LEARNER-CENTERED EDUCATION

Key Elements Research Guide

education reimagined

INTRODUCTION

Guided by Education Reimagined's 2024–2029 Research Agenda, this resource provides conceptual groundwork to advance research on the key elements of learner-centered education. While many of the terms used by Education Reimagined are featured regularly in educational discourse, their definitions can vary across scholarly and practitioner contexts. Furthermore, the deep connections between this paradigm and established scholarship have yet to be articulated. To address these needs and provide the connectivity required for more systematic study, this guide offers three components for each of the five key elements:



Definitions of the key elements describe the essential attributes of each element to create clear units of analysis. In doing so, conceptual boundaries are established to examine the key elements of learner-centered education with methodological clarity.

Sample observable indicators provide concrete instances of how each element can manifest in practice. Importantly, these indicators are illustrative rather than exhaustive; they offer glimpses into the approach and are intended to guide observation rather than prescribe evaluation.

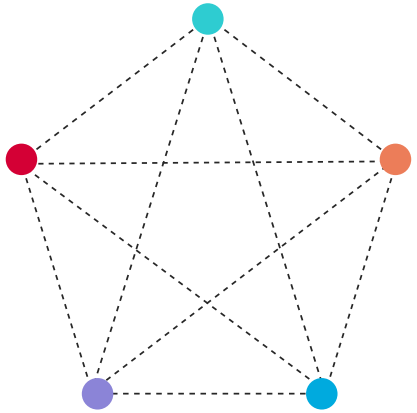
Correlating theories form theoretical grounding for each element. Curated from diverse fields—including developmental psychology, cognitive anthropology, and moral philosophy—these theories anchor the learner-centered elements in established scientific and philosophical traditions.

Serving as a bridge between practice and research, this guide functions as a technical companion to the Practitioner's Lexicon. By mapping the Lexicon's distinctions to operational constructs, empirical indicators, and established theory, reference points are established for future inquiry. In turn, this alignment paves the way for the evidence-building necessary to study the impact, sustainability, and spread of learner-centered environments and ecosystems.

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LEARNER-CENTERED EDUCATION

Education Reimagined defines "learner-centered education" as an approach to education that focuses on the holistic development of young people within and as part of supportive communities and through unique learning journeys. The 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 of society:



Learner Agency

Socially-Embedded

Personalized, Relevant, and Contextualized

Open-Walled

Competency-Based

Learner-centered education emphasizes core principles that support children and youth to cultivate their sense of self, develop healthy relationships, navigate the dynamic landscapes of virtual and community-based learning, and gain exposure to diverse life skills and pathways. Collectively, this approach aims to support lifelong well-being by equipping youth with skills, habits, and strategies that can help them and their communities thrive and, in turn, more broadly contribute to the world.

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE: Education Reimagined uses the term "learner" to refer to young people (ages 3–22). Unlike "student," which implies a passive role in school, "learner" captures the active, dynamic nature of learning and signals that education extends beyond formal schooling. It also encompasses the evolving ways that young people grow, explore, and understand the world around them.

Education Reimagined uses the term "learning environment" (or "site") 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 can include formal K–12 settings, youth development programs, and out-of-school offerings.

Learner Agency

Education Reimagined's Definition

The "learner agency" element refers to learning that recognizes and supports learners' capacity to take purposeful initiative in shaping the course of their education.

Learner agency can be seen when learners are supported to build a strong sense of self, chart and navigate their learning journeys, advocate for themselves and others, and contribute to decisions that shape their learning environment.

Sample Observable Indicators

- Learners describe how they proactively seek out a specific resource or person to support their learning needs (e.g., requesting specific feedback or resources).
- Learners explain how they have set or revised a learning goal based on personal reflections and input from an educator or community mentor.
- Learners have individualized learning plans that reflect their own questions, personal interests, and a variety of modalities (e.g., project-based, internships, or workshops).

Correlating Theories

- **Self-Determination Theory** is situated in the field of motivational psychology and posits that satisfying the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness fosters autonomous motivation and high-quality engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2000).
- **Social Cognitive Theory** is rooted in social-cognitive psychology and suggests that agency is driven by self-efficacy, which is a learner's belief in their capability to influence their behavior and environment (Bandura, 1997).
- **Action Regulation Theory** originated in work psychology and conceptualizes agency as operating across levels of regulation, from externally directed action to autonomous planning, execution, and self-reflection on goal-directed tasks (Hacker, 1985).

Socially-Embedded

Education Reimagined's Definition

The "socially-embedded" element refers to learning that is rooted in relationships, community connections, and social capital development, reflecting the belief that learning is inherently social.

Socially-embedded learning can be seen when learners feel known, valued, and part of a learning community. In these communities, diversity of perspectives is seen as an asset, mutual learning is encouraged, and learners have opportunities to develop social capital through authentic connections within and beyond the learning environment.

Sample Observable Indicators

- Learners shift between roles (e.g., teaching/learning, initiating/participating) with individuals across diverse ages, backgrounds, and professional roles.
- Learners explain a shared goal or problem they addressed by collaborating with others.
- The environment features visible social protocols (e.g., community norms) positioned to guide collaborative interactions.

