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Multiple intelligence theory based on 'flaky psychology', says professor

An intelligence theory widely used to support classroom practices is slammed as stemming from flawed psychology and sham science by Professor John White of the Institute of Education.

Professor Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (MI theory) claims that children are born with up to eight different types of intelligence (logico-mathematical, linguistic, musical, spatial, bodily-kinaesthetic, intrapersonal, interpersonal and naturalist) genetically wired into their brains.

In a lecture this week, Professor White will criticise MI theory for putting children into boxes that have not been proved to exist and that may end up restricting the education they receive.

"If reading is important, we need to find ways of teaching reading to children who find it difficult," says Professor White. "We should not tell a child to forget about reading because her strengths lie in gymnastics."

Professor White concedes that MI theory has been beneficial in raising children's self-esteem and in promoting inclusion. "Pupils who used to think themselves dim can blossom when they find out how bright they are at making music or friends," he says.

"But," he adds, "it is hardly news that intelligence can take many forms, and there is no scientific reason to restrict the forms to eight."

"It could even be dangerous if it leads teachers to overly rigid views of individual pupils' potentialities."

He concludes: "The idea that intelligence can take many forms is welcome and correct, as is its separation from IQ. But there are as many kinds of intelligence as there are human goals and activities, and straitjacketing them into eight has more to do with Gardner's own preconceptions about what's valuable than with how the human mind actually works."

John White's lecture, *The Myth of Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences*, takes place at the Institute of Education on 17 November.