

O'Toole, L (2019) 'Inner Differences: Exploring How We Seek to Know,' in Learning for Well-being Magazine, Issue 7, published by The Learning for Well-being Foundation.

Inner Differences: Exploring How We Seek to Know

By Linda O'Toole

1. Introduction

I was ten years old the last time I watched my father and brother move quickly from disagreeing, to excitedly arguing and shouting, to physically hitting and shoving one another. Even then, I knew that the major source of their frequent 'battling' was a difference in how they saw the world. More fundamental than divergent values, they differed from one another in how each of them needed to know and to engage with information, other people, and events in the environment in order to feel secure and effective in their actions. Unaware, and certainly unaccepting of these differences, they continued to clash and to believe they could not value one another.

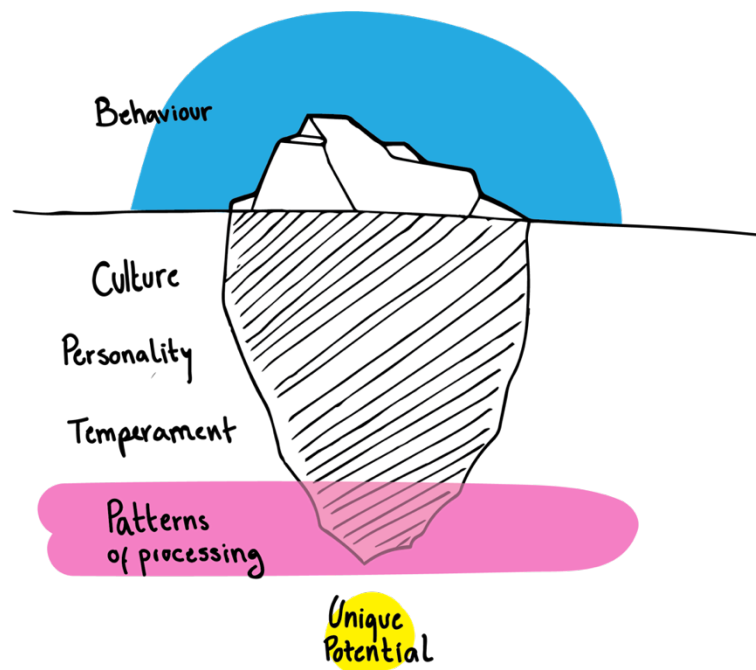
My early awareness of the existence of differences in the ways people perceive, learn, and communicate has encouraged a journey of exploring the ways in which these manifest uniquely for individuals. In my life work as a researcher, teacher and facilitator, I have sought to nurture understanding and acceptance of individual differences and to help myself and others learn to capitalize on them – first as individuals and then in partnerships and in groups. I have worked in this way with thousands of adults, children and adolescents in schools, health care facilities, literacy programs, businesses, and community groups.

In this viewpoint, I want to share my observations and explore the perspective that intergenerational partnering can be nurtured through understanding one's inner diversity. My experience is that when adults, children and young people focus on how they can recognize and acknowledge their inner differences, they are able to work together with greater joy and effectiveness. I am centering my descriptions on how we each 'seek to know,' primarily using examples with children and extending them to adults.

2. Meaning of 'inner diversity'

In the past three decades there has been increasing interest in individualized and personalized approaches particularly in the education and health sectors – including theories of multiple intelligences, cognitive diversity, neurodiversity and research on the impact of social and emotional responses in brain functions and behaviour. While these areas all relate to inner differences, I want to consider a more holistic perspective that we are calling *inner diversity*. The term refers specifically to the fundamental patterns through which we perceive, process and integrate information. It is through these foundational processes that thoughts, feelings, actions, and beliefs are filtered, organized, and given meaning.

Although inner diversity is a critical element in how we nurture ourselves and our relationships, it is a factor that is frequently missing or underrepresented in activities which intend to be inclusive. When we speak of group diversity, we often mean factors such as age, ethnicity, country of origin, gender identification, religion, economic status, and so forth. All of these reflect individual differences and clearly impact the ways in which people value, express, and define themselves. Yet there is more to be considered. The iceberg illustration depicts various ways in which diversity is approached, with the 'water line' differentiating between what is apparent and what is often unseen. At the base of the iceberg is where we place the patterns of inner diversity.



These patterns of how we process the world appear to be present at birth and continue through our lives, more fully expressed and nuanced but essentially consistent. As Loris Malaguzzi wrote,¹ children embody (at least) a hundred such individually unique patterns.

