

Teaching with Trust

**Creating Space for
Learner Agency and Connection**

Carissa Solomon

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PUBLISHING 

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Preface

Oliver stood at the front of the room, clutching a stack of handwritten notes. He cleared his throat, glanced at his peers, and began, “I think our school should provide noise-canceling headphones for any learner who wants them. Not everyone learns best in a busy, noisy classroom, and some of us need quiet to focus. This would help more people feel comfortable and supported.”

Nods and quiet murmurs of agreement rippled through the room. This was no assigned presentation. Oliver, a seventh grader who used to sit at the back of the room with his hood up, had initiated this project after a class discussion on neurodiverse learning profiles left him frustrated and fired up. Over the next few weeks, he interviewed classmates, analyzed environmental factors in our school, and read about sensory processing differences. His proposal included a cost breakdown, links to his research, and a list of potential funding sources. He wasn’t just completing a project. He was working to change the learning conditions for everyone in our community.

Hearing Oliver speak with such confidence, purpose, and clarity made me realize something. Learner-centered education makes moments like this possible. It wasn’t just about Oliver turning in an assignment. It was about him discovering his voice, engaging with real-world problems, and understanding that he had the power to create change.

Moments like this are why I wrote this book. If you are reading this, you likely work in education. You probably chose this career because you love learning, enjoy working with children, and believe your work will make a difference. However, over time, perhaps these feelings have dulled. The daily demands of teaching, paired with systemic constraints, can leave even the most dedicated educators feeling disconnected from their purpose.

This book is about helping you rediscover the feelings of efficacy, fulfillment, and (hopefully) joy that first led you here, not just for your own well-being, but because when educators thrive, learners do too. Simply instructing someone to “Find your joy!” doesn’t work. Trust me, I’ve tried. So, this book offers concrete strategies and tools to continue to deepen your learner-centered practices. A learner-centered approach empowers students to take ownership of their learning and fosters deeper engagement, curiosity, and connection. When we center education around the needs, voices, and potential of learners, we not only make learning more joyful and sustainable for ourselves, we also create the conditions where young people can truly flourish.

Because many of the ideas in this book are based on my experiences, observations, and research, here’s a little about me and my journey.

My Educational Journey

I am one of the fortunate few who have always loved school. I read every book assigned to me in English class. I relished history lectures because they made the past come alive. I even liked dissecting things in biology. Worms, frogs, mice, fetal pigs, cat brains: I was down for it all. As a result, I graduated from high school fully confident in my academic abilities.

You know what eighteen-year-old me didn’t have? I had no real sense of who I was or what I stood for. I didn’t know how to manage my time, build trusting relationships, or collaborate with others. I could conjugate French verbs, but I didn’t have the first clue how to adopt a growth mindset.

I spent much of my twenties figuring these things out. Thanks to wonderful friends, mentors, and lots of trial and error, I eventually established my sense of self and became a certified teacher along the way. Finally, I felt fully formed and sure of my mission—to teach learners the important stuff, the lessons I learned too late in life and without proper guidance.

Enter ten years of trying to make my dream a reality. I taught in various public and charter schools, supplementing my income with jobs at summer camps and after-school programs. Each time I accepted a new job, I hoped to close in on my dream. Surely, the next school, which boasted a comprehensive advisory structure or smaller class sizes, would be better. And while there’s no such thing as a perfect school, and many are doing great work, I wasn’t finding my dream job.

At the close of my tenth year of teaching, I was ready to give up, when I discovered a unique job posting. A nonprofit organization called Embark Education sought educators to help design and open a new kind of middle school. The posting mentioned ideas I'd never heard before, such as learner-centered education, micro-schooling, and learning embedded in the real world. It also asked me to incorporate the words *aardvark* and *cornucopia* in my cover letter. I was hooked! I applied, got the job, and have never looked back. Turns out, I'd been looking for a learner-centered approach all along. I had the great good fortune to design and teach in Embark Education's nationally recognized model for six years (Embark Education, n.d.-a). The lessons I learned there will forever impact how I approach education and provide the largest inspiration for the contents of this book.

