

INSTITUTE FOR EDUCATIONAL INQUIRY
AGENDA FOR EDUCATION IN A DEMOCRACY SCHOLARS

**FAILURE OF EDUCATION TO ACCOMMODATE INDIVIDUAL LEARNING
DIFFERENCES**

Work in Progress

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Abstract

Individual learning differences and the need for schools to address and cultivate them remains a thorny challenge for educators concerned about equity and diversity. While we know that students have varied and variegated intelligences and that many of them are not measured in school, we continue to reify the assessment of students to scores on standardized reading and math examinations. Addressing this intractable issue needs attention to both macro structures such as state standards and testing policies; and micro actions such as nurturing pedagogical practices and increased awareness. While our work is undone, we posit that fundamental attention to learning differences is an essential component of our Agenda.

In the end, a major reason for studying intelligence, dating back to Binet and Simon's time, has been its potential applications in education. Alas, during more than a century, the test for intelligence has served primarily to group people, not to help them learn. In sharp contrast, in a quarter of that period, Multiple Intelligences (MI) theory has been helpful to educators around the world. Among other things, MI theory has stimulated innovations in pedagogy, curriculum, the creation of learning groups, and individuals' knowledge of their distinctive approaches.¹

In the above, Howard Gardner asks us to consider the way we use theories of intelligence. Do we use them as a tool to classify people, or do we use them to help them learn? Our theories of intelligence do not fall from the sky but exist in a complex relationship with the cultural forces that produce them. Individual learning differences have been difficult to attend to, in part because they have been obscured by the dominant model of intelligence, which holds that intelligence is a singular and objective thing that individuals possess in measurable quantities. Gardner's view of intelligence contributes to a competing notion of intelligence, one that includes variegated and expansive notions, characteristics, and subfields of intelligence. Similarly, in a recent *Educational Researcher* article provocatively titled "Who Are the Bright Children? The Cultural Context of Being and Acting Intelligent," Robert Sternberg describes the limits of standardized testing and how Western norms affect "how culture influences what constitutes intelligence, intelligent acts, and intelligent teaching."² Sternberg's continued scholarship and advocacy on behalf of broad conceptions of intelligence continues to inspire, and provides a handy portal to this paper.

The issue with which we wrestle is how to better cultivate and use the huge body of information we have about individual differences among humans and about human development. It is in part due to the work of Sternberg, Gardner, and others that educators know about, and to some extent cultivate diverse facets of human intelligence. The cottage industry of 'Differentiated Instruction' grew largely from the wisdom of multiple intelligences theory, for example, and, a decade into a new century, it seems axiomatic that broad conceptions of intelligence and learning theories are essential to good and just pedagogy. Yet most education policy, up until and including the recent federal "Race to the Top" program, seems to reify the gospel of test scores. Are education policy makers disinclined to question IQ tests and the gospel of test scores? Or are they, like Sternberg, open to notions of practical, successful, and creative intelligence? Or, like Gardner, are they willing to include many intelligences, each with its own distinctiveness and field?

The tenets of the Agenda for Education in a Democracy—stewardship, access to knowledge, nurturing pedagogy, and democratic practice—presuppose a leaning towards inclusion, but it is worth underscoring here why the issue of individual learning differences and its concomitant understandings, policies and practices, are important to education in our democracy. Democracy is built on the assumption that individual differences are a fact of social life, to be nurtured, not suppressed. To move toward that ideal, schools need to recognize individual differences and prepare students to meet the challenges of living in a diverse society.

It seems impossible to practice a nurturing pedagogy without attention to individual differences or to the uniqueness of each student, yet schools, in general, are not necessarily set up to do so. Students with special education placements have Individualized Educational Plans

(IEPs), which in theory ensure attention to innate differences and provide for concomitant supports for students' variegated learning styles. But most students are not in special education. While a discussion of the challenges of writing and implementing IEPs is outside the scope of this paper, the concept of IEPs, of education responding to individual learning needs, can be seen as an anchor for, or steps towards attending to learning differences. Attention to variation in student capability and strength is nurturing for students, because while all students have the potential to transcend supposed limitations on their achievement, all too often their potential remains untapped. While most students with IEPs are unknown, some exceptional persons and students have stories explored and popularized by the media. Such stories provide evidence of human potential, and of the vastness of learning differences.

