LEARNER-CENTRED TEACHING STYLE: PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES OF TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT   Primary school principals and teachers were interviewed and observed to generate criteria that could identify a learner-centred teaching style. The data indicated two models of learner-centred teaching in schools. The first model infers that learning follows a pre-determined sequence which can be catered for once needs are determined; and the second, that learning is a complex process and providing for the complexity of the individuals in a class is achieved more effectively through an holistic approach. The implication of the first model is that the locus of control for learning is the prerogative of the teacher, whereas in the second, teachers and students share ownership.

INTRODUCTION

The New Zealand Curriculum Framework   (Ministry of Education, 1993) has established a guide to learning and teaching through a set of principles which challenge teachers to provide learning opportunities that foster achievement and success for all learners. Towards this end, teachers are encouraged to be responsive to individual learning needs, empower children to take increasing responsibility for their own learning, and ensure that children see their learning as being relevant, meaningful and useful. Implicit in the document is the suggestion that New Zealand teachers should embrace a learner-centred, rather than a teacher-centred, teaching style. But herein lies a problem for teachers. What, exactly, constitutes a learner-centred approach or style?

The current notion of learner-centred teaching in the New Zealand context can be traced to the 1920s and the experiential-learning ideas of the American educationalist John Dewey (Bennett, 1976). In his own country Dewey influenced a swing away from conventional ideas of schooling based on "bookishness" and teachers orally passing on knowledge, towards the concept of "progressive" education as an active, discovery-based process guided by a teacher. These ideas lost impetus in the USA in the 1950s when a perceived Soviet scientific advantage induced a reversion to positivist educational paradigms. However, in Britain, they gained favour with practitioners, leading to the British "informal" schools movement (Howes, 1974). By the 1970s, the advantages of informal schooling were reconsidered in the United States and an adaptation of the liberal British model established itself in the USA as "open" education (Gingell, 1973).

The essential elements of "open" education were embedded in a philosophy which interpreted Piaget's theory of child development as valid and in the belief that discovery-learning, understanding, and the *process* of education, were more important than content (Stephens, 1974). "Open" meant open to change, new ideas, curriculum, scheduling, use of space, honesty in classroom relationships

and shared decision-making. The characteristics of the "open" classroom were encapsulated in an environment that reduced the amount of whole class teaching to a minimum and provided conditions enabling children to actively pursue individual interests with a range of resources and materials. Children were trusted to direct many aspects of their own learning (Kohl, 1969). By considering each child as an individual it was deemed important that the teacher's role should include being a diagnostician, learning manager, facilitator, interactor and catalyst (Stephens, 1974).

Between 1940-60 New Zealand teachers were increasingly receptive to the concept of "open" education. The expansion of curriculum and recognition of the active role children should play in their own learning with an emphasis on understanding rather than rote learning (Sutch, 1966), led to the use of creative teaching approaches (Whyte, 1992). Teachers adapted educational advances initiated overseas and New Zealand established a reputation as a leader in liberal education and informal teaching styles (Ewing, 1970; Shallcrass, 1978). Ironically, it was noted in the 1960s in the *Report of the Commission on Education in New Zealand* (1962) that generally teachers experienced similar challenges to those that they currently face (Wylie, 1991). These challenges included social and technological change requiring different teaching techniques and class organisation in order to prepare children for the "knowledge explosion of the future" (Currie, 1962; Shallcrass, 1967; Freyberg, 1970). Despite the difficulties, there was a definite move in New Zealand during the "open" education era towards a greater emphasis on child-centred learning (McGee, 1994), the legacy of which continues to the present day as *learner-centred* teaching.

Today's teachers have access to differing perspectives of what constitutes learner-centred teaching. Constructivist learning theory, based on the idea that knowledge is the result of individual construction of reality, is the main theory that underpins learner-centred education. Learners discover and construct meaning from experiences in the environment through the analysing and detecting of patterns, forming and testing hypotheses, and integrating new understandings with previous knowledge (Piaget, 1969; Elkind, 1979; Osborne & Freyberg, 1985). A teacher's role is to create a learning environment that provides conditions to enable learners to clarify, discuss and explain their ideas. Within this supportive environment of active and creative learning situations, learners are helped to recognise their preconceptions and compare these with alternative frameworks. This enables them to change or modify their previous conceptions (Silvester, 1989).

