

Challenges to the Concept of Student-Centered Learning with Special Reference to the United Arab Emirates: “Never fail a Nahayan”

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Student-centered learning has been conceived as a Western export to the East and the developing world in the last few decades. Yet the concept of student-centered learning is less than fully developed in the literature. Philosophers of education often associate it with frameworks related to meeting the needs of individual pupils, from Deweyan experiential learning, to the “pedagogy of the oppressed” (Freire, 1972) and related, often dialogical social justice orientations. On the other hand, we can also see it become, in the era of teacher “accountability,” a jingoistic advertisement for a variety of practices and educational ideologies which can be seen to lead to a global devaluation of the educational profession, and the related bolstering of the view of the student as a consumer. In this essay, I want to disentangle these different views of student-centered learning and expose some of the limitations of both the exportable model of student-centered learning as well as the contemporary ideal of it in philosophy of education. To add some critical context, I consider the case of education in the United Arab Emirates today, which provides an extreme example of what can happen when student’s self-identified needs and interests are prioritized above all else, in an idealized or exaggerated student-centered concept of learning.

I Come Bearing Student-Centered Learning

At its base, student-centered learning emphasizes the student as an individual learner, whose needs and capacities should be at the forefront of educational practice. In one typical explanation, the teacher is the “guide on the side” in student-centered learning, catering to unique individual learning needs, and aiming to “meet the goals that have been made by the student and the teacher” (Overby, 2011, p. 109). A narrative often told in American education is that traditionally education there was conducted by a teacher, with students seated theatre-style, so that all could face the teacher rather than their peers, as it was understood then that the teacher was the holder of knowledge, and the students were the recipients. This traditional U.S. education aimed to serve industrialization and assimilation of diverse and/or poor newcomers. In the common school, Horace Mann argued that such education be both mandatory and free of charge: a public service to society, not simply to the students (Ballantine, 1993, p. 373).

This “teacher-centered” educational perspective correlates nicely with Freire’s (1972) concept of banking education, and though it is not entirely relevant to early American history, it is often included nonetheless in education foundations class discussions on the history of education, in this context. According to the banking concept, the educator is like a banker, from which the students may take a withdrawal, as if education was a transparent transaction of objective, abstract knowledge. In its model form, the student is conceived as knowing nothing and having no power, while the educator knows all which matters, and is all-powerful. Teacher-centeredness is therefore opposed to student-centeredness, as the former is hierarchical, vertical, and/or elitist, while the latter is horizontal, egalitarian, and democratic. As Tozer, Senese and Violas (2006) write, “At the core of Mann’s effort to reform common schooling was his belief that the school must inculcate an appropriate set of moral values in the *state’s* children” (p. 65,

my italics) while, on the other hand, progressive education of the early-twentieth century “rejected the traditional, classical curriculum and its methods of rote learning in favor of *child-centered curriculum* that emphasized student interests” (p. 109, my italics). Thus Dewey argued that students needed to be active to learn and develop skills, and that education could be democratic, not just aiding industry but benefiting society overall (e.g., 1916). Likewise, Neill’s Summerhill in England (1921) was designed to be free of society’s demands for social reproduction (1960).

Student-centeredness has been promoted today in diverse contexts. Following the Bologna Process for greater educational mobility throughout Europe in 1999, the EU funded a project, Time for a New Paradigm in Education: Student Centered Learning (“T4SCL”) (EU/LLL, 2010). Student-centeredness is encouraged here as participatory learning, responsibility taking by both students and teachers, and consent to learning goals by both parties (EU/LLL, 2010, p. 39). To give another example, the United States Peace Corps, which sends thousands of U.S. citizens abroad each year to build capacity in disadvantaged areas, has as one mission encouraging teachers in diverse countries on student-centered techniques, from Ukraine (OSIRP, 2012) and Macedonia (PC, 2012), to Thailand and South Africa.

