

A New Vision: My Personal Philosophy of How Children Learn Best and Its Implications for  
Education Professionals  
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### Abstract

This paper serves as a personal philosophical stance on critical factors that negatively affect the current education system, specifically for special educators and school psychologists, and potential solutions to those barriers. Key discussions on the purpose of assessment, the professional roles, and the nature of collaboration are described and analyzed within the framework of the proposed educational changes.

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**Core Beliefs Regarding How Children Learn**

**My Core Beliefs on Education**

I believe children learn best when they are engaged and motivated to learn, feel that they can be successful in the classroom, and are given appropriate scaffolding and support towards greater achievements and goals. Children learn best when what is being taught is interesting, connected, cohesive, and relevant to their lives. They also need to feel like they can actually accomplish what is being asked of them - that is, they need self-efficacy in the classroom. And of course, children need access to knowledgeable and skilled educators who have the tools to gently push each child toward their own maximum potential. As educators, we are called to maximize a child's individual learning potential. In fact, item (b) in the Principles of Professional Conduct of the Education Profession in Florida states that "the educator's professional concern will always be for the student and for the development of the student's potential." Thus, we are ethically obligated to learn ways to meet every student's needs so that they can reach their own unique potential. However, this calling is easier said than done when considering what educators and students face in today's schools.

**Critical Barriers To a New Vision**

1. Lack of time. I truly believe that most individuals who are employed as educators in today's schools have the capacity to be good teachers, and that it is a myth that there are so many bad teachers out there. The truth is that the way the job is structured makes it almost impossible to be a really great teacher 100% of the time. To do teaching well, especially for our schools'

children who need the most expert instruction, teaching is an all-encompassing job that goes far, far beyond the paid 7.5 hours per school day. School psychologists and special educators fall victim to this conflicting structure as well - their knowledge and capacity to do amazing things on the job is consistently compromised by a lack of time. Special educators have many IEPs to write and manage, and school psychologists, despite their breadth in training, spend much of their time conducting assessments (Fagan & Wise, 2007). Lack of time is a critical issue for all educators that prevents them from being more effective.

2. Accountability with consequences. I do not believe any educator or school psychologist would argue against the importance of accountability. It is important to continually reflect as a professional and takes steps to grow and improve one's skill set (Fagan & Wise, 2007). However, the reality of educator accountability in today's schools takes what could be a good thing (educator reflection and professional growth) and turns it into a monster. Now, educators are measured and compared by student outcomes on very specific tests and are subject to evaluation protocols which narrowly define the act of teaching as a set of specific behaviors. These evaluation outcomes then generate differences in pay, which results in teachers engaging in more competitive versus collaborative relationships. The very constructs that were meant to promote excellence instead have educators stuck in their own boxes that all happen to look the same.

3. A loss of balance in what constitutes a good education. We are using a very specific measuring stick to determine the educational progress of students and the educational effectiveness of teachers - one that involves only two subjects - reading and math. But education can and should be so much more. Imagine for a second that you have a child that struggles in

reading or math - or both. This child could have a disability or be an English Learner, or just be a child who does not necessarily qualify for a disability but possesses a learning difficulty. Does this mean that for the child's entire existence in the public school system, they will experience failure in measuring up to our school's standards? I believe we have lost sight of what constitutes a good education - what this means and what it really looks like to prepare a student for success not necessarily for college, but for an ever evolving world of tomorrow. If we were to broaden our view of education to something more whole child and less content-focused, this would have significant implications for our children and for special educators and school psychologists. These professionals would be able to focus on children who need to develop essential life skills and/or begin working in consultative relationships with classroom teachers and administrators to promote general child wellness and other social skills that students will find necessary when they graduate.

### **A New Vision**

1. Reconstruct the traditional school year. The original traditional school year format where students work consistently for 10 months out of the year and then are off for two months could be restructured to create more time for educators to plan and collaborate as professionals. The National Association for Year-Round Education has visual representations of what this may look like on their website (Calendars: Traditional vs. Modified, n.d.). Master teachers could work for two to three weeks with students and then break for a full week. Paraprofessionals could then watch children in structured activities similar to summer camp or aftercare while teachers are then freed up to work alongside other professionals such as special educators and school psychologists in long chunks of time (not just 40 minutes in the middle of the school day)

where they could actually collaborate on developing innovative, engaging Tier 1, 2, and 3 instruction. They would also have plenty of time to delve into curriculum, create lesson plans, and accomplish paperwork duties. Parents who work may also benefit from this new structure in that it would alleviate the need to find coverage during the long expanse of summer.

