

## What Makes a School a Multiple Intelligences School?

Julie Viens, Managing Director  
Multiple Intelligences Institute

When considering Multiple Intelligences theory for educational practice, one must keep in mind that it is a theory of intelligence; it is neither a specific educational method nor approach. Any application of the theory is an *interpretation* of this alternative understanding of intelligence, in the same manner that certain current pedagogical approaches are associated with more traditional views of intelligence. Therefore, there is no specific "right" way to apply MI theory. However, we can point to educational practices that are more or less '*in the spirit*' of MI theory; In other words, there are educational practices that align with MI theory and others that contradict MI theory. Moreover, there is a (growing) body of practices that are common among educators who use MI theory as a development tool. For example, most MI Schools typically integrate choice time into the school day.

An authentic MI School -one that operates *in the spirit of* MI theory- uses the theory, the specific intelligences, and key features of the theory to guide an intelligence-rich and individualized education for all students. Specifically, seven key features of MI theory inform a sound interpretation and application of the theory, starting with its definition of intelligence:

■ ***MI offers a definition of intelligence based on how intelligence works in the real world.*** Rather than a test score or a narrow measure of a child's language and math skills, MI theory defines and describes intelligence as consisting of at least 8 basic intelligences --ways of processing information-- that work together in complex ways, to solve problems and make products that are valued in at least one cultural context. In other words, intelligence is what people can do or make in the "real world"; the intelligences are their tools.

This key feature --MI theory's definition of intelligence-- suggests that learners should have opportunities to engage their eight intelligences as they would in the world outside of the classroom, to solve problems and make products that are of value to their community. For a young child, the problem might be how to share a precious material or how to make a block structure stand upright; the product might be a picture of their family, a story, a song.

■ ***There are at least 8 qualitatively different intelligences in the human "tool box."***

Our intelligences work together in different combinations and to varying degrees to solve real world problems of every kind, across domains and disciplines. For the classroom, this suggests accounting for all intelligences in the form of a variety of learning experiences, projects, teaching methods, tools, materials, and choice. Through this variety, each child has the opportunity to discover and exercise each of the eight intelligences in different combinations and contexts.

■ ***All eight (or more) intelligences are universal.***

All normally developing human beings possess all intelligences, each to varying degrees. The question is never whether or not a child possesses a particular intelligence, but rather, in what ways, to what degree, and in what combination with other intelligences will the child use that intelligence. For classroom practice, this means setting up the classroom and using instructional approaches that acknowledge all children bring all eight intelligences to the classroom and ensuring all children get a range of experiences over time that draws on the different intelligences.

■ ***Intelligences are educable: You can get smarter.***

In stark contrast to the traditional (Western) view that intelligence is primarily hereditary, an unchangeable trait with which you are born, MI theory holds that all children can get smarter across all the intelligences. This suggests high expectations for all children, but should not be mistaken to mean all children should or must excel in all areas. (That would be a misconception of the theory.) It does suggest offering repeated and multiple experiences, giving children time to build understanding and ability in different domains or areas of intelligence.

■ ***Individuals possess unique profiles of intelligences that develop and change over time.***

While all human beings possess all intelligences, each of us also possesses our own array of strengths and preferences. Particularly in youth, these profiles can change, develop, and grow, as both nature and nurture lend a hand in the process. Cultural, societal, familial, individual, and environmental factors all play a role in the shaping and development of each individual's constellation of abilities. The implications for the classroom, then, are found in both curriculum and assessment, in that we are charged with ensuring that there are opportunities for children (and teachers and parents) to discover, explore, and nurture those strengths and interests, as well as to recognize and build interest and skills in more challenging or less appealing areas.

■ ***Each intelligence has sub-abilities and operates differently in different domains or contexts.***

There are different ways to use and demonstrate each of the intelligences, be it musical or linguistic, interpersonal or another intelligence. Different domains, areas of development, or subjects tap into different intelligence sub-abilities, to varying degrees. Role play taps into interpersonal intelligence, as does playing on the playground, or working collaboratively on a project. Each of these activities brings to bear interpersonal intelligence, but in different ways. Each activity in which a student engages over the course of the day takes a combination of intelligences, and different sub-abilities within different intelligence. This suggests providing a variety of opportunities for children to explore and use the same intelligence across different contexts or domains. Applying MI well means providing a range of experiences that explore each intelligence in different ways.