What is being exported today as student-centered learning by Peace Corps and the like is not opposed to indigenous teacher-centered traditions, however. Instead, teacher-centeredness can be seen to have been brought in at an early time period by Western powers, in many cases. In Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, colonial and missionary schools were often among the first or earliest schools, though in some cases some version of schooling or education may have existed previously, which was diminished in this context (Altbach, 1971). The colonial schools aimed at educating typically some model minority group population (an elite or chosen group, mostly boys), to enable effective colonial administration. Such innovations were designed from an outsider perspective (Altbach, 1971). They are today often seen as part of a system of cultural domination, “as part of the process of penetration of the dominant country into the countries to be dominated,” influencing populations to identify with an empire, rather than with their tribe, or with “the world proletariat of which they are a part” (Masemann, 2007, p. 107). As Macaulay wrote of (Asian) Indian education by the British in 1935, “We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions... a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect” (p. 430). According to Yahya (1994), it was convenient to view education as serving local needs; yet many Victorian-era imperialists saw such as quite trivial in the overall context (p. 40).

Even within the West modern education has hardly been student-centered as a whole. The United States administrated a sort of colonial education in the twentieth century, in the case of Native American children’s assimilation in government schools. This education was said to aid the Native American child toward “civilization,” and thus to serve both the Native American student, and the maintenance of a functional, productive society, organized by European Americans. A paradox becomes evident when one sees how methods labeled as progressive were applied in this case, however, “not as a means of strengthening Indian cultures but as motivational tools to encourage the willing acquisition of English and the acceptance of schooling and as a cure for the ever-present ‘problem’ of Indian recalcitrance and apathy” (Tozer, Senese & Violas, 2006, p. 209). Here we see educational aims crumbling apart from progressive educational practices, as these schools responded more to the interests of mainstream society than to those of the students’, even if the pedagogy was progressive education, loosely understood as a motivational technique.

Student-centered learning today has been taken up by both those viewing education as society *maintaining* and as society *changing*, by both neoliberal and social justice oriented thinkers. On the one hand the social justice educator in the Freirean tradition sees education as a dialogic act between individuals idealized as equal parties in the educational setting: “The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself [sic] taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. In this project, arguments based on ‘authority’ are no longer valid” (1989, p. 67). In James Banks’ latest treatment of multicultural education within international context, the individual student is similarly conceived as central: “The school should help students to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to function effectively in their community culture, in the mainstream national culture, and within and between other ethnic cultures. The school should not require students to become alienated” (2009, p. 28). Both conceptions emphasize the individual needs and empowerment.

On the other hand, student-centered learning is employed within a neoliberal, market-driven conception of education today. The individual student and her desires and interests play a role in this view, particularly with regard to pedagogy, which is understood as more effective when catered to unique student needs. However, the role of student-centered learning, as in Native American Indian education in the early-twentieth century, often ultimately becomes in the context of international standardization and homogenization secondary to the role of other commitments shaping practice. As Rizvi & Lingard (2010) write, “it is no longer possible to understand education policy without an appreciation of the central role that testing and accountability regimes now play in policy development and evaluation” (p. 114). Teachers are accountable today for performing student-centered pedagogy, “producing creative, proactive individuals” (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 20). This is an explicit goal in national and local educational policies around the world today. However, the simultaneous prioritization of the production of data *demonstrating* educators’ commitments to student-centeredness in terms of learning outcomes has led paradoxically to a “concentration on those pupils who are close to the desired achievement levels to a neglect of others,” and the “thinning out of pedagogies” (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 20).

The affirmation of student-centeredness is showcased in the labeling of accountability programs, and other discourse around neoliberal initiatives which seem to punish educators for students failing tests. “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) would seem to indicate that every student is attended to through the educational innovation. However, when implemented NCLB lacked attention to learning differences and learning disabilities in testing. Though it was described as a way to close achievement gaps in some places, such gaps often grew, while educational opportunities were diminished: “districts in seven states shorted their work week to four days in order to save money...the reverse is happening: standards are being lowered in reaction to federal mandates (Berman, Marginson, Presgon & Arno, 2007, p. 242). Also lingering in the discourse of NCLB as well as the charter school movement in U.S. education today is the idea of the student as a consumer. Teacher authority and professionalism have been deemphasized here as students are supposed to be given a product, an “outcome” (i.e., autonomy, and a student-centered education), which teachers are viewed as either succeeding or failing to produce.

In sum, many kinds of educational philosophies, interventions, and practices have been described as student-centered. Fundamental to most traditional conceptualizations of student-centered learning, such as progressive and social justice orientations of the past and present, are the needs and interests of students as understood by teachers and students alike. However, it has

also been discursively employed recently as a pedagogical strategy to increase teaching effectiveness toward goals constructed from the top down. In the latter discourse the teacher rather than the student is central, as the teacher becomes accountable for facilitating learning, while neither party is prominent in decision making about educational aims and assessments. In this context, though we can see student-centered learning discourse as a global homogenizing force in educational policy, moving from the West to the East and South, I question its effective exportation. I consider the implications of the apparent movement of student-centered learning from the West in the next section, before examining student-centered learning as a philosophy of education in its implications in an exemplary or exaggerated form, in the United Arab Emirates.

