Redefining Intelligence: A New Look at Learning Differences

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Redefining Intelligence: A New Look at Learning Differences

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Statement of the problem or issue,
In the past, the educational system gathered children who had difficulties of almost any type under the category of special education. If a child had a hard time functioning in a “normal” classroom, they were taken out of the classroom entirely. In the special education programs they were given more individualized attention, but the system also placed the students on the sidelines and placed limitations on their potential. A child in special education knows he or she is different which often makes them believe that they are incapable of matching their peers. However, over the past twenty years we have seen incredible strides in the research and identification of learning disabilities. We can clearly identify the effects of many disorders and have begun to realize that these children aren’t “dumb” or “slow” they are different. Learning in a different way is in no way inferior to the traditional learning style.

However, the practical applications of these advances are often restricted to diagnosticians and specialists because the average teacher is given very little information on the topic of learning disabilities. Most teachers will earn their teaching certificates after taking to classes which address learning disabilities. While this may be enough to acquaint education students with the names and functions of some disorders, it does not result in a thorough knowledge of the differences they will face in the classroom. Children with a wide range of differences are committed to gaining an education in a “normal” classroom. While beneficial in many ways, this poses difficult problems for the teachers. Any given day a public school teacher is asked to walk into a room with up to thirty children and successfully convey important information to each child regardless of how they compare with the other children. Classrooms are filled with children who learn in different ways and the teacher somehow has to cater to every learning type. As a result it is easy to get frustrated, or accidently let a student fall through the cracks.

That is why we must strive to improve our knowledge and sensitivity towards the effects of learning differences. Many children who are different are thought of as lazy, unmotivated, or stupid. It is easy to get overwhelmed and assume that the child is simply not working hard enough, but if the teacher is given an idea of how and why the student needs different attention
it will be infinitely easier to create a successful learning environment. An increased awareness is not enough however; teachers must also be supplied with practical methods for helping children with learning differences. They need to know what kind of study aids will be improve their student’s understanding, and which methods will only increase their difficulties and right now, the state of Texas is not providing them with adequate knowledge in these areas. Teachers who believe in their students and know how to assist them effectively are essential to the success of these students, both inside and outside the educational system.

**Methods/ Actions**

An effective way to begin addressing this problem is through a specialized focus on learning disabilities. The seminar will be hosted by the Meadows School of the Arts, specifically the Cinema-Television department, in conjunction with the Simmons School of Education here at SMU and will take place in mid April. Rather than sticking strictly to a lecture format, this seminar will re-define perceptions about learning differences and spark interest in the topic through a short (10 min.) film addressing the personal experiences of a remarkable girl. Laura Fields studies four and a half to five hours every night in order to compensate for a learning difference. Laura has C.A.P.D. or a Central Auditory Processing Disorder; this means that it takes her three times longer than other students to process information. In spite of this difficulty, Laura is graduating high school having completed all of the courses required for a normal student on a college preparatory track. In addition, she has created a program to increase awareness about processing disorders, and brought the struggles that many learning-disabled students face into perspective. News of her story and presentation has spread across the country and she has been nominated for a national award for her project.

The centerpiece of the seminar however will be the opportunity to meet and talk with Laura and her mother, Katha Fields, in person. Katha has spent the last fifteen years developing a personalized curriculum, creating study aids, and navigating within the educational system to get Laura the help she needs. Seminar attendees will be able to ask this determined pair
what has been vital for Laura’s learning will use this information to gauge where their assistance is needed most in the future.

Laura’s story will bring a personal perspective and a sense of immediacy to the rest of the issues that will be covered during the seminar. Two additional short documentaries (5 min. each) will introduce topics such as: the changes that general education has begun to take regarding learning disabilities, how non-specialized teachers can balance teaching to a classroom of mixed abilities, and what steps should be taken to improve our educational system in the future. These short films will provide information to start a dialogue between the attendees and a panel of professors and/or educational professionals. The panel will expand on the topics introduced in the films and supply knowledge and help from the teacher’s perspective. Information on additional materials and resources will be provided for students who are interested in learning more about how to make accommodations for children with learning differences

Seminar Benefits and Additional Insights

The seminar will be free and open to any SMU student who is interested in becoming an educator, as well as to any teachers or students in Dallas who are interested in attending. Redefining Intelligence will marry the inspirational impact of Laura’s achievement with ways for education students and current teachers to apply their new knowledge. As a result, the seminar will create further awareness and discussion about a topic that is too often neglected in our educational system and foster further communication between SMU students and the neighboring communities. Students will get to talk to Dallas teachers about the difficulties that they have encountered in the classroom and the university will have the opportunity to provide some vital information to the post-graduation populace. Hopefully this seminar will inspire current teachers to come back to school and take courses to continue their education about learning differences.

Additionally, the seminar will bring favorable attention to the Simmons School of Education, and encourage other inter-departmental
partnerships. Film has the unique ability to become useful for every discipline and more partnerships like this one will make SMU known for creative opportunities that stretch academic barriers.

The education students will benefit from a program designed especially to enrich their student experience. Most teachers do not have special education training, yet every teacher has students that have specific needs. The main goal of the seminar is to equip current and future teachers with practical ways to assist these children and improve the awareness of their potential. Jobs in education can be difficult and thankless, but if we stop labeling kids with learning differences as “problem” children and teach to their strengths rather than their weaknesses, then we give these children a future, defined by what they can do rather than what they can’t.

Proposed Timeline

Stage 1: Completing the Film Elements Jan. 28 – Feb. 13

Planning for the seminar is already underway. One of the short films has been cut already and an SMU composition major creating a professional score. All of the footage for the other short films has been shot and is currently being edited. Laura and Mrs.
Fields have agreed to attend the seminar. During this time I will finish editing and polish the films. Secure the Venue.

**Stage 2: Gathering Resources/ Beginning Publicity Feb. 14 – Mar. 20**
Contact the Learning Channel, contact and decide which professors and/or experts to include in the panel, research local organizations that may be interested, purchasing and gathering resource materials and printing posters etc…

**Stage 3: Publicity Mar. 21 – April 15**
Sending out e-mails to interested parties, placing posters, contacting local schools, advertising on campus, Tech runs in the venue to ensure quality projection. Ordering refreshments.

**Stage 4: Redefining Intelligence**
Hold the Seminar on April 16, 17, or 18

**Stage 5: Response and Evaluation**

### Anticipated Budget

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DVDs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Table Cloths (for refreshment tables)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personalized Pens/gifts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Venue Rental</td>
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<tr>
<td>Travel for Laura and Mrs. Fields (including hotels)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Copying or printing expenses</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mailing expenses</td>
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<td>Refreshments</td>
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<tr>
<td>Website</td>
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<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
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Total anticipated budget: $2,268
Person responsible for funds: Elizabeth Johnston