



NETWORK NEWSNOTES

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Excerpts from:

Getting Smart:

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF INTELLIGENCE

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The Efficacy Institute

Our approach to educating children is failing because the attitudes that underlie it are wrong. American beliefs about human intelligence and educability are limiting and counterproductive; they represent a major constraint on the development of our young, and an entirely inappropriate basis for 21st century pedagogy. As the "American Century" draws to a close to the tune of the emerging economic hegemony of Japan, we confront a highly competitive global economic order that demands ever-increasing levels of literacy and problem-solving proficiency in workers. In response, we are raising children whose knowledge and skills are inferior to those of their industrial-age parents. The recent heightened attention of politicians and business leaders provides a clue about the seriousness and breadth of the national concern over this issue. The fact that no workable approach to national educational reform has yet surfaced indicates the depth of

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New Directions

This issue of the *Network Newsnotes* revolves around issues and business discussed at the annual fall meeting of the Advisory Board of the National Network of Principals' Centers. In particular, a new mission statement was created in order to redefine the mission of the Network. The Network now encompasses an international perspective, hence the new name — The International Network of Principals' Centers — and has taken a stronger stand as an advocate of children's education (See: Dr. Jeff Howard's essay on "Getting Smart") as well as maintaining its interest in the professional growth of principals. We have included an article written by Dr. Jane Ellison describing the slow growth and development of the Colorado Principals' Center as it tries to coexist with an institution of higher education and meet the practical concerns of school districts that feed into the center — *not always a fruitful partnership*. Developing inexperienced principals is the goal of Colorado Principals' Center New Principal Academy. Read about some of their activities. In addition to news about new Network staffers and Network activities, we are excited to share information about the Annual Principals' Conversation to be held in Atlanta, Georgia in April. ▲

Ron Cabrera, Principal, Douglas County Schools
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our muddle. After years of flailing about, looking for scapegoats and making empty demands for change, it is clear that something is interfering with our capacity to mobilize our resources and our know-how to educate children. The obstruction lies at the most fundamental level of our thinking about people and their capabilities: we operate from the self-fulfilling conviction that only a small percentage of children are intelligent enough to become well educated. This belief has a profoundly negative impact on our pedagogy, engenders lack of confidence in children and indifference to data that demonstrates that virtually all of them can learn, and it discourages mobilization of an effective movement for educational reform.

The urge to fortify children with knowledge is an instinctive, appropriate response to the perception of a society adrift in a competitive and dangerous world. Our prospects for maintaining our status as a great economic power depend on educating a generation who can solve our problems and restore our competitive edge. Our efficacy as educators, in turn, is bound up in our attitudes about intelligence and learning capacity. Despite the conventional wisdom, most of our children are not

congenitally limited in intellectual ability. On the contrary, most are more than intelligent enough to learn, if we learn to teach them. The optimistic idea that “all children can learn” is a basis for marshaling the commitment and investment required to build the education system we need. But optimism is not the dominant feeling now. Fundamental American assumptions about intelligence and education, and a set of policies based on these assumptions, interfere with our capacity to develop children.

I. The Psychological Basis of Underdevelopment

In the late 20th century, intelligence ranks as a critically important personal characteristic structuring not only the treatment children receive in school, but their self-concepts and prospects for productive employment in the information age economy. Picture a young child you know (perhaps one of your own) who is “very bright”; intellectually curious and aggressive, quick to grasp new ideas and concepts, and confident in his or her capacity to learn. Now think of someone, perhaps from the same family, who is “not very smart”; slower on the uptake of new ideas and concepts, inferior in academic skills, beset by low confidence in his or her abilities. Can you imagine these same children in their adult roles, 20 years hence?

Once adults judge children too dull to be taught complex material, we give up on teaching them what they will need to know. Instead, we send messages that teach them to view themselves as dumb—a self-conception that devastates self-esteem and blocks the capacity to commit to learning. Many children, especially poor and minority children, begin to show a strong aversion to academic work in the primary grades. They seldom read outside of school, and become increasingly alienated from the business of academic work in the classroom.