A Study of Teaching Style

In the context of a recent study into teaching style (Whyte, 1995), information generated from a section of the research provides an interesting perspective on the New Zealand approach to learner-centred teaching. As part of the wider study, the researcher needed to establish a benchmark of learner-centred teaching against which to gauge the teaching style of novice teachers. This required taking cognisance of the views and practices of respected practitioners and involved observation and discussion with experienced education professionals to identify criteria which could provide guidelines for comparison.

At the same time, a model was needed against which to test the teachers' views. In terms of learner-centred classroom programmes and setting up an environment with the necessary *conditions* for fostering learning, it was decided to use an Australian model of learning (Cambourne, 1988). The natural conditions identified as appropriate for supporting literacy learning in this model appeared to be transferable as a source of conditions typical in all types of learning. The model seemed comprehensive yet with detailed categories. The conditions that are central to the model are immersion, demonstration, expectation, responsibility, use, approximation, response and engagement. They were thought to be effective for use in identifying conditions relevant to learner-centred teaching provided some adaptations were made, as shown in Figure 1.

Condition	Explanation
Immersion	Learners need to be constantly surrounded by a wide variety of meaningful learning
Demonstration	Learners need to have demonstrations of how learning is used and how to reflect upon their own learning
Expectation	Learners are influenced by the expectations of peers and adults around them. They need to know they will learn successfully.
Responsibility	Learners become independent if allowed to make their own decisions about learning tasks. Adults need to have more faith in young people's learning ability.
Use Employment)	Learners must have the time and opportunity to practise what they are learning if they are going to gain control over it.
Approximation	Learners work confidently and are more prepared to "have a go" when they know that teachers will accept and encourage their approximations
Response (Feedback)	Learners need to engage or interact with (respond to) the experience for learning to be achieved.

Figure 1:   Adapted-Cambourne conditions for learning

METHODOLOGY

This paper focusses upon one part of the wider study investigating the teaching styles of a pilot group of recent teacher education graduates. One of the purposes of the study was to establish a definition of learner-centred teaching. Derived from interviews and observations of highly regarded teachers, the definition was seen as a source of criteria against which the beginning teachers' practice could be compared.

Sample: Two groups of principals and teachers at six schools in a regional city were interviewed and/or observed, in order to establish a definition of learner-centred teaching. In the first group, the six principals were interviewed on their perspectives and definitions of learner-centred teaching and from their recommendations a list of learner-centred teachers in their schools was compiled. The second group comprised ten experienced teachers (years teaching range: 4 - 28 years) selected from this list, to be observed and interviewed and this group

represented a balance of class levels and gender. The sample therefore comprised six principals and ten experienced teachers .

Design: A combination case study design was used which incorporated a triangulated, qualitative methodology at the initial data collection phase (non-participant observation, individual focussed interview, and case study), and quantitative, comparative methodology during the data analysis phase (Cohen & Manion, 1989).

Data collection phase: The open-ended focussed interviews with principals, of approximately an hour in length, were conducted by the researcher. They were designed to establish first, the principal's personal views/definition of learner-centred teaching; second, a description of how learner-centred teaching was implemented in each school; and third, the identification of staff at each school who were particularly learner-centred in their teaching approach. The teacher observation/interviews were designed so that the researcher could observe each of the ten selected teachers for a morning in their classrooms and document an anecdotal running record of events and the classroom environment. This is a technique noted as advantageous in that in trying to note down everything that happens, it is possible to see a complex network of interactions (McMillan & Meade, 1985). In addition, there was a semi-structured interview of approximately an hour in length with each of the ten teachers following the observation, to ascertain number of years as a teacher, personal philosophy of learning and teaching, identification of teaching style definition/label, description of class programme organisation, identification of sources that influenced teaching style, and self-placement on a learner-centred-teacher-centred continuum.

When observing the teachers in action, an attempt was made to carry out all the observations within a restricted time span in order to maintain consistency of the time frame within schools. This was so that different pressure points during the year did not interfere with the teacher's usual style and programme and therefore, skew results. The purpose of the interviews was to validate and clarify the information ascertained in the observations; to "check" the match of the practice and interview data against each other.

Analysis of data phase: Case study responses were related to the interview schedule headings and an analysis of these statements made to detect patterns of similarity and difference. For *principals*, the focus was on definition and implementation in the school. For *teachers*, the focus was on philosophy, style label and estimate, class programme description, source of motivation of style, and continuum· Adapted-Cambourne conditions for learning were applied to each observation running record and case studies were analysed for evidence of the conditions (see sample in figure 2). Finally a comparison of data was made across the sample groups for quantitative trends. Pilot study trials, including consistency checks with a colleague experienced in research methodology, demonstrated that the instruments used could be successfully applied with an acceptable level of consistency.