For example, in the book, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, French editor Jean Dominique Bauby describes his process of coping with "Locked-in Syndrome" by dictating letter by letter a full-length memoir. As seen in the film version, Bauby was paralyzed save for the use of one eye, with which he dictated, using a code developed by his nurses and occupational therapists.³ The courage of writing the memoir ensured his achievement, as he lived to see it published, then died within a few weeks.

In England, Stephen Wiltshire is a successful artist, known in part for his drawings recalled from eidetic memory. One such piece is a proportional drawing of Rome, rendered after only a 45-minute helicopter ride; no pictures, no videos, no props, just memory. Wiltshire is an autistic savant.⁴

In California, a lesser-known story illustrates the possibilities of inclusion; a special education teacher welcomes a new student's imaginary friend to class, except during focused reading and math time. During a school Olympics, the student's imaginary friend was the last to attempt a broad jump. Nonplussed, the student marked the fantasy jump well short of a classmates' best attempt. Why did the invisible, imaginary student not win? Was the child afraid that the mark of 'Charlie' would not be honored? Or was he simply content to have the surrogate participate? Or, suspending rationality for a moment, did 'Charlie' simply land where the student said he did?

What these seemingly disparate anecdotes have in common is exceptionalism: each protagonist demonstrates—by rare, bad luck; by unique genetics; and by social and emotional determination—the vast diversity within learners. What worked in each case is responsiveness—from nurses, patrons, or teachers—rather than resistance; and acceptance rather than conformity.

In this paper, we will discuss some of the issues around individual learning differences and claim that attending to these differences at school is an obligation that democratic educators share. We maintain that our commitment to inclusive and nurturing pedagogy for all children, and attention to individual learning styles is essential. This paper will discuss differences in the way individual's minds work, and differences in the cultural backgrounds and experiences of children entering the classroom.

We are cognizant that to be attentive to students' individuality during an era of increased standardization, testing, and narrowing of curricula is challenging on both micro and macro levels, but we are confident that humane, nurturing steps can be taken to move us further towards this ideal. We will also consider some of the actions, both big and small, that are necessary to create schools better equipped to realize our democratic ideals. Lastly, we will discuss a few promising programs with which we are familiar, and conclude the paper with implications for future work.

The One Best System: Eliminating (the Need for) Attention to Individual Differences

In 1868, a visitor went to Public School #14 in New York City and wrote about what he saw in the classroom. His observations are recorded in David Tyack's book, *The One Best System*:

Sitting there were hundreds of perfectly silent children, eyes fixed straight ahead, sitting as "regular as rows of machine-planted corn." When the Directress came into the assembly at a given signal "every face turned instantly, as though on a pivot," to greet the principal, all then swinging back again in unison upon the giving of the further signal. Recitations followed a carefully prescribed order. The teacher would propose a problem in arithmetic. "Down would go all the slates and the work of ciphering would proceed, and as the work was completed by different members of the class, the slates would pop up against the breast, one after another; and when a boy was called on to explain, up he would jump, rattle off his explanation, and then thump down again amidst the perfect stillness of the rest." The faults of such a system, wrote the critic of P.S. 14, "were the inseparable attendance of wholesale schooling. To manage successfully a hundred children, or even half that number, the teacher must reduce them as nearly as possible to a unit."⁵

The vision of schooling captured in this scene exerts as powerful a hold on the mind today as it did over one hundred and forty years ago. It is a vision of achieving total control over the behavior of our children. It is a vision in which our children move with the synchronous fluidity of machinery—a vision in which our children, like the raw materials brought into factories, are transformed by the educational process into producers who will contribute to the engine of limitless economic growth. It is a vision in which our individual differences—talents, limitations, and aspirations—become invisible, subordinated completely to the ritualistic performance that passes for the education of the young. It recalls Taylorism, assembly line thinking designed to facilitate schools' efficiency, not necessarily student learning, and certainly not student exceptionality.

Efficiency thinking is nothing new in American education, and while we may have changed our thinking about what schooling in America should be since that day in New York at the onset of the industrial revolution, we continue our desire for perfect control over children and outcomes. The vision of what schooling is and should be that was expressed in that New York City classroom long ago remains a powerful current pulling education policy.

