How many intelligences?

Daniel Willingham’s critique of Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences (“Reframing the Mind,” Check the Facts, Summer 2004) is yet another attempt by a psychometric supremacist to quash other views of intelligence.

Psychometric diehards assume that the correct model of intelligence can be generated by investigating how people think in highly atypical situations. It is true, as Willingham writes, that data from 130,000 individuals enabled John Carroll to produce a three-tiered model of intellect—with g (general intelligence) atop it all. But it is also true that those 130,000 individuals were largely plopped into isolated rows where they frenetically addressed peculiar puzzles and bubble-in answer sheets.

Rather than investigating bubble-sheet results, Gardner sought to illuminate the mental abilities that underlie actual human accomplishments found across cultures. What makes people capable mathematicians and writers as well as teachers, historians, farmers, artists, and even comedians? Gardner tackled this question by drawing on a wide array of evidence from the sciences and social sciences. Since statistical techniques for analyzing this diversity of evidence do not exist, Gardner could not simply use traditional methods. Therefore, he laid out his evidence, criteria, and reasoning—just as, for instance, Charles Darwin did.

Does this mean that all uses of Gardner’s theory are effective? No. Gardner, who had not anticipated the wide use of his theory in schools, initially encouraged broad experimentation with it. Hence there were brilliant and stupid uses. My recently published investigation of 41 schools that use multiple intelligences theory has identified those practices that enable educators to use the theory, not for its own sake, but to enable students to produce high-level work. It remains highly questionable whether psychometric theories, which are neither the whole story of human intelligence nor terribly useful to teachers, can do anything similar.

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The school that I lead, the New City School, has been implementing multiple intelligences theory since 1988. Our experiences with using Gardner’s theory have been very positive. Multiple intelligences theory is a tool that can be used to enable more children to learn and to enable children to learn more. By considering all of the intelligences as they plan and teach, teachers become student-centered rather than curriculum-focused. Too often, schooling is designed so that the only students who succeed are those who are strong in the scholastic intelligences (linguistic and logical-mathematical). In a multiple intelligences school, all of the intelligences are used as tools to facilitate and support students as they learn the requisite curriculum and skills. Our program is no less rigorous because of our use of Gardner’s theory; instead, our use of multiple intelligences gives our students richer and wider ways to learn.

Thomas R. Hoerr
New City School
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Many educators object to the unitary view of intelligence because it tends to narrowly circumscribe the measurement of intelligence and to emphasize verbal and mathematical (and related) skills. It is assumed that even if one could measure a broader range of abilities, the results would not alter any particular child’s standing on a combined intelligence scale. Verbal and math skills have traditionally been the focus of intelligence tests because these skills were the focus of schools; hence inquiry into understanding children’s intelligence was limited to those skills viewed as essential to learning. As Willingham says, “If it was important in school, it was important on the intelligence test.”

Educators have good reasons for seeking alternative views. If by reconstructing our views of children’s intelligence we can successfully teach a wider range of students, teachers should not be accused of being confused for doing just that.

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Worcester responds

William G. Howell concludes that the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has had “little impact at all” on the Worcester Public Schools (“One Child at a Time,” Feature, Summer 2004). He bases this conclusion solely on the fact that few parents in Worcester chose to exercise their rights to switch schools or to choose a for-profit vendor for after-school tutoring—options they possess under the federal law’s school choice and supplemental services provisions.

But should we be surprised that few parents chose to move their children to other schools? Howell reports that 80 percent of the Worcester parents he surveyed indicated that they were satisfied with their child’s school. Satisfied parents do not transfer their children out of a school.
correspondence

Howell neglects to mention that among the 14 largest urban districts in Massachusetts, Worcester had the second highest percentage (68 percent) of schools meeting state targets for making “adequate yearly progress” under the law; the statewide average was 48 percent. As a district, we met adequate yearly progress targets in English for all economic and ethnic subgroups of students.

Howell also downplays the fact that the Worcester school district is a state-approved provider of tutoring services to more than 800 students. Competing against for-profit tutoring firms, our highly qualified teachers have offered more services to more children for less money.

The major problem with No Child Left Behind lies with the accountability system and the definition of adequate yearly progress. Adequate yearly progress is an Enron-like mess based on different students in different years and different state cut-offs regarding when students are deemed “proficient.” Rather than focus on the real problem, Howell pursues the red herrings of choice and supplemental services.

