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STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING IN THE  
ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM

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**Abstract:**

Through working with and observing students in England, Sweden and America, I personally believe student-centered classrooms to be both effective and engaging to students. After student teaching in Sweden, I was inspired to research more about student-centered instruction and what exactly this entails. The following paper consists of my own observations and how they tie in with current research on the student-centered learning in the elementary classroom. Through both research and my own interactions with students, I have come to the analyzed that student-centered classrooms are beneficial to both the teacher and student in multiple ways.

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**Introduction:**

For the past two years, I have been lucky enough to teach in schools in two countries, observe in another, and work in both public and private schools. Though my studies abroad, I visited and observed in an English school and student taught for four weeks in a Swedish school. When comparing these international schools, it is the Swedish school system that most sticks out in my mind. Upon entering these schools, one almost automatically detects a subtle difference from any English or American school. Besides the obvious fact that students call their teachers by their first name rather than address them as mister or missus, one can see that there is a trust placed on the students that is rarely seen in America. It was upon seeing how *well* this system works that my interest was first piqued about student-centered learning. Because I had such a positive reaction to learning that places more responsibility and choice is placed on the student, I wanted to systematically inquire into just how effective student-centered learning is in the elementary classroom. I wanted to discover if student-centered learning environments were effective for student learning and question the practices that teachers use to create such environments. Throughout this paper, I will identify support for the effectiveness of student-centered teaching using personal experiences.

For the following paper, research and observations were taken from an elementary Swedish school, and both private and public schools in Central Pennsylvania, and personal tutoring sessions. The intention of this paper is to come to a more complete understanding of how children learn and what factors affect their learning. I hope to understand to what degree you can give students control over their education and still

meet the learning objectives. Ultimately, I want to apply the findings of this thesis to my future elementary classrooms.

### **What is student-centered learning?**

From the time we are infants, humans are constantly learning, whether it is from simple observation or experiential learning. Acquisition of knowledge takes place everywhere, whether it is at the kitchen table or in a formal classroom. As a future educator, it is for me to understand what will facilitate my students learning and what may hinder it. It is my responsibility as a teacher to observe my students and listen to what they are telling me, as “Being an accurate, careful observer of students gives you the master key to unlock the individual door to each learner in your classroom” (Fraser, p.2). Students will show you what they learn, both formally and informally. It is how the teacher reacts and adjusts instruction that measures the ability of the teacher. I believe in the Montessori idea “that adults have as much to learn from children as children do from adults” (Fraser, p.1). As Lucy Calkins stated, “If we adults listen and watch closely, our children will invite us to share *their* worlds and *their* ways of living in the world. And then, when children become our teacher, showing us what they see and delight in and wonder about and reach toward, then, and only then, will we be able to extend what they know and enrich their ways of knowing” (Fraser, p.3). It is school that creates this “important environment that can foster comprehensive growth in students and adults alike” (Cornelius-White & Harbaugh, p.xxii).

In discussing the importance of observing our students and learning from them, where does student-centered (or learner-centered) instruction fit in? What *is* student-centered instruction? Cornelius-White and Harbaugh define their model of learner-

centered instruction as “balancing challenge and empathy, high standards and high acceptance, achievement and enjoyment, as well as research and practice” (p.xxiii) as well as “an approach to teaching and learning that prioritizes facilitative relationships, the uniqueness of every learner, and the best evidence on learning processes to promote comprehensive student success through engaged achievement” (Cornelius-White & Harbaugh, p.xxvii). This is supported by Willis’ statement that “When subjects express feelings of contentment and safely, a stimulating, but comfortable amount of challenge has a positive influence” (p.35). The two previous statements are how I am choosing to define a learner-centered environment for the purposes of this paper. The term learner-centered, or student-centered, is most commonly used to distinguish from more traditional approaches to education. Below is a table that lists some student-centered terms that differentiate from more traditional teaching methods.

