

Howard gardners theory of multiple intelligences education essay



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Walk into a class of “ typical” second grade students and you will quickly learn that there is nothing “ typical” about any group of students. It would be expected that some of the students would excel in reading, and some would excel in math. According to traditional academic standards, these students would be considered intelligent and their intelligence would not be questioned. But look beyond the surface of academic achievement, and you would find that some of the students in this class can express themselves through beautiful poetry, some are graceful dancers, some are superior basketball players, some play instruments with such ease that it looks effortless, some can create exquisite artwork, and some are peacemakers. Are these children intelligent, or are they simply talented? Howard Gardner would say that their abilities stem from intelligence, not just talent.

Howard Gardner introduced his theory of multiple intelligences in 1983 and in doing so challenged the way people regarded intelligence (Ferguson, 2009). In the 1920s Spearman proposed that there is only one type of intelligence, called general intelligence or g. The notion that there could be only one type of intelligence was questioned by other psychometric theorists, such as Cattell and Thurstone. But even these theorists proposed that intelligence is limited to cognitive functions that can be measured. Traditionally, intelligence is measured using IQ tests such as the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale or the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children. IQ tests focus on assessing verbal skills, perceptual and spatial reasoning, working memory and processing speed (Berk, 2013). Gardner’s theory offers an opposing view to the psychometric theory. His theory proposes that intelligence is broader than what can be measured on an intelligence test.

Gardner's theory suggests that there are eight intelligences and each person possesses each one to a certain degree. The intelligence types are linguistic, logico-mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, naturalist, interpersonal, intrapersonal (Berk, 2013). A person who possesses linguistic intelligence has the ability to understand and manipulate language. A person who possesses logico-mathematical intelligence has logical reasoning ability and can understand and manipulate numbers. A person who possesses musical intelligence has the ability to understand and manipulate sound. A person who possesses spatial intelligence has the ability to understand and manipulate visual or spatial images. A person who possesses bodily-kinesthetic intelligence has the ability to move his or her body with skill. A person who possesses naturalistic intelligence has the ability to understand and question the natural world. A person who possesses interpersonal intelligence has the ability to understand and respond to the emotions and needs of other people. Finally, a person who possesses intrapersonal intelligence has the ability to understand and respond to their own emotions and needs (Christodoulou, 2009).

Gardner has proposed a ninth type of intelligence called existential intelligence (Christodoulou, 2009). In Howard Gardner's 2005 paper *Multiple Lenses on the Mind* he explains that when people ask questions regarding the how and why of life, they are exhibiting this intelligence. However, Gardner explains that he is not sure if this phenomenon should be declared an intelligence, " My hesitation in declaring a full blown existential intelligence stems from my uncertainty about whether certain regions of the

brain are dedicated to the contemplation of issues that are too vast...to be perceived” (Gardner, 2005, p. 9).

This statement reveals that the heart of Gardner’s intelligence theory is intelligence, not talent. Gardner reminds his readers that in order for something to be classified as a type of intelligence it must be something that the brain is capable of doing. In this case, Gardiner has reservations about including this type of intelligence in his theory because the human brain may not be able to fully ponder existential questions.

From an educator’s point of view, Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences makes sense. Go back to the second grade classroom and take a look at the students sitting in the seats. Every child in that class learns differently. Every child in that class observes and understands the world in his or her own way. I was the teacher in that classroom and I drew on Gardner’s theory to reach my students. I learned about the theory of multiple intelligences as an undergraduate education student. When I was first hired as a teacher I researched ways to integrate this theory as a way to promote learning in my classroom. I found many educational books, websites, and journal articles that provided real world application of multiple intelligence theory.

My students clapped and sang their spelling words, which appealed to those with strengths in the musical or bodily-kinesthetic intelligences. My students drew pictures to illustrate main ideas, which appealed to those with strength in spatial intelligence. Our class took a field trip to the Mississippi River, which appealed to those with strength in naturalistic intelligence. In

implementing these teaching methods I was doing more than reaching out to the different way my students learned. I identified their intellectual strengths and gave them opportunities which allowed their strengths to grow and flourish.

This understanding and belief in educating the whole child extends beyond self-contained, grade level classrooms. I taught in a school that valued education of the whole child. The students attended weekly classes in Spanish, art, music, physical education, library, and computer. For three years I was a specialty teacher in the school and I used multiple intelligence theory to guide my lesson planning. I taught computer for students in kindergarten through eighth grade. As the computer teacher, I designed curriculum based projects where students used technology to create original works that had a direct classroom application. For example, elementary school students used Kerpoof, a web application, to make stories illustrating their understanding of beginning, middle, and end. Middle school students used a program called ComicLife to create comics about everything from the Revolutionary War to famous scientists. The eighth grade student read *The Giver* in their literature class and then used a web application called Weebly to create a website for their own, imaginary, utopian society. All grade levels had the opportunity to use Garage Band to write music to accompany their PowerPoint presentations. Not every project appealed to every intelligence type. Some of these projects were required group projects while others were individual. Some relied more on verbal intelligence abilities, while others required more visual intelligence. But, every project relied on more than one intelligence type. And every project lead to the creation of work that the

students were happy to share with their classmates and the school community.

Reconciling the theory of multiple intelligences with the traditional psychometric theory of intelligence is difficult, if not impossible, to do. The debate that started nearly thirty years ago when Gardner introduced his theory continues to this day. In the article “ Not Every Child is Secretly a Genius”, Christopher Ferguson criticizes Gardner’s theory for being an all encompassing theory that allows for everyone to be smart (Ferguson, 2009). Joanna Christodoulou takes the opposing view in the article “ Applying multiple intelligence”. She explains that we need to stop thinking in terms of how smart people are. Instead, we should be asking, “ In which ways is she smart, and how can that profile be marshaled for meaningful goals?” (Christodoulou, 2009, para. 22).

The theory of multiple intelligences is not a data driven theory. There is little empirical evidence to support it (Ferguson, 2009). It will not yield an IQ score. It will not lead to a diagnosis of learning disability, intellectual disability, or gifted. If a teacher is interested in “ tracking” a student Gardner’s theory will be of little help because this is not the purpose of Gardner’s theory (Christodoulou, 2009).

The purpose of Gardner’s theory is to understand the intellectual capabilities of the whole child. It tells us that everyone is capable of intelligent thought or intelligent action on some level. It is a hopeful theory. It is a theory that “ highlights that intelligence is not fixed, but rather a dynamic capacity amenable to change via good teaching, high motivation, and adequate

resources” (Christodoulou, 2009, para. 24). Finally, it is a useful theory with many practical implications for the classroom. The purpose of the psychometric theory is to give an IQ score and, possibly, a diagnosis. But, the purpose of Gardner’s theory is to give educators a plan for reaching all students regardless of their score on a test or diagnosis on a psychoeducational evaluation.