What Is So Great About a Learner-Centered Approach?

The answer to this question is blissfully simple and frustratingly complex. The simple answer is that by putting learners at the center of everything, I finally found the humanity I had been looking for in education. Before, teaching often felt centered on compliance—delivering content, grading work, and enforcing rules. I was doing what I thought teachers were supposed to do: manage behavior, keep order, and get through the curriculum. But it often felt disconnected from the people in front of me. With a learner-centered approach, that changed. I began seeing students not as test scores or behavior charts, but as complex, thoughtful, growing human beings. Teaching no longer felt like managing compliance; it felt like connecting with people.

Even more powerfully, a learner-centered approach allowed me to view education through the lens of liberatory design—a way of creating learning experiences, environments, and systems that amplify the voices of those too often left out. Liberatory design combines imaginative problem-solving with a strong focus on justice and inclusion, aiming to create solutions that empower and respect all people (National Equity Project 2021).

In practice, liberatory design means intentionally centering learners' voices, needs, and experiences in every aspect of the classroom, from how we structure projects to how we arrange the physical space. It invites us to notice patterns of inequity, pause to understand them, and then co-design

Figure 0.1. Time to build more personal relationships with learners is one of the many perks of a learner-centered approach.



Credit: Stephen Martin

solutions *with* students, not just *for* them. Whether we're choosing texts, designing assessments, or setting classroom norms, liberatory design pushes us to create inclusive, empowering spaces where every learner can thrive.

This approach is reflected in the liberatory design process, which begins with observing and empathizing with learners. Only then do we move into developing instructional materials and assessments, adjusting and iterating as needed to reflect learners' lived experiences, strengths, and struggles. At its heart, liberatory design ensures that all learners feel seen, valued, and empowered to be active participants in their own learning.

Working in a learner-centered environment keeps things interesting and academically rigorous. Because a learner-centered approach is agile and relevant, the content and methods of instruction are constantly in flux. What and how I teach depends on the learners in front of me, the needs of our community, and world events. This doesn't mean that I'm inventing everything from scratch each day, nor that instruction doesn't align with appropriate academic standards. For example, learners must still practice persuasive writing techniques and understand how to collaborate

effectively. However, the exact manner and context in which they learn these skills can vary greatly. So, my work never gets stale. I get to respond, iterate, and improve my practice continuously. This keeps me engaged and excited, which makes it much more likely that my learners are engaged and excited too!

