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## **Education: Words and Meanings**

### **Exploring the Term: “Child-Centered”**

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### **The Word and Meaning: Child-Centered**

The word “child-centered” is often used in education to describe a philosophy and approach to children’s learning. Some people may use the term “child-centered” to mean that they “care” for the children under their supervision or guardianship. In exploring the meaning of the word “child-centered,” the description goes deeper than simply “caring” for children, or having concern, affection, appreciation, consideration, and responsible guardianship of children, although being “child-centered” embodies these important characteristics.

Even AI via Google responds with a concise definition that a child-centered approach in education “focuses on the individual needs, interests, and perspectives of the child.” AI’s summary of a child-centered approach includes respecting each child’s unique attributes and abilities and personalizing each child’s experiences to support his or her own developmental stage. According to AI, a child-centered approach is not a “one-size-fits-all” approach, which is often implemented in traditional educational settings. Furthermore, Nicholas et al. (2021) suggest that child-centered education “requires that a teacher shifts their focus from how best to teach or how to cover the curriculum to understanding and supporting student learning” (p. 3). While the AI summary is reasonable, exploring the word “child-centered” deserves a deeper and fuller explanation to undergird its profound implications for the children under the supervision of educators.

**Child Development.** For educators, child-centered pedagogy begins with an understanding of child development. Key contributors for understanding child development in terms of a child-centered approach are Piaget (1950, 1952, 1962) and Vygotsky (1976, 1978). Piaget, in his

theory of cognitive development, understood that the process of a child-centered approach was cultivated in each child's active involvement in his or her physical world and with people; children can build their understandings, construct knowledge through their personal interactions with their world environments and the people in their world of contacts. As children engage in the world, they build or construct meaningful learning important to themselves. Piaget (1952) noted that in a child's development, the child passes through stages of development (sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, formal operational). Each child proceeds through these stages of development at *different rates*. Because each child is developing at different rates, a child-centered approach necessitates that the teacher provides an individual and personalized approach to each child's continued learning by preparing an engaging, choice-based environment, scaffolding learning by using various strategies, and implementing authentic assessment tools.

Vygotsky (1978) complemented the individualized nature of a child's learning with an understanding of his or her interactions with adults and other children. Vygotsky added to the importance of child-centered learning as children engage with other children and adults, which he defined as the "Zone of Proximal Development." In this zone, learning is enhanced or nurtured by adults and the children's peers of same and mixed ages. As children engage with other children and adults in their world, learning with understanding is *naturally* scaffolded during these interactions. Vygotsky's zone is complementary to Piaget's consideration of how children engage with their own world and the people in their world.

In a child-centered approach, learning is an individual process for each child. Each child develops along his or her own timetable of development and within a rich, diverse environment of people and contexts.

**Learning Environment.** In a child-centered approach, the learning environment is designed for children's active engagement as self-directed learners who are in charge of their own learning, rather than completing teacher-designed curriculum tasks. In a curriculum-centered environment, the tasks are usually set in the curriculum and are not child centered. A child-centered learning environment is based on children's choices where the learning experiences are controlled and directed by each child, not by the curriculum expectations (Stone & Burriss, 2019). The child-centered learning environment highlights children's interests, autonomy, and choice (Curtis, 2017; Elkind, 2007; Robinson, 2015). To be child-centered, interest and curiosity initiate children's personal, continual learning experiences as children engage in opportunities that make sense to them; these experiences bring children a feeling of satisfaction through the learning process.

The child-centered learning environment engages children in play, experiential centers, active, child-directed projects, and personal opportunities to solve problems (Gray, 2013; Johnson et al., 2005; Wasserman, 1992). As an example, children, ages three to seven, participate in choice play centers such as the home center, art center, blocks, and games. In these centers, they are developing their ability to represent the world with symbols, such as using a yellow block to stand for cheese in the home center, to share paints at the art center, and to comfort one another when one is hurt at the block center (Johnson et al., 2005; Schrader, 1990; Stone & Stone, 2015). In game playing, they are learning to take turns, to be patient, and to count (Kamii, 1994). In

centers, they are constructing robots, watering plants, creating their own butterfly museum, and reading favorite books (Stone & Burriss, 2019).