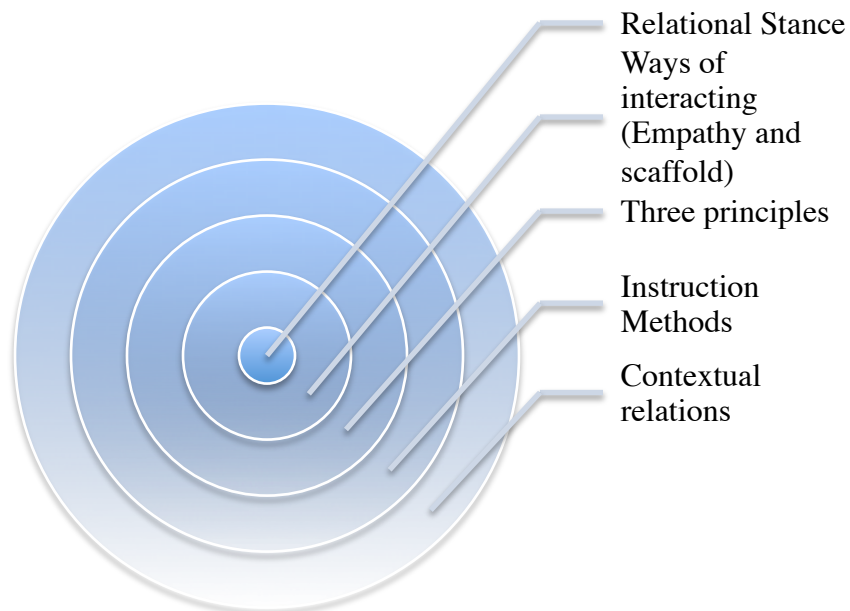
<i>Student-Centered Approaches</i>	<i>Traditional Approaches</i>
Person centered	Curriculum centered
Self-directed	Teacher directed
Child centered	Teacher centered
Process (how)	Content (what)
Constructing understanding	Covering subject matter
Thinking	Memorizing
Experiential methods	Lecture
Active	Passive
Showing	Telling
Cooperation	Competition or individualism

Inquiry based	Knowledge based
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(Adapted from Cornelius-White & Harbaugh, p. xxiv)

As shown in the table, emphasis is placed on the student's own inquiry and construction of knowledge, rather than more passive ways of learning.

The following figure and table shows the model for student centered instruction that aims for comprehensive student success, as adapted from Cornelius-White & Harbaugh.



Explanation of the Figure

Category	Examples
Relational Stance	Warm, real, trusting
Ways of Interacting	Scaffold, Empathy
Three Principles	Encouragement, adaptation, challenge
Instruction methods	Cooperative learning, direct instruction,

	authentic inquiry
Contextual Relations	Relationships with other teachers and administrators, relationship with parents, relationship to one's own fitness

Adapted from Cornelius-White & Harbaugh, p.xxvi

The figure shows how the principles of student centered learning interrelate with each other and bridge to other ways of interacting. In the relational stance, the teacher has to have warmth and respect toward the learners and leads to ways of interacting, such as having empathy and differentiation for each student. The relationship fostered with the student leads to the principles of encouragement and challenge. Instructional methods such as cooperative learning and authentic inquiry are core strategies for student-centered education. This model acknowledges relational influence or reciprocal relationships, that is, student success can foster positive teacher relationships even as teachers foster student success (Cornelius-White & Harbaugh).

Flexibility and differentiation to the needs of individual students is a core aspect of student-centered learning. Instructional strategies should combine new and innovative ideas as well as best practice but be based on the needs of the students. Differentiated instruction is “ensuring that what a student learns, how he/she learns it, and how the student demonstrates what he/she has learned is a match for what that student’s readiness, interests, and preferred mode of learning are” (Cornelius-White & Harbaugh, p.20). In student-centered classrooms, teachers make use of differentiated instruction, as that may be what is best for the student. This will foster student success, as well as help to create a safe and secure classroom environment and trust in the teacher.



## **Educational Theory**

Student-centered learning is deeply rooted in several foundational educational theories, especially humanism and constructivism. Prominent in these theories is the classical humanistic approach that rests on building a positive teacher-student relationship. Trusting relationships “foster the formation, process, and completion of self-actualizing and democratic goals, pedagogical flexibility, and the value of helping students discover how to learn more effectively so that ‘learning becomes life’” (Cornelius-White & Harbaugh, p.18). It was Carl Rogers who advocated the need for student self-actualization, which is to value all aspects of the student such as engagement and achievement.