2. Reconceptualize what good education looks like. I argue that we as a nation need to reexamine what constitutes a good education and ask of our current education whether or not it truly prepares students of the world of tomorrow. Golinkoff and Hirsh-Pasek (2016) in their book *Becoming Brilliant: What Science Tells Us About Raising Successful Children* posit that six domains of skills will be increasingly important in tomorrow's society for success: collaboration, communication, content, critical thinking, creative innovation, and confidence. Only one - content - includes what we typically think of when we think of education - reading, writing, and math skills. What if instead we created opportunities for children to learn and practice a multitude of skills that they will need to develop to be successful adults (college-bound or not)? Changing our focus of our education system would have profound effects on what we consider to be learning problems and the need to diagnose and support such problems in the school system.

3. Reconstruct the measuring stick. If we change what we consider to be essential education components in today's schools, we must also examine our measuring stick for making sure schools are meeting the needs of students. Parents' input on school performance should be considered through surveys. Kids' voices should be considered. Holistic measures for how a child is making progress in a variety of domains - social, emotional, academic, physical - should be included. It would be difficult, expensive, and messy to obtain data on these more

encompassing domains, but it would be an endeavor worth taking as what we tend to measure is what we tend to teach.

### **Roles Within New Vision**

If the components of what constitutes a public education changes, so to will the roles of those involved in implementing the education change. The general education teacher will still be held as the curriculum expert, responsible for being knowledgeable about grade level expectations and how to best introduce and maintain core knowledge and skills in the general classroom setting. The teacher will also be responsible for classroom management as well as implementation of any interventions and accommodations that take place for students in the general setting. However, paraprofessionals, as suggested earlier, can be used to alleviate some of the less instructional tasks that typically take up a teacher's time, such as recess and lunch supervision, and before and after school duties. This way, teachers receive larger chunks of time to plan for curriculum, analyze data, and other perform administrative tasks such as communication and paperwork.

Within the realm of special education, the special education teacher and school psychologist's roles will undoubtedly evolve if how we conceptualize education changes and the way we measure educational outcomes evolves. The school psychologist may see a drop in referrals for students suspected of a learning disability. The pressure for all students to be performing at a certain proficiency level in reading and math would be alleviated, and fewer referrals for the milder cases would occur. Because the academic environment would evolve to foster social collaboration, critical thinking, and communication, students would spend less time sitting in desks, and overall classroom behavior may improve. Though disabilities would still

exist and students would still need evaluation and services, the school psychologist would be spending more and more time engaging in tasks in Tier 1 promoting positive psychology and developing social emotional learning critical for post-high school success. Special educators too could either specialize in working with those individuals with low-incident impairments and in need of intensive services and working alongside school psychologists in Tier 1, assisting students at a variety of levels reach their own potential in content areas, but also in other dimensions of learning. Since more authentic collaboration is occurring due to the new structure of the school year, school psychologists and special educators may be co-teaching with classroom teachers more often, which may also result in more and more students being able to stay in general education settings for longer periods of time during the school day, ensuring even more access to FAPE (Free and Appropriate Public Education). Changing how we view education would have tremendous implications for those involved in special education as how we conceptualize what constitutes a disability with educational need would change.

