

Culturally- and Naturally-Relevant Special Education: The Intersectionality of Nature, Cognition, Human Rights, and Special Education

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THE NATURE OF NATURE AND THE NATURE OF COGNITION

Even under the harshest environmental conditions, life has always found a way to survive, and the scarcity of a specific resource has never pronounced the doom of life. For example, in order to generate energy, life uses photosynthesis when light is available; however, when light is absent, life uses chemosynthesis to generate energy. Different life forms use different modes of intelligence to survive specific environmental phenomena, but sometimes, one life form uses different strategies in order to survive a specific challenge. This elasticity of adaptation is generally accepted as fact in biology; however, in the field of education, elasticity of learning - and hence, teaching - is only embraced with semi-permeability. Should this be true, then fact-based, natural processes are not permeating education to an acceptable degree, and if so, then the praxis of education renders itself unnatural.

Early in the life of Special Education (before it emerged as a formal field of study), the President's Committee on Mental Retardation noted the following: We now have what may be called a 6-hour retarded child - retarded from 9-3, five days a week, solely on the basis of an IQ score, without regard to his adaptive behavior, which may be exceptionally adaptive to the situation and community in which he lives. (p. 2)

Forty-eight years later, one might argue that, although the terminology is no longer appropriate, the conditions that precipitated the stated "6-hour retarded child" who is educationally disadvantaged still prevail across educationdom. For example, culturally-irrelevant instruction artificially renders minority or otherwise othered children weak students who are disproportionately represented in Special Education (cf. Blanchett, 2006; Coutinho, Oswald, & Best, 2002) and referral services such as school suspensions and expulsions (Lewis, Butler, Bonner, & Joubert, 2010; Townsend, 2000).

The consequences of unnatural educational praxis can be very serious for both students and parents alike. Whereas students languish in the daily puni-

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tive existence of schooling and unknowing appeal to human dispositions Abraham Maslow would swear by, parents and guardians live on the other end of the axis, looking for humane solutions. Those guardians who are suspicious that the conventional educational system does not support the needs of their children are left with few options. For some, expensive, specialized schools become the solution; for others, two-income households are forced to have one parent stay at home and home school the child, at great financial cost to the family. If nature affords such a vast array of possible paths for survival and success, then the question is: Are humans an exception to the rule? If not, then why are educational systems still struggling to accept the vast diversity of possible doors that are open for supporting learners who struggle in conventional educational environments?

Arthur Levine (2010) observed that world transformation engendered by profound changes in demographic, economic, technological, and globalization is rather profound, and that such magnitude of change was last seen during the Industrial Revolution. He therefore asserted that teacher education - and by extrapolation, the education system at large as it is - was created for a different era in time, but that time has passed. For this reason, he argued that “even if the nation’s teacher education programs had been perfect, the best in the world, they would still need to change today” (p. 20). In an era when holograms are already teaching in classrooms with amazing canons of literature that are also accessible via cell phones, it is time for the old systems of assessment for placement into school programs to be revisited. In so doing, the nature of assessment itself should be re-conceptualized not only to align with current technology, but also, to match the diversity of natural human minds - and I have good reasons for so deliberating.

Having been born in Ghana but have been gone for about 27 years, I had one of my occasional visits last year (in 2016). While there, I visited several schools, but was especially interested in learning how Special Education as an area of discipline and practice was progressing. I was pleased that Ghana was making some progress in this area - especially in the praxis aspect. More children with different kinds of disabilities were being treated with the fuller humanity they deserved: they were receiving formal education. Thinking about Special Education in-location, however, invoked memories of my former classmates, because I wondered: Had the concept of Special Education existed when I was being schooled in Ghana to the same extent as it currently prevails in the West, how many of my classmates would have been referred thereto, for their education - and would that have been good or bad for them, in light of the benefits of mainstreaming?

In the same spirit of site-based memory invocation, I could not help but think about several of my classmates who were not necessarily great students

in the traditional sense, but were amazing at drawing representations of their thoughts. Some of them were very likely candidates for referral into Special Education services, since their academic performance in the traditional sense was abysmal. Of course, they were great, jovial colleagues during breaktime, until classes resumed, when they artificially transformed into silent, timid students. The question is: Were these indeed weak students, or they were students whose needs were undeciphered by the then traditional systems of teaching and learning? Were these weak students, because they were being educated under mismatched systems of education?