They Come Bearing *What*?

Reagan (2000) contrasts Western education with various indigenous, non-Western educational traditions around the world to arrive at a definition of Western and non-Western education from a comparative viewpoint. Though of course one can only generalize about what is “essential” when discussing such large-scale abstractions, Reagan argues that fundamental to distinguishing the two is the differentiation of schooling and education. As Reagan sees it, non-Western traditions are rich in education, but not in schooling, whereas Western traditions hold education and schooling as one and the same (p. 206).

The distinction can be seen as one of formal versus nonformal education. Formal education is institutionalized, graded and “above all certificated” (Rogers, 2004, p. 77). It is standardized at a large scale and transferable across systems, enabling comparison, greater ability to count every learner, and the development of clear, measurable objectives. Nonformal education has been defined on the other hand as being less or non-institutionalized. Enrolment is not required, as in one UNESCO definition; nor is it provided in a systematic way by the state, as according to USAID (Rogers, 2004, pp. 79-80). Reagan also cites experiential modes of education facilitated by families and small community groups, participatory mentoring, and vocational skills development which do not originate from political governing organizations.

In neither formal nor informal educational systems does the individual student need to be conceived as central to practice. Though on their face models of vocational and experiential learning common to indigenous, nonformal educational traditions seem more aligned with progressive and student-centered pedagogies, against the backdrop of Western liberal philosophy, Reagan casts many of the traditions as communitarian, emphasizing social rather than individual needs. Many Western thinkers have likewise viewed formal schooling as more focused on the individual; assimilationism is, after all, a liberal scheme, aiming to provide opportunities within a larger sphere than that of cultural or local traditions (Banks, 2009, p. 11). Yet schools as exports of the West, in the context of unequal power relations, colonialism, and neoliberal global education policy, are also difficult to truly view as student-centered, in their aims or practical implications. The formalism of education-as-schooling can be seen to lead to greater accountability that learning outcomes are met by individual learners systematically, but this hardly implies that such formalism is at the direct or sole convenience of the student, as societal interests in scaling back public expenditure or measuring international competitiveness are also factors for increasing standardization and formalization of mass schooling.

Today many postcolonial societies prioritize student-centered education in the context of both indigenous and globalizing concerns. Indigenous factors are values and priorities important to a society today which are not prescribed or particularly influenced by outside forces. These may include a pluralism of values, cultures, or lifestyles; forms of sustainability; or religious

flourishing. They can be seen as benefiting students individually even if they do not lead to greater economic productivity in society. As for the globalizing factors, student-centered learning is often correlated with outcomes, standardization, and accountability, as previously mentioned. The EU “T4SCL” describes this trend as an international paradigm shift in education: “from the focus on teaching to a focus on learning...the most noticeable changes that can be seen are a greater emphasis on the development of skills...and the writing of course units in modules in terms of intended student learning outcomes” (Rust, quoted in EU/LLL, p. 10). Once curriculum is developed and implemented in terms of measurable student outcomes, one can be held accountable for teaching said outcomes. These outcomes can serve students and society, providing objective criteria by which to evaluate educators, and maintaining “accountability” in relation to cross-national and other comparative standards (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

In South Africa, for example, student-centered learning has gone hand-in-hand both with outcomes-based education and the support of indigenous empowerment and knowledge in official policy documents since the end of Apartheid (Malan, 2000). In the past few years the emphasis on outcomes has been reduced and is increasingly seen as a failed policy, but initially outcomes-based education there was conceived as a way to solve problems related to teacher resistance to change since the end of Apartheid, by enforcing student-centered practices (Msila, 2007). The policy discourse surrounding both concepts—outcomes and student-centeredness—emphasizes local needs: “Outcomes-based education considers the process of learning as important as the content... The South African version of outcomes-based education is aimed at stimulating the minds of young people so that they are able to participate fully in economic and social life” (BE, 2011) thereby “ensuring that the educational imbalances of the past are redressed” (BE, 2011, p. 4). In South Africa they also changed “students” to “learners” in all government discourse in an effort to point explicitly to active learning.