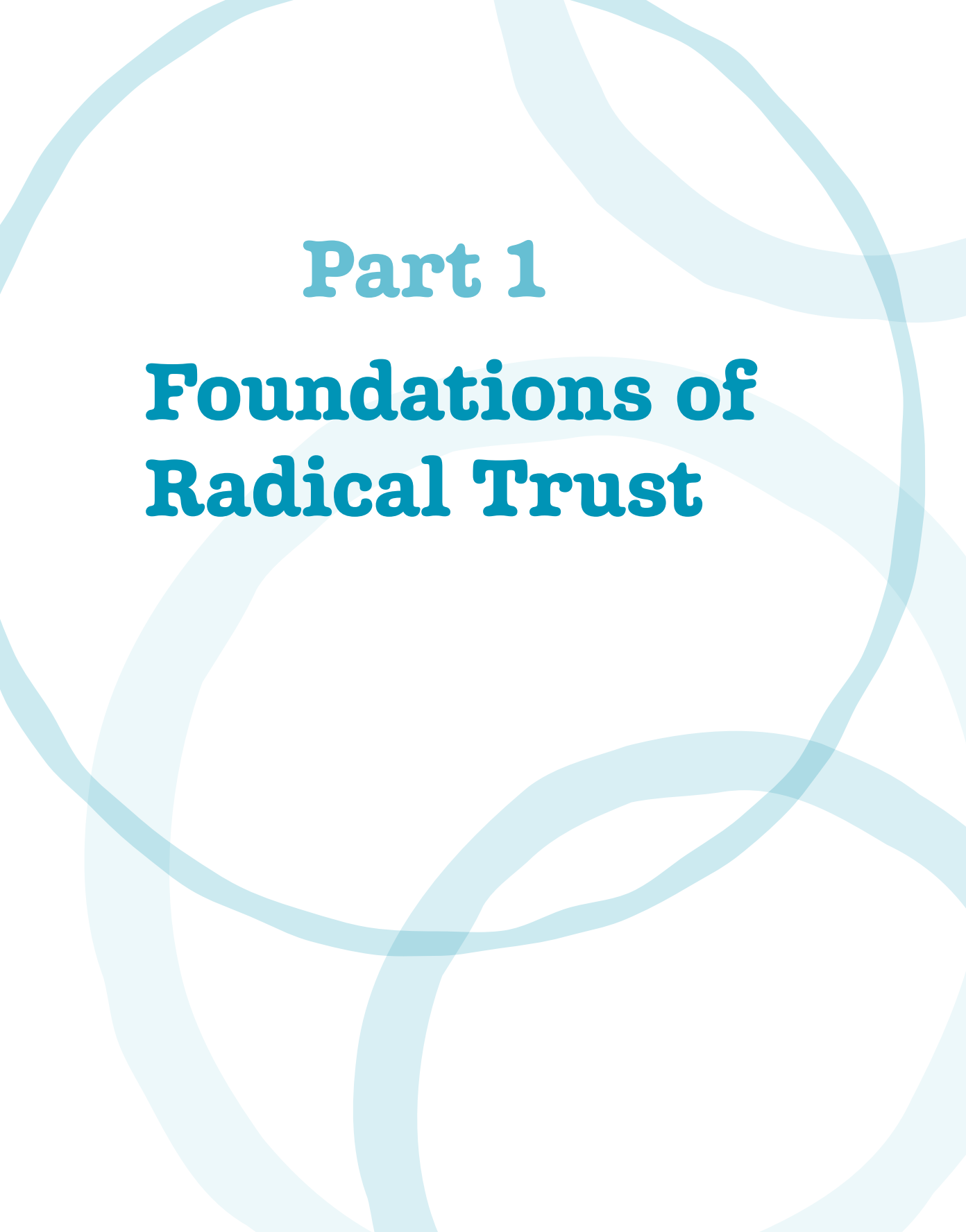
Re-centering education in the context of empathy, community, and liberation has reanimated my practice. Teaching and learning once again feel joyful to me and the learners I work with. And I want this same joy for you! This book provides you with a road map for developing structures and instruction that arise from and reinforce a mindset of radical trust.

Chapters 1 and 2 lay the foundation for learner-centered education by exploring the mindset shifts that make it possible. Chapter 1 introduces five key principles—agency, self-direction, connection, growth mindset, and relevant learning—that help move us beyond traditional, compliance-based models. Chapter 2 dives into the essential role of radical trust: what it means, why it matters, and how to begin practicing it in real ways with your learners. Together, these chapters offer the “why” behind learner-centered education and invite you to reimagine your role, not as a gatekeeper of knowledge, but as a trusted guide in a shared learning journey.

Chapters 3 and 4 describe simple strategies and lessons you can easily implement in your classroom. These include building positive relationships and supporting learners in developing strong reflective practices. While the efficacy of these practices will increase as more folks within your learning community adopt them, they can be practiced in isolation and still positively impact you and the learners in your care.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 describe more-advanced strategies that can be used to shift whole systems within your classroom, grade level, department, school, or district. These include reimagining instructional design to include real-world tasks, rethinking the use of learner and educator time, and redesigning your learning space. These practices represent larger shifts that are most effective when applied to a whole system, whether that system is contained within your individual classroom, your grade level, or your entire school.

