

AN INTELLIGENT USE FOR BELIEF

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Over the last three decades there has been a major shift in how practicing educators think about intelligence. One great driving force of this change can be attributed to *Frames of Mind: Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, written by Howard Gardner in 1983. Gardner's book is conceived around the premise that every human being maintains seven (now eight) different types of intelligences, with a ninth being recently considered. Largely biological in nature, these intelligences are capable of evolving. This theory was a radical deviation from previous models such as the Stanford-Binet IQ Test, which is based on the premise of one type of intelligence that was genetic in nature and thus fixed throughout life.

The eight different types of intelligences proposed in this theory each have their own identifiable characteristics. These characteristics distinguish certain skill sets and behaviors from one another. Currently, Gardner's identified intelligences include: spatial/visual, bodily/kinesthetic, musical, verbal/linguistic, naturalistic, logical/mathematical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal intelligence. The new intelligence being considered relates to an existential intelligence.

Since the Multiple Intelligences framework is based in a malleable, biological perspective, this theory provides one of the

most powerful concepts found to shape the field of education: the teachers' belief in the unique potential of each student. These ideas offer teachers a tool that they can use to view the students that they work with as unlimited human beings. Despite the attempts made by tests that aim to close this door, no scientist as of yet has ever found a limit to human potential. Instead of our misconceptions about a fixed intelligence or lack of ability limiting our practice, the purpose of education can develop into supporting even the most "unsuccessful learner," with the understanding now that there are no "hopeless students" but rather that each child interprets the world and learns in a unique way. One uniform method of assessing children does nothing but to limit the potential of their growth.

As the Multiple Intelligences theory has been absorbed into the field of education over the last twenty plus years, educators like myself have begun to examine the implications that these ideas have for practical application in the classroom. Feeling dissatisfied with the current one-size fits-all model prevalent in much of today's competitive high-stakes testing culture, we have been able to use Gardner's theory as a vital tool to realign our pedagogy to better value the individual children with whom we work. Using differentiated processes and assessments such as cooperative learn-

ing groups and class-generated rubrics, in conjunction with more conventional academic benchmarks, data collected using the Multiple Intelligence theory can be used to develop the skills of all students. Gardner's framework changes the competitive, Stanford-Binet model of "*how smart are you?*", into the question of "*how are you smart?*" (Deporter, Reardon, and Singer-Nourie 1999). This change is a fundamental shift in practice and theory, affecting both the students and the teachers involved.

For students in today's classrooms, the knowledge and awareness of how one is smart has many advantages. The first advantage can be said to be largely academic. Through an awareness of their intellectual strengths and challenges, and their specific profiles of intelligence, students can begin to learn strategies to use their intellectual strengths in support of their learning, while compensating for those areas that are more challenging. For instance, a student who might have a highly developed interpersonal and spatial-visual intelligence, but challenging musical and verbal-linguistic intelligence might have terrible difficulty sitting through a lecture with an instructor who does nothing but talk. However, with a conscious awareness of his/her intellectual strengths, this student might take highly graphic notes that offer visual reinforcement for the words being spoken. Additionally, once the lecture is over, participation in a question-and-answer session, or a discussion with peers would certainly support his/her interpersonal strengths and offer them an opportunity to make sense of the material. Students with acute awareness of their intelligences can thus also begin to

articulate and inform others of how they learn best. In so doing, teachers, parents and peers can then work to tailor their support to best meet the specific needs of the individual child.

A second advantage that the Multiple Intelligences Theory can offer students in a classroom is a sense of personal and collective value. Through an understanding of one's own learning needs- both challenges and successes- in the context of a classroom or community of learners, students begin to recognize what they have to offer to the collective group. They can discover their strengths in relation to the challenges of others, simultaneously allowing their challenges to be supported by the strengths of another. The Theory of Multiple Intelligences can thus be used as a tool to bring about an equating culture in a classroom, where students come to think of themselves as both successful and in need of others, all in the context of a community of learners.

Furthermore, students aware of their intelligences can also potentially discern for themselves the difference between challenge and failure. This is a crucial distinction, one that is essential in the development of positive self-esteem. Students who can learn to love themselves for who they are and "how they are smart" can come to welcome failures as a challenge. With a positive association to a challenging experience, students can take necessary risks with new material and they develop the ability to operate out of their comfort zones, regardless of outcome. Revisiting the example provided above regarding the interpersonal and spatial-visual learner in a lecture, a student with an awareness of

their areas of competence might walk away from that experience feeling like a success, rather than being self-critical of their struggle to focus.

As educators endeavoring to embrace the individuality of students in the classroom, it becomes crucial that lesson planning and class facilitation techniques take into account the different minds that comprise that particular group of students. Gardner's theory aids in illuminating the vital importance of the teacher's assessment of how each of his/her student's processes information. The educator must make sure that within each planned unit there is at least one lesson that covers or blends the full range of intelligences. Planning in this manner will not only will allow for each student to gain access into the content and skills being covered, but also allows each student an opportunity for success with the material. These two opportunities can be two of the most valuable experiences an educator can give their students.

I am proposing that as practitioners, administrators, and parents we should consider this malleable definition of intelligence, as opposed to a fixed one. We should broaden our views of what we understand intelligence to be, and not allow it to interfere with the belief we hold in the success of each child with whom we work. For our belief in the discoverable potential in each child carries a huge weight, and a child's future can be compromised when he/she is solely defined by quantifiable test scores.

I strongly encourage the reader to learn more about the Multiple Intelligences Theory, and then use it to help weave a

beautiful tapestry of how your students learn. Guide them to discover "how they are smart" and what challenges them, and then use the information to help them to become successful unlimited beings. Provide opportunities for each child to develop a consciousness of how his/her mind works, and teach towards the learning needs of all students in the classroom. Finally, help children to see that everyone has areas of strength and areas of challenge, and that it is worthwhile to celebrate their successes and failures as a community of accomplished learners. Our students and children are the ones who are here with us now, at this moment, and we can never live these times again. It is a huge risk for us not to facilitate and encourage them in their wonder.

References

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- Gardner, H. 1983. *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. New York: Basic Books.

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