South African decision making with regard to outcomes-based education and student-centered learning references as well following best practices in the United States and Western Europe, despite the fact that educational results related to outcomes and student-centeredness are not altogether clear or positive within and across the societies (Malan, 2000; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Indeed, all over Africa it has been observed that despite the possibility that practices associated with indigenous educational traditions could potentially strengthen societies, “the specification of educational quality is presumed to be universal rather than nationally, culturally, or situationally specific...Ironically, many of the strategies intended to achieve education for all in practice, render it a distant dream” (Samoff w. Carrol, 2007, p. 385). In the case that indigenous traditions may be more student-centered in aim or practice than Western imports, it would appear that the West is exporting something other than student-centeredness, a strange teacher-centeredness, as teachers are in outcomes-based models the major site of intervention, the producer of outcomes, and the body responsible for learning.

Thus, something resembling student-centered learning is becoming dominant around the world, which is viewed as an educational policy orientation exported from Western societies. However, as student-centered learning is incorporated into a globalizing educational policy, the latter’s simultaneous focus on outcomes and transferability moves away from student-centered learning as attentiveness and responsiveness to individual students; pedagogical needs are emphasized, but students’ overall needs and interests are constructed from outside. Outcomes are prescribed for students and teachers, such as learning math, for instance, or becoming educationally mobile. Yet their voices are absent from conversations about mobility and standards. Top-down policy cannot be exported for student empowerment. Though

homogenization might provide students around the world with more equal opportunities someday, non-Western traditions of education, as progressive education, can better match the unique conditions of students around the world at present, by including student interests and needs as important factors. In sum it seems that traditions have been dismantled around the world, replaced with Western teacher-centered schools, then criticized from within and outside for not being student-centered, in the paradoxical way the concept is understood in globalized policy today: as a consumerist pedagogy, rather than as an overall orientation. Next I question the extent to which student-centered learning, even in ideal form, is a good thing in all contexts.

“Never Fail a Nahayan”: Facing Students in the United Arab Emirates

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is new to schooling. A British protectorate during most of the twentieth century, no formal schools were built there until a Kuwaiti Mission school opened in 1953 (Daleure, 2011, p. 53). Though today access to education is universal there, due to a lack of schooling in the culture, and a lack of suitable trained Emiratis, the school system has been staffed primarily by expatriate workers, coming from parts of the Arab world with longer histories of schooling such as Egypt, Lebanon, and Jordan; from the West, Canada, Australia, Ireland, the United States, and Britain; and from India; to work in schools, the Ministry of Education, in teacher training, and in higher education. “Emiratization” is now being emphasized, which means in education the training of locals to work in this field, to take over their own educational system with a greater degree of autonomy than was practical in the past.

Of course, to be without schools is not to be without education. Like other Gulf Region countries such as Qatar (Boivin, 2011) and Oman, the UAE has traditionally facilitated education as religious study, in small groups and one-on-one. Many view this traditional Islamic education as more social constructivist in nature than the educational system in place in the UAE today. Islamic education “reflected the process of using thinking during the teachings”; “Even though it was highly textual and based on memorization, it involved critical thinking and inquiry” (Hourani, Diallo & Said, 2011, p. 340-1). Reagan’s examination of Islamic education shows a focus on social construction and student-centeredness:

All children have the capacity to learn... the purpose of education is not viewed as one of “correcting” or “remediating” a sinful nature but rather one of guidance... like the American philosopher of education John Dewey centuries later, [Ibn Khaldun] focused on the social nature of education... [and] addressed the role of reason in the learning process.... (2000, p. 191-2)

According to Hourani, Diallo, and Said (2011) the pedagogical difference here is due to the development of national postcolonial identities wherein “attitudes, opinions, and values are societal rather than individually constructed” (p. 344). Emiratis and others in the Gulf Region have come to see themselves as in opposition with the West, with Islamic education and western education treated as dichotomous models. Islamic education was conducted in a homogeneous cultural context where hierarchies and cultural values were well-entrenched. This differs from an Emirati classroom today, where a class in a men’s college might be taught by a Western woman in a skirt and sleeveless blouse, and a class in a women’s college might be taught by a white man in a tie and blazer. Despite a tradition of student-centeredness in Islamic education, in the UAE today the difference is seen as an issue of liberal versus conservative education. As one observer notes, “Western trained academics working in the Gulf region have to censor their academic thrust of knowledge in order for it to fit adequately to the sensitive social, cultural and religious contexts within which they are operating” (Hourani, Diallo & Said, 2011, p. 352).