In an era defined by profound technological progress that is eclipsing the very purpose of assessment itself (since content is becoming more and more technologically accessible and manipulatable, thus making nonsense of testing for mere information retrieval), a better question might be: What is the purpose of education? Is the purpose of education meant for life success, or is the purpose to meet some artificial assessment standards that have no connection to real life success? (It may be helpful to note that there are different reasons for assessment, including assessment for exclusion, and assessment for inclusion. In the context of Special Education, conventional school assessments reflect the exclusion, placement, and referral functions of assessment). The intersectionality of the purpose(s) of education, related assessments, and success (at least, financially) often compel me to wonder how and why, in many in parts of the world, success in life is not contingent on formal education, but by “street wisdom.” In other words, people who were written off as weak students can still grow up and become successful, when outside the tyrannical imperatives and strictures of formal education. This weakening of learners by dint of the imposed yoke of unnatural pedagogical contours merits reassessment. In the spirit of civil and human rights, all learners deserve to play on a level playing field that counts their natural gifts and abilities *while in school* - gifts and abilities that only count when they complete - or are forced to leave - school (cf. Lewis, Butler, Bonner, & Joubert, 2010; Townsend, 2000).

NATURAL LEARNING ALONG COGNITIVE HIGHWAYS

David Ausubel (1968) rightly asserted that humans are meaning-makers, and that fundamentally, learning is all about meaning-making. If street- or home-smart students who are otherwise labelled Special Education students from 9am to 3pm are able to make meaning in life and become successful, then educators must invest the time to wonder: Are the policies, standards, and practices involved in teaching and learning creating humans who are not at ease (that is, dis-eased or diseased) in conventional teaching and learning environments, such that average children are having to be either medicated or referred to special, interventive programs to realign them with the system?

The need for more humane education already has some credibility and currency in educationdom. Developmental psychology and related fields espouse the notion that the cognitions of children are different from those of adults, and so there should be differentiated expectations of them. Similarly, sociologists and anthropologists' concept of cultural differentiation espouse a similar idea: people adapt to their native environments; therefore, one cannot expect 10-year-olds from different cultural environments to exhibit the same set of knowledge (not necessarily abilities). For example, a child from the city may know more about public transit than her counterpart from the countryside. That is natural, because the child from the countryside is more likely to know more about wildlife than her city counterpart, all things being equal. A problem arises, however, when one form of knowledge is disadvantaged, and one child is deemed smarter than the other – and worse so, when significant consequences are attached to their differentiated knowledge and related interests.

One can envision Gardner's concept of multiple intelligences and the revisions thereof, as a concept that is reducible to cognitive pathways (or better, learning highways) where new information is traveling. Whereas nature endowed some students with four-lane mathematical highways but only one lane on the kinesthetic, others have four-lane verbal highways but only two lanes on the musical. Sadly, school assessments treasure some learning highways more than others, and those who do not use preferred highways are not only less rewarded, but are often punished, and forced to travel on highways less preferred. This puts them into a dis-eased (diseased) state, for which they can legitimately be referred for treatment and correction. This is not only a self-confirming process, but is also a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The same line of argument that certain school environments create learners who find themselves in diseased states can be advanced for students who are taught or administered in culturally-irrelevant instructional and administrative environments. When school curricula, policies, and instructional approaches are detached from the natural tendencies and interests of students' cultural strengths, it should come as no surprise that the students become disoriented and disinterested in school, resulting in decreased learning outcomes. This process is what Ighodaro and Wiggan (2011) described as "curriculum violence." It is my contention that this visitation of violence on learners can be partly addressed by heeding the arguments advanced in this editorial.

In conclusion, nature provides a diversity of ways to succeed in life as well as in school, despite humans' oft-contrived efforts to create systems of teaching and learning. As neuroscience provides deeper insights into the nature of human cognition, it is my hope that the teaching and learning sciences would conform accordingly. Teaching and learning should be natural and efficient; they should be more seamless with the nature of nature. After all, "much learn-

ing takes place without teaching, and indeed much teaching takes place without learning” (Wenger, 1999). If this is true, then we can do better - by ensuring that whenever teaching occurs, the likelihood of learning is increased, naturally.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

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