

Introduction to Inner Diversity: Nurturing Individual Differences in Learning and Communicating

Linda O'Toole
Universal Education Foundation
Brussels, Belgium

People learn in different ways. Even very young children demonstrate fundamental differences from one another in the ways they learn, communicate and interact with their environments. As teachers, caregivers and parents, we know this is true, but we often don't know how to address the uniqueness of each child and the diversity of learning processes within groups of children.

In this short presentation I want to introduce what we mean by inner diversity through heightening our awareness of the differences in learning processes, finding objective language to describe those differences and identifying ways for meeting the learning needs of children, individually and in groups.

Expanding how we define diversity

In the 21st century we are often asked to ensure that diversity is represented, and acknowledged. In general the term is related to external characteristics or collective identity. We want to expand how we define diversity to include individual differences of each child.

When we use the term "*inner diversity*", we are referring to individual differences at our core – the fundamental patterns through which we perceive, process and integrate information into an individually organized, and highly personal, representation of the external world. It is through these foundational processes that thoughts, feelings, actions, and beliefs are filtered, organized, and given meaning.

A simple example of the patterns of inner diversity is to consider your own natural rhythm and pacing, particularly when confronted with new information. At one end of the continuum is someone who responds rapidly without needing to place it in context; at the other end is someone who takes time to make meaning of the new information within a known context. Most people have some variation but you may recognize a pattern that has persisted through your life. You may have heard: "you leap before thinking", "you need to be more thorough", or "you are not listening to all the information." Or, you may have heard about "procrastinating", "taking too long", and "considering too many options." These reflect natural differences in pacing, but problems emerge when one end of the continuum is considered more desirable, or the only acceptable way. In those cases, those who naturally relate more to the other end of the continuum are deemed to have difficulties or, in extreme cases, disabilities.

Differences in Learning Processes

Here are a few examples of different ways children *get started, or engage, with a new task.*

Some children need to stand back for a while, to get a sense of perspective and to know why they are being asked to engage in an activity. They are answering the question “why?” *for themselves.* They need time to think through the situation and link it to their own internal values, without a lot of conversation or interaction with others. Otherwise, their learning process is stalled.



Isabella: “Can I do things by myself?”

Other children need to engage in conversations and activities with others in the first place and usually in the second and third place as well. Conversation helps them feel comfortable with the group *and* the activity. Talking aloud literally contributes to their learning. Without conversation – even if it’s not directly about the subject matter – it is virtually impossible for them to feel engaged and able to participate in the process of learning.



Jelle: “Please, listen to me and my story!”

There are still other children who rely on involving all their senses to engage with learning. To read or to listen to an explanation or watch a demonstration means little to them unless they can also actively touch, manipulate, smell, even taste the experience. This need for “hands on learning” is not a phase in the child’s life: a child of ten who will read, see, smell, touch everything he possibly can related to a specific topic, and still does not feel he knows enough, will grow into an adult who declares: “Let’s learn more by going to places where this is actually happening!”



Zohra: “Do I have time to look around?”

Children as young as seven years old (in some cases, much younger) can reflect on and talk about the way they learn and even describe the underlying pattern. They can also describe the basic needs for learning and communication of other children and talk about how they are different from their own.

When children are encouraged at a young age to realize that there are different ways of thinking, processing their emotions, using their senses, contributing to the group, as well as different ways that each of them can grow and develop, they will recognize their own unique ways and those of others. Each boy and girl needs to be respected and nurtured in **how** they naturally approach each of those areas.

Observing/Listening for Inner Diversity Patterns in Infants

Patterns can be observed in infants, although it is often easier once the child begins walking. Some basic observation points, with an example question for each, include:

Pacing – *does the natural rhythm of the child tend to be quick and varied or more steady/sustained?*

Space – *does the child's focus of attention tend to be centralized or is she/he more aware of events throughout the space?*

Weight – *does the child tend towards strong and definite gestures or are actions more light and fluid?*

Flow – *does communicating/engaging with others tend to be deliberate and precise or more flexible and approximate in what is conveyed?*

Transitioning – *does moving from one action to the next require completion/closure of the first activity or does one activity seem to merge into the next and then the next?*

Finding Non-Judgmental Language to Describe Differences

Finding an objective language for describing differences in learning processes requires *creating an environment* that supports a variety of authentic and valuable learning opportunities; *cultivating capacities* of the learner, but also our own; and encouraging ongoing *conversations* about learning processes.

