Doing Different Things

The E-Exam/Ed.T.E.

Marjorie Spiak

If a butterfly flapping its wings in the Amazon can change the global climate, what will happen when we begin to alter the human genome? The child of the twenty-first century must have a subtle, flexible mind to live in a new world where molecular switches and cloned beings will be a part of every day life. The ethical and social complexities of this world will be difficult to grasp, but must be understood by the majority of our citizens, for such terrors and wonders as we have yet to imagine will require constant vigilance. This brave new world will belong to the well informed, facile problem solvers of the next century.

Where will they come from? Pop tests flashed all over the news media weekly tell us that our children do not even know that the Sun is our local star, or that the pull of the Moon creates tides. My sense of this is that we spend vast amounts of time parking our children in front of the campfire where we attempt to impart our culture to the next generation to kids that are ill prepared to learn, or who are not interested. And, of course, our classrooms are sensibly arranged in most cases to facilitate this - crisp rows or clumps, high stool for the Shaman in front, and bells to tell them when they can stop listening.

In creating a new paradigm, we will be asking our Shamans who keep and impart our culture, to completely rethink themselves. Not an easy task. The pull and comfort of the familiar will be a strong counter force to change, but change we must. Information is now accumulating at such an dizzying rate that learning to seek, sort and connect it, will require a myriad of skills that we have barely begun to master ourselves. We begin then with the teacher. The students of the next century will need the best teachers that have ever lived on the planet, and more of them than ever before. We cannot train subtle, flexible minds if we do not have them ourselves.

Who will these teachers be? Where will they come from? Who will train them? Current practice for training teachers has been to
spend five years in a sausage factory, where little uniform links are popped out on a regular basis. Dissolve Teacher Education as we know it. Let’s surround our children, instead, with people who know how to think and how to teach children to think. They may come from all walks of life, be any age: they only need to be proven thinkers. This is the group we can train to be with, and guide our children. A differentiated pay scale, flexible hours and schedules may bring us engineers, marathon runners, sculptors and other fascinating beings who populate our planet, but our children never see. THESE ARE THE TRUE SHAMANS. We need to develop a sense of community that prizes educating our children above all. (Tax credits for contact hours would nudge the less altruistic among us.) To create life long learners, we need to be life long learners ourselves. What would happen if we could only advance on the pay scale, by advancing our own learning - with time to learn built into each day - and there was no ceiling or cap on this scale. Would we see the first millionaire educators on the planet? And why not. Is not the talent to train minds equal to the talent to put a ball through a hoop? Could these Super Talents change the world? You bet they could.

Our children will also need vast quantities the best tools available to train their minds. If every home in American, and every school in America had computers and all of the other tools necessary, would they come down in price, say to the price of a TV or even a phone. We may even have different degrees of equipment for different tasks, with some high end technology always new and at hand. If the need for vast quantities of cheaper but elegant computers developed, it is the way of this inventive culture of ours to jump in with a solution. Our children will need a different kind of school experience with lots of thinking time, and lots of time for projects and interaction with varying levels of experts and thinking. The traditional school year will just disappear, with schools open from seven to seven and parents welcome to learn right along with students and teachers. Each child would have an their own learning plan that would follow them through school. Forget grades. Replace with milestones, as we scaffold to higher levels of learning.

We will need courageous, committed leaders to lead us forward, not just in schools and communities, but at the highest levels of government. In the mean time, great schools with visionary teachers will begin to lead the way. The funding is available in the richest state in the richest country that has ever existed. What is lacking is a vision
for our children in the twenty-first century. A fire needs to be lit. Who can do this? Our visionary leaders will need to forge a partnership with the media, crossing every facet of American life. Perhaps town meetings should begin to spring up for this purpose. Would the community turn out for a forum on: How will we teach our children in the twenty-first century? I believe that with the right spin doctors, a feeding frenzy can be created around this topic! Can we afford not to try?

Children of the twenty-first century will be lost without a vision and a plan. A gulf has developed and is widening between the haves and have nots in our society, differentiated by degree of flexible thinking ability, and the ability to reinvent ourselves when needed for the current trends in the job market. We must decide as a Nation if we are willing to live with a vast, poorly educated under class that will be even more pronounced in the future than it is today. We must bring the resources to each of our children equally to prevent the most massive brain drain in our history.

This is the kind of problem that our Nation loves. We have often pulled ourselves back from the brink of disaster. The gift of the next millennium to each child should be the best trained mind possible is your birth right.