### **Role of Assessment in Vision**

We see the role of the school psychologist and formal assessment already evolving as a result of Response to Intervention and Multi Tiered System of Support legislation. The role of using formal assessment measures is being diminished in favor of more curriculum based measures that are monitored over a period of time. Though I believe using curriculum based measures provides an important perspective in a child's academic performance for evaluation purposes, I still also feel that formal assessment measures that examine cognitive processes also provide a valuable piece of the puzzle. I would argue that within a new vision of education, assessments would become more and more process-based, examining a child's specific strengths



and weaknesses in great detail and using this information to create highly individualized intervention plans versus trying to define a child's disability with the use of a label. Labels are still very important right now, as the provision of a label allows one to receive special education services, but receiving a label is not synonymous with receiving high quality intervention services. I would argue that the latter should be most important when considering assessment as school psychologists. Think of it this way: the more we know about how a child approaches learning (their cognitive strengths and weaknesses) the more we can pinpoint specific interventions and accommodations for that child so that the child can be successfully included in the general education setting.

### **Role of Collaboration in New Vision**

We as educators often hear the word “collaborate” in our practice as so often we are called to do so; however, the realities of the professional practice of education often prevent the collaboration that we are called to do. If a new school year structure is adopted, general education teachers, special education teachers, and school psychologists would all have more and larger chunks of time to engage in authentic collaborative experiences. Changing the “what” of teaching and how we measure educational outcomes would also decrease the imaginary lines drawn between the role descriptions of general education teachers, special educators, and school psychologists, as all would find themselves overlapping in each other's disciplines more frequently in the Tier 1 setting. The general educator would be more fluent in adapting learning experiences for all children and special educators and school psychologists would be spending more and more time in general education environments and get to feel what it is really like to be

a classroom teacher. This fading of the lines between disciplines would create parity, which we know to be essential for true collaboration to occur (Hernandez, 2013).

With large chunks of time to meet and parity in place, general educators, school psychologists, and special educators could sit down and jointly construct Individual Education Plan goals or other intervention plans. Together, they would be able to develop goals based on the student's specific strengths and weaknesses and these goals would much more likely be implemented consistently as all had a stake in their creation.

### **Parents a Necessary Component of New Vision**

Parents do have an important and unique role in their child's educational outcome. A parent is truly his/her child's most knowledgeable expert on their child, and they have the unique advantage of knowing their child's case history, likes and dislikes, and strengths and weaknesses from a broad perspective. This vantage point should be valued on an IEP team and used to pinpoint important goals for a child that are truly relevant and socially important. Often times when a child is struggling, the list can get quite lengthy when determining all the things the child needs to improve. The parent's unique role is to monitor this list to make sure they are relevant, challenging yet attainable, and still allow the child to learn and develop other important skills that are not necessarily academic. A parent needs to make sure that the goals are allowing the child to continue to make progress but also have a chance at attaining happiness.

Just as parity between professionals is an essential element for professional educational collaboration, a sense of parity is also very important when engaging in true collaboration with parents within the context of assessment and IEP development. Often times, how IEP team meetings and other special education meetings involving the parent are structured creates rather

than breaks down barriers for parity amongst parents and professionals. School psychologists may wish to contact a parent prior to a formal IEP meeting to simply educate the parent on the entire staffing process, review the legal jargon that will be presented in the official meeting, and clarify any misunderstandings prior to the parent walking into the boardroom. This initial contact serves to create rapport between the school psychologist and parent and allows the parent to feel more confident in knowing what to expect and why certain procedures are followed during the meeting. Special educators can follow the same guidelines as described above. The more efforts that can be made to make the parent feel less uncertain and more confident in what is occurring, the less likely the parent will feel threatened and potentially make for an uncomfortable meeting.

### **My Role in the New Vision**

As a future school psychologist, I hope to create seeds of change within my professional practice in how I approach assessment, report writing, and collaboration with classroom teachers, special educators, and parents. I hope to use my knowledge as a parent and former classroom teacher to conduct assessment and write reports that are easily digestible to all parties and provide valuable insight to how a child best learns. I can also use my teacher and parent perspectives to create parity and engage in authentic collaboration with parents and teachers, as I can see things from their perspective and help to create opportunities to make everyone feel like they have a role in the child's education, because they do. I hope to serve as a social connector, creating bridges between parties and providing a means to understand how children learn and practical ways to make their learning possible in the classroom. And for the sake of my own children, I hope to be part of a growing movement in dissatisfaction with the status quo of what

constitutes education so that my children can benefit from an education that more closely resembles what we know in research to be the essential components of what it will take to be successful in the world of tomorrow.

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