Adapted-Cambourne Conditions for Learning	The Morning programme in Action:
Immersion Response Demonstration Demonstration Responsibility Expectation Use/Response Expectation Use/Response ...	Children seated around one of the carpet's edges, facing teacher and whiteboard area. The teacher collects in 'sausage' money for lunches then gives it to a selected child to count and mentally work out how many sausages are required, then calculate with paper and pencil to check accuracy. The teacher verifies answers and the child proceeds to organise the envelope and order form for the class. A prayer in Maori led by the teacher is followed by an assigned child choosing a waiata, which everybody sings. The roll is called, with individual greetings and well-being question/answer interchanges, in Maori. Children respond positively; and co-operatively, if the nominated children needs help with the answer- or question-formulation ...

Figure 2:   Example of the application of adapted-Cambourne conditions for learning to the case study observation

Observation notes were analysed for adapted-Cambourne conditions for learning, as in figure 2. The number of occurrences of each condition in an observation were counted. It was recognised that the observation data and analysis of the data according to the adapted-Cambourne conditions for learning had a certain subjectivity relating to the perception of the researcher-observer. However, only one person (the researcher) covered all the situations in pilot schools and had established an acceptable level of consistency for ratings. This ensured that one set of data would be analysed in the same way as the others.

RESULTS

Principal Interviews: The six principals appeared to hold two different perspectives about the nature of learning, which was reflected in a dichotomy of views of learner-centred teaching. Half of them perceived learning as following a pre-determined sequence. This could be catered for by a teacher assessing and evaluating to determine students' needs, followed by teaching that tracked the sequence and took the learner on to the next pre-determined stage. The other three principals had an alternative view that learning was not pre-determined, that responsibility for learning was owned by the learner, and that both the teacher and the learner worked collaboratively to determine and cater holistically for the learning needs of each learner. The manner in which learner-centred teaching was implemented in each school differed, but responses indicated a three-fold approach to the degree of principal involvement in implementation in classrooms. This ranged from highly proactive, to moderate, to fairly low-key. Teacher quality was a consideration spontaneously mentioned by all principals,

with the characteristics of *intelligence* and *willingness to learn* cited by all of them. A large number of names of teachers considered to be strongly learner-centred in teaching style was identified.

    Teacher Observation/Interviews: Observations of the ten experienced teachers revealed two trends. First, the polarised views of learner-centred teaching as held by the principals was reflected in the practice of the teachers, but there was not a match of principal/teacher philosophy according to schools. Second, there was a difference in level of personal projection of the teachers during their teaching, with longer-service teachers being more understated in style than those comparatively newer to teaching. Analysis using the adapted-Cambourne conditions for natural learning (on average Cambourne's conditions occurred between 25-35 times over a case study) showed that the conditions of Responsibility and Response (engagement) were not as much in evidence as the other conditions of Immersion, Demonstration, Expectation, Use and Approximation, as shown in Figure 3.

Name of condition	Immers- ion	Demon- stration	Expectat- ion	Respons- ibility	Use/Empl- oyment	Approxim- ation	Response/ Feedback
Number teachers with condition evident	10	10	10	2	9	10	4

Figure 3:   Adapted-Cambourne conditions for learning
observed in classroom practice

The most obvious indication of the lack of Response/feedback was in the numbers of children in classrooms who did not appear to be "engaged" and who were unable to sustain consistent attention at a task or activity without regular "reminding back" by the teacher. This was directly related to the other condition, Responsibility, in that it appeared that the teacher was taking responsibility for the behaviour and learning of the children, rather than the children themselves. In the classrooms with Responsibility and Response very much in evidence, the teacher rarely needed to attend to such matters as the children were obviously "engaged" and totally absorbed in their learning.

    There was also an obvious link with personal projection. It was noted that the teachers with the most years of service were more understated in projection and profile of themselves in the classroom environment than those who were comparatively recent to teaching. In most of the classrooms of teachers with less than half the service of the others, the teacher appeared to be a focal point in the classroom and the momentum of the programme appeared to be carried by personal charisma and personality. Again, this could possibly be seen as the responsibility being more in the hands of the teacher than the children; and could explain why there was, at times, more evidence of consistent and intrinsic engagement by children in classrooms where the teacher's personality projection was more low-key. The responsibility for learning and behaviour was seemingly more contingent on the children themselves, than the teachers, in these classrooms.

