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Interview with Ph.D. Thomas Armstrong on Neurodiversity and Construction of a Talent Pedagogy: critical axes for a new Inclusive Education¹



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(* The photograph has been assigned by the Ph.D. Thomas Armstrong from his personal photographic archive for the publication of this interview.

¹ This work corresponds to the cycle of interviews prepared by the author in the inaugural frame of the section "Interviews with great personalities of Education, Social Sciences and Critical Thinking" of the Center for Latin American Studies of Inclusive Education (CELEI).

Bionota:

Thomas Armstrong, Ph.D. is the Executive Director of the American Institute for Learning and Human Development, and an award-winning author and speaker who has been an educator for over forty years. Over one million copies of his books are in print in English on issues related to learning and human development.

He is the author of sixteen books including: a) The Myth of the A.D.H.D. Child: 101 Ways to Improve Your Child's Behavior and Attention Span Without Drugs, Labels, or Coercion, b) The Power of the Adolescent Brain: Strategies for Teaching Middle and High School Students, c) Neurodiversity in the Classroom: Strength-Based Strategies to Help Students with Special Needs Achieve Success in School and Life, d) Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom 3rd edition;, e) In Their Own Way: Discovering and Encouraging Your Child's Multiple Intelligences, f) 7 Kinds of Smart: Identifying and Developing Your Multiple Intelligences, g) The Power of Neurodiversity: Unleashing the Advantages of Your Differently Wired Brain, h) The Best Schools: How Human Development Research Should Inform Educational Practice, i) ADD/ADHD Alternatives in the Classroom, j) Awakening Genius in the Classroom.

Abstract

The interview with the Ph.D. Thomas Armstrong, author of the famous book "The power of neurodiversity" and director of the American Institute for Learning and Human Development, delves into the emerging understanding of the field of knowledge of neurodiversity, trying to establish significant analytical and methodological links in relation to the dimension didactic of Inclusive Education. The central premise of neurodiversity - a concept that emerged in the early 2000s - provides a new framework for the understanding of human nature, through which neurological differences based on genetics in a person should be considered as variations normal in human functioning as well as in the diversity of gender, ethnicity, cultural origin, etc., states the Ph.D. Armstrong. In relation to the education of educators, it is recommended to apprehend to recognize the positive attributes present in the multiple singularities of the human being, to structure the educational and formative processes from the confluence of their interests, motivations and interests. Finally, he explains how Inclusive Education is linked to neurodiversity, arguing that, the neurodiversity paradigm helps to support inclusion in the classroom, because we begin to see that everyone has differences in the ways in which they attend, learn, they behave, they think and they feel. In short, the interview provides new keys to operationalize the understanding of the whole conceived as multiple singularities.

Keywords: *neurodiversity, talents, human nature, inclusive education*

Resumen

La entrevista realizada al Ph.D. Thomas Armstrong, autor del célebre libro "El poder de la neurodiversidad" y director del American Institute for Learning and Human Development, profundiza en la comprensión emergente del campo de conocimiento de la neurodiversidad, intentando establecer vínculos analíticos y metodológicos significativos en relación a la dimensión didáctica de la Educación Inclusiva. La premisa central de la neurodiversidad – concepto surgido a inicios de la década del 2000– proporciona un nuevo encuadre para la

comprensión de la naturaleza humana, a través de la cual, las diferencias neurológicas basadas en la genética en una persona se deben considerar como variaciones normales en el funcionamiento humano al igual que en la diversidad de género, etnia, origen cultural, etc., afirma el Ph.D. Armstrong. En relación a la formación de los educadores recomienda aprehender a reconocer los atributos positivos presentes en las múltiples singularidades del ser humano, estructurar los procesos educativos y formativos desde la confluencia de sus intereses, motivaciones e intereses. Finalmente, explica de qué manera la Educación Inclusiva se vincula con la neurodiversidad, sosteniendo que, el paradigma de la neurodiversidad ayuda a apoyar la inclusión en el aula, porque comenzamos a ver que todos tienen diferencias en las formas en que asisten, aprenden, se comportan, piensan y sienten. En suma, la entrevista aporta nuevas claves para operacionalizar la comprensión de la totalidad concebida como singularidades múltiples.