Sound like something you want to get in on? Great, let’s do this learner-centered thing together!



Part 1

Foundations of Radical Trust



The Learner-Centered Revolution Is Here

In *Evolving Education*, Katie Martin outlines a mandate for revising traditional education.

It is increasingly clear that we need to honor and develop students' abilities to think differently, solve problems, and navigate new and different situations. We also need to teach and support the development of skills that enable students to develop their own path along with social and emotional intelligence so they can thrive in a constantly changing and unpredictable society. This means we can't structure learning experiences with a fixed curriculum that is outdated or fails to reflect the complexity of diverse perspectives. We can't be satisfied with merely covering content or meeting standards. (2021, 12)

How will schools reach this goal? Martin and I agree that a learner-centered approach provides the best path forward, and we are far from alone. Learner-centered education is at the forefront of many conversations. As I write this, there are over 330 results for the search terms "student-centered" and "learner-centered" on Edutopia. So, what do these terms mean?

At its core, a learner-centered approach is about who controls power within an educational context. Imagine you could draw a continuum of power for any learning environment. On one end of the continuum lies a school-centered approach in which adults make almost all the

decisions. Here, learning is guided by a predetermined curriculum, rigid behavioral expectations, and teacher-led instruction. On the other end lies a learner-centered approach, in which learning is shaped by students' needs, interests, abilities, and learning profiles. Learners share power with their educators to co-create structures, expectations, and curriculum that meet their needs and are relevant to their lives. Figure 1.1 provides a more complete outline of the differences between a school-centered approach to education and a learner-centered one.

Few environments fall directly at one end or the other of this continuum. Instead, most learning falls somewhere in the middle. At Embark Education, I had the privilege of seeing how far I could push our approach toward the learner-centered end. I worked to give my learners as much power as possible over the content, pace, and organization of their learning while still keeping them safe and ensuring that they learned enough to succeed beyond the walls of our school. It was in this transition of power that I simultaneously rediscovered my joy as an educator and saw learners reach their highest potential. I got to spend my days serving as a guide for discovery, delight, and wonder rather than as a task manager expecting compliance. The learner-centered approach at Embark was grounded in five key elements: connection and community, growth mindset, relevant and rigorous learning, learner agency, and active self-direction. I write about each of these in the following pages.

Connection and Community

Learning thrives when it happens with others. In community, learners see new perspectives, challenge assumptions, strengthen communication skills, and collaborate toward shared goals. They benefit from a natural feedback loop in which they learn from observing peers and receiving informal guidance. "Learning environments that prioritize connection and a sense of community also build skills and mindsets such as social skills, hope, and healthy habits that are critical for learners' overall well-being now and in the future" (Transcend, n.d.-b, para. 2).

Figure 1.1. School-centered versus a learner-centered approach

The Learner-Centered Paradigm for Education asks us to transform our way of thinking about education. It requires us to make a shift from School-Centered thinking to Learner-Centered thinking. The following chart outlines this shift.

FROM: SCHOOL-CENTERED	TO: LEARNER-CENTERED
Students arrive not yet ready for life and work. They must be prepared with an appropriate standardized base of knowledge and, based on their performance, sorted according to their potential.	Learners arrive as whole human beings whose context, lived experience, interests, and aspirations should inform and guide their learning and human development. They are living life now and their potential has no limit.
Students are known by how they compare to their class averages on standardized assessments.	Learners are known as individuals—each with their own lived experiences, interests, goals, aspirations, and ways of contributing to others and their communities.
Equity in education is a commitment to students reaching their full potential through high expectations and closing achievement gaps.	Equity in education is a commitment to every learner having access to what they need to live fulfilling lives, and to each person in diverse and inclusive groups being supported to attain all relevant outcomes.
Education is done to the students.	Education is done with and by the learner.
Learning happens in schools during a school day.	Learning happens whenever and wherever the learner is.
Learning happens best when students are focused on the teacher and content, compliant with institutional expectations, and competing against one another for the best test score.	Learning happens best in environments that foster joy in learning, vulnerability amongst adults and learners alike, and mutualism—a reciprocal partnership among learners and adults.
All students follow standard paths within age-based, rank-and-sorted cohorts. Students work within standardized timeframes, demonstrating their knowledge retention and skill development in standardized ways, absent of meaningful context.	Learners are deemed to be successful when they have developed what they need to lead meaningful, fulfilling lives of their own choosing.