In this context, student-centered learning as a concept shaping the curriculum according to student interests and needs becomes corrupted, because the students are empowered from a material, socioeconomic viewpoint over the educators. This disparity makes Emiratisation in education challenging, as “One of the biggest issues is pay equity and conditions of employment; Emiratis typically demand higher pay and shorter working hours in comparison with expatriates employed in the same job” (Raven, 2010, p. 16). Today in the emirates pay for newly licensed teachers is among the highest in the world. Yet Emiratis are in general unmotivated to become teachers, due to having a high financial status in comparison with expatriate workers, who come from relatively poor and/or depressed educational environments all over the world to teach there.

Material factors impact on Emirati’s motivation to study in a variety of fields and at various levels, as well. In the UAE, “nationals perceive that good jobs can be had with only a high school diploma or less,” which is a reasonable perception, indeed (Daleure, 2011, p. 62). To give a bit more context here, in Abu Dhabi, the capital of the UAE, “citizens each have an average net worth of \$17 million” (ABC, 2007); though the society suffers from inequality, the average student’s disposable income in the Emirates is likely to be at least twice that of their teachers, who are middle-class expatriate workers, making more in the UAE than they would at home, but hardly approaching the wealth of the emirates. Research on student motivation to learn English has found that “No participant responded positively to the idea of going abroad to live for work or study, and the anecdotes that they told about their travels abroad generally tended to be negative” (Fields, 2011, p. 38). Emiratis do well without advanced education, and do not see greater opportunities globally than within Emirati society. As Emiratisation in education is unsuccessful, hiring quotas are sometimes dramatically applied. It is not uncommon to see in a university setting in the emirates, for example, a young Emirati (no more than 35-years old) with a local Master’s degree working as an Associate Provost, while middle-aged, nearing-retirement Westerners with doctoral degrees from Western universities remain permanently as Assistant Provosts.

The power dynamic of teacher-centered learning, where the teacher holds power over the student, does not apply in this context as a tradition, or *de facto* model. However, at the same time, student centeredness is also challenged there by a “lack of willingness to learn interactively” among Emiratis (Raven, 2010, p. 18). Student-centeredness paradoxically demands teacher-centeredness in pedagogy in the UAE, because the students find active learning inconvenient. There is no force, such as norms, student interest, or external motivation, to study rigorously. Thus, to attend to student interests here means to not require seriously learning.

At its most exaggerated form, this organic, materialist-based student-centeredness of the UAE results in a teaching condition I call “Never Fail a Nahayan.” The Minister of Education Sheikh Nahayan is known for supporting open, collaborative learning spaces such that he will take listen to any student’s concerns, despite being quite busy as the Minister and the Chancellor of the three public universities in the UAE. He is not known for firing anyone students dislike. However, this does not stop educational professionals in this hierarchical, dual-track Emirati/expat society from fearing repercussions related to students not liking them, from him, down to much lower-level managers. As a professor there, your supervisor may like you, but she may fear for her own job security in the case you get a bad review from students under her watch; thus, at all levels of the educational hierarchy it is emphasized to not fail students.

Student evaluations are formally a part of most faculty review processes in the UAE to a much greater extent than one would see in a Western society. This is related both to government emphasis on educational innovation and student-centered learning, and to the goal of making

UAE institutions credible in the context of the global movement of students within the region and around the globe (Aubrey & Coombe, 2011). In this context teachers are encouraged to find ways to hold students to some types of standards, without making class “too hard.” Institutional research committees might spend time determining how instructors have cooked their books to avoid failing students, thus catching teachers cheating for their students and for themselves. And of course, should a student have a last name like “Nahayan,” as the Minister of Education, or “Nahyan,” as the large ruling family of Abu Dhabi, educators are likely to be extra careful around them, though such discrimination is ineffective from either an outcomes-based or student-centered viewpoint.