Dewey and Piaget were two of the most prominent educational scholars and are still very influential today. Together, these two intellectuals form the main points of constructivism. “Dewey suggested that people learn through authentic experience and reflection. Piaget asserted that people develop through experiencing within their environments” (Cornelius-White & Harbaugh, p.20-21). It was Vygotsky that “clarified the meaningful social and linguistic aspects of the environment” (Cornelius-White & Harbaugh, p.20-21). All of these aspects mentioned are pivotal to creating an effective student-centered classroom atmosphere. Exploratory and cooperative learning environments and positive teacher-student relationships help create a positive classroom environment and thus a classroom conducive to student-centered learning.

## Researching the Proof

As a future educator, I firmly believe in the importance of allowing school to become a place of inquiry and investigation, rather than an institution of rote learning. This is especially important in the elementary years. As said by Willis, “childhood is a time when students are naturally curious and want to pursue their interests by learning all they can about the things that intrigue them” (p.34). In recent years, however, the narrowing of the curriculum by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the resulting standardized tests has made the process of student-centered learning much more difficult. Unfortunately, “this generation of students could become the most tested, least knowledgeable generation of public school students in decades” (Willis, p.34). As a Helsinki principal stated, “If you only measure statistics, you miss the human aspect” (Hancock, p.96). Students are now highly at risk of losing their natural propensity for learning if engagement in learning through their strengths, interests, and prior knowledge are taken out of the school curriculum. Though teachers are now limited in *what* they teach, they are not limited in *how* they teach it. Though NCLB is reducing the opportunities to keep student’s curiosity alive in student-centered learning environments, teachers can still implement strategies to keep this childhood curiosity alive.

There has recently been brain research undergone to support research-based and more student-centered teaching strategies. Neuroimaging and brain mapping investigations show what happens in the brain when learning is occurring, through colored PET and functional MRI scans. As a result, “neuroimaging brain research demonstrates that superior learning takes place when classroom experiences give active voice to students” (Willis, p.34). If the curriculum is relevant to the student’s lives or if

the student has a genuine interest, neurotransmitters are released and increase executive function and attention. This leads to engaged and motivated students. This brain imaging just proves what makes sense: if you have an interest in something, you are more willing to learn about it.

Conversely, if students feel alienated from what they are learning or can make no connection to the learning, there is increased blood flow to the “emotional” portion of the limbic system. When the brain is in this hyperexcitable state, neural activity to the higher learning and association centers in the brain is greatly reduced. In this state, students can become anxious about their lack of understanding and frustrated with both themselves and their learning. In the brain at this point, there is reduced stimulation to the parts of the brain where information is processed, associated and stored for later retrieval (Willis, p.34). I have observed this firsthand with a first-grader, who is in the phonics stage of learning to read. As part of his tutoring assignments, he would be assigned short books with basic phonic words. Though this student could decode the words, he often struggled with overall textual meaning. Because these books consisted of mostly nonsense words, with no plot or story, this student would become frustrated with his reading. He wanted to be reading for a *purpose*, not just for the sake of reading. In his eyes, there was no reward for decoding the words: they did not mean anything. This was shown when he would ask, “But why?” or “That doesn’t make sense”. When we would come back to the same book at a later date, there was no word recognition or higher fluency. This was because there was nothing in the book for him to make a personal connection to, and to therefore activate higher processing learning. This is in line with the theory that learning that is connected with positive emotion is retained longer, and that stress and anxiety can

interfere with learning (Willis, p.35). As a Finnish principal so succinctly put it, “Children learn better when they are ready. Why stress them out?” (Hancock, p. 97).

As a teacher, it is important to achieve the correct balance when planning lessons, as “the right balance of activity comes from instruction that promotes mild to moderate challenge and stimulates students’ authentic curiosity and engagement in lessons” (Willis, p.35). It is in this balance that students learn most effectively. Examples of this could include student choice, hands-on activities, cooperative learning and engaging literature. These examples will allow students to have a personal connection with the material but also may incorporate an appropriate challenge and achievable goals. Aleksis Gustafsson, a Finnish teacher with a Master’s Degree in education, incorporates this method into his own teaching of 7-and 8-year-olds. He often takes his students outdoors for classes, giving them laminated math cards saying, “Find a stick as big as your foot”, or “Gather 50 rocks and acorns and lay them out in groups of ten”. When questioned on his methods, Gustafsson simply stated, “I did research on how useful this is for kids. It’s fun for the children to work outside. They really learn with it” (Hancock, p.99).