The Innate Ability Paradigm

The way we treat children is based on powerful assumptions we share about the distribution of intelligence and its relationship to learning capacity. These assumptions generate educational practices that enter the child’s experience as critical events, introducing the conditions for failures of confidence and disrupting the motivation to work at learning. They may be summarized:

- There is a distribution of intelligence within what is considered the ‘normal’ human population; some individuals are highly intelligent (kids would say “very smart”), some are moderately intelligent (“sorta smart”), and some are not very bright (“kinda dumb”).
- We can specify how much intelligence is needed to learn particular skills and concepts in school, and fulfill particular vocational or professional functions in adult life.
- We can employ standardized tests to measure the intelligence of children, and then predict who will be able to master which skills and assume which functions. Academic placements matching intellectual demands of curricula to the intelligence of individual children are made on the basis of these measurements.

Dr. Howard spoke to the Advisory Board of the National Network of Principals’ Centers on Sunday, September 29, 1991. He recommended that the Network should use its political influence and professional responsibility to advocate a stronger position on the behalf of all children, especially minority children.

Dr. Howard argues that every child is capable of succeeding with a first-rate education if we, as educators, are willing to change our traditional paradigm of grouping and educating children. Instead, schools often allow children who are deemed “low” or “slow” achieving to slip through the “cracks.” The excerpts from Dr. Howard’s essay “Getting Smart: The Social Construction of Intelligence” (March 27, 1991) more clearly describe his position. For more information on Dr. Howard and the Efficacy Institute call (617) 862-4390 and ask for Pat Johnson.

• We can infer levels of intelligence in the absence of direct intelligence test data by assessing which material the child seems to be able to master, and which s/he cannot, and by assessing the rate of mastery of new ideas, concepts and operations. Thus, assessments of ability need not be left exclusively to experts and standardized test scores; they may reasonably be made by classroom teachers as well, relying upon their own observations. Inferences drawn in this way operate with the same force as test data in subsequent ability placements.

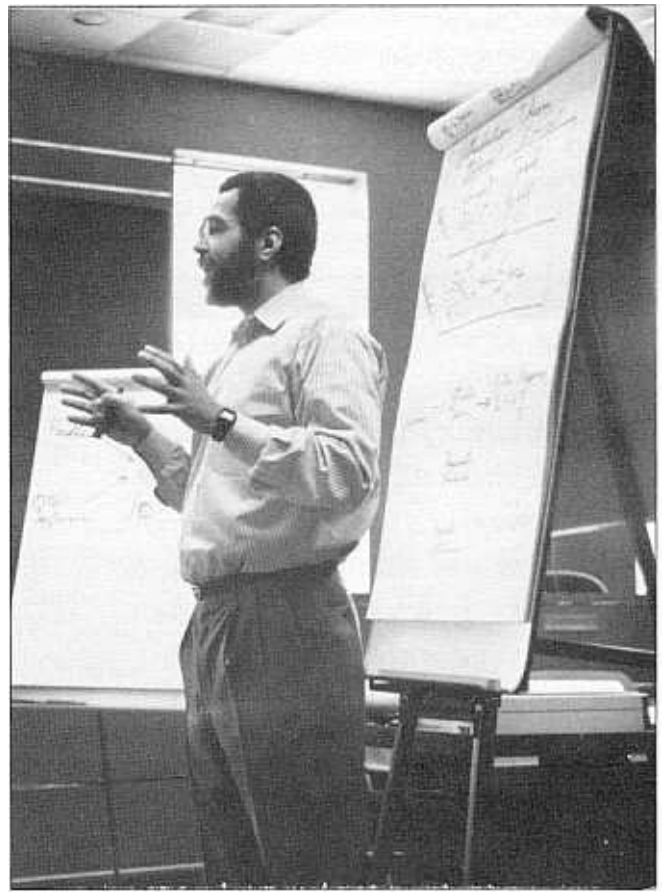
These beliefs constitute a paradigm—a more or less universally accepted, taken-for-granted theory which organizes perception and behavior. The core idea of this paradigm is the belief that intelligence controls the capacity of an individual to develop intellectually. Intelligence is thought to be an innate endowment, fixed at birth, apportioned to different people in different quantities. The relationship between intelligence and learning capacity may be modeled.