L. Malaguzzi (undated) Poem (accessed 11/2/13 at: <http://pah2.golding.id.au/theChild/>)¹.

He makes this point to emphasize that school and upbringing ‘steal ninety-nine’ of those ways.

*[Children have] ... a hundred languages
a hundred hands
a hundred thoughts
a hundred ways of thinking
of playing, of speaking.
A hundred, always a hundred
ways of listening
of marveling
of loving
a hundred joys for singing
and understanding
a hundred worlds to discover
a hundred worlds to invent
a hundred worlds to dream.*

Taking account of inner diversity is particularly relevant for young children as they begin learning about themselves, how they fit into their environment, and what they need to offer and receive from their relationships. It might seem difficult to identify differences in functioning, yet parents with more than one child almost always notice differences in their children at an early age. Some differences may be related to temperament – outgoing or reserved (as two points) – but much of what we notice in the beginning is differences in inner functioning.

In the next section we’ll consider some common patterns to give a better sense of what we mean by inner diversity.

3. Examples of how we ‘seek to know’

Through the lens of inner diversity, I see people, young and old, seeking knowledge and understanding. They need information in a form in which they can use it – to express their thoughts and ideas, and to move into action. Both young people and adults want to give and receive information that is clear, relevant, and complete. Difficulties often arise between adults and children around inner diversity for two reasons: first, adults believing that their way of seeking or offering information is the most effective way, expecting children to function in the same ways as they do; second, adults seeing that there is a standardized norm for success and wanting the best for children in their care.

To explore these difficulties I want to briefly consider four common areas of inner diversity which can lead to conflict or misunderstanding: Starting (how we engage with a new task); Pacing (how we move in time); Noticing (how we pay attention) and Expressing (how we use words.) These points are not independent of one another.

a. How we engage

I've noticed that people, old and young, *get started, or engage, with a new task* in different ways. Here are a few examples:

'Can I do things by myself?'

Some children need to stand apart, 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, linking it to their own values, without conversation or interaction with others.

In adults who function similarly, this process is often one of mapping, in which information and experiences are slotted into specific categories to build a basis for action. This may involve many questions, on a variety of subjects, as different scenarios are developed.

'Please, listen to me and my story!'

Some children need to talk in the first place. Conversation with others helps them feel comfortable with the group *and* the activity. Without talking aloud – even if it's not directly about the subject matter – it is virtually impossible for them to feel engaged and able to participate in learning or other activities.

In adults we often recognize this pattern as learning through engaging with others – knowing what they know as a result of their conversations and interactions. For people who need to talk, it may also be essential to establish a personal connection before other topics can be discussed.

'Do I have time to look around?'

Other children rely on involving all their senses in order to engage fully. To read, 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 likely grow into an adult who declares: 'Let's learn more by going to places where this is actually happening!'

In groups settings especially, taking time to consider a response, to see the whole picture, or to observe carefully before moving into action can be considered as signs of disinterest or lack of engagement instead of reflecting a different way of functioning.

b. How we move in time

Pacing is such a basic element of a person's innate patterning that some mothers can connect their experience of movements *in utero* to their children's pacing as they grow. Pacing is related to speed, but the two are not identical. Pacing refers to the rhythm of one's way of focusing, expressing, and acting. Two broad categories, existing on a continuum, are steady (deliberate) and syncopated (unexpected beats). In our patterning, most of us reflect some ratio between these two ways, but the basic rhythm for each of us is consistent.

You may recognize a persistent way in which your own natural rhythm and pacing has been perceived. For example, you may have heard repeatedly: ‘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.’

In children we often notice pacing in how they transition between activities – does she need to bring the activity to completion (which can include putting away everything in a deliberate manner and ‘finishing the story.’)? Does she follow the flow of what is happening with others who are involved, using a more syncopated pacing that fluctuates with circumstances?

As adults these distinctions continue and we see pacing reflected in whether time is considered a measured commodity, variable and elastic depending on interest, or regarded as a challenging adventure – ‘a race to be won.’ Cultural norms play a role in one’s relation to time, but probably less than individual differences. In our contemporary world in which most activities are precisely timed (e.g. tests, meetings, train schedules), pacing is one of the most controversial and conflictual elements in any group (school, family, community, work.)

c. How we pay attention

What part of the world (or your immediate situation) captures your attention in the first place – do you look inward at how you are feeling in response to what is around you? Are you noticing your physical body? Is your attention drawn to what has changed in the environment? To what needs doing? To how you are feeling about what needs doing? To planning how you will do it?

