

Dean Wells MP - Ideas and action

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Intelligence

Few people, let alone politicians, have the ability to make a complex philosophical point in clear and accessible language, and then use it practically for achieving social change. While Education Minister, Wells argued a startlingly radical view, which gives enormous weight to the argument for inclusive education. He believes not only that I.Q. tests are not a useful education tool, but that the concept of measurable intelligence is actually meaningless. His argument on this is compelling and put in a refreshingly original way.

The human instinct to rank people into hierarchies is strong and perhaps strongest when it comes to wanting to rank people by intelligence. The traditional way of doing this is by I.Q. tests. The trouble is that success in an I.Q. test predicts nothing except that the person is likely to do well next time he or she sits one. That much is widely understood. What is not widely understood is why. The reason is that there is no such thing as measurable intelligence. In fact the concept of intelligence is not one that is apt to admit of degrees. We can talk about intelligent life forms and contrast them with unintelligent life forms. This is where the concept is at home – in the context of a qualitative judgment, not a quantitative one. The concept of intelligent versus non intelligent operates like our concept of the quick and the dead. We are not tempted to ask ‘how dead?’ unless we are speaking metaphorically. People who talk of degrees of intelligence are actually the linguistic captives of a metaphor and don’t know it.

There cannot be any such measurable mental state as being more or less intelligent because there is no way to calibrate the thermometer. High ‘intelligence’ does not correlate with anything specific in the real world. There is no frame of reference outside the I.Q. test room in which we can observe behaviours that would verify the results of an I.Q. test. Without any criterion of verification, the proposition that someone is extremely intelligent is actually incoherent and therefore meaningless. We know the frame of reference, and the behaviour patterns, that other psychological tests seek to measure: for example mental states like intellectual impairment, depression, dyslexia, well

adjustedness or whatever. These descriptors all correlate with readily identifiable features that manifest as a person reacts with the world. For example people with intellectual impairment will all be unable to perform certain life tasks. But people who get high scores on I.Q. tests will not necessarily have behaviour patterns in common. For example they will not all be life competents. One might be an Einstein and another might be a Rain Man. Alternatively, one might have a mind like a steel trap and another will be an absent minded professor. The will o'the wisp of I.Q. measured 'intelligence' is unlike any other mental state in that you cannot, from the mere fact that you are told that somebody has it, make any accurate prediction about how they will perform in their lives, at work, at home, or at leisure. Nor can you predict that they will have any other mental capacity that may be prized, such as wisdom, sagacity, cunning, judgement, reasonableness, understanding or savoir faire. The concept of measurable intelligence is therefore empty of content, and we in Education Queensland should not use it. Do not ask "how intelligent are they?" Ask rather "what can they do well?"

**Speech to Senior Officers of Education Queensland, Bardon
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