

Report - New Paradigms in Education

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This personal perspective on this weekend Conference comes from one who, as a staff member of The Open University for 30 years, has been long committed to learner-centred approaches to education, inter-disciplinary thinking and teaching, the relationship between the cognitive and the affective and, indeed, the importance of relationship between students and between student and tutors.

The conference on 'New Paradigms in Education' affirmed that these hallmarks are now under discussion amongst leading-edge thinkers in the compulsory sector of education where, especially in the Secondary Schools, so much curriculum and methodology seems to be underpinned by the "old" ideas of mechanistic science. In recent years this has been exacerbated by the culture of accountability with its emphasis on uniform standards and content that must be taught with little attention paid to the ways that people, young and old, best learn.

As a member of the International Consortium for Experiential Learning, the principles and practices introduced by PHILIP GANG and MARSHA MORGAN were not new to me but I welcomed their emphasis on the fundamental purpose of learning being the deepening of relationships to one's inner self, to family and colleagues, to the global community and to the earth. I also appreciated ways they demonstrated of honouring people as individuals and, as teachers, to providing congruence between what we know and how we act. I also enjoyed some of the activities they introduced and will long remember one in which we walked around each other in accordance with a principle we had been given but which a small group of onlookers did not know but had to guess; a real lesson in the poetic insight that we cannot "disturb a flower without the troubling of a star".

It was the insights of the new scientific paradigm offered by CHRIS CLARKE that were, for me, the most contributory to my own quest for forward direction in the field of education. This has been to find ways of evoking the dimension of Spirit within education and of enabling spirituality to emerge from the boxes of religious frameworks in ways that can be understood and engaged with by those who no longer find that the traditional religions to be satisfying in this regard.

As a non-scientist, I am fascinated to learn how quantum physics demonstrates what the mystics have always taught in that we are all ultimately inter-connected and how in understanding indeterminism, we see that each moment is open to new opportunities to develop creative and meaningful relationships, and in accepting that we live in a participative universe, we see that each of our actions propagates infinite effects. This insight provides good reason for us to become fully committed to engagement with the world.

For me the present "crisis" in education comes partly from the reaction of children knowing these things deep within but finding that the approach of too many teachers is predicated on a predictable curriculum with an expectation of set outcomes and results. My own youngest daughter on entering Secondary School was traumatised by her perception that

"the teachers don't know anything" and that "they just want to open my head and stuff facts in - they don't see me". We perhaps need to see pupils and students not as recipients of a provision but as participants in an inter-connected process.

It was also good to know that Prof. BART MCGETTRICK from the University of Glasgow, is not only helping students move towards a new vision but is also walking in the corridors of accountability suggesting "transformative thinking" and a complementary "culture of love". Indeed, the number of educators who are moving with this new paradigm is growing and some of the participants at this Conference were going on to the Conference at the Findhorn Foundation in October on 'Spirit of Learning : Soul in Education'.

Such conferences are, hopefully, one way of strengthening the group field of the "new" education in dialogue with the insights of the "new science" in order that a new paradigm in education might truly emerge.

If we are to shift from an era of mechanistic thinking in which acquisitive materialism, fragmentation and strident competition have dominated, to one predicated on communion and co-operation, then education must surely have a pivotal role to play.

And an education that engages in this way in the evolution of consciousness will, perhaps, be embodying a "new" spirituality of daily encounter in a participative universe, of loving and honest engagement with all creation - human and non-human, and of our open-ness to life in each moment, both within ourselves and in each other.

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