

A Vision Dimmed

As I write, I am listening to a teacher's voice, on-line, conducting a live lesson intended to prepare a group of homeschooled fourth graders for their state testing. These children have been pulled out of the public school system for many reasons. Some are the children of free-spirited parents who are raising their children on their own terms; some are the children of parents who don't want their children exposed to what they see as the evils in society; and some have parents who honestly believe that they can do a better job than can professional educators. But the child I tutor is unique.

But wait a minute! *All* children are unique! Christopher, however, has had experiences that have made it impossible for him to survive in a traditional classroom. When it comes right down to it, my take on the situation is that he's simply brighter than the adults who have authority over him. Not "smarter" . . . not better informed . . . simply brighter. His mind works faster. He processes information in ways that his teachers cannot understand. His talents are not only not supported by the system, they are seen as downright disruptive. He is an individual. And as a particularly strong individual – at 10 years old – he won't let the system force him into a mold that does not fit.

So here I sit. Listening to a recording in which a well-meaning teacher, a disembodied voice, is trying to calm the fears of a group of silent children, spread all over the state, so they will perform on the state test in a manner that will reflect well on the on-line school.

When I left classroom teaching in 1998, I did not see this coming. There were those, however, who did – and warned the rest of us that we in the public schools would need to improve our "customer service" in order to remain competitive. Parents were beginning to see that curriculum was becoming more and more standardized, the levels of stress and anxiety felt by adults in the system was causing stress and anxiety in their children, and ideas like "school choice," "innovative and flexible charter schools," and "home schooling" were making them question whether or not the public schools were best serving the needs of their children.

Even though I knew it was time for me to leave the classroom, I was fully aware that I was not ready to leave education. I had the opportunity to help write a National Blue Ribbon Award application for the school where I had been teaching, and I was excited about the possibilities for education in the coming years. I wanted to consult and write . . . and I believed that my voice could make a difference.

So, for the first time in my 30-year career as an educator, I began attending state and national educational conferences. I soon became aware of what President G.W. Bush had called the “Decade of the Brain.” It seemed to me that we were on the brink of a transformation that would positively impact education, society, and all future generations of learners. It was an exciting time for me. I had wonderful memories of my years of teaching, a beautiful vision for the future – and lots of time on my hands.

Over the next few years I attended conferences and workshops, bought books, and became familiar with the ideas of educators like Phil Schlechty, Eric Jensen, Bill Spady, Geoffrey and Renate Caine, Bob Sylwester, Robin Fogarty, Alphonse Kohn, Marion Diamond, Spencer Kagan, Carla Hannaford, and many, many more. Their ideas inspired me to work with others who believed as I did that we were on the brink of true educational reform.

In 2001 I had the opportunity to work with some truly enlightened people on an educational model that was not only learner centered – but held at its core a deep respect for the child at the spiritual and emotional levels. That model was designed to encourage creativity, collaboration, and compassion in learners while developing competence in the concepts and skills they would need as productive members of society. In addition – and most important – was our focus on helping children become truly conscious of who they really are and the people they are becoming. For almost three years we were well funded by a visionary entrepreneur and our excitement ran high. Three schools on two continents were established and we all truly believed that the HeartLight model would transform education.

Unfortunately, our schools in this country had to close after the first year because they were not fully self-supporting. But did we fail? Or were we simply premature? I believe that in time, others will wake up to the reality that our children are more than what a test can measure.

Models like ours will then begin to attract enough families (and entrepreneurs) to make them “cost effective.” (Which, we must admit, is the bottom line for any venture like this.)

After the HeartLight Learning Communities were closed, another opportunity came my way. This time I worked with a forward-thinking superintendent who helped me apply for a grant to start a charter school in our small community. Believing that any rational human being would realize that the best way to educate children is to honor the way they naturally learn, I set off to write the HeartLight model in language that would be accepted by traditional educators. At that time (2003) the criteria for such schools in our state were that they be innovative and flexible, community driven, and provide opportunities not available in the local public school system. Our grant was funded and Upper Chetco Charter School opened in September 2005 with 25 students, two teachers, and a great many excited community volunteers. But once again, the model was premature, our timing wrong – and within six months of opening, the newly hired staff fell back into a traditional, standardized, one-size-fits-all curriculum. Our dream of bringing an enlightened model of education to our little town was gone.

Disappointment ran high for those of us who were so committed to both of those projects. During the years that have followed public education has moved in an entirely different direction – even farther away from our dream. But I still don’t believe that either of these ventures failed. It sometimes feels to me like our vision has dimmed – but then I realize that the people who worked with us, the minds we opened, and the children we inspired will take what they learned, make it their own, and continue the journey toward a better future for themselves – and perhaps even for the world.