

The Elephant in the Empire

Naming, aiming, framing, proclaiming

There's an elephant in this room said the emperor and we've got to get to grips with it, and call it out, and deal with it. Six research teams were assembled and went forth to observe, analyse, theorise, conclude and advise on, as it would in due course be known, **elephant education**.

The first team went to the Ivory Coast in West Africa, since this is a country actually named after elephants, albeit only partially, and they studied the records, manifestos, policies and programmes of *Le Parti Démocratique de la Côte d'Ivoire*, and concluded in their interim report that elephant education is another name for **political education**, and **citizenship and human rights education**.

The second team watched a film called *The Elephant Man* and studied elephantiasis, a condition caused by obstruction of lymphatic vessels, and they considered also the damage to ozone layers caused by Jumbo jets, and concluded in their interim report that elephant education is another name for **sustainable development education**, and **climate change and justice education**.

The third team recalled the use made of elephants by Hannibal of Carthage in 220 before the common era in his people's struggle for liberation from the *pax romana*'s structural violence, and concluded in their interim report that elephant education is another name for **peace education, decolonisation**, and **truth and reconciliation education**, and is inspired in part by the **Black Lives Matter** movement.

The fourth team noted that humans treat elephants in a range of different ways, most of them patronising, dehumanising and disrespectful, and concluded in their interim report that elephant education is another name for **equity, diversity, inclusion and accessibility education**, for example with reference to **age, disability, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexuality** and **socio-economic equality**, and in accordance with the concept of **due regard**.

The fifth team noted the demeaning stereotypes which underlie discourse about elephants in so-called jokes. Why do elephants paint the soles of their feet yellow? – so that they can float upside down in the custard without being seen. How do you know that you are in bed with an elephant? – because he or she has an E embroidered on their pyjama jacket. The team concluded in their interim report that elephant education is another name for **personal, social, sexual and moral education** and **mental health education**.

The sixth team went to India and familiarised themselves with the compassion and wisdom of the god Ganesh, and with Ganesh's awesome skills and repertoire as a great storyteller. They concluded in their interim report that elephant education is another name for **religious and worldviews education**, and for **philosophy for children**.

At a major pan-imperial conference the six teams met to agree which of their interim reports should be pre-eminent in their imminent presentation of their final report to the emperor. In the opening stages of this conference they simply but vehemently argued and disagreed with each other. Each believed that they themselves had the best grasp of elephant education and that it was their understanding, essentially, that should be presented to the emperor.

But the more they talked and argued, the more they listened to each other. From their talking and listening they came to two agreed conclusions:

- 1 All their reports stressed that in all education, whatever the content, process is as important as content – ‘how’ is as important as ‘what’: the artistry and inspiration of teachers and the space and autonomy that teachers need; relationships and trust between teachers and learners; the activities, practices, games and exercises that teachers plan and use; engagement of the brain’s right hemisphere; how to deal with controversial and sensitive issues; how to grow and show respect for each individual learner; and how to develop confidence, curiosity, challenge, resilience, and creativity.
- 2 All their reports contained much the same recurring key concepts and fundamental ideas: ‘metacrisis’, ‘interdependent’, ‘interconnected’, ‘othering’, ‘polarising’, ‘vicious circle’, ‘belonging’, ‘evolution’, ‘flow’, ‘nondual’, ‘compassion’, ‘the open and the closed mind’, ‘trauma’, ‘structural’, ‘systemic’, ‘without contraries there is no progression’, ‘paradox’, ‘unknowing’, ‘right hemisphere’, ‘unfinished’.

They told the emperor.

‘Really?’ said the emperor. ‘*Unfinished* is your last word?’

‘Yes, indeed.’

‘I am surprised,’ said the emperor. ‘and I am very disappointed.’

Source: This re-telling of a famous Indian folktale dates from 1981 and in its original form was presented at an international conference entitled **Education for Peace** held at the United World College of the Atlantic in South Glamorgan, Wales. It was subsequently published in the conference proceedings, edited by Colin Reid, and as a brief chapter in *Daring to be a Teacher: essays, stories and memoranda* by Robin Richardson, Trentham Books 1991, pages 89-92. The concept of elephant education became widely known in the 1990s through the work and manifold projects of the **Development Education Centre** in Birmingham, later **Teachers in Development Education** (TIDE) and its magazine *Elephant Times*. The re-telling here dates from July 2024.