CHAPTER 22

Personal Intelligences and a Colombian Experience

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This chapter explores the potential of the personal intelligences as a means to achieve the educational goal of developing autonomous individuals. We share our experience of promoting the personal intelligences in Colombia. We describe the challenges we faced when starting a school for disadvantaged children, developing curriculum relevant to these students' lives, and designing a discipline for empowerment program to affect students' behavior. Examples in the chapter illustrate how MI empowers teachers and students to become agents of change and growth. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the critical importance of personal intelligences for solving problems in productive and nonviolent ways.

In this chapter, we share the experience of a group of educators who took on the challenge of starting a school for disadvantaged children from the slums of Bogotá, Colombia. Central to our effort was finding ways to make formal education relevant to students who live in an environment characterized by cycles of poverty, hopelessness, and violence. For these children, we believed that the most important educational goal is to help them become agents of change in their own lives, as well as in the lives of those around them.

In the search for a meaningful educational model for disadvantaged children, we found Gardner's MI theory to be quite compelling as a guiding framework.

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In particular, we saw the relevance of his notion of personal intelligences (intra- and interpersonal intelligences) for our context. Personal intelligences emphasize self-knowledge and understanding of others. We see both as critical for the development of the intellectual, moral, and social autonomy of students. This autonomy is a precursor of the "capacity to govern one's self taking into consideration the points of view of those around him or her" (Kamii, 1984, p. 410). To us, personal intelligences, autonomy, and agents of change are interrelated. For example, it is difficult, if not impossible, to talk about autonomy if there is no appropriation and appreciation of oneself—one's feelings, thoughts, and actions. Likewise, it is this sense of autonomy that allows an individual to go beyond himself or herself to understand others: how they think, feel, and act. Following Gardner, we see personal intelligences as specific competences and skills that allow human beings to discover themselves and transform their reality to make the world a better place. Based on this conviction, our work focused on developing students' capacity to better understand not only specific subjects of study, but also themselves, the people with whom they interact, and the world they share.

We begin by providing a brief contextual background on education in Colombia. We describe the socioeconomic conditions of the students in Bogotá and some of the behavioral challenges educators encounter daily. We go on to tell the story of how our project started and our study group formed. The group was a key resource in addressing the challenges we faced. We provide examples of how our inquiry into the personal intelligences supported curriculum development and behavioral changes. Finally, we offer concluding remarks about how a deepening understanding of personal intelligences can support educators who are committed to students' autonomy and their development as agents of change.

OUR PROJECT AND ITS CONTEXT

In the mid-1980s, following the publication of a body of literature on liberation theology, the impact of the writings of Pablo Freire, and the launching of literacy initiatives in Central America, a group of Colombian educators turned their attention to the urgent need to offer an education that would allow students to develop their own voice—to pronounce themselves as people and not just to pronounce words. As part of this group, we founded a school in Bogotá, a city of more than 7 million residents where only a small percentage of children have access to good educational opportunities. Our school served students living in a community made up of several poor neighborhoods, or barrios. In this community, a potential student population of over 2,500 children had access to only one elementary school that was designed to serve 150 students.

In 1985, we started our school, Colegio Del Barrio (the low-income neighborhood school). Initially it was a primary school with 80 students. By 1995,

through violent confrontation, acting as if the law of the strongest were the only way to resolve conflict. Seldom would we see them engaging in dialogue or negotiating with one another. Frequently we found them carrying knives, screw drivers, or switchblades, which they described as "defense" or "personal attack weapons." These children were bringing to the school behaviors that were critical for their survival in the streets.

Too often students demonstrated a complete disregard for authority and school rules. Vandalism was common on the school campus. For example, the students repeatedly destroyed the plants and flowers in the carefully arranged flower garden on the school grounds, despite warnings that there would be consequences. This destructive behavior was also displayed in other places, such as classrooms and the dining room. Bathrooms were constantly littered.

Because our previous experience was with students from a high socioeconomic background, we lacked the contextual knowledge needed to understand the sociocultural circumstances of low-income students. As we started working with them, it became evident that in order to be effective, we must become familiar with their social context and recognize the individual differences that characterize their learning processes. Instead of blaming students, we needed to approach some of their behavioral challenges by examining the context in which they originated. These violent behaviors often are the only tools students have to defend themselves and survive on the streets. At the same time, we also must help students understand that school is different. It is a place where teachers have their best interest in mind, they are protected, and their behaviors have consequences. A fundamental challenge was to find ways to reduce the conflicts that arise from these colliding realities, for students and for teachers. Meeting this challenge has been a struggle throughout our project.

MEETING CHALLENGES AND MOVING FORWARD

The challenges and problems we encountered were not only many; they were also severe and required collective efforts. In this section, we describe how we addressed the challenges described above, including the formation of a study group of educators. We also discuss how our inquiry into the personal intelligences influenced the development of new forms of curriculum and led to the use of effective approaches to promote student empowerment.