Concentrating on a single point is certainly one way of focusing attention, but some people naturally pay attention in a broader way – noticing the whole context, and the interconnections and relationships between all the parts. Others follow the interactive flow of people and their environment so that the ‘attention’ seems to be fluctuating or pulsing between one area or another.

How we pay attention and the information we need is often revealed through the questions we ask. For example, are we seeking factual clarity (‘what did that word mean?’ ‘what’s the source of that information?’); personal validation (‘are we still moving ahead?’ ‘is everyone feeling okay about this process?’); the action that is needed (‘what are we going to do with this information?’ ‘can you show me how this works?’) It is natural that questions vary with context; still, there is often a predominant pattern (a type of default position) that is clearly or subtly present for each of us.

People are always paying attention to something, even though it may not be what you expect. Giving people choices in the types of information available, how and when to access it will reduce the chances that only one way of paying attention will be acknowledged.

d. How we express our thoughts and feelings

Relationships are impacted by biases about how thoughts and feelings are expressed. The following admonitions for 'managing impulsivity' – *Take time to consider options; Think before speaking or acting; Remain calm when stressed or challenged; Be thoughtful and considerate of others; Proceed carefully* – clearly preference some people over others; as one example, some naturally think before they speak (they pause to consider the words they will use); others need to speak aloud in order to know what they are thinking (through verbalizing they know what they want to share.) Depending on the adult's own ways of listening and observing, specific ways children express themselves may be regarded as positive or negative. Learning to self-regulate emotions in ways that recognize, respect, and develop natural tendencies is critical.

Respect for differences also applies to the ways in which young people are encouraged or rewarded for sharing their ideas. Frequently those who are given opportunities for presenting, in classrooms or meetings, are gifted in using language that corresponds to the dominant patterns of the adults selecting the presenters. Those who express themselves better in interactive exchanges or who share through images, storytelling, written text or metaphors sometimes don't have the same opportunities to share their thoughts. Adults need to be particularly aware of this tendency to privilege certain ways of speaking – for the sake of children and also for other adults who may have learned throughout their lifetime that their ways of expressing thoughts and feelings were not acceptable or valued.

4. Exploring inner differences

Reflecting on your own way of processing is critical to exploring inner diversity because your pattern of processing is the filter through which we view what others are doing – how they are functioning. There are questions you can ask yourself such as the first question in the last section: *what do you need in order to start?* Expanding on that: Do you need to get clear about the purpose of what you are doing? Talk to others about what they are thinking and feeling? Gather information on what has been done before? Understand the strategy for what has been happening? Walk around and see for yourself what has been done and what is possible?

While inner diversity steers us away from labelling ourselves with a specific processing pattern, having a simple framework to guide your exploration is often helpful. Comparing a particular pattern to that of someone else is a way of authenticating your own experiences. For example, after years of difficult experiences in the classroom, John confronted the possibility that he was like those who were constantly attending to 'the big picture'. Suddenly he was able to see himself and his schooling experiences in a way that made sense:

With each part to which I was exposed, I wanted to keep connecting that part to something whole – something bigger. I needed to know more, and I needed to know the 'nuts and bolts' ... where does this come from? I would look around and wonder how other students could just move from point to point without stopping and pondering and making connection to the bigger picture.

John had a breakthrough in his understanding (and his acceptance of himself) when he contrasted himself to others, but also when he was able to identify others who shared a similar pattern (i.e. needing to see 'the big picture'). It was the link with others that confirmed that his approach was valid.

Noticing differences in others

When starting a new group project or activity, we often notice how others need different types and amounts of information at certain points in the process; for example, we may notice how others tend to gather the information they need – some taking time on their own to review the information, others talking with at least one person. In addition, we can note different pacing and timing in carrying out a piece of work and how we measure our progress in different ways – against the objectives of a plan, in relation to what the group has achieved, in terms of our own priorities, etc.) One typical way of noticing these differences is a built-in signal: we find ourselves annoyed and making judgements: 'weren't they listening?' 'why mention this NOW?' 'how can *that* possibly be important to consider?' 'here's another divergence, just when we were about to make a decision!'

If you don't find yourself irritated by particular questions or requests for clarifications or additional information, you may still be asking yourself with wonder: *Did we not hear the same words? Not see the same images? Not experience the same situation?* The quick answer: No, in most cases, you did not.

When this signal (of irritation or wonderment) happens, whether the person is a child, adolescent, adult, or senior, we need to remember to turn around our judgements: What is the information they are seeking? What are the questions left unanswered? What might they be seeing that we have not noticed, or taken into account?