Older children, ages eight to eleven, further develop socially and emotionally through choice-based endeavors. They learn social norms and how to deal with conflict with others through various contexts that cannot be created artificially by a teacher. In other words, meaningful, consequential choices lead to dynamic and varied interactions that provide multiple, non-linear opportunities to build an understanding of others. They can also develop cognitively and in their academic knowledge through interest-based explorations that are intrinsically motivated such as designing an Egyptian pyramid, illustrating a travel brochure, or developing a project on castles during medieval times.

In a child-centered environment, children are choosing their own projects to investigate or problems to solve. Children may choose to research trees and create a model, craft a volcano, or solve the problem of a raccoon eating the garden plants. They choose to engage with scientific phenomena or social studies concepts purely out of interest, which makes them the main stakeholders in their own learning process.

Kohn (1993) shares that when children have a “sense of control over their lives,” their physical health and happiness are affected. Kohn (2008) adds that when children “are invited to help direct their own learning - they are not only more likely to enjoy what they’re doing but to do it better” (p. 24). Dewey (1938) also promoted child-centered environments which engaged children’s natural curiosity, interests, and enthusiasm in order to meet children’s current needs. Importantly, child-centered learning environments enhance children’s learning potential, provide spaces for children to thrive, love learning, experience joy, and ultimately, safeguard their well-being (Gray, 2013; Kohn, 1993; Lange, 2018; Stone & Burriss, 2019).

**Learning Process.** With a child-centered approach comes a purposeful commitment to create a child-centered learning process. The child-centered approach engages a constructivist point of view which aligns with facilitating the unique and personal development of each child across whole child development (cognitive, social, emotional, physical). Each child is valued as unique, an original person with the primary goal of facilitating each child’s personal construction of knowledge and understanding (Stone & Burriss, 2019). This is why similar terms, and possibly more widely used terms like “student-centered” and “learner-centered” will always fall short. These terms frame the centeredness in the academic realm in that the person is only ever considered a “student” or “learner.” However, the whole person is considerably more than just their academic learning.

A child-centered approach is the opposite of a curriculum-centered approach. A defined or grade-level curriculum is not flexible enough to meet the varying needs of various children in a school setting. In a child-centered approach, every child is on a personal learning journey where they enjoy an innermost sense of confidence and competence. A child-centered approach does not try to fit children into a pre-determined curriculum of a one-size-fits-all method which cannot possibly meet the diversity of the children’s needs or interests. The learning process in a child-centered approach easily accommodates a diversity of learners as the teacher uses a variety of

learning strategies instead of curriculum-centered lesson plans. Learning strategies support the flexibility needed to meet the different needs and varied development of each child.

The teacher's role in a child-centered approach is to become a *facilitator* of each child's learning and development. Based on continual authentic assessments, and the teacher's understanding of child development, the teacher scaffolds each child's learning as it pertains to whole-child development. The teacher accommodates the variety of children's different learning continuums by integrating multiple teaching points within whole group, small group, and individual learning opportunities and experiences that are specific to the varied learning needs of the children. Multiple teaching points support children in their process of picking out what they understand.

Learning strategies are guided by daily, or close to daily, authentic assessment tools the teacher uses to guide his or her ability to scaffold each child's learning development across multiple areas of child development. For example, in a daily, whole-group modeled writing strategy (Stone & Burriss, 2019), the teacher shares and discusses content with a group of children of mixed abilities and often mixed ages. The content frequently varies in theme (literature, sciences, social studies). After a short discussion, the teacher models writing about the topic on a large tablet or electronic device for all the children to see. The teacher, knowing the varied developmental stages of every child from continual assessments, embeds varied teaching points within the modeling (i.e., letter recognition, word spacing, compound words, irregular spellings, paragraphs). Over time, children pick out what they understand. The children then write about the topic in their own journals, with choice a key component in their writing. As children finish their writing, each child conferences with the teacher where the process of scaffolding learning is personalized.

