

Sharing, reflecting and learning

Guerrand-Hermès Foundation for Peace

International Conference on Human-Centred Education

The International Conference on Human-Centred Education took place on July 18-20, 2005 in Innsbruck, Austria. The event was attended by 60 educators from 33 projects in 20 countries. Please see the separate list for details of these projects. According to the feedback given by the participants, the conference was a success, especially in that it created opportunities for sharing, reflecting and learning.

This report briefly summarises the background, structure, process and proceedings of the conference. It is intended to remind participants of the richness of the conference experience and encourage continued reflection and further learning.

Background

The first International Conference for Educators took place in 1999 in Tlaxala, Mexico, sponsored by the Guerrand-Hermès Foundation for Peace. It became a catalyst for a number of exciting educational projects. These projects, which include a number of new schools, share similar values and ideals, i.e. of an education that aims at developing the full potential of individuals as human beings. This is what we term as human-centred education (HCE).

Over the last few years, the GHFP has extended its contacts and links with many other projects and organisations that support HCE values. The Foundation came to realise that because these projects are working from diverse principles and using very different approaches to education, most are seen as alternatives to mainstream education and are isolated and lack support in the context within which they work. There has therefore been a strong need for these educators to share their experiences and learn from each other.

In response to this situation, the GHFP planned and organised the second International Conference for Educators on Human-Centred Education. The purpose of this conference was to:

- bring educators together to share diverse approach to human-centred education
- provide opportunities for educators to articulate and reflect on practice
- deepen our understanding of essential qualities of human-centred education
- enable educators to connect and support each other

Conference structure and process

As conference organiser, it was our intention to construct a meeting space that would enable participants to have a rich human experience through creating as much space as possible for sharing insights, intimate group discussions and experiential learning. The discussions and dialogue were centred round a different theme and question(s) each day. These included:

Day 1: Reflect on good practices

- 1) *What makes good and effective practice?*
- 2) *How does it contribute to the development of children?*

Day 2: Think critically on our practices

- 3) *What can we do to improve our educational practices?*
- 4) *How can we best help our students in this changing world?*

Day 3: Conceptualising the aim of human-centred education

- 5) *What are the essential qualities of a truly human-centred education?*
- 6) *How do we create educational experiences that enable human flourishing? What do we mean by that?*

With this goal in mind, we structured the three-day conference as follows:

Each morning, panel speakers presented and discussed their projects or research, followed by small group discussions; the afternoons saw experiential workshops and continuation of group discussions; the evenings were kept as an open space for participant-initiated discussions, forums and workshops.

Part of the last day was devoted to reflecting on learning from the conference. We asked participants these three questions:

- *How has this conference changed the way we conceptualise ourselves and our work?*
- *How can we apply what we have learnt to our professional situation?*
- *What practical steps can we take when we get back?*

Participants were encouraged to work in their own institutional teams or as individuals as part of a team and reflect on their learning during this conference. Some participants presented their reflections using posters, a summary of which is presented in the later part of the report. Displays of these posters at the end of the conference made it possible to share reflections and show how the conference could enable further steps to be taken to move a project forward.

The conference was co-ordinated by a team of experienced facilitators. It is worth mentioning that silence and circles were features well received by all participants at the conference. Silence before discussions allowed participants to return to their true self, and silence has also been recognised as an important approach to cultivate spirituality in children and young people.

The conference started with the formation of a number of semi-circles and peer bonding using appreciative enquiry approach, and ended with one big circle symbolising our unity and integrity as a group and as human beings. These were moments where we each recognised others as individual human beings with inter-connectedness and interdependence.

Conference content and outcome

The following is intended to provide a glimpse of the richness of the conference by summarising the key points from speakers, workshops and group discussions, and team and individual reflections on conference learning.

