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EPSE 512

July 9, 2012

Sternberg, R.J. (2007). Who are the bright children? The cultural context of being

and acting intelligent. *Educational Researcher, 36*(3), 148-155.

In his article, Sternberg defends different cultural, adaptive, social, and cognitive values of intelligence. It is a mistake to make one, uniform definition of intelligence and stick to it while describing each person’s intelligence level. In fact, it is not intelligent.

Sternberg describes a number of fascinating cases, which were studied in different cultures around the globe. He observes that Latino children display a higher level of social intelligence, while Asian and Western European children display a higher level of academic intelligence. Based on other readings and class discussions we had thus far, such observation makes complete sense when paying attention to cultural development (Winzer, M. & Mazurek, K., 2010), family values (Bui, Y. & Turnbull, A., 2003), and poverty level (in Sternberg’s description of homeless children in Brazil) in societies with different cultural backgrounds.

Sternberg describes in further detail the practical knowledge of Kenyan children when it comes to medicinal herbs recognition and application, but their lack of academic and linguistic skills to be able to discuss this knowledge. These children have an adaptive, practical intelligence, which is needed for their survival.

I really tear up, however, when I read about the study done in Alaska. A group of Eskimo children is studied and the teachers claim that their students are not really bright. The teachers, being academically advanced, focus on academic intelligence only. The author describes how an Eskimo child is able to travel in the middle of winter by dog sled from point A to point B without maps, signs, or academic navigational skills, and get there safely and without difficulties. In the next sentence the author adds that any teacher in this group likely would not survive such a trip. How dare these teachers call their students “not bright”? What is more important in the habitat these children live in: academic knowledge or advanced survival skills in such harsh environment? Intelligence is a matter of perspective, not a set ideology.

In this article Sternberg does not focus on children with special needs, but he does discuss the types of intelligence needed for different professions our students may choose in their future. One of my personal examples is a story of one of my students. When he was about 5 years old, two of his siblings died in a house fire. His parents split up and his brother moved away with his mother, while he remained with his father. He moved from one school district to another. Some of his education included home schooling, which was not really effective in the standard education sense, because his father is illiterate. Finally, he ended up in my school at a grade 10 age level on a modified program. His formal education had not really begun yet. I learned that due to trauma, he did not speak well until recently. Indeed he was really quiet and shy. I have known this young man for nearly three years now. In the first year at our school, with a special program purchased by our principal specifically for him, the boy learned to read from no skills to a grade 2 level with age-appropriate comprehension. In the following two years he completed his high school math with an A average. Needless to say, his father and I did some paper work to transfer him from the modified program to the Dogwood diploma. But most importantly, this boy can make amazing art from metal and wood. Due to his First Nations heritage, the theme of his art is often Native. He makes miracles from metal – a carved belt, for example, that he can wear – and wood. He reads blue prints to other students he supports, because his spacial abilities are far above average. In addition to his amazing talents, he has the most polite personality. In terms of creativity and artistic talent, his intelligence is far superior to mine. He chose to stay an additional year in high school to gain his high school diploma in 2013.

Children on the autism spectrum are another misunderstanding in terms of testing their conventionally acceptable intelligence level. Not unlike the students who choose their future career, many high-functioning autistic students have one outstanding talent that is generally superb in comparison to their peers. That is their special intelligence. I was cheering just a few weeks ago at my daughter’s grade 7 graduation, when she was called to the stage to receive a plaque for the Achievement in Fine Arts award. I must say I was not surprised, and might even have been somewhat disappointed had she not been recognized in this category considering her amazing intelligence in this area.

Finally, it is the Canadian and American teacher’s duty to teach in the way that we respect cultural intelligences of all our students due to the fact that we live in multicultural societies. Each student deserves our utmost attention based on his or her culture, and social and family values. It is up to us, teachers, to look for perhaps sometimes hidden intelligence – I am sure that most of the time we will find it and be, once again, amazed.