In the student-centered classroom, the teacher can easily connect to the students’ interests through interest inventories, peer interviews or even student autobiographical poems. The teacher can then take this information and incorporate it into the curriculum. This could be as easy as looking for real-world examples before starting a new unit and connecting them to what the teacher now knows about each student. By showing interest in student choice, students have a higher propensity to be involved in their own learning rather than sitting there and learning by rote memory. “Instruction that includes open-ended and student-initiated questioning offers a balance of emotional and intellectual

opportunities and, therefore, helps students engage their motivation and higher-order executive functions” (Willis, p.36). Simply, if students have an emotional or personal connection to their learning, they will invest more attention in their lessons and activities.

The following teacher self-survey could be used to assess a teacher’s own teaching strategies within the classroom and what may be done to acquire a more student-centered environment. Motivated teachers could even turn this survey into a format that they would give their students to gather information about their teaching.

TEACHER SELF-SURVEY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Is your classroom a place where students feel welcome, connected, safe, and sure they will be treated fairly?</li><li>○ Do your lessons have enough surprise, novelty, and variation to inspire awe or capture and hold attention?</li><li>○ Are there opportunities for students to explore a multitude of skills, abilities, and interests so they can discover one or more that engage them and use their learning-style strengths?</li><li>○ Do you use experiential learning, inquiry learning, multisensory demonstrations, and cooperative activities to help students manipulate information by actively processing data through the executive function centers in their frontal lobes?</li><li>○ Are your lessons planned so the student can <i>own</i> the knowledge by making connections with personal meaning and prior experience, allowing the learning to be personalized and pleasurable?</li><li>○ Once you have their attention, do you help students stay connected by engaging their interests and creativity?</li></ul>

- Are you giving recognition for progress, not just success and final goal achievement?

(Adapted from Willis, p.36-37)

### **School-wide Support**

While academic learning occurs within the classroom, it is how a school is organized that has a major effect on the instructional exchanges within the classroom. Bryk has identified five essential areas for supports in school improvement. These five areas are: a coherent instructional guidance system, professional capacity, strong parent-community-school ties, leadership drives change, and lastly, a student-centered learning climate. For the purpose of this paper, I will only focus on the need for a student-centered learning climate. While all schools strive to achieve a safe and orderly environment, it is the endorsement of ambitious academic work coupled with support for each student that follows the student-centered model. According to Bryk, it is this combination that “allows students to believe in themselves, to persist, and ultimately to achieve” (p.23). There is evidence that “listening to pupils, encouraging their participation and giving them more power and responsibility (i.e. greater democratization) can enhance school effectiveness and facilitate school improvement” (Harber, p.38). Studies have found that when students are given more responsibility, there are better examination results, better behavior and attendance and less misbehavior. Instilled in students are a strong sense of responsibility, initiative to solve problems and communicate effectively and a commitment to learning. In schools that gave students a democratic voice, it was concluded that “It seemed to everyone clear that when pupils had a voice and were

accorded value, the school was a happier place; where pupils are happy and given dignity, they attend more and they work more productively” (Harber, p.40). Both democratic practice and a focus on the student have proven to have considerable benefits, both for the whole school and individual student.

### **The Student-Centered Model as Best Practice**

Through my research and observations focusing on student-centered learning, I have decided to focus on three main areas within the topic: cognitive approaches, motivational and affective approaches, and developmental and social approaches. Together, these four main aspects create the student-centered model that focuses on both the learner and the learning process. Since 1993, this student-centered model has been thoroughly researched and emphasizes the principles of “encouragement of meaningful and deep learning, challenging higher-order thinking, and adaptation to individual and cultural differences” (Cornelius-White & Harbaugh, p.xxv).