5. Inner differences for partnering

Inner diversity makes a critical contribution to how we create and nurture partnerships of all kinds, intergenerationally and with peers. The patterns of inner diversity are not the source of difficulties between adults and children – they are a major source of difficulty in how people of **all** ages relate to one another. However, one of the most significant ways inner diversity impacts intergenerational partnerships is that adults have learned to privilege certain patterns of processing, often to their own detriment, and they pass along these biases in what they expect from children and other adults through how they design activities, and communications.

Working with inner diversity to unwind the impact of selective privilege requires three broad considerations:

- a. Understanding differences through cultivating capacities
- b. Accepting differences through creating positive environments
- c. Capitalizing on differences through inviting full participation

All three considerations require a change in how we think about the underlying differences – it is a shift in mindset as much as any particular action.

a. Understanding differences through cultivating capacities

We need to be aware of *all* of the ways in which we operate in the world, internally and externally. Those ways include what we see, feel, sense, and imagine. Such capacities as noticing, listening, discerning relationships and patterns, imagining and reflecting are fundamental to understanding our patterns of processing. A shift in mindset requires us to approach this understanding in a neutral way—as objectively as possible: to *notice* and *listen* to what is happening rather than being focused only on what is not happening. *Discerning relationships and patterns* may involve discovering that a child standing slightly apart at the beginning of one activity may do this in many other situations. *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 an awareness of inner diversity.

Here’s an example of how one teacher and student cooperated 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 labelled 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 labelling 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 observed pattern 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 who stands apart.

b. Accepting differences through creating positive environments

Acknowledging that each person is born unique requires us to be aware of the implications of this fact. Adults can model an openness to differences, expressing genuine curiosity about the ways people learn, and demonstrate a willingness to suspend judgement. It’s easy to form a habit of agreeing with one another on the surface and ignoring very real differences in how we perceive and express our needs. To counteract this tendency, we can

actively encourage both young people and adults to share their ways of learning. Dialogues are a good way to do that. By asking questions about the process ('how does this happen?') we are assuming sufficiency rather than deficiency. For example, if we ask how someone 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). We will never discover this information if we assume there is only one way of paying attention.

Using simple questions, here's an example of exploring 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 more meaningful than earning a higher 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.

c. Capitalizing on differences by encouraging ways to participate

Active engagement may be the most fundamental factor for successful outcomes in learning and working together. There is an important distinction between *engaged* participation as opposed to *pro forma* participation in which young people are simply present or consulted. *Engaged* participation requires that everyone involved (children and adults) has an interest and a stake in the outcome. Partnerships require active participation from everyone, stemming from curiosity, genuine interest, and the willingness to co-create the experience. The only way you can truly capitalize on inner differences is by approaching them as gifts, in service to the work that you are doing together. Initially, people may not know or recognize how differences contribute to the group or the work, but the explicit assumption must be that they are real and valuable. With this attitude, you create a space for creativity and innovations.

You can also build in certain practices such as:

- Providing opportunities for everyone to *choose* how to undertake an activity (particularly how to begin) and being open and explicit about the fact that all options have value.
- Allowing space and time in the process for *reflecting* before a task and when it is complete; and
- Encouraging *self-assessment*, according to the participant's own criteria, which allows everyone to speak about their individual approach.

These practices help people feel recognized for how they function, and act as concrete reminders of the ways inner differences can impact relationships and bring strength and creativity to the group.

6. Conclusion

The Learning for Well-being principle of inner diversity suggests that well-being flourishes in environments in which we ‘respect individual uniqueness and diversity: encouraging diverse perspectives and multiple expressions.’ At a minimum, this implies providing opportunities for everyone to be aware of inner differences, to develop ways for exploring their patterns of inner diversity, and to actively encourage other ways of functioning. We know that supporting diverse ways of processing contributes to the overall innovations and insights of both children and adults. The critical factor for this increased creativity in the group seems to be the extent to which participants are comfortable in expressing those diverse perceptions. Most importantly, we need to approach differences with the notion that there is something valuable and precious in how others seek to know.

7. Author



Linda O'Toole has been co-editor, with Jean Gordon, of the *Learning for Well-being Magazine* for the last four years. She has pursued her interest in inner diversity patterns for nearly four decades by honing her capacities to inquire and listen. As a life-long Californian she has survived encounters with earthquakes, wildfires, and landslides. With amazement and joy, she's still here.

8. Dedication

For Jean. Daily, you are missed.