe and welcoming space for each and every member.

Whenever a learner is engaged with others in the process of their learning, we can say their learning is social. This can involve learning with those in and outside of their learning community, such as a family member, a mentor, an educator, someone in the broader community, a boss or supervisor, or another learner. The social aspect of learning can be seen in relationships that encourage the provision of guidance to one another and in the opportunity for shared discovery with one another. Each person has something to learn and each person has something to teach. There is a mutuality to the learning and to the relationships.

When a learning environment strongly expresses a Socially Embedded element, social learning is a central part of each learner's journey. Each learner's pathway includes continual engagement in sustained relationships that support their learning. These may be one-on-one relationships, such as mentor/mentee relationships or peer-to-peer relationships; or they can be small group relationships, such as those made in project teams; or they can be larger group relationships, such as those made in an entire advisory group or learning community. In all cases, there is mutual support for everyone's learning.

Socially Embedded learning environments further encourage and support the building of each learner's own social capital. By the term "social capital," we mean the set of resources made available through family and community relationships. Learners in Socially Embedded environments have the opportunity to form their own social and professional networks as they engage in volunteer efforts, internships, community projects, and their relationships with mentors. While this is of significant value to any learner, it takes on even more importance for young people who grow up with limited contact with and connections to people who control access to community and economic resources. As such, intentional efforts are made to enable those without these connections to both build their social capital and learn how to leverage it. Efforts to support the development of a young person's social capital are one valuable approach to combating structural racism.

When the Socially Embedded element of a learning environment is well established, we would expect to see each and every learner developing the skills and dispositions needed to:

1. Be responsible for finding one's place in different groups and for handling differences, disagreements, competing values, or adversity that may come up in a group;
2. Feel, express, and accept vulnerability and authenticity in ways that allow one to be and celebrate their full selves in the presence of others and to hold space for others to do the same;
3. Empathize and identify with other people and groups, such as those with differing racial, ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds or those with differing gender identities and expressions, religious views, ideologies, and physical or mental capabilities;
4. Collaborate successfully with colleagues of different ages and lived experiences; different interests and aspirations; different abilities and proficiency levels; and/or different approaches to learning and problem solving; and
5. Build the kind of social capital needed to effectively navigate the community, the economy, and the world.

What learners gain from Socially Embedded environments is critical to living a meaningful and fulfilling life as part of a family, a community, and a society.

DISTINGUISHING “PERSONALIZED, RELEVANT, AND CONTEXTUALIZED”

When we say that learning is “Personalized, Relevant, and Contextualized”, we mean that the learning experience is a match for each learner’s unique needs, interests, and circumstances. In learner-centered environments, this is achieved through a partnership between adults and young learners who work together to ensure that each learning experience is a good match for each unique learner.

When learning is “Personalized, Relevant, and Contextualized,” there is a shared commitment for those involved in the child’s learning to be attentive to and, as relevant, explore each learner’s background, circumstances, lived experiences, strengths, interests, and aspirations. Adults and young learners work together to establish individual learning goals that are relevant for each learner’s aspirations and personalized to each learner’s strengths and interests. Likewise, they clarify the context for each learning experience so that each experience is meaningful in the world of the learner. Working together in this way, they shape the learner’s learning pathways and experiences to be a match for the learner as a whole person.

This is in contrast to school-centered environments where learning goals are standardized by grade level and made the same (with limited variation) for all learners. In such environments, learning experiences are then aimed at these standardized goals and shaped to be appropriate for an “average learner” of that age.

In learner-centered environments, it is the element of Personalized, Relevant, and Contextualized that ensures that learner uniqueness is seen as an asset and as central to the design of their learning pathways. Making learning Personalized, Relevant, and Contextualized requires sensitivity to the background and circumstances from which each learner comes. Learners arrive into a learning experience with assets, considerations, and external challenges based on their own cultural, social, economic, and family contexts. Learning experiences advancing Personalized, Relevant, and Contextualized are attentive to those contexts, seeking to avoid any imposition of harmful bias while also leveraging the richness found in the learner’s background.