Forming the Study Group

Along with the establishment of Colegio Del Barrio, we formed a study group consisting of teachers, the principal, the academic coordinators, and a psychologist. The purposes of the group were several: to systematically reflect on difficult situations as they emerged, study theories that informed our reflection,

and put into practice the recommendations reached through our collaborative work. The group's greatest asset was each member's deep commitment to children's education. We started to read theories and study concepts, including the concept of autonomy, MI theory, and Project Zero's teaching for understanding framework. We met every Saturday morning for four hours to analyze and reflect on individual cases and situations that demanded action.

At the beginning of the study group's work, we also reflected on the importance of understanding our individual strengths and weaknesses and knowing how to use them to create an environment of trust and openness to learning. Studying personal intelligences reaffirmed our belief that a critical factor in improving the school was strengthening relationships and communication among administrators, teachers, students, and community members. We saw development of the personal intelligences as the driving force for change. When we started studying and developing materials and models among ourselves, one of the greatest sources of satisfaction was the recognition of our own personal growth. This sense of fulfillment led us to make an even greater commitment. We all felt part of the endeavor and were willing to take responsible risks to improve our practices in the classroom and the school.

MI theory helped us discover our strengths and use them to solve problems creatively and work collaboratively. As we continued our joint study and work, it became even more evident that applying MI theory empowered us to be more tolerant with people who were different from ourselves and to truly understand that not everyone processes information in the same way. Identifying our own strengths gave us the confidence and security to face our own weaknesses. Little by little, we created a trusting environment that allowed us to share with one another our greatest accomplishments and most difficult obstacles in trying to implement new ideas in the classroom and the entire school.

As a trusting relationship formed among the members, this study group began to play a leadership role in developing curriculum and solving everyday behavioral problems creatively. Our new curriculum was more engaging and relevant to the needs of our students and the community. Our discipline for empowerment program fostered students' skills in interpersonal negotiation and nonviolent problem solving.

Revamping Curriculum to Increase Relevance for Students' Lives

Because of their prior experiences in an impoverished and violent sociocultural context, our students receive and process information in unique ways. For example, compared to students who attend Colegio St. Frances, our students had greater difficulty solving textbook problems when operations had the mathematical symbols of "plus" or "minus." However, our students were much quicker at using mathematical operations when solving day-to-day practical problems, such

as buying rice and bread and bringing back home the correct change. These children were comfortable working with mathematical concepts in the real world but encountered difficulty with abstract problems.

This example was one of many that made evident the importance of bringing the students' world into the classroom and making what they learned in the classroom relevant to their world outside school. This kind of curriculum, we thought, would bring new ways to interact with our students. To develop this curriculum, we needed to acknowledge the community as a source of learning and use that realization in formal school learning. It took us about four years to feel that we were bringing down the walls of the school and getting closer to meeting the challenge of combining school curriculum with the students' lives outside school.

One example of how curriculum changed to meet this goal was a project developed by fourth graders. They were studying plants and had planted a small garden to grow vegetables. One child said his father had worked on a potato farm and was now driving his truck to bring potatoes to small markets around the city. We invited him to the school several times, sharing with the children everything he knew about growing and shipping potatoes. The children then visited one of the small stores he delivered to and interviewed the owner about selling potatoes. The project, which started as a science activity, ultimately involved mathematics, language, and economics. It also gave the students a better understanding of the world around them as it related community activities to what they were learning in school.

Another example of connecting curriculum to students' lives comes from a computer technology class. In the early years, when we used the Colegio St. Frances building for our school site, our junior and senior students had access to the computer lab once a week for a three-hour period. The students were required to complete a number of assignments, including reports on the history of computer technology and its current importance, as well as written responses to questions in prescribed guides regarding technical aspects of computer use. Both the students and the teacher found this content disengaging, resulting in frequent disciplinary problems. The study group, which included the technology teacher, decided to rewrite the curriculum.

Developing a new computer technology course became a truly collaborative initiative among all participants, which resulted in the idea of having students use the computer lab to research and design an interdisciplinary project for graduation. The students had their senior year to choose a topic, develop the project, and complete it under the guidance of an adult mentor-advisor. The project had to reflect the interests and needs of the individual student and the community, provide the student with an intellectual challenge, and take into consideration his or her abilities, talents, and goals. Students used the computers to gather information, tabulate data, produce graphics, write the report, and present their

final project. In the process, they learned how to use computers in a practical way. The teacher created a climate in the classroom that allowed students to learn at their own pace. Students who were quicker at acquiring computer competency helped those who were less advanced.

The students were clearly motivated. Despite the constraints of time and resources, they were able to produce final projects of impressive quality. At the same time, disciplinary problems almost disappeared. Many of the students found the use of computers to be of great help in their school-to-work program. This program for high school students allowed them to work in the mornings and study in the afternoons, thus offering them the opportunity to gain practical experience. For some of them, computer use became a source of income. After graduation, a good number of students continued the study of computer technology.