Correlating Theories

- **Sociocultural Theory** hails from developmental psychology and maintains that cognitive growth is a social process shaped by interaction with more knowledgeable persons and mediated by cultural tools, particularly language (Vygotsky, 1978).
- **Ethics of Care** originated in moral philosophy and argues that ethical decision-making should be grounded in empathy, attentiveness, and responsibility within relationships, rather than in abstract principles of justice or rights (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984).
- **Rhizomatic Learning** is drawn from poststructuralist philosophy and was applied to education by Cormier (2008). It conceptualizes learning as a nonlinear, community-driven process in which knowledge emerges through networked connections rather than hierarchical pathways (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

Personalized, Relevant, and Contextualized

Education Reimagined's Definition

The "personalized, relevant, and contextualized" element refers to learning that is responsive to who learners are, how they learn, their lived context and experience, and their life aspirations.

Personalized learning can be seen when learning pathways are individualized and shaped by a learner's unique growth and development. Relevant and contextualized learning can be seen when experiences and content are meaningful to the learner and connected to the real world.

Sample Observable Indicators

- Adult-learner interactions prioritize coaching questions (e.g., "How does this link to your goal?") over directives.
- Learners share how their work is connected to a personal interest or community issue they are eager to solve.
- Learning spaces feature materials that reflect learners' identities, interests, and real-world partnerships (e.g., family photos, vision boards, or resources from internships).

Correlating Theories

- **Constructivist Theory** is grounded in developmental psychology and holds that learners actively construct understanding by interpreting new ideas through the lens of prior knowledge, personal experience, and interaction with their environment (Piaget, 1952).
- **Critical Pedagogy** originated in critical social theory and positions learners as co-creators of knowledge who draw on their lived experiences and cultural contexts to engage in critical inquiry and challenge inequitable systems (Freire, 1970).
- **Funds of Knowledge** is rooted in educational anthropology and recognizes the knowledge, skills, and cultural practices from learners' homes and communities as assets for meaningful classroom learning (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992; González et al., 2005).

Open-Walled

Education Reimagined's Definition

The "open-walled" element refers to learning that includes and leverages a variety of resources, opportunities, people, and spaces in local communities and the virtual world.

Open-walled learning can be seen when learners are exposed to diverse ideas, mentors, experts, and experiences. In practice, this means learners access community-based opportunities shaped by their interests, make real-world impacts, and receive credit for learning regardless of where it occurs.

Sample Observable Indicators

- Learners are observed in active collaboration (e.g., co-designing, troubleshooting) with adults beyond the learning environment's staff.
- Learners identify specific external audiences for their work (e.g., proposal for the City Council, customers at their internship).
- Travel infrastructure and logistical systems (e.g., dedicated vehicles, transit passes, or off-site tracking logs) are visible and utilized to support the transportation of learners to off-campus locations.

Correlating Theories

- **Situated Learning Theory** comes from cognitive anthropology and holds that learning occurs through active participation in real-world communities of practice, with learners moving from peripheral to more central roles through legitimate engagement with practitioners (Lave & Wenger, 1991).
- **Connectivism** emerged from educational technology and frames learning as the process of forming and navigating connections among people, digital tools, and communities within dynamic, networked environments (Siemens, 2005; Downes, 2008).
- **Rousseau's Natural Education** is grounded in Enlightenment philosophy and holds that authentic learning takes place beyond formal instruction, emerging through direct experience with the world and guided by the learner's developmental readiness (Rousseau, 1762/1979).

Competency-Based

Education Reimagined's Definition

The "competency-based" element refers to learning that focuses on learners' development and demonstration of cognitive, social-emotional, and behavioral skills in authentic contexts and across diverse modalities.

Competency-based learning can be seen when learners develop life skills and academic competencies, engage in meaningful reflection and assessment, demonstrate learning across contexts, and chart their own learning goals.

Sample Observable Indicators

- During presentations of learning and exhibitions, learners receive and respond to feedback from diverse audiences (e.g., peers, family members, or community partners).
- Learners describe how they used specific feedback to pivot their approach or solve a specific challenge in their work.
- The environment features visible progress-monitoring tools (e.g., competency trackers) showing individual learners' different developmental stages.

Correlating Theories

- **Bloom's Mastery Learning** is situated in educational psychology and holds that all learners can achieve mastery when provided with sufficient time, appropriate instruction, and formative feedback (Bloom, 1976).
- **Competence Motivation Theory** stems from developmental psychology and argues that individuals are driven to develop and demonstrate competence across distinct domains, with perceived competence shaped by mastery experiences and feedback from key people in their lives (Harter, 1978).
- **Goal Orientation Theory**, originating in social-developmental psychology, distinguishes between "mastery goals" focused on personal growth and "performance goals" focused on demonstrating ability relative to others. This distinction highlights that a mastery orientation is a key driver of intrinsic motivation and deeper learning (Dweck, 1986).

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