Working together, adults and young learners continually ensure that learning experiences are Personalized, Relevant, and Contextualized. What do we specifically mean by each of these terms?

- **By “Personalized,”** we mean that the learning experience is appropriate to each learner’s individual needs and strengths. When learning is Personalized, we have addressed the question: How can each unique learner be best supported in their learning and development? For each learner, this means consistently exploring: how the learning experience is advancing the learner’s learning goals and aspirations; what strengths the child brings to the table that can be leveraged; what support may be needed for the learner to engage fully in their learning; and with whom and in what way the learner will best learn for the particular learning challenge at hand.
- **By “Relevant,”** we mean that a learning experience is applicable to the learner’s interests, challenges, and/or aspirations. When learning is Relevant for the learner, there is always an answer to the question: Why am I learning this? What is being learned occurs for the learner as useful or in some way applicable to their lives. The learner is clear how their learning supports them in enjoying an area of interest, or in better handling daily life challenges, or in pursuing their learning goals or a long-term aspiration. In addition, learners are encouraged

to explore entirely new experiences and entirely new areas of interest, expanding what is Relevant to their learning as they grow and develop as people. When learning experiences are Relevant, the learner is naturally pulled into them.

- **By Contextualized**, we mean that the learning experience is related to within a context or frame that makes the experience significant for each learner. Learners are supported in developing the capacity to identify or create a context in which their learning shows up as meaningful to them. When their learning is Contextualized, there is always an answer to the question: What does this learning mean? When a learner then engages with a learning opportunity within a meaningful context, they can see how what is being learned fits into the world. That context may come from a learner being engaged by an authentic inquiry; the learning challenge's connectedness to the child's development of real world skills; or the learning being a necessary foundation to pursue a meaningful, fulfilling life.

When learning is Personalized, Relevant, and Contextualized, learning pathways respond directly and specifically to each child's learning needs, interests, backgrounds, and circumstances. Only then can we say that it is each unique learner who is at the center of their own education.

DISTINGUISHING “OPEN-WALLED”

What do we mean when we say that a learning environment is “Open-Walled?” Taking the term literally, we mean that the learning is not walled into a single environment. The idea is that when young people and the adults supporting them think about learning, what they consider as sources of learning, people to learn from and with, places where learning occurs, and what “counts” as learning, they are not walled in by a single building, time of day, learning provider, or kind of learning—often called academic learning. When an Open-Walled orientation to learning is taken, different choices show up as a learner, their family, and their advisor(s) consider the learner’s goals, activities, and learning experiences that may be pursued. Said another way, it is acknowledged that learning can happen anywhere, anytime, and with anyone. When a learning environment is Open-Walled, the broader community and even the whole world become the learner’s arena both for learning and for making meaningful contributions.

When we say “Open-Walled”, what walls are we talking about? We are talking about the walls or boundaries around a learner’s central learning environment—the base from which the learner operates and engages with other sources of learning in their local community and virtually. A learner’s home base is a safe space in which learners: engage with their learning community for mutual support, work with their advisors to shape their personal learning journeys, and access the specialized resources they may need as they progress on their learning journeys. In most cases, the central learning environment will be a physical location, which might be referred to as a “home base” or a “school.” It is also possible that the central learning environment can be the learner’s home, a virtual location, or another gathering place in the community.

When Open-Walled learning is a significant element of a learning environment, such learning can be depended upon to enable the other elements of a learner-centered education, bringing more opportunities for exercising Learner Agency, for expanding Social Embeddedness, for increasing the Personalization and Relevance of learning journeys, and for the development of competencies that are needed now in the local community and in the world. Part of having an Open-Walled element present is that the learning opportunities that are a match for what the child’s interests are, how they learn, and their goals and aspirations dramatically expand. Another part of having the Open-Walled element present is that young people are supported to develop their own ability to design and manage their Open-Walled learning. This is important in preparing oneself to be a lifelong learner.