One significant problem with the vision, then as now, is that it is deeply anti-democratic. In a democracy, messy as it is with compromise and contradiction, individuals can be valued as ends in themselves, not as means to others' ends to profit or production. In a democracy, we want people to be able to think for themselves, to make up their own mind about how they want to live, and to participate in setting the course of a shared social life. We understand that individuals are different, and we find those differences to be a source of richness and meaning. In a democracy, we should expect that our children's education—first and foremost—cultivates individuals, enables them to reach their unique potential, and fosters the habit of thinking independently and working with others to secure the well-being of their communities. We also know that some of the more thoughtful approaches to cultivating these habits—Professional Development Schools come to mind—are both labor intensive and expensive for school districts and universities alike.

In order to organize schooling as it was organized in PS 14, the visitor observed, "the teacher must reduce them [the children], as near as possible, to a unit." Professional educators know how difficult it is to make structural changes in the regularities of schooling that keep the vision of PS 14 alive and well in the 21st century. For example, students with Individualized

Educational Plans do have attention to individual learning differences, but often in self-contained special education settings. Increasingly, smaller options such as charter schools, or private school vouchers or schools-within-schools spring up to fill this very need—to increase the likelihood that students will reach or approach their potential.

Defining the Issue: Learning Differences and Democracy

In order to understand the imperative of educating all students and learning styles in our democracy, it seems prudent to separate the micro from the macro, to illustrate first the key elements and conditions that define the issue, and then to explicate how the issue defines or determines classroom and school practices. That is, how do our assumptions and (mis-) understandings contribute to policies and practices that impact students directly?

Writing in 1986, Philip Jackson described the centuries-old debate between education that is subject-centered (often labeled “traditional”) and that which is child-centered (often labeled “progressive”). He called the two positions ‘mimetic’ and ‘transformative’ respectively. The mimetic “gives a central place to the transmission of factual and procedural knowledge from one person to the other, through an essentially imitative process,” (p.117). The transformative tradition, on the other hand, seeks qualitative changes in the student that “would include all those traits of character and of personality most highly prized by the society at large (aside from those having to do solely with the possession of knowledge per se),” (p.121). The transformative is “more deeply integrated and ingrained within the psychological makeup of the student...” often involving character, morals, and virtues, or in more modern terms, attitudes, values and interests that make them better persons, not just more knowledgeable or skillful. Rather than learning through imitation as in the mimetic tradition, in the transformative, the modes include personal modeling by the teacher, “soft” suasion, and use of narrative, and story telling, (p. 124).

Although Jackson claimed that these two traditions each tend to be more prevalent in certain teaching situations and curricula, he believed that “most, if not all teaching situations can operate to some degree within either dominant tradition,” but at the time of his writing, he thought that “(t)eaching within our own country and possibly within the Western world at large seems to be moving in the direction of becoming increasingly mimetic in its orientation and correspondingly, less transformative,” (p. 131). He was “struck by the gradual turning away of educators in general from that broad set of goals...character, moral development, deportment, good conduct, and citizenship...” (pp.131-32.) Talk of morality and character had been replaced by notions like mastery, basic skills, competency, and accountability. The rise of the educational testing movement and concurrent focus on research and teaching in reading skills, mathematics, and the sciences --all school subjects “most infused with a mimetic outlook,” were offered as evidence of this trend, which Jackson saw as part of a larger social trend, (p 132).

Jackson worried that “students are differentially exposed to the two traditions on the basis of social class membership...” This he declared a form of social injustice, where those of lower socio-economic classes experience mostly the mimetic and often the poorest versions of that tradition, rife with depersonalization, control, standardization, and efficiency. When there were elements of the transformative in their school experience, they focused on the development of character traits like docility and punctuality, rather than “inquisitiveness or intellectual aggressiveness,” (p143). Shades of PS 14.

Jackson was not overly optimistic about the likely resolution of the two traditions in a happy, creative blending. If the resolution were to occur, as he believed it sometimes did through the effort of a small number of excellent teachers, it would continue to be at the classroom level,

not be at the level of public debate where one is forced to choose sides. And so now, nearly twenty-five years since Jackson wrote, the trend he worried about has, indeed, continued. The mimetic tradition is the primary one a whole generation of teachers has known, but that does not mean that those of us who value the transformative tradition must capitulate. Instead, we need to look for the artful blend, but attention to individual learning differences is essential. Before describing what that might look like, however, we need to illustrate the urgency of our issue.