The *interviews* revealed insights that could account for the variances in practice. Several teachers noted that they currently felt less learner-centred in their teaching than they would like and had experienced at other stages of their career. The pressures and demands of the new curriculum and assessment documents had altered the school's expectations and requirements, which affected their approach. The teachers' philosophy of learning showed they recognised holistic learning styles as being more prevalent in their classrooms, than closely pre-determined sequential or serialist learning styles. Data-gathering and assessment pressures tended to influence the way their programme evolved so that they felt they were often required to use sequential-inferring assessment and evaluation, which pre-disposed them to use a more teacher-centred style than preferred. Overall, the teachers considered the establishment of a collaborative shared learning environment to be a major aspect of a learner-centred approach. Central to this philosophy was valuing the learner as a resource as well as aiming to help children develop responsibility for their own learning. The conflict between practice and philosophy was therefore attributed to school requirements.

Teaching Style Label: The range of labels offered by the teachers to identify their own teaching style included the following terms in order of popularity: *needs-based, developmental, informal partnership, verbal, child-centred/interactive, pot pourri, firm but fair.* These labels were not defined further by the teachers but were their chosen preferred term for the pedagogy they employed.

Class Programmes: There were elements of similarity in class programmes, in that the teachers used a topic-based approach and integrated curriculum areas as much as possible when translating school planning into the classroom. At times an integrated approach was constrained by having to accommodate the curriculum requirements of student teachers who regularly visit as part of their teacher education programme. All teachers shared some planning with children and had a range of different strategies for fostering independence and a collaborative classroom. In all schools there was some form of school-based assessment and evaluation the classroom teacher was required to contribute to, and this in varying degrees influenced the programme of the teacher. All the teachers maintained on-going formative and diagnostic assessment of the children and this was generally seen as a base from which to teach to needs, often through flexible groupings.

Influences: Initial influences towards learner-centred teaching were attributed to a variety of factors. Staff role-models, support, courses, opportunities to be innovative, and the role of the staff development programme, were noted. Personal characteristics seen to be influential were experience, knowing about learners from long observation, knowing one's capabilities, and having the confidence to stand up for one's convictions about teaching.

Continuum: Self-nominated indications on a continuum of teacher style showed more than half of the teachers perceived themselves to be more learner-centred than teacher-centred, and the remainder preferred to be more so, but felt they were less so now, than before *Tomorrow's Schools* (Figure 4).
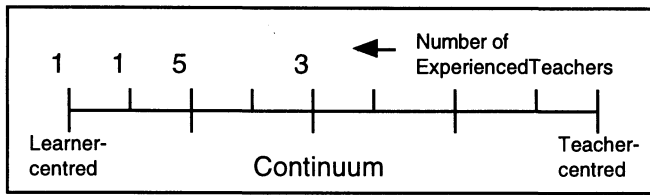
Figure 4:   Learner-centred - Teacher-centred continuum
             responses of experienced teachers

DISCUSSION

To answer the research questions of the broader study, it was necessary to utilise a combination research design that could incorporate a qualitative methodology for the data collection stages and allow for a comparison between the results of each of these stages. This seemed to suggest the need to quantify information, but not to the extent of restricting rich verbal responses and narrowing information into predetermined uniformity. Collecting primary school teachers' views and observations of practices of learner-centred teaching involves looking into a culture of learner-centred teaching as it operates within the broader culture of primary schools in New Zealand (Smythe, 1990; Ramsay & Oliver, 1993). Therefore, while not strictly fitting within the bounds of ethnographic research techniques which would require intensive periods of time in the school for the researcher (Cohen & Manion, 1989), the study involved the essence of ethnographic research, i.e. to enter into the classroom life of those being studied, become sensitive to the intersubjective meanings that are part of the learning environment, and acknowledge the effects of social influences on those being observed (Faire, 1992).

The semi-structured interviews of the case study subjects encouraged the respondents to produce a valid representation of their views and allowed for a fair amount of informality but had the disadvantage of being time-consuming during the analysis phase (Cohen & Manion, 1989; Pollard, 1985). The time-disadvantage was outweighed by the advantage of the case study method. The interviews and/or observation case studies provided a rich source of material from which to make generalisations, at the same time recognising the subjectivity of the interviewer and the coding (Cohen & Manion, 1989). The possible detrimental effect of an observer's presence was reduced by the researcher attempting to remain as unobtrusive as possible. Despite these shortcomings, some interesting patterns emerged.