Simply including some learning experiences that take place outside the walls of the “school” or bringing outside resources in does not make a learning environment Open-Walled. To be called Open-Walled, a learning environment must systematically leverage and integrate the vibrant opportunities available in a community and virtually within a child’s learning journey and acknowledge that learning in ways that can be counted toward meeting learning goals. Any learning environment can be made to be Open-Walled by including learning opportunities happening throughout the community and virtually as integral parts of a child’s learning journey and by encouraging those learners to demonstrate their learning so that it can be credentialed. When this is done consistently and systematically, we say that the environment is Open-Walled.

The more fully expressed the Open-Walled element is, the more impact learning experiences in and with the community and virtually will have on a learner’s journey. Every community has a myriad of organizations, people, and resources that can contribute to and host learning experiences. Learners might engage with these learning resources through such activities as volunteer and/or paid jobs, internships, service learning, and group field projects, to name a few. A learner’s engagement will be based on the child’s developmental level, maturity, and

learning goals. When Open-Walled is present, such resources as libraries, YMCAs, Girl and Boy Scout troops, and area colleges are embraced as providers of enriching learning experiences and leveraged fully as resources in a learner's journey. In addition to what is available in their local community, learners can access organizations and educational resources online, extending their arena for learning to the whole world. The dichotomy between what is now called "informal" vs. "formal" learning providers no longer dictates what is seen as valuable for a learner's experience.

Open-Walled environments encourage learners to engage in learning opportunities throughout their community, and as importantly, learning opportunities and resources can be brought in to the environment as well. The walls are open in both directions. This is a particularly important option for the youngest learners and those learners who may face barriers that limit their ability to easily access learning outside the safe space of a central learning environment. All of the resources that can be accessed outside the walls of a central learning environment can also be brought into the environment where concerns for learner health, wellbeing, support, and safety can be directly managed.

Moreover, where Open-Walled is fully expressed, there are avenues by which unplanned learning that happens in the course of a child's day and life—through such activities as play, babysitting, and engaging with friends and family—can be counted, when relevant, as contributing toward setting and achieving learning goals.

In enabling Open-Walled experiences, unique and important equity challenges present themselves. A child's race, gender, physical ability, mental capacity, socioeconomic status, immigration status, and any number of other characteristics can limit, present barriers to, or negatively impact that child's Open-Walled experience. It is important the learning environment brings focus to alleviate these inequities in both a child's access to and experience of Open-Walled learning.

In particular, issues of equitable access and the impacts of conscious or unconscious bias must be attended to at the front-end of and during a child's Open-Walled experiences. As a child identifies and pursues an Open-Walled experience, the learning community ensures limits are not placed on where a child might seek an Open-Walled experience and that in taking one on, they are appropriately prepared in a culturally responsive way. Then, while the learning community will do its best to mitigate the impact of the various inequities of the world in a child's learning journey, they must also be prepared to support a child to make sense of and navigate their experiences when they encounter those inequities in their Open-Walled learning.

When the Open-Walled element is strongly expressed and issues of equity in regard to access and the impact of bias are being addressed, we would expect to see each and every learner developing:

- An increased clarity regarding their interests, gifts, and aspirations in life, including how they can meaningfully contribute them to their communities and the world;
- Skills and dispositions needed to be engaged community participants and citizens;
- Experience in the world of work and the skills and dispositions to navigate, engage, and contribute effectively in an evolving economy;
- The ability to locate and leverage assets in their local community, online, and in the broader world;
- An appreciation for and connection to the diverse people and resources in the learner's local community;

- An increasing amount of social capital, the set of relationships a learner has with people who control access to community and economic resources; and
- The lifelong ability to relate to any experience as a learning experience.

When a learning environment is committed to being Open-Walled, it can catalyze a network of learning opportunities, which are hosted by a variety of people, institutions, and organizations in the community, including the education system. Once engaged, these individuals, institutions, and organizations begin to see more and more ways in which one another's missions and assets can be complementary in providing a flexible, adaptable learning ecosystem.