## **COGNITIVE APPROACHES**

Cognitive approaches to learning in the student-centered classroom focus on the academics of the classroom, rather than facilitating relationships or creating a safe learning environment. In the following sections, I describe my observations of student-centered learning in this area and come to conclusions on why these student-centered learning strategies are beneficial to the student.

### **Notes on a Private Charter School in Central Pennsylvania**

While working on my elementary education degree, I decided it would be best to have experience with the private school system in America. All of my previous

experiences had been with the public schools, both because that was the type of school I had attended and that is where most of my experience has been. While working and observing in this private charter school, I noticed how similar it was to the Swedish school system in that it was very student centered and had a more relaxed classroom atmosphere. In this particular building, there are only about fifty students in the whole school. The school goes from first grade up to eighth grade, and has mostly mixed grade classrooms. The room I was in was a mixed first and second grade classroom. Because there were only twelve students in the class and they were at different grade levels, instruction automatically became very individualized. The challenge was to meet the needs of every student while creating a stimulating learning environment for all.

The classroom itself had a very relaxed classroom atmosphere with the students calling their teacher by the teacher's first name. Student's work is displayed throughout the classroom, giving students a sense of pride in their finished work. Because of the student's young age, the teacher did have to exert control over much of the happenings in the class rather than having complete chaos rein. Despite this, the teacher used a student-centered approach with the class and the students trusted and respected their teacher for this.

One area of work that was completely individualized in this class was reading. In this one class of twelve students, the entire reading spectrum was represented, from students learning phonics to students reading chapter books. This is what I observed from my first reading lesson with this class.

“Today during reading class, the teacher instructed students to continue reading the book they were on. For the younger students, this



meant working with an older student. The teacher would then take this opportunity to work with the younger students who are still developing their reading skills. The teacher called over one student at a time, and had the student read a book on their current reading level. The teacher would record the words that the student missed. This word would then go in the students “Word Box” to be practiced with at a later date. When the student was reading, the teacher would record the fluency of the reader by taking notes on what was missed, how many times, etc. During reading, the teacher would do this with every student so as to know where each student was how and how they were developing their reading skills.”

October 11, 2011

While it is more time consuming to work with every student individually, the teacher is ensuring that each student is receiving the best instruction that is geared and individualized toward his or her own personal needs. When I talked to the classroom teacher about the difficulties of individualizing instruction for each student, she said, “Yes, it is time consuming, and can be difficult, but it is what is best for the child. With a classroom like this, there is no way that the whole class could focus on the same work. The readings need to be geared toward the student’s needs and developmental level” (Interview, Fall 2011).

Bouncing off the idea of focusing on each child’s needs and developmental level, spelling is also a subject that becomes individualized for each student in this class. Every week, each student gets an individualized list of spelling words that they are to focus on. Tests therefore have to be given separately, as well. This extreme individualization within this classroom is a prime example of fostering to the needs that each child has and giving them the tools to build upon their learning.

Upon observing the teacher in this educational setting, I saw that the school focused on implementing successful humanistic theories to adapt to the specific circumstances of each student. In this case, the teacher was effective in that she would “recognize the uniqueness of every student, incorporate student’ needs for special attention into their teaching, and differentiate their instruction to fit those unique needs” (Cornelius-White & Harbaugh, p.19).

## **MOTIVATIONAL AND AFFECTIVE APPROACHES**

Despite how effective a teacher may be at the more technical aspects of teaching, there is still a huge human element when interacting with students every day. Teacher-student relationships are central to student learning and creating an effective classroom atmosphere. It was Carl Rogers that advocated, “facilitative relationships characterized by empathy, acceptance, and honesty are the key to human growth and development” (Cornelius-White & Harbaugh, p.xxv). These traits are essential to creating a beneficial student-centered classroom. In my observations, I have come to the conclusion that building positive, trusting relationships with the students and creating a safe classroom environment is key to creating student-centered classrooms.

### **Notes on the Swedish School System**

Before I start examining observations and notes from my time in Sweden, I will explain some of the school and class dynamics, as the Swedish school system is very different than the American school system. For my placement, I was in a Year 4 classroom, the American equivalent of 5<sup>th</sup> grade. In all there were 43 students, however this group was almost always split into two sections: the red group and the blue group.

