

**Chapter 28:
The Analogy of the
Amoeba**



All Pianos Have Keys & Other Stories

by José A. Cárdenas, 1994
IDRA Founder & Director Emeritus

**Special Edition Serial Release
for IDRA's 50th Anniversary**

Chapter 28: The Analogy of the Amoeba

I have been a professional educator since 1950, when I received my bachelor's degree from the University of Texas and a teaching certificate from the state. During these years my strongest commitment has been to the children involved in the educational process. My second strongest commitment has been to the adaptation of educational practice to the characteristics of different types of children.

I do not consider a commitment to children as being a prime consideration of the schools. Although there certainly is a pervasive dedication to children by most educational personnel, this dedication is often debilitated by a conflicting commitment to self, to the profession and to the educational system.

The commitment to adaptability in the educational system has been late in coming and weak in intensity. It has always been preferable to expect children to adapt to uniform materials and methodologies than to develop a pluralistic curriculum that adapts to the unique characteristics of groups of students and to individuals with a diverse background in culture, language, socio-economic status and lifestyle. Thus, schools have traditionally communicated with students in a language that the students cannot understand and presented instruction that is culturally irrelevant at best, and culturally contradictory and psychologically damaging at worst.

Looking back at my experiences as an educator, I can't help but note that I didn't always have a sensitivity to the differing characteristics of children, nor a strong commitment to the adaptation of educational practice. It wasn't until my seventeenth year as an educator that, like St. Paul, I was struck down on the road to Damascus and arose with a different perspective on the education of atypical children. This perspective was to have a strong influence on my professional role for the remainder of my life.

The incidence that triggered my conversion was a conversation with a cultural anthropologist in which he mentioned some interesting experiments with low forms of animal life. In order to put across some minor point that I have since forgotten, the anthropologist mentioned that using different colors and intensities of light, even an amoeba could be trained in a laboratory to differentiate between letters of the alphabet. Having spent 17 years as a teacher and administrator and having spent 17 years dealing with the frustration of attempting to teach reading to students who could not differentiate between letters of the alphabet, I was stunned by the capability of these micro-biologists.

Long after this revelation took place, I contemplated the educational implications of this bit of information. I eventually concluded that the success experienced in teaching amoebas in the laboratory was attributed to the unique adaptation of the instructional process to the characteristics of the amoeba. Scientists in the laboratory created a special instructional environment for the amoeba, including microscopic versions of the letters to be presented.

The importance of this adaptation was realized when I speculated on what would happen if instead of teaching letters of the alphabet to amoebas in the laboratory, the scientists would have simply sent the amoebas to a school where there were experts in the teaching of reading and reading readiness skills. I speculated that the student amoebas would have been placed in a regular classroom, assigned to a regular seat and given a regular reading textbook.

The size of the textbook would have precluded the amoeba traveling the length of one page in a lifetime, and the attempt to educate the amoeba would have ended in frustration and failure.

Following this frustration and failure, the unsuccessful school would inevitably rationalize its failure by attributing it to the victim:

- * The amoeba did poorly in school because it had a limited knowledge of the English language.
- * The amoeba came from the wrong side of the pond where education is not seen as a vehicle for upward mobility.
- * The amoeba came from a foreign culture that does not value education.
- * The amoeba's parents did not cooperate in the education of their offspring.
- * Amoebas have lost their family values.
- * The amoebas were obviously female since they were more interested in mitosis than in schooling.
- * Amoebas have a poor sense of deferred gratification. They would rather party and have fun now, than work and sacrifice now to attain future benefits.

The list could be expanded, but it is not necessary to do so. The salient point is that a failure to adapt instructional programs to the unique characteristics of students' accounts for their poor performance in school. The victim of inappropriate schooling is then blamed for the poor performance.