




Learner-Centered in Focus

An Exploration of Young People's
Experiences in Learner-Centered Environments

Khara Schonfeld-Karan, Ph.D.
November 2024

education 
reimagined

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In an era where the need for educational transformation is more critical than ever, how can the needs of every young person truly be met? Education Reimagined, a national nonprofit organization, considers this question in all aspects of its work. To center public education around the needs of young people, it is vital to understand their educational experiences. In research, this means turning to the real experts—the young people themselves.

Education Reimagined aims to make learner-centered education available to every child in the United States, inclusive of race, background, and circumstance. Over the past 10 years, the organization has worked with communities to galvanize the field of learner-centered education. Education Reimagined defines “learner-centered education” as an educational approach that focuses on the holistic development of young people within and as part of supportive communities and through unique learning journeys. This approach is grounded in five key elements that, when present and equitably expressed, are designed to support young people for a life of learning as engaged members in society: 1) learner agency, 2) socially-embedded, 3) personalized, relevant, and contextualized, 4) open-walled, and 5) competency-based

As the demand for insight into innovative approaches for public education continues to grow, Education Reimagined commenced its research work by examining the self-reports of youth to discover what they are experiencing in K–12 learner-centered environments. This report dives deep into those experiences, offering a compelling glimpse into the innovative practices that are shaping the future of education. In addition to amplifying learners’ voices, young people’s learner-centered experiences are compared to national benchmarks and enhanced by showing how these experiences are enabled and supported in learning environments. The intention for this report is to share these valuable insights with those interested in supporting learner-centered education and understanding its broader significance within the educational landscape.

EDITOR’S NOTE

Learner: Education Reimagined uses “learner” to refer to young people (ages 3–22). Unlike the term “student,” which often implies a passive role in school, the term “learner” captures the active and dynamic nature of learning in learner-centered environments and acknowledges that education is not limited to formal schooling. It also encompasses the evolving ways that young people grow, explore, and understand the world around them.

Learning Environment & Site: Education Reimagined uses these terms interchangeably to refer to educational settings that are designed for holistic learning and to support the interests, needs, and goals of each learner in their community. Learning environments include formal K–12 school settings, virtual spaces, youth development, and out-of-school providers.

Methods

Drawing from data collected from nine K–12 learning environments, this exploration focused on 1) the extent to which learners are experiencing—and sites are expressing—the five elements of learner-centered education, 2) the learner-centered practices that youth are experiencing, and 3) how young people’s experiences in learner-centered environments compare to those of other youth across the nation. In addition, references from academic research show potential outcomes of the learner-centered approach and practices. To collect data, Education Reimagined employed a mixed-method design utilizing the following tools:

- **Transcend’s [Leaps Student Voice Survey](#)** was issued to 308 learners from nine sites to report on their educational experiences in learner-centered settings. Aggregated survey results were examined via descriptive analysis and compared to the survey’s national benchmark dataset representing other sites, including many conventional district schools and a few independent, charter, or microschools.
- **Site Self-Assessment Questionnaires** were completed by site leaders to self-assess how learner-centered education is being expressed in their learning environments, report on their learner-centered practices, and share reflections on learner survey results.
- **Virtual Interviews** were conducted with select site leaders and learners to better understand the survey results by learning more about their models, practices, culture, and learners’ experiences.

The learner-centered environments that participated are located across seven states, representing public schools, a public charter school district, independent private schools, and an out-of-school organization. These sites include the following:

- **FabNewport** (Newport, RI)
- **Highlands Micro School** (Denver, CO)
- **The Lab School of Memphis** (Memphis, TN)
- **LaFayette Big Picture** (LaFayette, NY)
- **Norris School District** (Mukwonago, WI)
- **Rock Tree Sky** (Ojai, CA)
- **Springhouse** (Floyd, VA)
- **Village High School** (Colorado Springs, CO)
- **The Village School** (Arlington, VA)

Key Findings

The findings from this exploration suggest that young people’s experiences in the participating sites closely align with the collective goals for learner-centered education in that learners are known, feel cared for, understand their gifts, and know how they can contribute to the world. The findings from the three data sources indicate a strong connection between the intended vision for the approach and its actual application in practice. This is seen through the survey responses, which show that a majority of surveyed youth agree that their experiences in learner-centered environments reflect the key elements of learner-centered education.

Overall, young people from learner-centered sites reported 73% agreement to having experiences that reflect all five key elements of learner-centered education, which is 21% higher than the survey’s national benchmarks.