The classroom was basically comprised of two classrooms in one, each a mirror image of the other. A divider would go up in the center when separate lessons were going on. There were 3 main teachers for this group of students and together they would team-teach. As a teacher, you would teach the same lesson twice, once to each group. Depending on the resources needed, the teacher would switch sides of the room, or students would switch sides. When students switched, they sat in the same seat that they had on the other side of the room. Core subjects were Swedish, and Swedish geography, math, science and English. This was little to no differentiation. Students had a special every day, such as woodworking, art, sewing and gym. Gym was separated by gender and students were required to change their clothes and shower after each gym class.

At the school I was in, there were separate areas outside the classroom where students would gather and wait to be let inside the classroom. This is where students would hang their coats and backpacks and change their shoes. Students wear different shoes inside (if any at all) than they do outside. It was very common for students to walk around in their socks inside the classroom. When I asked my mentor about this, she simply replied, “That is just the Swedish culture. It is more comfortable for the students and better for cleaning” (Skogeryd, 2011).

Students in Sweden also call their teacher by the teacher’s first name, rather than addressing the teacher as mister or missus. This is not seen as a sign of disrespect, rather that the teacher and student are equals who work together to reach a common goal. Coming from America, where a student would never dream to call a teacher by their first name, this seemed revolutionary. However, my mentor merely stated, “That is just the way it is, especially if there are a couple teachers in the room. It could get confusing”

(Skogeryd, 2011). After spending some time with the students, I rather liked this informal form of address and did not find that students disrespected me any less than if they were addressing me as “Miss Schooley”. In fact, the students in general were much more respectful than I had observed in the American school system.

### **The Importance of Trust**

From my observations over the course of my college career, I have come to believe that trust is a fundamental aspect to developing and maintaining beneficial teacher-student relationships. This is true at any age, but especially important for elementary learners. Such trust is shown in my observation journal from my time in Sweden.

“The school atmosphere is very different here from home. Students don’t wear shoes in the classroom; they can sit however they choose (leaning back, leaning over the table, etc.), though they do have assigned seats. In the morning, they are let into the classroom at all once by the teacher and greeted individually (good morning, hand shakes, etc). Coats and shoes are left outside the classroom. When going to specials, the students walk outside the building, rather than through it, all without supervision. For gym class, after showering, students went back to class independently, whenever they were ready. To go anywhere within the school (lunch, specials, etc.) students walk around the building.”

May 5, 2011

When discussing the aspect of trust to my Swedish mentor teacher, she said, “I think it’s very important to listen to the students. What they say and what they think. I will have respect and be respected but I also have to respect the child” (Skogeryd, 2011). She explained to me that in Swedish classrooms, respect is earned on both ends of the

spectrum. For a teacher to expect respect from the students, the teacher has to give respect. While this concept makes perfect sense to me, as an American student who was raised in the American school system, it was also a bit revolutionary. In my own experience as a student, respect was rarely a mutual concept. Respect had to be given to the teacher automatically, whether it was earned or not. In my observations in the Swedish school, both parties mutually gave respect. Most importantly, this *worked* in the classroom. Students wanted to work hard to please the teacher and this resulted in not only a productive classroom but also a much more relaxed and trusting classroom environment.

Overall, the greatest difference I noted in the Swedish school system was that more trust and responsibility is given to the students. On one occasion, the class was going on a field trip to some local stables. Rather than a school bus picking the student up at the school and dropping them off at the desired location, a city bus drove the students as is normal in the Swedish school system. As I wrote in my observation journal,

“Today our class went on a field trip to horse stables nearby. There was no school bus, but an ExtraBus picked us up at the school and dropped us off at a normal 101 bus stop on the side of the road. Then with over forty students, we walked along the road (with no sidewalk) to the drive that led to the stable. It was actually a long walk, probably  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile. I thought it was interesting that we just weren't dropped off right where we were supposed to be, considering it was only school students on the bus and we hired this bus. Once at the stables, there was also a period of time where the students were doing nothing and the teachers were not supervising them. After the manager of the stables showed up, the class was split in two. However, two girls were allergic to horses and stayed

outside while their group interacted with the horses. They had no supervision.”

