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**Marlo Payne Thurman Ph.D.**  
[Different Minds](#)

# Rethinking Intelligence: Saving Our Different-Minded Kids

Traditional ideas about intelligence often overlook talent in diverse learners.

Posted Jan 13, 2020



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As a society, we easily accept the notion that we know what intelligence is and we can effectively test for it. Based on IQ tests and the scores that come out of them, we then comfortably make life-changing assumptions about what certain individuals can or cannot do, and we design entire educational systems, along with standardized curriculum to

“intellectually” prepare youth for their place in the world.

But as changing times and technologies across my lifetime have moved us into the information age, I have begun to wonder if our current definition of intelligence and its implications for education and learning still make sense for the twenty-first century.

Based on a modern-day construct about what intelligence actually is, we draw from our collective beliefs about intelligence to define cognition, learning, and subsequently, education. With these beliefs as our starting point, we have created a system for teaching all children, constantly striving to more finely tune the existing system. Within this model, we have developed even more rigorous, evidence-based methods for standardizing and measuring our definition of teaching and learning. Luckily, this works for a lot of kids.

But, as someone who has made my living for 25 years conducting psycho-educational assessments for different-minded kids, I would like to ask why so many intellectually and academically capable kids are struggling in college, and afterward become stuck with unemployment. At the same time, others with much lower measured IQs and poor academic histories (especially those with diagnoses under the autism umbrella) are finding success as adults in STEM and other high-level, applied, visual-learning fields, even though their childhood performance suggested that this level of adult functioning would be impossible.

This leads to the question: Do we, as a collective, really understand what intelligence actually is? Moreover, do we know what to do to fully develop it?

Within any definition of intelligence throughout human history, it could be said that those individuals who met the demands of their world and excelled were intelligent people. But to say this, we must first acknowledge that what we are really saying is that intelligence is entirely dependent on the time and circumstances of the society in which one lives. As such, in past generations, above-average intelligence might have been ascribed to those who easily grew crops or accurately collected medicinal plants to treat the sick. Intelligence might have even been defined by one’s ability to use some strategy to stay alive in hand-to-hand combat.

What if Spearman and others in our modern time missed something when they defined intelligence for today? More specifically, what if all of our modern-day human-thought about intelligence, our classification systems, our developmental milestones, and our very definition about what is normal and what is not is wrong for today’s 21st Century world? Wouldn’t it then be possible that at least some of today’s kids with really different minds, the ones who don’t test well, fit in, or do particularly well in school, are just misplaced and miseducated within our limited understanding about intelligence and learning?

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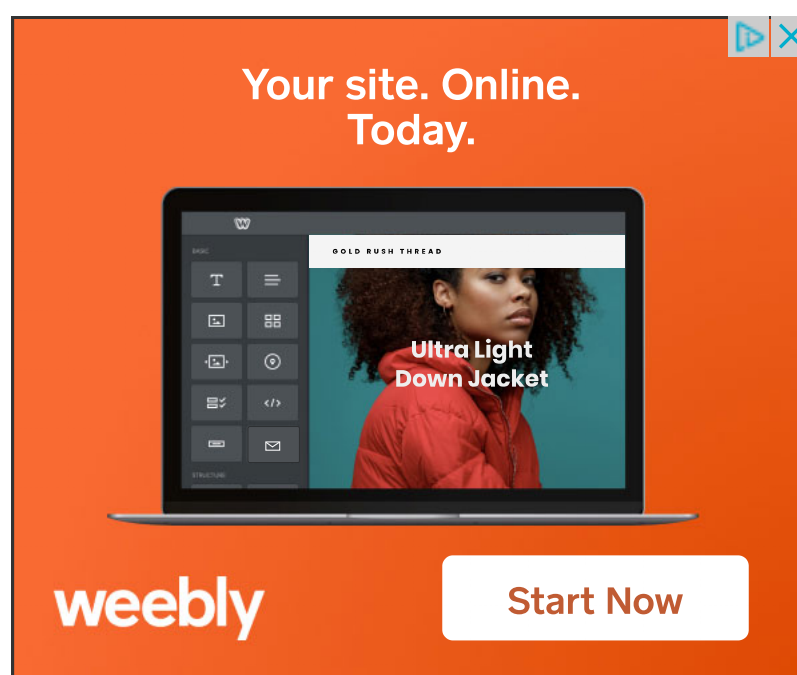
As someone who has tested thousands of kids, I have seen countless, unnamed aspects of cognitive skill that feel like deep untapped and unmeasured abilities. As one example of many, I had a student a few years ago who could not recall a series of six numbers without first converting them into the military's alpha-numeric coding system. Then, with that as an adaptation, he was able to store and repeat 20 digits, even though his Digit Span score, when reported in a standardized way, came in at the fifth percentile. Can anyone explain this to me? I suspect some people can. More importantly, though, this feels like deep cognitive ability, and oddities like this are common within individuals labeled as different minded or even disabled.