The overall survey agreement rates from young people in learner-centered environments were substantially higher than the survey’s overall national rates. These notable results are evidenced by the following findings that reflect each learner-centered element.

Overall, young people from learner-centered sites reported 73% agreement to having experiences that reflect all five key elements of learner-centered education, which is 21% higher than the survey’s national benchmarks.



Learner Agency

Promoting Empowerment, Self-Awareness, and Personal and Shared Responsibility

- **All nine learning environments provide learners with opportunities to cultivate learner agency to a large extent**, according to the site leaders' self-assessments.
- **Youth from learner-centered sites reported 72% agreement to having experiences that support learner agency, which is 19% higher than the national benchmarks.** Through indicators related to learning agency, young people report that they positively experience this element in learner-centered settings, which includes having choices about how to do their work and how to pursue their learning goals.
- Findings from this exploration suggest that youth in learner-centered sites are supported to do the following:

1
Learn more about who they are and experience learning that matters to them

2
Determine what they want to learn, select goals for their learning, and decide how to pursue those goals

3
Be supported to develop their own ideas and learn a lot through high expectations and levels of support

4
Advocate for what they want to see happen in their learning environment while also taking action to fix societal issues

LEARNER AGENCY RESEARCH

Research indicates that fostering learner agency can lead to promising outcomes. When young people feel like they have a choice about how to frame a learning activity in their educational environment, they may be more likely to experience optimal engagement (Schmidt et al., 2018).

LEARNER AGENCY PRACTICES



of the sites offer passion projects or project-based learning



of the sites engage in learner-led conferences

Socially-Embedded

Cultivating a Sense of Belonging, Mutual Learning and Support, and Expanded Social Networks

- **All nine learning environments provide learners with socially-embedded opportunities to a large extent**, according to the site leaders' self-assessments.
- **Youth from learner-centered sites reported 72% agreement to having socially-embedded experiences, which is 16% higher than the national benchmarks.** Learners' reports on socially-embedded indicators show that they positively experience this element in learner-centered settings by having their ideas respected and by being appreciated for being themselves.
- Findings from this exploration indicate that learner-centered environments support youth to do the following:

- 1 Be part of a caring community where they are welcomed, appreciated, and celebrated for being who they are
- 2 Feel safe and proud to be themselves and feel included by their peers
- 3 Have their ideas and suggestions respected and well-received
- 4 Be encouraged and receive help when they want to give up on difficult tasks

- 5 Share with interested educators about their experiences at home
- 6 Interact with and learn from a network of adults beyond site educators

SOCIALLY-EMBEDDED PRACTICES

8 of the sites have mentorships or internships

6 of the sites have advisories or home-base structures

SOCIALLY-EMBEDDED RESEARCH

When learners feel personally accepted, respected, included, and socially supported by others in an educational environment, research suggests that they are likely to perform better in school and show more favorable motivational, social-emotional, and behavioral outcomes (Korpershoek et al., 2020).

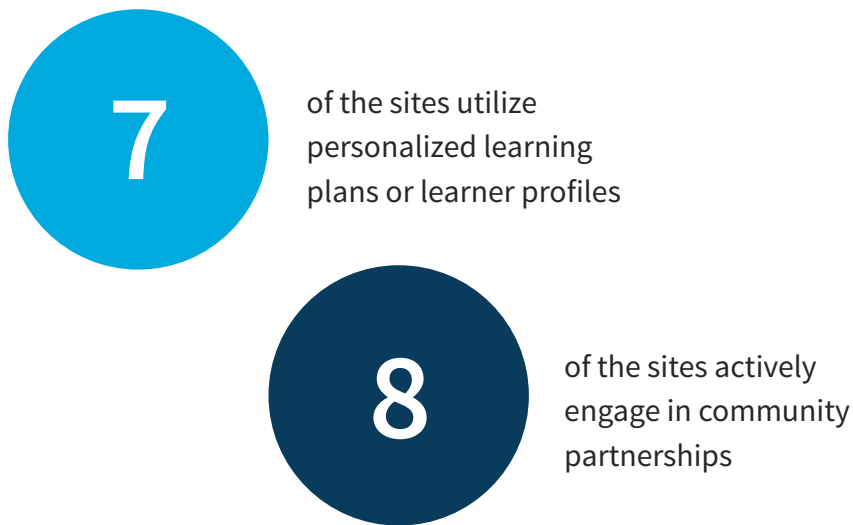
Personalized, Relevant, and Contextualized

Focusing on Purposeful Learning, Dynamic and Responsive Experiences, and Real-World Application