May 6, 2011

In my experience, I would never want to walk along the side of a road with over forty students. My Americanized experience would have thoughts like liability and terrible accidents running through my head. As someone responsible for all these students, the idea would terrify me. But as this happened, in this case, the students handled themselves very well, followed directions, and most importantly, *had fun* with the entire experience. The teachers gave clear directions and trusted that their students would follow them. The expectations are set up that students will behave themselves, and the students follow suit.

There were several times throughout my time in the Swedish classroom that after a long lesson, the teacher would have the students go outside for a “Flying Kilometer”. This would happen if there was a particularly difficult lesson or if the students were starting to lose their focus. During this time, all the students would go outside and either walk or run around the entire school. This walk would take them off school property and out of the teacher’s sight. The fact that the teacher allows the students this time shows two things: that she is respecting the students as people and she is trusting them to return to class in a timely manner. The respect for the students is evident when she sees that they need a break. This time outside is an opportunity for students to get some fresh air, stretch and burn off some energy, as well as taking the time to refocus for the next lesson. Not only will this allow the next lesson to run effectively, the students will be refreshed and ready to learn. The fact that students are briefly leaving school property and are mostly unsupervised infers within the students a sense of responsibility and trust. I asked

my mentor about liability and trust. What if a student doesn't return? In that case, it is the same as it is in America. She responded by stating, "We are responsible from 8 am till they finish they day. They are not allowed to leave the schoolyard without permission. If they don't come back we have to find them" (Skogeryd, 2011). The fact that teachers are still liable simple enhances the fact that so much trust is placed in the teacher-student relationship. Unlike the American propensity to sue others, suing a teacher or a school is nearly unheard of in Sweden. Through conversations in university courses and though talking to my mentor, I learned that it is very rare that teachers or schools are taken to court by parents. In fact, my teacher did not know of an instance that this had ever happened. This societal tendency to stand by teachers and support their decisions rather than challenging them in the courtroom leads teachers to feel more free with their students by giving them more trust. Teachers in Sweden are more concerned with what is happening with the individual students rather than having to cover all their bases so they don't get sued. It is up to the American school system to stand by their teachers, as this will ultimately benefit the student.

In the case of the Swedish classroom I was in, such trust in the teacher-student relationship grows over the course of three years. Each teacher in that school has the same class of students for three years, allowing for the teacher and students to really know each other and benefit and grow from that relationship. This is not typical of all Swedish schools. However, in the class I was in, this was their third year with the same teacher. The teacher knew all the students individually and knew that she could trust them with more responsibilities. Because of this, the classroom was intensely student centered, not only because that is the Swedish way, but also because a special

relationship had been formed between each individual student and the teacher. Knowing the student is an essential aspect to this approach and this is evident from my observations in the Swedish school system.

### **Notes on a public elementary school in Central Pennsylvania**

Much of my time spent in the American school systems gaining experience was in the public school system, where I myself had attended school. In the classroom I was placed in, there were nineteen students who formally addressed their teacher by missus. Conversely from the Swedish school system, the school day is much more formalized. As students move throughout the halls, they are expected to be quiet and stay in a straight line. When students are outside, they have to stay within school grounds, and always be supervised by a licensed teacher. Despite this more rigid environment, students still have fun with their schooling and there is still an aspect of student-centered learning in their day.

### **Creating a Safe and Secure Classroom Environment**

A huge aspect of having a student-centered classroom is in creating a classroom environment where all students feel safe and welcomed. In the classroom I was placed in, this is achieved in several ways. In the first, the teacher and class have a weekly meeting (if time allows). This gives both the teacher and the student an opportunity to share what they did over the weekend or what their plans are for the coming weekend. In this activity, all students share two stories as their peers listen. Students always sit in a circle so that they can see whoever is talking and be an equal part of the group. By taking the time from pressing academic work, the teacher is showing that she values each student



individually. By listening to student's stories, the teacher and class are also getting to know each student on a more individual basis, such as their interests and activities.