DISTINGUISHING “COMPETENCY-BASED”

By the term “Competency-Based,” we are referring to a learning environment’s focus on building learners’ ability to do things competently in real-world contexts. This is distinct from learning environments where the focus is on each learner accumulating standardized sets of knowledge and skills in subject areas within an arbitrary amount of time and demonstrating the acquired knowledge and skills in contrived settings. While the ability to do things competently requires relevant knowledge and skills, it also requires the dispositions necessary to do things in real-world circumstances.

To be competent at something is to be able to do that something effectively and reliably in a variety of circumstances; it is not the mere retention of a given set of facts, procedures, or theories. The difference between Competency-Based approaches and knowledge-based approaches is like the difference between learning to be a good swimmer and learning the theory of swimming. In one case, the learner is able to perform swimming in a variety of circumstances; in the other, the learner knows the facts and theories of swimming. (Fortunately, swimming classes have always been Competency-Based!)

In Competency-Based learning environments, a “competency” is an area of performance, and a learner may be considered proficient in a competency when they demonstrate their ability to perform in that area. In Competency-Based learning environments, development of a proficiency occurs: 1) in a timeframe that is a match for that unique learner; 2) in the context of their overall learning journey (which itself is not linear); and 3) simultaneously with the development of other proficiencies.

While knowledge acquisition occurs as part of competency development, it is not done for its own sake. When demonstrating a competency, a learner is demonstrating the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are needed for them to perform competently in a given area or activity. Here, we define “knowledge,” “skills,” and “dispositions” as follows:

- **Knowledge:** The theoretical, conceptual, or practical understanding of something, which includes but is not limited to what is referred to as “content knowledge”
- **Skills:** The capacities needed to apply knowledge effectively in producing desired results, including the skill to acquire additional knowledge as needed
- **Dispositions:** The behaviors and ways of being needed for a person to engage with the world effectively in the circumstances of life, both currently and in the future

Competencies, as comprised of knowledge, skills, and dispositions, form the fundamental unit of learning in learner-centered environments. Each learner’s learning journey emerges from an exploration of which competencies are needed to realize their learning goals and of what kinds of learning experiences will best allow the learner to develop those competencies—all consistent with who they are, how they learn, and where they want to go in life.

While learning environments may differ in how they organize and characterise competencies, the aim is to cover those areas that research indicates are critical for the development of well-rounded, healthy human beings who have an ability to engage productively as members of community, civic society, and the economy, as well as to continue their own lifelong learning journeys.

Typically, these competencies fall within twelve areas for exploration:

1. Physical and emotional well being
2. Self-awareness, self-direction, and self-advocacy
3. Community, history, and culture
4. Self-exploration and identity
5. Relationship, collaboration, and social skills
6. Language, communication, and expression
7. Scientific and mathematical problem solving
8. Creativity and innovation
9. Civic engagement and contribution
10. Connection to the natural world
11. Hobbies and life activities
12. Career options

The particular competencies to be developed in each area for exploration, and the level of proficiency needed, will be unique to each learner. Learners and their advisors work together to create individual plans for their learning journey—setting individual learning goals and identifying appropriate pathways for exploration that are a match for the learner’s interests, aspirations, and needs.

Competency-Based approaches fit naturally with the other elements in a Learner-Centered environment. Learner Agency is easier to empower when the connection is clear between what is being learned and the related knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Competency-Based environments also naturally enable Personalized, Relevant, and Contextualized learning, meaning learners take the time they need to achieve levels of proficiency and demonstrate that proficiency in a number of ways, assessed by a variety of stakeholders. Open-Walled learning experiences involving internships, volunteer jobs, or field projects integrate smoothly with the rest of a learner’s journey because such experiences easily lend themselves to being Competency-Based. And, the development of competencies is naturally Socially Embedded—pulling for interaction with mentors, peers, and others in the community.