Working with outdated models of how the brain works and the mind learns, adults are often blind to the unique learning strengths and weaknesses of the individual children for whom they are responsible. For children whose minds are well suited to perform the tasks that are recognized and rewarded at school, the cost of adult's systematic blindness to individual learning differences may be relatively low. For children whose minds work in ways that place them at odds with the traditional demands of schooling, the cost of this systematic blindness can be devastatingly high.

There is a growing body of research in cognitive science and psychology that challenges this simplistic understanding. While human's brains share basic general capacities, scientists are now able to take a closer look at the brain and are discovering the extent to which our brains are remarkably different and become more so through lived experience.

The Mindful Brain and Multiple Intelligences

How do we teach reflective skills?

Reflection, as we have come to define it, has at least three dimensions: receptivity, self-observation, and reflexivity. Each of these elements can be a focus of school-based exercises that nurture the prefrontal region's capacity to be open, self-aware, and meta-aware—the awareness of awareness.⁶

It is a fair assumption that most teachers, well intentioned as we may be, do not teach reflective skills to the degree illustrated above by noted Neurologist Daniel Siegel. And to the extent that reflection itself cultivates intrapersonal intelligence, the above descriptors—self-observation and meta-awareness—may serve as markers or symbols for expanding notions of intelligence. One way to expand our notions of intelligence is to be open to the variegated nature of learning experiences. We are discovering, for example, the way that experience shapes brain wiring. Experience strengthens neural connections, which change the physical structure of our brain. Violin players, for example, have “really strange brains compared to non-violin players,” as John Medina reports in *Brain Rules*:

The neural regions that control their left hands, where complex, fine motor movement is required on the strings, look as if they've been gorging on a high-fat diet. These regions are enlarged, swollen and crisscrossed with complex associations. By contrast, the areas controlling the right hand, which draws the bow, looks positively anorexic, with much less complexity.⁷

Neural connections that have been reinforced over time are more likely to be available for use together in the future. Said simply: ‘Neurons that fire together, wire together.’ The past leaves a trace in the present in the form of strengthened neural connections in our brains. Our unique pattern of neural connections will condition how new experiences will be integrated in the brain—in other words, how we learn. Since no two individuals have exactly the same experiences, no two minds will learn in exactly the same way, not even violin players.

Discoveries about how experience changes the brain raise new questions for educators.

How do repeated experiences of high stress or malnutrition in childhood affect neural connectivity? Conversely, how can we marshal early learning experiences to better prepare students for further education, both in and out of school. We now know that adult brains continue to change in response to conditions (neuroplasticity and neuroadaptation) and that the brain is capable of regenerating or renewing itself (neurogenesis). As Siegel and others continue to show, recent research on social neuroscience can contribute invaluable information to teachers and teacher educators struggling to better reach students. Other cognitive theories add to our understanding as well.

For example, Ryan and Deci's "Self-Determination Theory" posits that neurological research shows that failing to meet basic physiological and psychological needs will contribute to pathology and ill being.⁸ Might these factors impact a child's readiness to learn? What sort of obligation might we have as a society to ensure that the early experiences of young people fully support learning in school, that they include a wide variety of social, artistic, and motor movement opportunities, for instance? These questions must move from the periphery to the center of our discussions about what it means to educate all of our children well. Dewey, Kaplan, Crawford and Wilson propose, for example, that motor movement facilitates the formation of neural circuits during development and can make a difference in attention, learning, and psychological adjustment.⁹

If experience shapes brain structure, then teachers, who frame the experience of children every day at school, are doing more than objectively observing the unfolding powers of children's minds—they are actively shaping the structure of those minds, as are other children who are learning with and around each other. What should teachers know about the brain and the mind, how it learns, and how its development varies among individuals? The profession has acted long under the assumption that one semester-long course in child development and learning is sufficient background for teachers.

None of us choose to have the brain that we have, and all of us have both strengths and weaknesses in learning. Some process factual information quickly, and others need more time, but retain more. Some easily grasp complex ideas, but struggle to remember the sequence of steps in a dance. Some have a talent for understanding how things work, but might not be able to demonstrate that knowledge on a pencil and paper test. Some might be sources of endless creative ideas, but struggle to make good choices in social situations.