Another student-valuing activity, that the students particularly love, is memory circle. For every "memory circle", one student's name is pulled out of a hat. The chosen student then discusses five of his or her interests. Their name, picture and likes are then on the board until the next memory circle. Every student then writes a letter to the chosen student about their interests and what they have in common. At the next memory circle, everyone reads his or her letter to the one student. The main student will then collect all of their letters to make into a book and to keep as a memory from their peers. Throughout all the year, all students will be chosen for memory circle and be able to take away letters as a keepsake from all of his or her peers. The teacher also writes and shares a letter for each student. This is an activity that all of the students love. They all feel valued in the class and love sharing their letters with one another. By the teacher taking the time to do this shows that individuals and their interests and valued within the classroom. Student voice is taken into account and everybody within the classroom environment learns more about one another.

## **DEVELOPMENTAL AND SOCIAL APPROACHES**

Research firmly supports the idea that strong teacher-student relationships are central to creating a positive classroom environment, and thus, a constructive learning atmosphere. Carl Rogers put forward that "facilitative relationships characterized by empathy, acceptance, and honesty are the key to human growth and development" (Cornelius-White & Harbaugh, p.xxv). There has been much educational research to

support the need for positive and caring student-teacher relationships, as they provide a “positive climate out of which natural learning and motivation emerge” (Cornelius-White & Harbaugh, p.xxv). I saw such relationships when I worked in a fourth grade Swedish classroom. It was easy to observe within minutes that there was a mutual respect between students and the teachers involved. Every morning, as students enter the classroom, the teacher stands at the door and says good morning to every individual student. It was clear that the teacher saw the students as people first, rather than another number in the classroom. This fostered a feeling of being appreciated within the students as well as helping to create an encouraging classroom environment.

During my time working and observing in the Swedish school system, the most distinctive aspect I saw to focus on the student was “kompissamtal”, or a class discussion. The following entry is what I wrote in my journal.

“Once a week, the class is split up and the teacher asks each student questions such as “Did you hurt someone’s feelings?” “Were your feelings hurt by someone?” etc. This week, red and blue groups split the group. As always, as the teacher comes around, the students have to give a simple yes or no answer and not mention any names. If a student says yes, they may elaborate on the situation, though they may not say any names. Other students can comment but they can’t call out and they have to raise their hands. This is great for students to talk about their feelings especially if they need help from an adult. Students also see how their actions affect others. This is a great strategy for reducing bullying and clearing the air within the class.”

May 13, 2011

It was in the class routine to have *kompissamtal* once a week. Depending on the lessons that day, it could be a whole-class discussion, divided by gender (as I saw during my first *kompissamtal*), or split into red and blue groups. During this time, students would come together and sit in a circle, with the teacher a part of the circle as well. As I stated in my journal entry, this was a time for the students to air their grievances and talk out any issues they may have had with an adult. This is simply another instance where the teacher is looking to the needs of the student, respecting those needs and facilitating a safe environment to foster to the needs of the students. By looking beyond the academic needs of the student to more affective needs, the teacher is fostering “people that cannot only think, but who can feel, who are concerned about others, who can develop and utilize all their potentials as persons – as fully functional or self-actualized persons” (C.H. Patterson, p.8-9).

## **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

Student centered instruction is a classical humanistic and constructivist approach to teaching that, in my observations and research, has shown to be a beneficial teaching method for both students and the teacher. Such an approach depends on democratic goals, instructional flexibility, trust, and the importance of creating a safe learning environment for all students. Carl Rogers is considered to be the founder of person-centered educational theory and argues, “the facilitative relationship is one characterized by empathy (understanding students where they are at), authenticity (being real), and unconditional positive regard (accepting and prizing)” (Cornelius-White & Harbaugh, p.18). As a future teacher, it is my responsibility to create “profound, nurturing, student-

centered and provocative places for learning that would provide wondrous opportunities for all” (Schultz, p.4).

The implications of both observations and analysis done on student-centered learning show the ways this method can be implemented into the classroom and the components that make it successful, not only for the student, but for the teacher as well as the whole school. Unlike more traditional methods of teaching, student-centered instruction involves the individual student and what works best for them. Educators must build cooperative relationships both with the student, as well as parents and administrators to provide any necessary support to ensure success. Strategies in to classroom may be cooperative learning groups, exploratory learning, reading groups and many more. Most importantly, the teachers need to take advantage of children’s natural curiosity in learning to engage in them the strategies of lifelong learning.

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