Person-Centered Education: A Meta-Analysis of Care in Progress

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Abstract

Research on person-centered education (PCE) is vast but largely unknown to most educational researchers. The learner-centered model (LCM) is a recent evolution of PCE, which is highly influential at current. Neither body of research has been meta-analyzed separately or together. This paper reviews the theory of PCE and LCM and describes the methods of a meta-analysis in progress. PCE appears to be a demonstrably effective educational reform movement built on improving student-teacher relationships.

Person-centered educational research (PCE) began in the 1940’s and declined after it reached its peak in the 1970’s prior to the invention of meta-analysis. Hence, no meta-analysis has been conducted on PCE. It has been researched in 7 countries with approximately 100,000 students (Aspy, 1986; Rocha, 1984). PCE evolved into the learner-centered model in the 1990’s though connections are rarely made between the two traditions. Today the learner-centered model (LCM) is an influential paradigm with empirical research from grades K-20, involving over 35,000 students in 3 countries (McCombs, 2004), but which also has not been meta-analyzed. The ongoing project synthesizes both traditions. This paper aims to qualitatively describe PCE, including its evolution to today’s LCM, as well as the methods used in the meta-analysis.

The Person-Centered Educational Approach

PCE is an approach to education, which hypothesizes that people learn and teach best when reciprocally facilitated with empathy, warmth, and genuineness. It grew from the person-centered theory and research with counseling. Empathy refers to an experience of understanding by one person of the feelings, meanings, and goals of the experiences of another. Empathy is always uniquely experienced with each person. Understanding a specific person’s learning style means accommodating to these individual and cultural differences. Warmth is an unconditional positive regard, respect for, or acceptance of another’s experience. Genuineness refers to an honesty within a person of that person’s own experience. It is a congruence in which a person is not distorting or denying his or her own experiences and being “real” with others. Together, the three attitudes form an interpersonal approach of establishing respectful, positive relationships between students and teachers (i.e. how to effectively care). Its goal is broad-actualization of individuals and their systems. Cognitive, behavioral, and affective outcomes are sought. In addition to the traditional affective and behavioral outcomes from the therapy research, the largest PCE researchers in the USA, Dave N. Aspy and Flora N. Roebuck, also conceptualized PCE to include facilitation of critical thinking behavior (Aspy, 1972; Aspy & Roebuck, 1977). According to Rogers (1983), “Significant learning combines the logical and the intuitive, the intellect and the feelings, the concept and the experience, the idea and the meaning. When we learn in that way, we are whole” (p. 20).

PCE has roots and similarities in several traditions, such as affective, humanistic, open, Montessori, and cooperative education. However, LCM is most similar in name and operationalized concepts. LCM emphasizes both a focus on the learner and learning itself. While the learner-centered model was established in relation to the scientifically based Learner-Centered Principles (APA, 1997), research into its effectiveness has utilized the Assessment of Learner-Centered Practices (ALCP) batteries (McCombs, 2004). While there are four forms of the ALCP (K-3, 4-8, 9-12, 13-20) with subscales varying
by age, the extent of the teachers’ development of positive relationships, honoring of students’ voices, encouragement of higher-order thinking, and adaptation to individual differences are the core ingredients measured. Positive relationships are very similar to those described by PCE. Honoring students’ voices is close to respectful empathy. Encouragement of higher-order thinking is analogous to the facilitation of critical thinking measured in the classic studies of Aspy and Roebuck. A teacher who is open to and adapts to individual differences is a teacher who understands and genuinely accepts a student’s unique learning experience, thereby adjusting his or her teaching style. The ACLP also includes measurement of teachers’ learner-centered beliefs in addition to their perceived behavior.

Both older and newer PCE research has been uniquely concerned with issues of diversity (Aspy & Roebuck, 1977; McCombs, 2004). Both approaches recognize how mainstream education (Aspy, 1986; Cornelius-White & Godfrey, in press), such as current reform movements based on high stakes testing (Amrein & Berliner, 2003) often disenfranchise minorities, including Latinos (Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Rocha, 1984). Also, the LCM and the PCE paradigms have been adopted in the context of technology enhanced learning (McCombs, 2001; Motschnig-Pitrik, 2001; Motschnig-Pitrik and Holzinger, 2002), which can help bring education to those who might otherwise not be served.

Methods of the Research Synthesis

Meta-analysis has revolutionized the utilization of traditional research findings. It is a method used to quantitatively synthesize research in a specific area for both descriptive and inferential purposes. It is particularly useful to policy makers, students, and the general public in addition to scholars as it gives an accessible picture of the size and extent of what a specific field has found. When a field reaches sufficient maturity, a meta-analysis of primary studies is called for to guide current practice and future research towards effectiveness. Meta-analysis can be particularly helpful in applications to diverse populations, like those seen upon the borders of the United States, because it can specify the extent and magnitude of relationships that exist in the literature with regards to specific groups as well as all people tested. Furthermore, it can be utilized to guide current researchers in their studies, such as to strengthen diversification, complement existing research, or simply to help to establish contacts.

Mackay, Barkham, Rees, & Stiles (2003) appraised the quality of 255 meta-analyses and literature reviews published during the 1990’s using 8 criteria. Only 20% met 7 criteria and 11% met all 8 criteria. Meta-analysis quality did not improve over this time. The current study was designed specifically to meet all 8 criteria: clear questions, comprehensive search for primary studies, inclusion criteria, validity of primary studies, accuracy and bias control, analysis of variation in findings, appropriate combination of findings, and adequately supported conclusions.