■ ***Intelligences Work in Combination, Not Isolation.***

No intelligence works in isolation in the real world. For example, activities in the musical domain require more than just musical intelligence. Take playing an instrument: musical, bodily kinesthetic and intrapersonal intelligences are all brought to bear in effectively playing the instrument. For the classroom, this implies using the intelligences in the combinations in which they are used in real world problem-solving. Rather than creating a learning center for each intelligence, it is more authentic to have learning centers based on domains, interest areas, on a project theme, or otherwise organized such that children's intelligences are drawn out and used in combination, in authentic ways.

Whether a preschool or graduate program, day care or corporate setting, the label "MI-based" or "MI-inspired" means that the program is accountable to the key features of MI theory. In other words, if you believe that intelligence is as MI theory defines and describes it, then your program should align with and operate in accordance with MI theory and its major features. For example MI theory claims that intelligence is a pluralistic concept -there are several intelligences- and that we all have our own unique profiles of intelligences. Therefore, an MI-based program would ensure opportunities for students to exercise a range of intelligences; assessment practices would include observation of the student as they engage in a task; it would involve understanding, reporting, and integrating into the curriculum children's abilities beyond a narrow set of literacy and numeracy skills. MI programs are about providing an education to develop the whole child and to prepare each child for subsequent schooling and for life, with necessary skills, positive attitude, and self-confidence as a learner and person in the world.

It is clear that interpreting the key features of MI theory well still leaves a great many possibilities for how one applies MI theory and the resulting educational practices. Dr. Gardner, the creator of the theory, has pointed to three fundamental components of a school that is in the spirit of MI theory:

**1. Students are provided the opportunity to engage in experiences across a range of intelligences or domains.** According to Gardner, an authentic MI school allows for the experience and expression of many different intelligences for all students over time. A variety of activities, learning formats, tools and materials allow students to both solve problems and make products that have personal and broader meaning and to experience and nurture a range of intelligences as well as their specific strengths and interest areas.

**2. Educators know their students well, specifically their strengths and interests.** In order to nurture students' particular profiles of intelligences –to nurture and maximize strength areas and to support areas that are more of a challenge—we need ways in place to gather that information. Only through a performance – by observation and documentation of students as they work and play – can we come to understand the types of things in which they excel, enjoy, are challenged, or avoid. We observe them in action and look closely at their work. We identify patterns of behavior, problem-solving, what a student chooses to do, what he or she does well, where or when a student takes initiative or a leadership role, when they he or she has a wealth of knowledge or understanding or produces exceptional products, whether it is a construction, a dance, a story, or sculpture. In providing a variety of experiences for our students, we must use each experience as an opportunity to see them in action and, more specifically, to "catch them at their best." The resulting understanding of our students is put back to work in subsequent curriculum and activities we develop and in our reports to parents.

**3. Students have a hand in defining the curriculum.** As #2 above implies, one of the purposes for getting to know our students and their developing collections of intelligences and interests, is to inform the curriculum. MI theory says that we each have preferred ways of working, learning, understanding; or ways that work best for us to solve problems, make things, or to make meaning more generally. A powerful implication of the theory is to create an educational environment that allows our students to discover and explore domains that call on different intelligences; the second implication is that we build an understanding of each student's abilities, preferences, and challenges. The third implication is to turn that information back into the curriculum. While a curriculum must include things students should or must learn, it

should also include things students want to learn or experience. Whether it is allowing for lots of time with building blocks or art activities for those spatially-strong children or whether it is taking time to study bugs after one is discovered on the wall and sparks children's interest, what children want to study is a strong force. Children's interests and passions, the things they are good at or love to do, these make the educational experience motivating, engaging, meaningful, and fun for children. It also improves the odds that children are learning, are getting smarter.

These implications for MI theory for classroom practice might be summed up in three short phrases:

*Nurture the child, know the child, and trust the child.*

For an effective school whose practices are in the spirit of MI theory, these are the guiding principles.