The practice of “Never Fail a Nahayan” can be seen among educators in the UAE from primary and secondary schools to tertiary institutions, and is not simply about the Minister of Education and his ilk, but rather about a culture of radical student empowerment and educator fear. As one blog devoted as a way for educators there to blow off steam has reported recently on an institution in Dubai, “the worst thing about the place is that the students know that they can complain to the head of the department and swiftly get the faculty member into trouble. The students will outrageously lie doing this, and get away with it easily” (Oasis, 2012). Testimonies like this about institutions in the UAE can be easily found online, warning away potential instructors. In sum, the UAE has on the one hand “many Western teachers being brought in” to rid the nation of outdated techniques and bring in student-centered approaches (Raven, 2011, p. 18). On the other hand, the UAE has richer students than teachers, and more empowered students than teachers on a material level; teachers actually fear the students depriving them of their livelihood. Student-centeredness has run amok.

Of course, the UAE is not the only place where teachers are beginning to fear their students—what their students can and cannot do, and their motivation, or lack thereof—in the era of accountability. The well-known *Freakanomics* (Levitt & Dubner, 2005) follows U.S. teachers who cheat tests in an effort to maintain their position; in South Africa, national tests are subject to an elaborate security apparatus, not due to *student* interest in the answers, but due to *teachers’* interests in how their own performances will be considered based on the exams at the end of the year. In these contexts power is not tied so apparently to knowledge; if knowledge is power, students in the Emirates are definitely lacking it, though they are quite powerful in the context of their instructors who want to maintain a high income and full employment. “Never Fail a Nahayan” is an effect of a consumerist orientation’s influence on education; but it is not in the UAE today technically of Western origin, nor of indigenous Islamic traditions. Rather “Never Fail a Nahayan” emerges in specific interrelations, not influenced by West more than East, and is a result of a different educational context than that which philosophers of education are accustomed to, though consumerist approaches to education increasingly shape the landscape.

Perhaps this view of extreme student-centeredness should be complicated by the reconsideration of the results for Emiratis, who do not want to study abroad, or want professions, and so on, and seen as communitarianism run amok. However, is it not student-centered in the clearest sense of the term, as respectful of indigenous traditions and students’ own orientations, to not force on students outside viewpoints, instead affirming them, and listening to what they say matters? Consciousness-raising could be a strategy here, as promoted by Freire (1972), to enable students to view their world abstractly and within a problem-based framework. To a limited extent such has been found productive in the UAE for teaching critical thinking (Raddawai, 2011; King, 2011). Yet fundamental to the Freirean approach is that the teacher does not presume to know what problems or “generative themes” to base consciousness-raising

around; to demand students to identify problems in this context resembles ethnocentric pestering, as students do not express interests related to such study or reflection, and do not lack for much that a teacher could provide! Student-centeredness in the UAE will likely continue to dominate, as “Never Fail a Nahayan” precludes the educator suggesting that something might be wrong with students’ world, lives, and society.

Summary

The student-centered learning concept in Western educational thought assumes a specific *a priori* context of the Western school wherein the teacher and the society’s interests are institutionalized with little thought for the interests or needs of the students as identified by the students. This Western school is distinct from non-Western, non-schooled traditions, wherein education is often dialogical, student-centered, participatory, vocational, and/or small-group-based. Thus, *teacher-centeredness* has truly been a Western export to the South and East. This education was developed with colonial interests in mind. A power dynamic can be observed in the relationship between teacher and student in these contexts, within and outside the West. Relatedly, it has often been held in Western thought that abstract knowledge is better than relational, personal, or individual forms of knowledge and understanding. Thus the colonial mindset is seen as a dominating force in non-Western contexts, devaluing indigenous understandings, beliefs, and values, for the convenience of administration from outside.

Though student centeredness is associated in today’s globalized context with traditions of the West such as progressive education, the West should not be seen as its origin, as many traditions can be seen to support participatory learning, social construction of knowledge, and vocational and skills-based education. Furthermore, what has resulted from student-centeredness in global educational policy has been problematic. Student-centeredness has been conflated with outcomes-based education, high-stakes testing, and accountability of educators; these latter terms move us away from students’ interests and needs as understood by students.

The case of the UAE shows that even progressive orientations to student-centered learning have limitations, however. Student-centeredness in the UAE emerges from international frameworks for standardization and student mobility, as well as from a unique postcolonial context where students are over-empowered, reversing the traditional *Western* dynamic. Yet this extreme student-centeredness can preclude learning, as a “the customer is always right” mentality develops. This case adds nuance to other instances where student-centered concepts disempower and delegitimizes educators. Teachers should remain influential in education, even while we aim to ensure that students and societies are also stakeholders in educational contexts.

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