Innate Development Intelligence

This simple idea has the power to shape what we see when we look at children. The belief that the potential for intellectual development is controlled by an unequally distributed trait, intelligence, focuses our attention on indicators of differences in intellectual ability. The logic of the innate-intelligence paradigm generates, in fact, an exaggerated search for differences—even among very young children. Evidence that one child has a broader knowledge base than most, or that another proves unable to assimilate material that his/her age-mates readily grasp will be taken as evidence that this child is brighter, that one deficient. The standardized tests routinely used on children as young as four years of age are explicitly designed as instruments of differentiation. Test items that are answered correctly by too many children (indicating mastery of what may be important skills or knowledge among a broad segment of the population) are viewed as irrelevant to the task of measuring variation in achievement or ability, and are discarded in favor of items that only some children answer correctly. (See Jeannie Oakes, *Keeping Track, How Schools Structure Inequality*, 1985, Yale University Press, for an excellent discussion of the use of standardized tests to artificially differentiate children. Oakes cites a range of studies that demonstrate the negative impact of ability grouping on students classified as below average, with no evidence of positive impact for students in the upper tracks.) The fact that variations in performance on these tests may simply reflect differences of a few months in the timing of cognitive development (with no more significance than similar differences in the timing of motor development) does little to mitigate their effects in shaping subsequent educational experiences.

Ability Grouping: The Tracking of Future Prospects

Once individual differences in ability have been established, our beliefs about the relationship between innate ability and learning capacity indicate an obvious fix. Children in American schools are routinely sorted into what educators refer to as “ability groupings”, which dictate what curricula, at what pace,



Dr. Howard writes: "*Placement within the hierarchy of ability groupings is a matter of profound importance in the life of a child—different academic tracks lead to very different destinations in American society.*"

and with what sort of homogeneous population they will work. Placement within the hierarchy of ability groupings is a matter of profound importance in the life of a child—different academic tracks lead to very different destinations in American society. Placements may be ‘academic’ or ‘vocational’; one may be considered ‘gifted’, ‘college bound’, or not. Those in the ‘non-academic’ tracks are dispensed a curriculum that does not pretend to prepare them for higher education or the demands of the employment market they will face. Children are well aware of the implications of these placements; they are a primary currency of self-esteem and self-confidence in school, and ultimately of status, productivity and earning power in society.

Ability group placements represent powerful expectancies; when we group kids according to our assessments of their intelligence, we communicate clearly what we think of them, and we shape their conceptions about their places in the world. On a typical elementary school playground, a child asked to give directions to the “dumb room” will point, without hesita-

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tion, to a "special education" classroom. Ask the same child (or any other), to point out the 'really smart' kids at his or her grade level, and your attention will be directed to the children in the fast, or 'gifted' academic track. Research has shown that self-assessments based on scores and ability group placements become permanent features of the child's self-concept, and shape attitudes and behavior toward academic work.

Children who admit to themselves that they are dumb feel a loss of control over future prospects, and find it difficult to rationalize the investment of greater commitment. ("If I'm not smart enough to be successful, why bang my head against the wall?")

African-American and Latino children in particular are subject to negative expectancies about their intellectual capabilities. Once we accept the idea that intelligence is distributed unequally among individuals, it is a small jump to the conclusion that it may be distributed unequally among different population groups, too. There is a rumor of inferiority that follows minority children to school, especially racially integrated school. (Jeff Howard and Ray Hammond, *Rumors of Inferiority*, The New Republic, September 9, 1985.) They enter the school environment under a general expectation that they have less intelligence, are severely overrepresented in slow, or special education classes, and even more severely underrepresented in the upper end of the placement hierarchy, and are subject to a range of forces outside the school, including negative peer pressure, that oppose any commitment to intellectual development.

The Effects of Undermining Confidence

There is an obvious question that few adults ever ask: are children placed in slow, or low ability subject groupings in the primary grades because they will never be good at those subjects, or do they fail to master particular subjects because of the negative psychological impact of placing them in low ability groups? A strong case can be made that when we undermine children's confidence by communicating low expectations, we set up cognitive and behavioral dynamics that are crippling to the child's later ability to learn.

Expectations, Impact, Thoughts and Effort

Placing children in average or low ability groupings is a clear signal that they are not regarded as smart. It is a blunt communication of negative expectations from trusted authority figures that diminishes their confidence and leads to self-

defeating thought and behavior patterns.

Attributing failure to personal inadequacy has a disabling impact on the capacity to marshal effort. Children who admit to themselves that they are dumb feel a loss of control over future prospects, and find it difficult to rationalize the investment of greater commitment. ("If I'm not smart enough to be successful, why bang my head against the wall?") They attempt to work, since each attempt at the task represents a confrontation with one's own inadequacy. (Bernard Weiner, *An Attributional Theory of Achievement Motivation and Emotion*, Psychological Review, 1985, vol 92, #4, p. 548.) This is especially pronounced when these children confront difficult material. For many, avoidance based on the thought, "I can't do this," is the automatic response to anything that doesn't come easily. When we induce children to think and act in this way, we condemn them to long-term failure and a permanent sense of inferiority.

