



Dr Patricia Edgar

# Why intelligence can be taught

*Coming top of the class in language or maths may be a worthwhile objective, but not if it comes at the expense of developing balanced life skills.*

When I went to school, kids were labelled ‘dumb’, ‘smart’ and ‘average’. The test for IQ – the intelligence quotient – was treated as holy writ, and gave the imprimatur to a label you were stuck with throughout your school years. Intelligence tests try to measure some innate capacity we have when born, but it has been shown to be a flawed tool. IQ tests measure words, numbers and logical reasoning with no recognition of other forms of intelligence where children might excel. Good scores in reading and mathematics meant you were good at things that mattered. Sporting skills could make you popular, but didn’t count in the classroom. Talent with art, music, dancing, woodwork, mechanical design, domestic science or typing and shorthand simply meant you could get one of those less important jobs in the end.

But as it turned out, the kids who were very good at school weren’t necessarily the most successful when they left school; the kids who were the brightest at university were not always the ones who rose to take on leadership roles in business or the community. Other skills, like social skills, not taught within the classroom, seemed to account for success.

We now know we have multiple intelligences that are not just innate and intelligence is not a unitary concept. Professor Howard Gardner’s work at Harvard University described in his book *Frames of Mind: Theories of Multiple Intelligence*, challenges the view that IQ tests measure general intelligence and gives support to non-verbal forms of intelligence, like those used by people who work in visual, aural

and kinesthetic modes. Importantly, Gardner identified inter- and intra-personal intelligences – often called emotional intelligence – as a separate kind of intelligence and in need of specific development.

According to Gardner, each area of intelligence is characterised by an area of brain activity peculiar to it; each area has support from experimental psychological tasks and testing and if children are not encouraged to use their separate intelligences they will lose them, no matter where their natural talents lie. So assigning a label such as an IQ can damage a child’s chances of learning and close off opportunities.

As it turned out, the kids who were very good at school weren’t necessarily the most successful when they left school.

Gardner believes that the plasticity of the young mind permits “significant improvements” for those less talented, as well as an “acceleration in pace for those who thrive”. That is, the brain is so malleable that kids with not much natural talent in a particular area, such as music or sports, can develop such skills, while those who are truly gifted can move along more quickly given the right stimuli.

The usual subject matter of school tests – words and numbers and logical thought – covers an essential range of skills. Of course children need to learn how to listen and read with understanding, power to assess the logic and value of what other people put to them; they must have basic number and calculation skills if they are to manage a budget, group objects and make inferences from their many observations.

But equally, they need emotional intelligence; they have to learn to recognise their own feelings and the feelings of others, to have empathy when someone is upset or sad, to deal with emotions and have self-control that enables them to keep calm, negotiate conflicts in the playground, make friends, be part of a social group. These are important skills for life.

Without social skills, we cannot interact with others, be a team member or play a meaningful part in the wider community. Developing the child’s brain and its many potential forms of intelligence is not an end in itself. Coming top of the class in language or maths may be a worthwhile objective, but not if it comes at the expense of developing balanced life skills, and not if the wide range of intelligences are not valued. Our ideal goals should be practical, applied know-how and the capacity to adapt to live a fulfilling life as an ethical citizen, making a working contribution in a rapidly changing world. ■

*Dr Patricia Edgar is an author, television producer, educator and founding director of the Australian Children’s Television Foundation. Her latest book is **The New Child: In search of smarter grown-ups.***