Two views of teaching

The data revealed two views of learner-centred teaching which suggested the differing perspectives of the process of learning, proffered by the principals, was reflected in the observed classroom practice of the experienced teachers. The fact that there was not a direct match of principal philosophy with teacher philosophy, across schools, indicated the teachers were not under pressure to adopt the personal views of the principal.

Teachers who subscribed to the first view that the process involved assessment and evaluation to determine individual needs, followed this with teaching of the next "stage" of learning. They consistently assessed children's needs through collecting data about their learning, evaluating those data and providing teaching for the needs that were determined. Teachers who subscribed to the second view that learner-centred teaching was a holistic process, enhanced opportunities for individuals to learn through the provision of suitable *conditions* for learning. They provided contexts within which children could make choices and develop the understandings that suited their abilities, interests and needs, while the teacher facilitated when required. The inference that can be taken from these two variations of practice is that the locus of control for learning in some learner-centred classrooms remained the prerogative of the teacher, while in others the teacher tried to shift the responsibility to the children in terms of encouraging them to make more decisions for themselves.

The interviews though, revealed that some of the staff whose teaching style mirrored the first view, perhaps taught this way because of the demands of a system (Department of Education, 1988) which necessitated the recording of large amounts of data (Elley 1992) about children's learning and promoted segmentation. Personal understandings of children's learning were overridden by requirements which probably predisposed them to a more teacher-centred approach, suggesting that practice does not always reflect belief. The interviews supported this hypothesised discrepancy, in that the sample of experienced teachers as a group expressed a philosophy that reflected the second view, which was a more holistic view of learning and teaching. The focus seemed to be on a sharing, collaborative classroom that provided for the affective and aesthetic needs of the learner as well as the intellectual and physical needs.

Philosophy	Adapted-Cambourne Condition
The teacher is a joint learner/motivator/challenger with the children	*Immersion/ Expectation*
Children bring a lot of knowledge and beliefs with them to the classroom	*Response*
The teacher's job is to provide the right conditions to bring out learner potential (of teacher and children)	*Use*
Therefore the classroom is a learning centre where understanding and meaning are paramount	*Immersion*
The learning centre environment is collaborative -we do it together - we share: learning and the fun and not-so-fun times - we see both teacher and children as learning	*Demonstration Use Approximation Response*
There is valuing of children and their ideas	*Expectation*
There are high expectations of children Children have high expectations of themselves	*Expectation Response*
Children have responsibility for themselves and their goals	*Responsibility Response*

Figure 5: A representation of the philosophy of learning and teaching held by the experienced teachers, related to the adapted-Cambourne conditions for learning

When the elements of the philosophy were broken down into the adapted-Cambourne conditions for learning, all the conditions were present, but when the same analysis was applied to the observed classroom practice, two of the conditions (Responsibility and Response) were not consistently evident. The representation of the experienced teachers' philosophy of learning and teaching shown on the left of Figure 5 can be considered as the core of the philosophy of learner-centred teaching that came through in the interviews.

Such a philosophy would dispel the suggestion that the locus of control for learning in some learner-centred classrooms remained the prerogative of the teacher. Clearly the philosophy identified in Figure 5 fosters empowering of learners to take responsibility for their own learning and goals, and when adapted-Cambourne conditions are applied, this is even more evident.

Principals, teachers and teaching style

The manner in which learner-centred teaching is implemented in the six schools indicated there are varying degrees of principal involvement, ranging from highly proactive, to moderate, to relatively low key. An implication that might be taken is that the highly proactive principals, keen to develop a learner-centred school culture, would follow the second view of learning and would be influential in effecting staff to follow the second style of teaching, the holistic approach. While it was found that the teaching styles of their staff happened to be towards the learner-centred end of the continuum, it was not found that their staff styles were more learner-centred than the schools with moderate to low key principal-role. Indeed, the most learner-centred teacher worked at one of the moderate principal-role schools. This pattern shows a mix between a principal's philosophy of learning and the degree of principal influence in the implementation of learner-centred teaching.