Speakers

The keynote speaker of the conference was Dr Michael Fielding, Director of the Centre of Educational Innovation, University of Sussex. Michael's speech set the tone of the conference discussion and interaction as open, human-centred and critical. His argument, based on the work of the Scottish philosopher, John Macmurray, is that the centrality of human-centred education is the communal nature of human being and becoming. Michael maintains that a notion of community must go beyond the dialogic to embrace human beings in the many sidedness of their agency as persons. Community is fundamentally relational, emancipatory and inclusive, and is most appropriately understood as a process. He says that within each community there exists two forms of opposite human relation, the functional and the personal: the functional is for the sake of the personal and is transformed by/expressive of the personal.

Michael quoted Macmurray's essay on 'Learning to be Human':

The first priority in education – if by education we mean learning to be human – is learning to live in personal relation to other people. Let us call it learning to live in community.

With this quote, Michael stressed the importance of care, respect and human dignity in these relationships.

Michael's well-researched insights and critical analysis on what he terms as person-centred education provided theoretical and philosophical underpinning for participants to re-articulate their understanding of a truly human-centred education.

Six presenters shared their views on the diverse aspects of human-centred education from their individual perspectives. In the order of their presentations, here is a brief summary:

- Dr Peter Laurence (Founder/Director, Education As Transformation, USA) introduced Quaker educational principles which lay emphasis on 'inner light' and spirituality;
- Leonardo Wild (Member, Fundacion Educativa Pestalozzi, Ecuador) described the educational principles and approaches developed by his mother Rebeca Wild in the Pestalozzi School, Ecuador, which encourages children and young people to initiate spontaneous activities within a carefully prepared learning environment geared towards their individual needs and in accordance their different developmental stages;
- Dr John Pryor (Senior lecturer, Centre for International Education, University of Sussex, UK) discussed formative assessment as a human process, which involves dialogue and collaboration between amongst learners and teachers;
- Kumari Beck (a doctoral candidate and an instructor in international teacher education programs in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University, British Columbia, Canada) presented her research-in-progress on how care could be cultivated in the classroom, arguing that ethics of care form a vital core of a teacher's practice;
- Fiona Carnie (Consultant, Human Scale Education, UK) summarised some of the main characteristics of human-centred education based on her own work and the discussions during the conference, highlighting the importance of holistic approach to developing the whole person and fostering positive relationships amongst all within a learning community and with our environment;
- Prof Ian Cunningham (Founder/Director, South Downs Learning Centre) presented his work at the Centre which takes self managed learning approach to provide personalised learning experience to young people who create and follow their own learning programme with the support from a learning group and adult facilitators.

Workshops

In addition to these presentations, the conference also provided parallel workshops in the afternoons. Educators from eight different projects gave experiential workshops on their own educational approaches:

- Bella and Joe Rosario (Founders/Directors, Mithra Foundation, India) gave a detailed view on how they strive to provide educational experience for children, with a focus on their human rights;
- Sebastian De Rios (Founder/Director, Fundacion Amor, Colombia) presented how love and compassion are instrumental to learning and development within children;
- Sarojini Vittachi (Founder/Director, Girls Education Plus, India) made everyone become more aware of the importance of educating girls;

- Stephanie Davies-Arai (TET Instructor/parent, Lewes New School, UK) allowed the participants to have a flavour of the non-violent communication model developed by her and the teachers and children at the Lewes New School;
- Illène Pevec (Founder/Director, Children's Peace Garden Project, Canada/Brazil) shared with her participants diverse perspectives on the important effect on learning that can be generated through creating a natural environment in school grounds;
- Kathy Eldon (Founder/Director, GlobalTribe Network, worldwide) ran a workshop on using media to promote and document educational projects worldwide and how young people from around the world can be connected using films and the internet. This made many participants feel empowered and encouraged to have their voices heard by utilising modern media.
- Lailah Armstrong (Director/Trainer, International Children Development Programme, worldwide) gave a fully experiential workshop which helped deepen participants' understanding of the six principles of the ICDP and the importance of empathic communication in developing the relationship between a child and their carer;
- Francisca Pedroso (Director, Roda Viva, Portugal) showed us that human-centred educational approaches empower young people to take the initiative to effect positive changes in themselves.