- **All nine of the learning environments provide learners with personalized, relevant, and contextualized learning opportunities to a moderate or large extent**, according to the site leaders' self-assessments.
- **Youth from learner-centered sites reported 70% agreement to having personalized, relevant, and contextualized experiences, which is 23% higher than the national benchmarks.** Personalized, relevant, and contextualized indicators show that learners positively experience this element in learner-centered settings by having resources and knowing that their learning interests are being accounted for and valued.
- Findings from this exploration show that young people in learner-centered sites are supported to do the following:

- 1**
Learn what, and in ways that, interest them
- 2**
Have the resources to support that learning
- 3**
See how their learning relates to what they have learned in the past
- 4**
Connect learning experiences to their lives, personal experiences, and life outside of the site
- 5**
Apply what they have learned to their own interests and solve real-world problems

PERSONALIZED, RELEVANT, AND CONTEXTUALIZED PRACTICES



PERSONALIZED, RELEVANT, AND CONTEXTUALIZED RESEARCH

Research shows that educational environments that are more positive and individualized to learners' needs can lead to more caring relationships among teachers and students with fewer youth "getting lost" in the system (McClure et al., 2010).

Open-Walled

Advancing Community Connections, Exposure to New Perspectives and Opportunities, and Equitable Access

- **All nine learning environments provide learners with open-walled opportunities to a moderate or large extent**, according to the site leaders' self-assessments.
- **Youth from learner-centered sites reported 71% agreement to having experiences that support open-walled learning, which is 31% higher than the national benchmarks.** Learners' self-reports on open-walled indicators show that they positively experience this element in learner-centered settings by learning from and within their local communities.
- Findings from this exploration suggest that youth in learner-centered sites are supported to do the following:

1

Share what they are learning outside of school and have these activities valued

2

Spend time and learn outside of the site building

3

Experience community-service opportunities and learn from local community members on- and off-site

4

Have tools to learn everywhere, from everyone, all the time

OPEN-WALLED PRACTICES

ALL 9

offer field experiences or other off-site learning opportunities

5

of the sites credential out-of-school learning

OPEN-WALLED RESEARCH

When educational environments develop community partnerships, spaces are created for learners to explore their interests and develop trusting peer relationships (Malone, 2020).

Competency-Based

Emphasizing Holistic Development and Life Skills, Reflection, and Proficiency Over Pace

- **All nine of the learning environments provide learners with competency-based opportunities to a moderate or large extent**, according to the site leaders' self-assessments.
- **Youth from learner-centered sites reported 79% agreement to having competency-based experiences, which is 16% higher than the national benchmarks.** Learners' reports on competency-based indicators show that they experience this element in learner-centered settings by explaining their ideas and having opportunities to think about and correct their mistakes.
- Findings from this exploration suggest show that youth in learner-centered sites are supported to do the following:

1

Be where they are in their learning journeys

2

Explain their ideas and answers and correct their mistakes

3

Use critical thinking skills to analyze ideas and solve complex problems

4

Consider other ways to understand what they are learning

COMPETENCY-BASED PRACTICES

8

sites use learning portfolios or alternative records to capture young people's learning journeys

8

sites hold exhibitions or other demonstrations of learning

COMPETENCY-BASED RESEARCH

When educational environments incorporate competency-based learning, research suggests that learners become more autonomous, perform better, and are more motivated (Henri et al., 2017).

Key Takeaways

Youth in learner-centered environments reported substantially higher agreement on having experiences that reflect all five key elements in comparison to the survey's national benchmarks. Descriptive analyses revealed that overall response rates were as follows:

31% HIGHER

for Open-Walled Questions

23% HIGHER

for Personalized, Relevant, and Contextualized Questions

19% HIGHER

for Learner Agency Questions

16% HIGHER

for Socially-Embedded and Competency-Based Questions

These insights are compelling, and they represent just the start of Education Reimagined's research journey, paving the way for deeper investigations into the implementation and impact of learner-centered education that are yet to come.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1

Results from learners' and site leaders' self-assessments show how the key elements of the learner-centered approach are being intentionally and thoughtfully implemented.

2

The anticipated outcomes of key learner-centered elements and aligned practices are undergirded by academic research.

3

Findings suggest that the learner-centered approach and practices are translating into meaningful, positive experiences for young people.

Suggested Citation: Schonfeld-Karan, K. (2024). *Learner-centered in focus: An exploration of young people's experiences in learner-centered environments*. Education Reimagined. <https://education-reimagined.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Learner-Centered-in-Focus-Report.pdf>