Within my formal training, the skills I have seen that I believe demonstrate deep intelligence, yet sometimes make an IQ score lower, are actually hard to even discuss or explain because we don't yet have words for them. However, if you talk to people who test intelligence a lot, those of us who have given several thousand IQ tests, a common theme emerges — some kids are much smarter than their scores reflect and they often have unusual skills that are not included anywhere within our modern-day tests. Skilled clinicians know, even though they can't prove it, that their instincts about intelligence are sometimes much better than the IQ score obtained, for predicting an innate ability and a person's potential for success.

I should add that for me, some of these observations became even more evident following my own head injury. After my accident, I had extremely slow processing, my short-term memory virtually disappeared, and overnight, I could see phenomenal three-dimensional images in my mind that had never been there before. As just one example of how thinking differently changes academic skill, with my new way of thinking, I literally couldn't read for about six months, even though by then I had completed my graduate-level training in school psychology and never had a problem with reading before.

Let me explain; it wasn't that I forgot how to read. Instead, it was as if I could now see every letter, every word, and every sentence, in motion, with multiple possibilities where only a tiny spin or movement in position and order changed the entire meaning of the text in front of me. Adding to that, my eyes no longer moved properly, so when I could finally pin the letters to the page in my mind, I still could not track them effectively.

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With this as only one of many changes in my brain, I began to view the world from a different mind and as I did that, I saw children and the unusual patterns they presented differently too. This led to three questions:

What if there really are big differences between us in our most basic aspects of intelligence? What if these differences are essentially unaccounted for within our definitions of education and learning? Do individuals who really think differently require a different way to learn and a different definition about basic curriculum and testing to bring them into adulthood?

Today we live in a very different world than we did when I was growing up. Our advances in many fields have modernized the job market in ways that no one could have predicted. This has led to a unique set of circumstances occurring for our young adults — many, even those that were deemed intelligent and good at school lack the necessary skills to join the workforce.

At this same time, however, industries are calling for a workforce that can think outside of the box and arrive at novel conclusions especially within fields that are heavily steeped in visual and spatial problem-solving. However, in school, we don't really teach spatial skills. In fact, in my opinion, we don't even recognize some of the visual, spatial, and perceptual strengths that drive innovation in so many of these fields.

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Therefore, if education doesn't prepare children to understand their world and enter the workplace of today, what is its purpose? It seems to me that, perhaps for the first time in our human history, at least part of what we are teaching to our children, might not readily apply to adult functioning. So how do we solve this? A friend with autism answered this best:

"There needs to be a distinction between our definitions for intelligence and those for wisdom or discernment. While we need some degree of both, discernment is the byproduct of applied intelligence to the task of independent thinking and successful adaptation to the world in which one lives."

With this, I personally feel like it is the right time to re-open discussions about what exactly intelligence and cognition actually are. As we do this, I believe we will be forced to rethink the very construct beneath cognition and learning and work to redesign a model of education that works for all children.

Many will say this is too great of a challenge and the existing system is too entrenched within our modern-day world. I would argue that even from the perspective of global sustainability, not to mention the value of the individual child, the cost of lost talent in any child is far too great to overlook. Therefore, rethinking intelligence, expanding our definitions about cognition, and truly individualizing learning for all of the different skills that can be made manifest within human cognition is, in my opinion, necessary to our very survival. It's time we talk about intelligence again.



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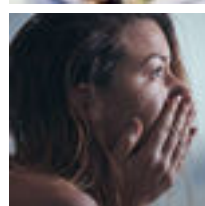
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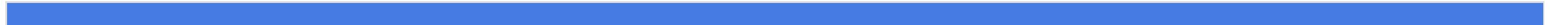
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