A Diminished Sense of Control

Perhaps the most pernicious result of labeling so many children unintelligent is the degree to which it robs adults and children of a sense of control over the learning process. Teachers, especially those assigned to instruct 'slower' students, daily confront the task of teaching children who are considered incapable of learning. Is it any wonder that the profession is plagued with apathy and burnout?

The innate-ability paradigm is at the heart of the disarray, the stagnation and the sense of helplessness that pervade American education. Our ideas about intelligence and development are a self-inflicted wound, generating practices that hurt children and undermine our position in the world. They are also a filter, screening out the information and techniques that could help us get better. If many children are congenitally incapable of learning complex material, what sense does it make to explore alternative pedagogical approaches and redirect billions of dollars to restructuring the education system? The same fundamental beliefs that are ruining our schools and injuring the spirits of our children also blind us to educational techniques that work, and reduce reform, in the minds of many, to an expensive exercise in futility. We are surrounded by the painful evidence that our ideas about intelligence and educability are destructive, and that the system we have built to execute them does not work. It is time we deliberately restructure the basic assumptions that shape the way we treat our children, and employ a new paradigm as a basis for an entirely different approach to education.

II. Getting Smart: Development as Process

If nearly everyone in Japan is smart enough to learn higher mathematics, what sort of future will we build by assuming that the majority of our children are not? People are obviously not born with the same talents, in the same measure, but it is reasonable—and prudent—for us to assume that the great majority of our children, too, are endowed enough to achieve verbal and mathematical competence. They will live in a technological age, and operate in an international economy; we

must find a basis for believing in their intelligence and managing their development.

We need a new approach to education; one that will give our children the solid basis of knowledge, skills, and confidence they will need to meet the challenges of their time. An alternative paradigm, a new framework about development based on the simple proposition that “all children can learn”—once they are taught how to learn—will help us reorganize our thinking and our practices. A new framework will start with an empowering idea of what development is: it is a process of

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building capability. In this definition, development is not tied to some innate, fixed trait beyond our influence. It is dynamic; the capabilities of children, including high order intellectual capabilities, can be deliberately built up. In a new educational paradigm, the most important single factor controlling the learning capacity of children is a characteristic of adults: the ability to view development as a process that we have the power to manage. Taking responsibility for the development of children depends on willfully breaking the link, in our own minds, between a child's learning capacity and crude measures of intelligence. All children can learn, if the process of learning is effectively organized and managed by adults. A society organized around this central idea will be moved by the examples of educators who have always known that it was true, and will incorporate their techniques into an effective movement to reform our educational system.

A new framework for thinking about education will include a major emphasis on the psychology of teaching and learning, in addition to the traditional focus on transferring the content of specific subject material. It will redirect attention from the current preoccupation with sorting children, and shift primary interest to the challenge of building a basis for teaching them. A psychologically sustaining pedagogy will include three critical elements: we must replace the old, destructive ideas about intelligence with a new, constructive conception of development; we must build children's self-confidence through positive expectations and emotional support; and we must instruct them in a general technique for development, applicable across the range of academic domains.

Teach Children a Constructive Theory of Development

The destructive idea that we have put in the heads of our children, that development is the province of an innately gifted few, must be replaced with a new idea that will provide a psychological foundation for confidence and committed study. An empowering idea, explicitly taught as part of the formal school curriculum, will define intellectual development as an ongoing process of building analytic and operational capability through effort.

Think You Can, Work Hard, Get Smart

This model, developed by Verna Ford, underlines the notion of intelligence as something constructed, something one can build. It is an idea easily taught to young children: “If you believe in yourself, if you ‘think you can’, then you will be able to ‘work hard’ at what you are trying to learn. And if you really work, if you don't give up, you will learn. You will ‘get smart’.” This is an alternative, constructive notion about the basis of development that can be summed up in a single line:

“Smart is not something that you just are, smart is something that you can get.”

If development is understood by the child to be built up through the expenditure of effort, then the child is in control—the decision about becoming smart is in his or her own hands. Children are empowered and energized by the notion that they can choose to get smart. Instilling confidence that “smart is something that you can get,” and training students in the techniques associated with getting smart should be primary objectives of early education, at home and at school.