During the short conferencing, the teacher first recognizes and shares with the child several good things that the child is doing such as using beginning sounds, writing a difficult word, or using paragraphs. The teacher uses questions, so the child verifies these good things (i.e., Did you use a period at the end of your sentence? The children answering, "yes" with a smile.).

The teacher then chooses one or two teaching points by using questions to guide the child to think about what is needed in his or her writing such as adding a period, choosing to put an additional letter in a word, or encouraging the use of descriptive words. The teacher personalizes the teaching points by using questions which prompt the child to "think" about what is needed in the writing, thus, supporting the child in building his or her own understanding (i.e., Are there any letters you could add to this word?).

Importantly, the teacher does not correct the entire writing as this would overwhelm the child, rather the teacher only focuses on a few examples that are helpful in nurturing the child's continued abilities to hear sounds, figure out the letters, sentence or paragraph structure, and so on. The teacher records the child's growth and progress in a portfolio and utilizes a stages of writing development chart to choose teaching points (Stone, 2001). Over time, each child confidently matures in his or her own writing abilities and writing samples which show growth are included in a child's portfolio. Similarly, the teacher personally scaffolds learning for each child across the whole child developmental continuum.

**Learning Assessment.** In a child-centered approach, the teacher chooses authentic assessment tools. Authentic assessment helps the teacher identify what the child knows and understands in each area of development, thus, supporting the teacher in scaffolding and nurturing the child's continued learning and development.

With general guidelines of how children build their own understandings in the whole-child areas of cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development (i.e., literacy, math, sciences, friendships, self-control, interests, running and throwing), teachers become knowledgeable and discerning in when, how, and where to scaffold learning goals for each child, supporting the child's personal construction of understanding. In a child-centered learning environment, teachers choose child development continuums for guidance, rather than grade-level curriculum standards (Kohn, 2010).

A portfolio is created for each child which authentically documents what a child knows, understands, and can do, which also provides the child with a positive confirmation that he or she is learning and growing. Rather than being *evaluated*, the child is *valued* as the portfolio captures the child's successful advances over time. Thus, the child-centered assessment process not only values the learning process but values the child as well. A child-centered approach to learning acknowledges, confirms, documents, and encourages each child in his or her continued growth and development. Authentic assessment based on child development in a child-centered approach is critical for guiding the teacher in how and when to scaffold learning for every child. Authentic assessments provide evidence of what a child actually knows and understands along the varied continuums of child development.

**Conclusion.** The role of the teacher in a child-centered approach is one where the teacher creates and plans the learning environment (i.e., play, centers, projects) *with children*, uses child-centered learning strategies instead of curriculum-centered grade-level lesson plans, uses authentic assessment tools based on child-development to support the personalized scaffolding of children's varied learning (cognitive, social, emotional, physical), and develops a learning portfolio which documents the continued, positive development of each child based on a whole-child continuum. In a child-centered approach, the teacher is the professional who designs and supports learning opportunities that benefit and encourage every child, giving each child the gift of time to develop. The teacher responds to children with respect and care by nurturing every child's wonderful potential (Curtis, 2017).

The children in a child-centered learning environment see learning as an adventure, rewarding, and enjoyable. Because every child is supported as an individual, learning in his or her own timetable, children naturally develop in all areas of the whole child without pressure or stress – children can enjoy their childhood! Daniel Pink (2009) states, “human beings have an inner drive to be autonomous, self-determined, and connected to one another. And when that drive is liberated, people achieve more and live richer lives” (p. 71). The well-being of every child is at the forefront of the child-centered learning process. The child-centered learning process is a gift for every child, offering each one the opportunity to learn, to grow, to play, to achieve, to have friends, and to enjoy productive, happy lives.

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