Many participants commented that these presentations and workshops made them aware of the huge diversity in approaches to human-centred education. Each approach was seen as being in accordance with what is appropriate to its own socio-cultural and economical context. It was recognised that sharing individual life stories and the narrative of their lived experience of working with children and young people formed a big part of the conference interaction and discussions. It also formed the basis for participants to reflect deeply on their own educational practices.

Discussions

In addition to becoming aware of the diversity in approaches, through the three days' discussions, individual groups came up with some consensus on understanding the essence of human-centred education.

Human-centred education enables children to flourish by being

- life affirming
- holistic
- respectful
- peaceful
- lifelong
- forgiving
- democratic
- joyful
- reflective
- caring

Human-centred education helps children

- become their own teacher
- consider everything as a potential source of learning
- be guided in their development by their best self
- learn to be concise and precise
- develop resiliency
- become who they are and augment who they are
- respect and care for themselves and others
- be respectful and appreciative of differences
- learn from their mistakes
- be peaceful yet effective problem solvers
- find and use their own voice
- be nourished physically, emotionally, spiritually as well as mentally
- become active, effective citizens
- exercise power with responsibility
- develop a healthy sense of playfulness and fun
- develop their capacity for discernment
- become resourceful
- cultivate a sense of mystery and awe
- become not just knowledgeable but wise
- be reflective human beings

Conference conclusion

Drawing on the myriad strands conjured from the conference activities and interaction, the following points summarise the essential qualities of human-centred education as identified by the participants:

- ◇ taking human flourishing at the core of its aim: developing each individual's full human potential and enabling the expression of their true talent

- ◇ the centrality of positive relationships
 - love, care and respect
 - mutuality of learning
 - awareness of each other and of our environment
 - community
- ◇ holistic approach to learning and assessment: the development in all aspects of a human being, including the physical, moral, creative, emotional, intellectual and spiritual
- ◇ priority of experience: the importance of encounter
- ◇ dialogue and democracy
- ◇ education as process of human becoming and personal transformation

In her concluding speech, Mrs Sarojini Vittachi reminded the conference to bear in mind the importance of the fundamental right of children and young adults to have **access** to education. She used Varindra Tarzie Vittachi's writing on children's rights to summarise this:

A child has the need and therefore the right, to be a child. This is an important fundamental right of a child: the right to a childhood.

Sarojini stressed that human-centred education should not be exclusively for the privileged few. She challenged us to explore how to encourage mainstream state education to become interested and adopt the human-centred educational principles in order to benefit more children and young people. She also asked us to consider ways to take this initiative forward, scaling up and making our effort self-sustainable, through critical reflection and ongoing assessment.

Learning from the conference

Participants commented that the conference helped confirm and expand their own understanding of the essence of human-centred education. The following comments highlight these reflections:

'The conference opened my eyes. It made me realise that there are diverse approaches to human-centred education'. (Ina, Germany)

'I find that many of the values and truths that I held fast to were confirmed by the people in the conference who believe in the same things.' (Salamah, Indonesia)

'Working on an alternative educational project is hard, especially when you are isolated. Getting in touch with other people, sharing experience with other projects, encourages us to continue our work and gives us tools to continue.' (Pedro, Ecuador)

'The conference made me recognise that we are on the right track with our own work.' (Faustina, Austria)

'I feel more integrated rather than isolated.' (Charlotte, Congo)

Recommendations for future events and possibilities of conference follow-up

From their experience of the conference, participants were invited to make recommendations for future events and follow-up activities. Their suggestions included:

For future events:

- ◇ More space for personal contact and intimate discussions and interaction
- ◇ More time to learn about each other's work
- ◇ Allowing participants to determine the conference agenda
- ◇ More space for dialogue

Possible follow-up activities

- ◇ web portal and forum to continue the discussions
- ◇ networking opportunities amongst participating projects
- ◇ a smaller conference in 2 years time
- ◇ a teacher training programme on human-centred education

For more information about the conference, and about participating in ongoing discussions, education forum, and to sign up for our monthly newsletters, please visit the project's website: www.human-edu.net or contact the project co-ordinator:

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