Source: *Practitioner's Lexicon: What Is Meant by Key Terminology*. Education Reimagined. 2024. Used with permission.

A Note About Embark Education

Several of the examples in this book are based on my experiences at Embark Education, so it feels important to explain a little about the school's unique environment. Embark was a tuition-free independent middle school in Denver, Colorado. It was a micro-school, meaning it served only about thirty learners each year, with around ten learners per grade level. Embark's mission was to support learners to courageously inquire, engage, and discover a sense of self. To fulfill this mission, Embark's program was built to maximize learner voice and choice.

For much of their day, Embark learners determined what weekly assignments they wished to work on, where within our building they wanted to work, and with whom. Learners were expected to attend required lessons, but educators often offered multiple sessions of the same lesson throughout the day, and learners selected which session to attend. In this way, learners used their agency to develop a deep understanding of what worked best for their learning and acted upon that knowledge daily.

Embark's many unique aspects allowed me a much higher degree of autonomy and creativity in designing curriculum. Thus, you may find yourself surprised by some of the examples I offer. When I discuss Embark's model with other educators, I often hear, "Oh, well, I could never do that at my school." However, I encourage you to keep an open mind. True, you may not have the freedom to try out all the strategies I offer, but you might be intrigued to discover how many ideas can be adapted to fit your own context. This book is not an argument for duplicating Embark's model, but rather an invitation to explore the mindsets, values, and practices that support learner-centered education, wherever you are. As you read, I encourage you to notice the underlying principles at work, consider how they might take shape in your own setting, and reflect on what small shifts could create meaningful change for your learners.

An example of connection and community: Ms. Wenzel begins each morning with a classroom temperature check. Each individual (learner and educator) places a numbered sticker that represents their “temperature” next to their name on a chart. As seen in figure 1.2, these numbers (1–5) correspond to different emotional states. Ms. Wenzel then gives learners who want to share the why behind their numbers a few moments to do so. Open sharing about their emotional states builds community as it helps everyone learn how to respond to one another’s needs. For example, if most of the class reports a 2 because they’re tired, Ms. Wenzel might lead a quick brain break to help everyone reset before starting academic work. Or, if Neela feels like a 5—energized and upbeat—while her project partner, Elias, is at a 2, she might check in to see how Elias is doing or offer some space rather than unintentionally overwhelming him with high energy.

Figure 1.2. Temperature check scale

- 
- 5** Excited, engaged, and ready to go!
 - 4** Feeling pretty good.
 - 3** Just a regular day. Nothing amazing. Nothing rotten.
 - 2** Something has me unsettled.
 - 1** It is a rough day. I could use some adult support.

Growth Mindset

Learning grows when mistakes are expected and valued. Students view learning as a journey in which obstacles, challenges, and failures are part of the process. They know that growth happens not only through doing but also through receiving feedback and reflecting on their experiences. Even when an experience feels like a success or a failure, learners understand that reflection and feedback turn every experience into growth.

An example of a growth mindset: A class of learners at the Denver Green School Northfield hypothesize that including more vegetable options in the school’s cafeteria will boost learner health. Their hypothesis proves incorrect because learners don’t eat the veggies, which mostly end up in the trash. Sigh. Yes, the results were disappointing, but by reflecting on the experience, they can learn many valuable lessons, such as the importance of collecting empathy data before implementing a solution. *Empathy data* helps learners understand the real experiences, preferences, and needs of the people they’re designing for. In this case, it might have meant talking to classmates about their food choices, observing what actually gets eaten at