All too often, children whose learning strengths and weaknesses do not match up well with school expectations are held morally culpable for the mismatch. In fact, some wonder if this pattern is in our best interest, noting, "schools themselves are a very recent artifact of civilization. The more powerful force in the brain's architecture is arguably the need to navigate the social world, not to get As."¹⁰

For over twenty years, Psychologist Howard Gardner has challenged the notion of a single intelligence, and has argued that intelligence assessed by general intelligence tests can easily lead to an incomplete measure of human potential. Intelligence tests, claims Gardner, may reliably measure a type of linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligence, but others-- for example, musical, social, kinesthetic, or spatial intelligence —represent an independently operating capacity to solve problems or fashion products that are valued in a particular culture.¹¹

Clearly, there are some important implications for schools. If there are multiple intelligences that can serve the individual and the community, then schools might have an obligation to cultivate all of them; or at least, more than can be tested by linguistic/verbal or

quantitative measures. Gardner's research at least puts the issue on the table, and forces us to defend our choices when we, as parents and educators, emphasize certain types of intelligence but not others. Gardner's work prompts us to consider how educators should encourage children to explore their capabilities in areas other than in linguistic-mathematical thinking. Environments might be designed to develop capacity in spatial reasoning, for example, eventually assessing the learning strengths and weaknesses of children in multiple domains. Less time might be spent in activities in which all children learn, and are assessed on the same things, at the same time, in the same way, and are then assessed by a single yardstick as well. Fortunately, the explosion of pedagogies and professional development activities such as *Differentiated Instruction* has carved out a niche and a market share for using curricular and human resources to attend to learning styles and variegated intelligence.

There is no point in pretending that we, as a nation, are going to embrace with one accord a more pluralistic vision of the mind and of schooling just because there is a growing body of scholarly work and academic work that supports it. To embrace this pluralistic vision would mean that we would have to let go of the vision that created the dystopian efficiency of PS 14. We would have to abandon the hope of gaining perfect control over children and be willing to become students of children—listening to what they reveal to us about who they are and what they are capable of becoming. We would have to give up the notion that all children's minds are alike, and that by expecting them all to do the same things at the same time we are being fair and objective. Instead, we would become curious about how children's minds work differently. We would understand fairness to mean not that we treat everyone the same way, but that we give unique individuals what they need to thrive. Finally, we would have to rethink our tendency to think of schools as workshops whose sole function is to transform children into economic producers. We would have to ask ourselves, is that really what we want for our children—*our* children, not just for other people's children? Surely, there is room for us to work towards our highest democratic ideals, and for nurturing, socially just pedagogy for all children.

By the time we become adults, most of us already have a good deal of experience with schools, and we have fairly established notions about what schooling is and should be. Unlike other professions—law or medicine, say—most adults have enough experience in or with schools to have their own opinions about what they should be like. For many of us, the model of schooling that we carry around in our heads bears some resemblance to the uniform approaches of PS 14. In any event, by the time public policy is made, what people remember about classroom realities and children's developmental characteristics is over shadowed by demands for standardization and assessment. As a result a challenge facing the nation in providing for individual differences in learners lies in the enormity of changing a system designed to assimilate and produce workers.

Stories from the Field

As educator Mike Rose knows, sometimes a story can reveal the complexities of life and learning in a way that detached academic analysis cannot. In *Lives on the Boundary*, Rose tells the story of his own educational journey, one that took him from the ghettos of Los Angeles to the sprawling campus of UCLA. Rose tells of his struggle to find meaning and voice in school settings where the rules of the game were so different from those he learned in his home neighborhood. He also tells stories of the kids he met along the way, kids from similar neighborhoods to his own, dealing the same struggles to find their place in academic environments that often seemed alien and sometimes hostile.

Rose's stories speak to us about another type of learning difference—one rooted in the

vastly different social experiences our children have in this highly stratified society. Stress and poverty leave their marks on the minds of children, and as Rose notes, we must listen to their stories if we are going to meet their needs at school. Among the children he profiles is Harold, a twitchy fifth grader who attended Rose's writing class in his school.