There was no straightforward connection between philosophy and implementation. The discrepancy between principals, philosophy and staff practice questions the extent of the principal's influence. It appears that there is not a neat match between a principal's belief and their staff's pedagogy. Otherwise, the teachers with a more learner-centred approach would be found at the schools where the principals had the second, holistic view, and the teachers not as far along on the learner-centred continuum would be found at the schools where the principal had the first predetermined learning sequence view; neither of which was found. Where there was more than one teacher observed in a school, there was a combination of learner-centred teaching styles, which demonstrates that principals' beliefs do not necessarily influence all staff.

The next obvious consideration for the apparent difference in some observed practice came from the second trend that arose from the observation of experienced teachers. There were two distinct patterns in teachers' style and personal projection which were seemingly dependent on years of experience. It was noted that most of the teachers with greater length of service were more understated in their projection and profile of themselves in the classroom environment compared with those who were "comparatively recent" to teaching. There appeared to be a direct relationship between years of service, practice, and

the second view, the holistic view of learner-centred teaching. It could be suggested that these teachers probably trained during an era when interest in "open education" was at its height in New Zealand, and this may have impacted on their style.

It could be that some of the other influences which the experienced teachers as a group attribute to their teaching style, are also salient. Figure 6 indicates the various motivators that contributed to the learner-centredness of experienced teachers. Considering the bottom row of elements, it can be suggested that these variables also strongly influence practice. It is hypothesised that degree of learner-centredness in teaching style is attributable to a relationship between personality, experience as a teacher, and understanding about learners and the learning process.

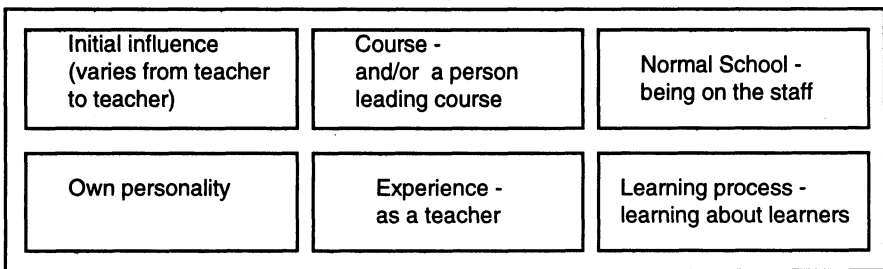| Initial influence (varies from teacher to teacher)	Course - and/or a person leading course	Normal School - being on the staff
Own personality	Experience - as a teacher	Learning process - learning about learners

Figure 6: Influences that have affected the learner-centredness of experienced teachers

This could explain why teachers who are comparatively new to teaching can be more susceptible to system pressures which impact on their teaching style than teachers who have longer years of experience. The latter's understanding of the vagaries of the system and experience allows them to interpret the requirements of the system in their own way, confirming the tendency for primary school teachers to accept official documents but radically reinterpret them (Smythe, 1994), and use initiative and decision-making autonomy in spite of policies which could be restrictive (McGee, 1994). Research has found there is a strong relationship between teacher aims and opinions and the way teachers actually teach. Informal teachers value social and emotional aims, preferring to stress the importance of self-expression, enjoyment of school and the development of creativity rather than academic attainment alone (Bennett, 1976).

Although the subjectivity of this type of research can be questioned, nearly 30 years of inconclusive research findings raised doubts that traditional positivist methods of research were useful to teachers (Doyle, 1977; Tom, 1985). Now there is less emphasis on trying to establish statistical links (process-product) and more on trying to establish the factors that affect learning (Nuthall & Alton Lee, 1990). This study therefore utilised a pragmatist multi-method approach of gathering data and interpreting them, more in keeping with this development.

CONCLUSION

The real value of this study for classroom teachers is that it supports the view that there is no one set way to implement learner-centred teaching in the classroom. Two different approaches considered by teachers to be valid forms of the teaching style were found in classrooms and schools within close proximity to each other. Both approaches were working effectively for the teachers using them, which satisfied the demands of their principals and schools, and were compatible with most of the principles laid down in *The New Zealand Curriculum Framework*. It is, of course, possible that if this research had been carried out in other areas of the country, it may have produced even more variations of learner-centred philosophy and teaching style. It would seem that it is largely up to teachers themselves to determine how they interpret, implement and maintain the process of learner-centred teaching in their classrooms. The ultimate test as to whether their teaching style is successful is the progress achieved by their students and their motivation and attitude to learning.

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