

## Lessons from the Garden

You don't have to be a master gardener to appreciate the beauty and rich floral diversity in even the most humble of neighborhood gardens. The seasons in their turn celebrate all varieties of plant life regardless of our labels that categorize some plants as bothersome weeds and others as exotic beauties.

As a teacher and avid gardener I am keenly aware of a strong analogy between being a masterful gardener and a skillful teacher. Both prepare the soil, plant the seeds, nurture and provide support, so that all may grow, flourish and blossom. The beauty of a well tended garden is rarely seen in the similarity of plants, but rather in the glorious variety that makes up the lavish whole.

In education, we need to heed this lesson from the garden in order to reflect on the effects of high stakes testing currently being promoted for students in schools across the nation. Nature does not aim for monoculture. It is the complex web of interconnection and variety that sustains a healthy ecosystem. Biodiversity is the rule for success in nature and we are wise to learn the importance of diversity in the classroom as well. When educational philosophy leans too far in favor of standardization, and when children's success in school is based too heavily on how well they perform on well-meaning standardized tests, the lessons from the garden are lost.

Each child is unique and comes to school with special skills and capabilities. Children deserve to enter a classroom in which the teacher attempts to meet their needs and provides a learning environment where their interests and abilities are developed. When classroom instruction is based too heavily on what students must demonstrate on some version of standardized assessment, the daily lessons become filled with test-preparation activities to bring the student into compliance with a particular grade level standard instead of focusing on teaching to the strengths and diverse learning styles of the students. If we are going to use conformity to a standard to measure student progress in school and incidentally as a way to measure teacher accountability, we need to remember that by definition, a standard is something accepted as a basis for comparison. It is imperative that more than one assessment tool be used so that there is, in fact, something to compare.

Stephanie L. Bravmann, a research consultant at the Center on Reinventing Education at the University of Washington, in Seattle, reminds us that, "there are four distinct kinds of assessment that need to occur in schools, none of which can or should stand alone and each of which is integral to the process of education." The four kinds of assessment she is referring to are placement, formative, diagnostic and summative. But it is the fourth type of assessment, summative, that is being focused on solely to meet district, state and national mandated examination requirements. Ms. Bravmann emphasizes that, "These elements, when used together to inform and advance the acts of teaching and learning, are what help ensure growth for students."

We must look carefully at what we expect teachers to do with children if we want all children to be successful in school. How is the wisdom and intuition garnered from years of teaching used in a classroom where all students are expected to learn in the same ways and at the same rate and to achieve the same outcomes? Stephen Kramer, an elementary teacher in Brush Prairie, Washington, reflects that,

“Testing frenzy is having a big impact on what happens in elementary schools, and much of it is not good. Research indicates that in our state, and others, teachers are neglecting instruction in subjects such as art, science and social studies because they aren’t tested.” He further notes that, “Elementary teachers are spending more and more class time on test-preparation activities. And prescriptive writing instruction all too often sacrifices the originality and inventiveness of developing writers in an attempt to raise test scores on writing tests.”

A masterful gardener honors the diversity in the garden and knows that to thrive, each plant must be planted in the right place. All plants do not have the same soil, water and sunlight needs and when you disregard the special requirements of individual plants, they often become susceptible to disease and pests, struggle and do not flourish or thrive. Let’s remember these lessons from the garden when we consider the claims of a federal mandate - No Child Left Behind, that seeks to enforce accountability for students and teachers with narrowly focused standardized testing.

Let’s use our energy on finding ways to best meet the educational needs of each child without reducing the curriculum goals to one-size-fits-all. We know that children have diverse learning styles. The joy in teaching, as in gardening, is in the nurturing and caring for each unique child, or seed, as the case may be, so that each may grow, thrive and unfold. School should be a place where children come to learn in an environment prepared to meet the varied needs and talents of all. When the educational focus has been narrowed to whether or not students can pass certain academic benchmarks within each grade level, what becomes of the child who easily exceeds these standards or who cannot possibly attain them due to developmental delays or language barriers? When a child’s education is based too heavily on passing mandatory tests, we miss the big picture that recognizes the value and importance of creating a learning community where the needs and learning styles of all are taken into account.

The theory of multiple intelligences, developed by Dr. Howard Gardener, professor of education at Harvard University, broadens the definition of intelligence by recognizing eight different intelligences: linguistic intelligence, logical-mathematical intelligence, spatial intelligence, bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, musical intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, intrapersonal intelligence and naturalistic intelligence. This theory challenges the wisdom and effectiveness of using any narrowly focused teaching or assessment tool that neglects to recognize the unique ways of thinking and learning among children. Dr. Gardner admits that, “the idea of multiple intelligences is rightly seen as a critique of the notion of a single intelligence, and of a school curriculum targeted exclusively to linguistic and logical skills.” We are encouraged by Dr. Gardener to place equal attention on individuals who show gifts in the other intelligences: the artists, architects, musicians, naturalists, designers, dancers, therapists, entrepreneurs, and others who enhance the society in which we live. But many children who have these gifts don’t receive much recognition or reinforcement for them in our schools. Dr. Gardner reminds us that, “A belief in multiple intelligences, however, is in no sense a statement about standards, rigor, or low expectations.”

A standard-based approach to education must be balanced with the understanding that children learn in different ways and at different rates and that they

demonstrate their learning in different ways. Standardized testing may have a place in the education of the young, but it should not supplant the importance of each child being allowed to grow at a rate that is developmentally appropriate for them. Where is the sense of wonder and possibility for a child, the love of learning that we want them to embrace, if the bottom line in their education is how well did they score on state and district standardized testing?

As each school year unfolds, let us remember some lessons from the garden - all children are unique, each child deserves to be appreciated for his or her special talents, gifts and learning styles. Schools should be a place where all children can "blossom", as members of a learning community where diversity is celebrated and an appreciation for the unique ways children learn is nurtured. Let's advocate for schools where all children can experience success based on a broader understanding of intelligence, one that protects the integrity of the individual and keeps in perspective the value of standards-based testing, while the beauty of diversity is celebrated within each classroom across the nation.

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