Build Up Children's Confidence Through Belief and Emotional Support

Lack of confidence is the intangible at the core of the educational problems experienced by so many of our children. Building confidence in their learning capacities will be an essential part of the cure. Strong confidence generates positive attitudes toward development, positive feelings between teacher and student, energizes effort, and allows attention to focus on strategic approaches to the work of learning and teaching.

Positive expectations and emotional support are powerful tools that adults can use to shape the confidence of children. Jon Saphier suggests a three part communication combining the two:

- *This schoolwork I am asking you to do is important*
- *I know you can do it, and*
- *I won't give up on you*

The belief in the child expressed in this kind of communication is experienced emotionally. It is a gift, an embrace: “I believe in you, and I won't give up on you.” Children need love and affirmation to grow confident and strong, and they respond to expressions of support and belief from authority figures. Building confidence must become a major objective of all instruction, especially in early education.

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Teach Children the Efficacy of Effective Effort, Step-by-Step

Children who believe that they can learn are able to give their full commitment to learning the process of learning; they are, in fact, eager to do so. What we have characterized as the “step-by-step process of development” represents one simple, easily learned technique for ‘getting smart’. It begins with teaching a child to choose an appropriate starting point, one that matches the difficulty of the materials to be learned with the present capabilities of the individual. Initial objectives should be somewhat challenging (involving a stretch, and some real possibility of failure), but very realistic (failure may be a possibility, but the goal is within the range of what is realistically attainable). In the model of development we are proposing here, note that assessment of present capability (not innate ability) is a tool in the process of getting better, rather than the final judgement about how good one can become.

One important implication of a step-by-step approach is that it honors the individual schedule of the child. It is appropriate that we set firm standards of mastery for the end points of instruction (academic years, graduation dates), but we will not be successful in getting children to meet those standards by starting everyone at the same point, and then attempting to push them along at the same pace and labeling those who don’t keep up as “slow”. Instead, instruction must be geared to finding the correct starting point for each child, instilling initial confidence, teaching him/her to think of failures or difficulties as feedback calling for a different, more effective approach to the task, and then supporting him/her through the step-by-step process of effective application of effort at increasingly challenging goals.

III. The Social Construction of Intelligence

There is nothing particularly new in the ‘new’ framework for development I am proposing. It is simply a way of organizing discussion of a set of techniques that effective teachers and parents have always used. These techniques have a long

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tradition in American culture, but they exist outside the current mainstream of educational thinking and practice. This is what must change; a truly effective pedagogy that instills confidence in children and shows them how to learn must become the central focus of a national thrust for educational reform. Such a change can only come about through a transformation of our most fundamental assumptions about education—a paradigm shift that will focus our attention on the wonderful potentials of

all children, instead of on an exaggerated sense of the differences among them.

The fundamental problem of the present system is that it undermines the capacity of children to commit their effort to learning. The testing/tracking approach to education, based on the assumption that intelligence is fixed, unequally distributed

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and controls learning capacity, is an assault on the confidence and self-esteem of most of our children.

Intelligence, properly understood as a process of ‘getting smart’, is a social endowment, not a genetic one. Children may become confident and smart through the deliberate actions of the adults responsible for them. We are confronted now with a critical choice: we can learn to think and behave in a manner that builds the intelligence of our children, or not. Our most successful international competitors do believe in their children, and they act on their belief. They de-emphasize ability differences, understand the causal relationship between effort and development, and achieve spectacular educational results by setting high expectations, inspiring self-confidence, and instilling strong cultural values around effective effort. We must do the same, at all levels of society and with the full diversity of our population. It is within our power to decide to believe in children; once we accept the idea that they can learn, we will discover within ourselves the will and the know-how to restructure our schools and our pedagogy, and enough faith in the future to invest our resources and our best people in education.

Ultimately, it is the ranking of societies, not children, that will determine the quality of our lives. The most important criterion for the international sorting process we are living through is no longer military prowess, or natural resource reserves, and it is certainly not scores on standardized tests. It is the degree to which a society learns to develop its children that will determine its place in the world of the 21st century. The ideas that structure the present system of American education are clearly interfering with our capacity to transfer knowledge and skills to our children, and matters will only improve when we organize a broad constituency for change, based on an optimistic assessment of our children’s capabilities. The will to restructure our education system, and the courage to invest in it, are contingent on the belief that our kids will prove equal to the considerable, and unpredictable demands of their time. Learning to believe that they can learn, and that we can learn to teach them, will require an act of faith, in children and in ourselves. It is a faith that will restore our confidence in the future. ▲