Clear questions

First, what is the extent of the relationship between person-centered teacher behaviors and positive student outcomes? Person-centered teaching behaviors of empathy, warmth, genuineness, nondirectivity, higher order thinking, encouraging learning/challenge, adapting to individual and social differences, and composites of these are the independent variables. Synonyms for the three facilitative attitudes, such as understanding (empathy), unconditional positive regard, respect (warmth), and congruence (genuineness) were also used. Dependent variables are either cognitive or affective/behavioral. Cognitive dependent variables include achievement batteries, grades/retention, perceived achievement, verbal achievement, math, science, social science, IQ, and creative/critical thinking. Affective/behavioral dependent variables include student participation/initiation, positive motivation, self-esteem/mental health, social connection, attendance/absences, global satisfaction, disruptive behavior, negative motivation, and drop out prevention.

Second, what variables modify the relationship between teacher behavior and student outcome? The researchers coded 38 modifiers, including 5 publishing, 2 methodological, 7 sample, 5 student, 4 teacher, 4 independent, 5 cognitive dependent, and 6 affective/behavioral potential modifying variables. In addition to variables on interval scales, variables on nominal scales included up to 9 categories and variables on ordinal scales had up to 5 levels. Examples include publication year, student ethnicity, and perspective used to measure an affective/behavioral dependent variable (student, observer, teacher, or composite).

Comprehensive search

The author searched PSYCINFO and ERIC for all studies using words from the independent variables list. From these studies, the author checked all references for potential studies and sources for more studies. The author found several bibliographies, which he also searched. These included: Carkhuff’s (1983), Peter F. Schmid’s (www.pfs.com), Swisher, Monsted, Aide, Wilson, & Kirschenbaum’s (1980), Gray’s (1976), & Stanley’s & Purkey’s (2001). The author contacted experts including but not limited to Barbara
McCombs, Judith Meece, Reinhard Tausch, Dave N. Aspy, R.R. Carkhuff, Howard Kirschenbaum, William W. Purkey, and Jerome Freiberg for additional studies. Several studies were unobtainable, mostly papers presented at conferences, theses/dissertations, or incorrectly cited studies, which could not be located in any search engine or from the experts above. From thousands of references and abstracts, the first author reviewed approximately 1000 articles, book chapters, reports, and unpublished papers.

**Inclusion criteria**

A study needed to have statistical information from which a correlation could be calculated or estimated as well as one or more independent variables and one or more dependent variables as specified in the primary research question. The studies also needed to be written in English or German. The author began the search in August 2002 and concluded in May 2004. Studies needed to available during this time to be included. There were 119 included studies representing 1450 findings and over 355,000 learners.

**Validity of primary studies**

Validity was assessed with one nominal and one ordinal scale. First, two coders categorized studies as either correlational or comparative. If a study used both correlational and comparative methods, it was classified as comparative. Second, the coders assessed each study using the Scientific Methods Score (Sherman et al., 1997), a 1-5 Likert scale the author identified from other meta-analyses. In brief, a score of 1 is characterized by having statistics, 2 an independent variable that was measured prior to a dependent variable, 3 comparison groups, 4 randomized or controlled moderators, and 5 large samples. A higher score generally assumes the presence of features from lower scores. For example, a pure correlational study with independent variables and dependent variables measured in the same sitting, which involved 1000 students would be scored 1. An experimental study with one control group, involving a convenience sample of 100 students would be coded 3.

**Accuracy and Bias Control**

To establish what possible modifying variables would be coded, 30 teachers (all of which were graduate students), four professors in three colleges in two continents, and one high school student brainstormed potential modifiers. The researchers aimed for multiple perspectives from different vantage points to assure adequate breadth in what would be investigated. All studies were read and coded by two coders. In English, the first two authors coded 92% of studies independently. Differences on variables between coders were recorded and then discussed until both coders unanimously agreed upon the best coding. An inter-rater reliability (kappa) will be calculated from a random sub-sample of studies. The remaining 8% of studies in English and all studies in German were coded by two persons working together. This was necessary for coders to reach a level of understanding of the coding process. Since there were relatively few studies in German, moving beyond this learning and orientation phase was not possible.

**Analysis of Variation**

The researchers will use SPSS 10.0 to track the role of the 38 potential modifiers in the variation of the results. In addition to mean correlations for various findings, standard deviations, and practical explanations of these values will be given. The author also intends to give some sample effect sizes so that the results may be more easily compared to meta-analyses that use this basic statistic.

**Appropriate Combination**

As many of the studies included correlational methods, the author designated that correlation was the conservative and most appropriate primary statistic to represent the findings. The MetaStat1.5 program was released one month prior to the commencement of the meta-analysis, assuring a reasonably up-to-date statistical package for calculating, estimating, correcting, and combining correlations. This program also was co-authored by Gene V. Glass, the originator of the meta-analytic technique. The author also consulted the Hunter & Schmidt (1990) authoritative comprehensive text on meta-analysis as well as Robert Elliot, author of the largest and most recent meta-analysis of person-centered therapy, and John Hattie, a reknown synthesizer of all educational innovations.

**Supported Conclusions**

While the researchers have not concluded the research, conclusions will aim to be adequately supported and critiqued. Likewise, the author aims to recommend future research, which will both utilize the best findings and correct for gaps in the literature.

**Conclusions**

This paper reviewed the theory of PCE, including its evolution as the current LCM. It described how PCE can address the need for educational reform that is based upon respect for human dignity, supported by scientific research, and is appropriate to minorities, like Mexican-American students on the border. Finally, the author also illustrated the importance and process of a quality meta-analysis to synthesize and utilize this large body of research.
References
Aspy, D. N. (1986). This is school: Sit down and listen. Amherst, MA: Human Resource Development Press.