Harold's group met once a week in the cafeteria. Harold didn't put pencil to paper for quite a while, then, slowly and with deliberation, wrote about a picture of Pig Pen, the hirsute keyboardist from the Grateful Dead:

"The middle one makes me feel funny."

...I had decided to have another look at Harold's file. The principal handed me the thick folder, and I took it to the teacher's lounge and closed the door. As I went through the pile of smudged and dog-eared pages, slowly this time and with my weeks with Harold and a visit to his house behind me, I saw how his teachers had increasingly misread his tics and twitches and detachment as signs of organic damage, how they had gradually despaired of helping him, how he was progressively defined by the school as the outsider his mother felt him—and herself—to be. The folder described the sad and elaborate chronicle of what happens to a child who is too distressed to fit neatly into our classrooms.¹²

Rose's poetic tale draws the reader into Harold's story. We feel something for this boy—sympathy perhaps, or discomfort, maybe a desire to reach out and help. We feel involved with Harold because Rose risked seeing Harold and making a connection with him. But Harold was a boy who was easy not to see. How many Harolds are there out there in our classrooms, waiting to be seen? How often do we convince ourselves that we have a handle on kids like Harold, that we have done all we can, because we have assembled thick files on them full of descriptions, diagnoses, and treatments? What are we systematically failing to see?

Wise educators have known for decades how important a human connection can be, whether for kids who live in high poverty or high stress environments, or those that live in wealthy loneliness. In the 1970's, James Comer was achieving extraordinary results in inner-city schools in New Haven.¹³ He placed relationships and human development at the center of his School Development Program. What Comer understood—and we have often forgotten—is that if kids are going to be able to learn at school, they need to be emotionally resilient. They must be able to accept the frustrations of doing something difficult, to delay gratification long enough to see a project through to its completion, to invest the effort it takes to learn something new, and to manage conflict with peers and authority figures. In Comer's experience, kids from stressful environments often lacked this emotional resilience. He believed that if healthy relationships could be modeled at school, by children and adults alike, kids could be taught the social and emotional skills that make learning possible. And it worked—relationships improved dramatically at Comer's schools, and as they did, academic achievement improved too.

Deborah Meier is another educator who achieved success turning around low performing schools beginning in the late 1970's. Like Comer, Meier knew that building trusting, respectful relationships among adults, as well as among the children, was essential work if they were going to create a culture that supported learning. Meier understood that getting serious about relationships meant more than exhorting everyone to be nice to each other. For Meier and the Central Park East schools she led in East Harlem, it meant thinking small—reducing the size of the school, class sizes, and the typical number of students each teacher sees in a day. Relationships take time, Meier understood, and so does learning. "Caring and compassion are not

soft, mushy goals.” she reminds us, “They are part of the hard core of subjects we are responsible for teaching.”¹⁴ There is nothing soft or mushy about the results of the Central Park East schools —“of the first seven graduating classes of CPE elementary school (1977-1984), 85 percent received regular diplomas and another 11 percent got GEDs. This compares to roughly 50 percent citywide.”¹⁵

A common thread that runs through the work of Rose, Comer, and Meier is the belief that if we are going to help all children succeed in learning both academic knowledge and the elements of citizenship and character, we are going to have to get closer to them. As we get closer to kids and listen to their stories, we see things that are impossible to observe from a distance. A simple failed assignment turns out to have complex causes. Kids themselves turn out to be complex. It is easier, of course, not to look at school failure too closely, not to get involved in the stories. As Rose learned, getting involved is risky, but as he also learned, sometimes you need to know the story; you need to risk the relationship, if you want to find out what you need to know in order to help a child succeed:

Every day in our schools and colleges, young people confront reading and writing tasks that seem hard or unusual, that confuse them, which they fail. But if you can get close enough to their failure, you’ll find knowledge that the assignment didn’t tap, ineffective rules and strategies that have a logic all their own; you’ll find clues, as well, to the complex ties between literacy and culture, to the tremendous difficulties our children face as they attempt to find their place in the American educational system.¹⁶

These are some of the things that Rose learned by listening to kids. Aren’t these just the sort of things that we need to understand about kids if we are serious about not leaving children behind? Like Levine and Gardner, Rose encourages teachers to become curious about children and the stories that lie behind their struggles at school. Sometimes the story holds the key to opening the door of learning for a child.