JAMES CARADONIO
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William Howell responds: In Worcester, one child has taken advantage of the choice provisions of NCLB in order to seek supplemental tutoring services from a private provider, and one other child switched out of a school deemed in need of improvement in order to attend a higher-performing public school. Yet thousands of students qualified for both educational options. The purpose of my essay was to explain how this happened.

I identified numerous factors that contributed to the low take-up rates in Worcester, ranging from the district’s practices and students’ demographics to parents’ interests in alternative schooling options. Nothing in Caradonio’s response rebuts any particular observation. Instead, Caradonio highlights those that compliment his district and dismisses the rest. By his account, it is immaterial that few parents even knew about their options; that the district created a cumbersome process for exercising those options; or that private providers had few means by which to communicate directly with eligible students.

Abolish school boards?

The continuing battle for control of the New York City schools shows why school boards are a valuable part of public education (see “The Future of School Boards,” Forum, Summer 2004). In 2002, the state legislature eliminated the school board and gave total control of the school system to Mayor Michael Bloomberg. Over the past two years, however, many who wanted to see the board abolished have grown unhappy with Bloomberg’s handling of the public schools.

Brookings Institution scholar Diane Ravitch and United Federation of Teachers president Randi Weingarten, both of whom supported mayoral control, wrote recently in the New York Times that Bloomberg’s powers are “unchecked” and the city’s education department operates in secrecy, denying “the right of the public to have a say in important decisions.” In their words, it is time to allow a “board of respected citizens to set policy for the schools” and to “reestablish the role of the public in public education.”

This sounds like Ravitch and Weingarten want a local school board.

In Canada, the government of New Brunswick abolished elected school boards in 1996 in favor of a corporate governance structure that gave absolute power to the Minister of Education. Four years later, the parents, the public, and school administrators were frustrated at being left out of the decision-making process. They vented their anger at the polls and voted out the ruling party. The new government immediately reinstated elected school boards.

That’s because school board members are the public’s voice in public education. For generations, the public has trusted school boards to balance community goals and values with the needs of children. School board members are accessible to parents, advocates for children, and accountable for student performance. They are an essential component of the future of public education.

ANNE BRYANT
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In arguing for the elimination of the local school board, Chester Finn and Lisa Keggan (“Lost at Sea”) state, “[State-level child-centered funding] would create not
only a more equitable system, but also more effective schools.”

I agree that a child-centered funding system would be more equitable. I also agree that our large city school districts are examples of monopolies at their worst. Yet it is not clear that a complete move to a state-funded, child-centered funding system would lead to more effective schools. For one thing, taxpayers might be less likely to support the current high levels of education funding if such funding were completely centralized.

In researching the effects of school-finance centralization in California, Harvard economist Caroline Hoxby found that increased centralization of school financing led to lowered per-pupil spending. This isn’t surprising given that many individuals support local school taxes because doing so will increase the resale value of their home. No such incentive exists in a world of centralized funding.

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Reform in Britain

No doubt readers of Christopher Woodhead’s article (“The British Experience,” Feature, Summer 2004) will have figured out that this is a polemic rather than a balanced discussion of the pros and cons of recent education reforms in England. For instance, Woodhead’s claim that the examination agencies in England lack real independence has never been substantiated by any of the many independent investigations carried out from time to time in response to accusations of the “dumbing down” of exams.

The “exhaustion and anger of teachers” referred to in the article is seldom directed at the “educational establishment” but more often at policymakers—and most frequently at those who offer unbalanced and poorly substantiated criticism of the education system and whose own policy ideas are so obviously ideologically driven.

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Consequences of Brown

Thomas Dee’s finding (“The Race Connection,” Research, Spring 2004) that both white and black students learned more when taught by teachers of the same race has implications that go far beyond his discussion.

One of the unfortunate results of Brown v. Board of Education was that many black teachers and principals throughout the nation lost their jobs, as white administrators refused to hire them for the newly integrated schools. As a result, most black and Hispanic students still have white teachers. In 2000, 38 percent of public schools had not a single teacher of color; nationally, only 6 percent of teachers are black. Even in large urban school districts, where the student body is largely minority, only about 18 percent of teachers are black and 9 percent Hispanic.

To some extent, then, the racial disparity in the teaching force that has been an unfortunate consequence of Brown has probably contributed to the survival of the achievement gap that integration was meant to solve.

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