Our experience with MI theory had led us to see our students in a new light and helped us understand that all children, whatever their socioeconomic status, are intelligent in different ways, with distinctive abilities and talents. MI does not offer a prescribed curriculum or specific instructional strategies. Rather, it offered us an opportunity to think about possibilities for engaging our students in learning relevant to the contexts of their families and neighborhoods. In the examples, we incorporated multiple entry and exit points in our curriculum units. Gardner (1991) describes entry points as different ways a teacher can approach a topic. These different ways help all students find a way to engage in learning. To make the meaning more concrete, think of school topics as rooms. Entry points are different doorways through which students may enter the room. They may involve the use of narrative, logical-quantitative, existential/foundational, aesthetic, hands-on/experiential, or interpersonal. We also used exit points in our curriculum units, offering students different ways to express their understanding. We experimented with nontraditional forms, such as a poem, a sculpture, dramatization, and a brochure that students produced to show their understanding of a specific subject. We discovered that allowing students to express their understandings using their strengths helped them gain a better sense of who they are and what they do best. The process of expressing their understanding improved their self-esteem and self-confidence—the two qualities deemed essential for the development of students' autonomy.

EMPOWERING STUDENTS TO MAKE BEHAVIORAL CHANGES

Another area of concern where MI theory has been particularly useful is the development of better social interactions among students, family, and community. Specifically, we used the development of personal intelligences to promote

changes in students' school conduct. We designed a "discipline for empowerment" program that aimed to foster students' ability to function as agents of their own change and growth.

Early in our work as a study group, we decided to move away from traditional school disciplinary procedures. In that model, the discipline coordinator was in charge of dealing with all student disciplinary matters. When a behavior problem arose, the teacher, instead of resolving it with the individuals involved, had to report to the discipline coordinator, who took responsibility for solving the problem and deciding on a punishment. In addition to being bureaucratic and inefficient, the punishment, such as no recess or staying after school, almost never related to the student's transgression. Furthermore, such disciplinary procedures reflected a level of heteronomy on the part of the adult. Students had no voice and took no interest in solving the problem. The study group tried many different strategies and failed many times. Eventually we identified a series of steps, called "discipline for empowerment," that proved to be effective.

1. When an act of aggression occurred between two or more students, each student was given the opportunity to tell his or her own version of what had happened. Sometimes the students were questioned individually and sometimes together. In most cases, we obtained very different versions of the same incident. The common tendency was to blame the other.
2. In some cases, especially with older students, they were asked to individually write down, as faithfully as possible, their version of the incident. Younger students were asked to talk among themselves and to try to come up with one description of the situation. This process invited the students to reflect on and discuss the level of responsibility of each person involved in the incident. In some cases, when the written versions continued to be different, students were asked to read each other's version. Then they were given a certain amount of time to come up with a single version.
3. Once the students arrived at a single version of what had happened, they had to propose a way to make amends for their behavior. Initially the students gave themselves traditional punishments, such as "no recess," "stay after school," or "do extra work in a given subject." With time and reflection, the students came to understand that the sanction should be reciprocal; that is, it should make amends for the behavior by taking into consideration the people affected, feelings that were hurt, and damages incurred. It was very important to earn again the trust that had been broken by the student's misconduct. The relationship with the person affected needed to be repaired.

4. The students had to come up with three possible sanctions. After discussion, all parties had to reach consensus on the most appropriate one. Once the students agreed on the sanction, they wrote it down and made a commitment not to repeat the offensive behavior. This contract had to be taken home and signed by the parents. This step kept parents informed and gave them an opportunity to comment on the agreement. If the situation were serious enough for parents to be involved directly, they were asked to come to school and hear the students tell them what had happened.

The change that resulted from these discipline for empowerment steps was evident. As students began taking responsibility for their actions, they also began to develop a sense of personal autonomy. Eventually, when a problem arose, students looked for solutions instead of a scapegoat.

CONCLUSION

We believe that MI is particularly relevant to the context of socioeconomic inequality in a country such as Colombia, where conventional educational structures have imposed methods and curricula that are largely unrelated to the difficult challenges students encounter in their daily lives. Traditional educational structures tend to reinforce a hierarchical system of inequality. They fail to recognize agency in students and teachers. Also overlooked are the needs of communities to have their young educated in ways that will prepare them to address deep societal problems.

MI theory contributed greatly to strengthening interactions among the different players in our school. It helped us identify multiple potentials in our students that contributed to the community at large. In terms of our curriculum, one significant change was the introduction of community-relevant projects. The presence of the students' diverse intelligences became evident as they selected projects. The students chose projects that matched their own strengths and interests. It was also easy to see the personal intelligences at work during these projects. Students demonstrated an honest desire to help one another and to work as a team, even though each student was individually responsible for his or her own project. Instead of an exclusive focus on competition, we found real collaboration and genuine care among students.

The demonstration of positive student behavior as the result of the discipline empowerment program impressed teachers, parents, and community members. For the first time in their lives, many students began to see themselves as agents of change and growth. They saw the consequence of their aggressive behavior and learned alternative prosocial actions. They understood the importance of

developing skills to engage in positive social interactions among students, with their teachers and parents, and in their community. As their personal intelligences developed, so did the school community.

Our school provides an active, student-centered curriculum that responds to students' sociocultural context. It is our hope that we have created a positive atmosphere at the school that invites students to learn and enjoy learning. Our ultimate goal is to have a school where the teaching is meaningful to students and what they learn is useful in their daily and future lives outside school. MI theory has helped us move toward achieving this goal.

References

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