Palabras clave: *neurodiversidad, talentos, naturaleza humana, educación inclusiva*

Aldo Ocampo González (A.O.G.):

Good morning Ph.D. Thomas Armstrong

First of all, to thank you for your kindness in the acceptance and support for the realization of this cycle of interviews, carried out by the Center for Latin American Studies of Inclusive Education of Chile, it is an honor and a great joy to hold this dialogue with you.

I would like to start this interview with the following question: ¿How would you define the neurodiversity?, ¿what is your position today, within this pedagogical and research program?

Thomas Armstrong (T.A.): Neurodiversity is the idea that genetically-based neurological differences in a person are to be regarded as normal variations in human functioning just as we have diversity in gender, ethnicity, cultural background and so forth. I am an independent scholar who writes and speaks in different parts of the world about topics related to learning and human development.

A.O.G.: *¿What are the central themes that make up the neurodiversity proposal?, ¿in what sense is this concept revolutionary and innovative for pedagogy?*

T.A.: Themes include: a) the idea that the brain is more like a rain forest than a computer; b) the idea that so-called disabilities exist along continua; so for example, dyslexia exists along a continuum from severe difficulties with reading and language to exceptional talent in reading/writing capabilities, c) the idea of neuroplasticity—that the brain is sensitive to change from environmental influences (thus educators can have a great impact) y d) the idea of positive niche construction—creating nurturing environments that tailor a person’s surroundings to their own unique ways of being in the world.

Neurodiversity suggests that a ‘disability’ paradigm (which is currently used) is too limited and limiting to an individual’s potential.

A.O.G.: *¿Do you agree that neurodiversity is a concept under construction?, ¿what can be its main limitations?*

T.A.: Yes, this is very much a concept under construction. One issue is how far to extend the definition of neurodiversity (do we include conditions like ALS, cerebral palsy, sociopathy etc.).

A.O.G.: *¿How would you incorporate the 8 principles proposed in your book: "The power of neurodiversity" when planning the teaching and evaluation of learning, so that in each class, students can express the richness of their brains?*

T.A.: I would focus most attention not on the 8 principles, but on the 7 components of niche construction. These provide us with the tools to practically help neurodiverse individuals (e.g. specific UDL tools like speech-to-text apps, strength-based learning strategies like creating letters and words from clay, specific environmental modifications like stability balls to sit on etc.).

A.O.G.: *¿What recommendations could you make to teachers so that they are aware of the extraordinary talents that their students with SEN possess and how to maximize them through their schooling process?*

T.A.: I think there needs to be a big focus on assessment of strengths – teachers should use the inventory from my book, or other strength-inventories to gather information about the positive attributes of their students; they should use parent-teacher conferences to get information about the strengths at home, they should conference with other teachers who work with a child, to learn of strengths not seen in their own classrooms etc.

A.O.G.: *¿How should the operation of the schools, their teaching practices and the work of the teachers be configured to have effective neurodiversity in their day to day?*

T.A.: I think there needs to be a big effort toward professional development so that these ideas become integrated with the existing programs—seminars, support groups for teachers, coaching of teachers, are all good ways to help accomplish this

A.O.G.: *¿Is there any relationship between Inclusive Education and Neurodiversity? If so, ¿what would be its main thematization axes?*

T.A.: Yes, the two ideas are closely related. The neurodiversity paradigm helps support inclusion in the classroom, because we begin to see that everyone has differences in the ways in which they attend, learn, behave, think, and feel – the more a teacher sees the strengths of kids with neurodiversity issues, the more willing they'll be to work to accommodate these kids in a regular classroom setting.

A.O.G.: *¿What practical recommendations could you make to design a daily schedule of classes at any educational level, thinking through the neurodiversity and its principles?*

T.A.: It's not so much creating a daily schedule as it is using the tools of positive niche construction in whatever particular classroom structure is used (I think there can be a variety of classroom structures that can successfully accommodate neurodiversity tools and strategies). I hope this helps you!

A.O.G.: Finally, I would like to thank you for your kindness in granting me this interview. Undoubtedly, interesting reflections and didactic contributions to understand Inclusive Education in relation to neurodiversity.

T.A.: Thank you for this invitation.

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