In schools and classrooms throughout the country, similar and dissimilar tales emerge. For example, stories from current classroom teachers posted on the NNER webpage attest to the importance of seeing all children with potential, even if, in the classroom or school setting, they are considered special. In personal language, one teacher, an English Language Learner and sibling of a special needs child, forcefully argues the needs for curricular and evaluation flexibility:

I know this may come off a bit strong but the truth is that an injured brain will not accomplish the same tasks as a brain that works at full potential. So why force a child to learn to do things he or she will not be able to do? Why frustrate the child by making him or her feel incapable because they are different?¹⁷

But national trends are pushing educators in the opposite direction. We seem to be caught up in the belief that more tests are somehow going to help Harold, and kids like him. Those at the top of the system want control—or at least the appearance of control—over the educational process and outcomes, and they believe that more and better testing data will give them the control they seek. They act as if they believe that treating all students fairly means treating all students the same.

While more tests may help politicians and policy makers tell stories with numbers, and they might help the testing businesses and their stockholders quite a lot, they are not likely to help Harold. A lack of tests was never Harold’s problem. It is not going to help Harold if his teachers

find themselves wishing he would stop coming to school so he would stop dragging down their test scores or if they cease to be curious about the perfectly silent children in front of them, eyes cast downward on their test booklets, sitting as “regular as machine-planted corn.”

Conclusion: What is the Ideal We Seek?

We seek schools that are responsive to all children and adults that work with the children and in the schools. We seek systems and policies that both individuate learners and are inclusive. We seek schools of education and arts and sciences, and the public schools, the tripartite, working together towards coherent, cohesive and comprehensive education for all students. We seek apertures of possibility for innovation, common grounds for common successes, and dialogues and discussions with all parties. Given that ideals are, by their very nature, beacons for progress rather than easily attainable goals, we believe that in working to resolve these issues, we are engaging in meaningful work. Our journey, in this case better attending towards humanity and human difference, is the goal. Of course, the varied and variegated interests currently served by pool of human and financial resources involved in public education makes even the best intentioned movements slow and cumbersome, necessitating that we prioritize our movements towards this ideal. What can we do? We can start by focusing on what is necessary and possible, and by making the most of our limit situations.

To some extent, the continuing work related to the Agenda for Education in a Democracy (AED) has already moved many closer to this ideal: the hundreds of Leadership Associate Alumni, the thousands of teachers and students touched in some way by the work of the National Network for Educational Renewal, and the millions of learning opportunities educators connected with the AED create all contribute to a collective pedagogy that is responsive to student needs. And, while the work processes and products of our partnerships doubtless contribute to the general good, we try to model democratic practice, continuously renewing our professional and pedagogical selves. For example, the group that germinated the ideas touched upon in this paper morphed into another and another, each iteration representing additional voices.

In some ways the unfinished nature of all our work, on this essay as well as in our local professional lives, illustrates the need to attend to individual learning differences and individual needs. How many times do we change a syllabus, for example, to better meet student needs? We are continually undone, unfinished educators driven to investigate and create context for positive change and lifelong learning, and, as we have tried to introduce here, we find that attention to individual learning differences is an irreducible component of democratic and good teaching. The histories we bring and the lenses through which we see color and condition what we see, and, by being aware of how we do see, and hear, we better understand our pedagogy, and the world in which we live. We owe students the same opportunity, and by attending with care to their learning styles and needs, we will be more likely to deliver it.

End Notes

- ¹ Howard Gardner, "In Defense of the Theory of Multiple Intelligences," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 4, 2009, B18.
- ² Robert Sternberg (2007), "Who Are the Bright Children? The Cultural Context of Being and Acting Intelligent," *Educational Researcher*, Vol. 36, No. 3, pp.148-155.
- ³ Jean-Dominique Bauby (1997). *The diving bell and the butterfly*. NY: Vintage.
- ⁴ <http://www.stephenwiltshire.co.uk/documentaries.aspx?page=6>, Accessed 29 August 2009
- ⁵ David B. Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), 54.
- ⁶ Daniel Siegel, *The Mindful Brain: Reflection and Attunement in the Cultivation of Well-Being*. NY: Norton, 2007, p. 262.
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