Creating an Environment

To create an environment in which differences can be used constructively, it is necessary to reframe the concept 'differences in learning'. For example, the utterance 'your child is a different kind of learner', is usually interpreted as a warning, implying cognitive, emotional or sometimes physical disorders. As noted, even young children recognize differences in how other children learn but they will follow the lead of adults and the messages embedded in the environment in how they interpret them.

Adults can create a receptive environment for children through modeling openness to differences, genuine curiosity about the ways children learn, and willingness to suspend judgment and notice what is happening rather than focusing on what is not happening.

Cultivating Capacities

Learning how we learn requires being aware of *all* our own signals and the ways in which we operate in the world, internally and externally. Those signals include what we see, feel, sense, and imagine. Children must be engaged in developing such basic capacities as paying attention, discernment of patterns and pattern relationships, and reflection.

Paying attention implies observing and listening to what is happening rather than being focused only on what is not happening. *Discerning relationships and patterns*: you may discover that once you start noticing how a child stands slightly apart at the beginning of one activity that he also prefers to do this in many other classroom activities. *Reflecting and imagining* help one play with the needs underlying a pattern: 'If I had to make up a story about what I'm seeing, what might be happening here?' This kind of internal pattern-seeking and metaphor-making is central to creativity, and supports an awareness of inner diversity.

Example of how a teacher and student might cooperate in developing some of these capacities.

*Alex, as a first grader, chose not to participate in games with his classmates or even sit in a reading circle. He was labeled as a stubborn and uncooperative child. His teacher, however, began to notice that when he was not participating, he was standing close by and watching. So the question might be: **How does Alex participate in a new game?***

The teacher noticed that he observed until one cycle had been completed. He then joined in. She looked for this pattern in other activities and found it. This allowed the teacher to see what was going on (sufficiency) instead of labeling what was not going on (deficiency.)

For Alex, we might imagine that his need was that he felt most comfortable knowing what was going to happen or that watching one cycle gave him an advantage in the game or that he liked having a sense of the overview and knowing where he would fit.

Having some clear options about the observation, pattern, and needs allowed Alex's teacher to ask him questions that helped him understand his needs. Together, Alex and his teacher considered ways in which he could meet his need to have an overview and not be perceived as an outsider.

Encouraging conversations

Start with simple questions. Here's an example from a new stepmother and 12 year-old Tim.

I asked a few questions about school. It was useful for me but it was useful for him as well: What do you like learning about (___)?

I followed up with asking "How do you like to _____?"

and, then: How do you do ___?

and still another: How does ___?

Together we discovered that he likes to learn from pictures and movies, because they are quicker than words. Using the example of a video game, we learned that he likes the challenge of getting to the next level and solving the problem -- challenges that are meaningful than earning a better grade.

I asked with genuine curiosity because it was interesting to know more about how he learns. I shared a little about how I'm different from him in my learning.

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By asking questions about the process ("how does this happen?") we are assuming sufficiency rather than deficiency. For example, if we ask *how* a child pays attention we may discover that it can be described as a direct focus; alternatively, we may see it as being aware of peripheral details or of shifting between an overview and a single detail (a macro/micro perspective). But we will never discover this information if we assume there is only **one** way of paying attention.

Strategies for Working with Differences

Caregivers and teachers know that children learn in different ways, but often do not know how to work with groups of children with different ways of learning. The most important strategy you can use to address inner diversity is to *invite learners into the process*:

Provide opportunities that give them a **choice** about how they undertake an activity. Give them various options and be open and explicit about all options having value.

Allow space and time for **reflection** both before undertaking a task and when it is complete.

Encourage **self-assessment**, according to the learner's own criteria, and allow children to speak about this assessment.

The younger children are when we engage them in exploring issues of inner diversity, the easier it will be. When children are involved in discovering and working with their own learning processes, they can take responsibility for how they learn as well as what they learn.