These are Elephant Times

This fable was written by Robin Richardson, Multicultural Advisor for Berkshire, to illustrate a current educational dilemma — that of a fragmented curriculum.

Development Education Centre policy is centred on the principle that development education has the same fundamental concerns as many other curriculum “lobbies”. Like social education, multicultural education etc. it should not jockey for a position on the timetable as such. Indeed, like them it has a role as an approach in all aspects of the curriculum.

The challenge is to establish common ground and look for ways of organising to enhance the effectiveness of what is being done.

THE TASK IS TO CREATE THE WHOLE ELEPHANT.

‘The world we live in contains elephants. The classrooms of our schools should therefore reflect our need to know about and to understand elephants. Resources should be allocated urgently to more and better elephant education.’

‘Elephant education!’ exclaimed the people when they heard this recommendation. ‘We are not entirely sure what that is.’ Six blind people went forth to find out.

The first blind person went to the Ivory Coast, in West Africa, since this is a country actually named after elephants, albeit only partially. The first blind person looked at the records and record of the Parti Democratique de la Cote d’Ivoire, its struggle for independence, its life in and out of the French Community, its affairs with de Gaulle, its use of pressure, power and resources over forty years; and concluded that elephant education is another phrase for political education.

The second blind person went to a film called The Elephant Man, and looked at elephantiasis, the swelling of limbs, obstructions in the flow of lymph, over-growth of subcutaneous tissue; and in looking thus at sickly growth and wrong progress, and comparing it with healthy growth and right progress, this second blind person concluded that elephant education is another phrase for development education.

The third blind person looked at the diverse ways in which human beings relate to elephants. We corral them in keddahs, hum them with howdahs, train them for traction, parade them in processions, circle them in circuses. The third blind person saw not only diversity but also conflicts of interests, discrimination, prejudice, bars and barriers, and concluded that elephant education is another phrase for multicultural education.

The fourth blind person looked at the escalation of the arms race which was occasioned in 220 B.C. by Hannibal of Carthage, when he resolved to use elephants in his war of liberation against the Pax Romana. Seeing thus both direct and structural violence, this fourth blind person concluded that elephant education is another phrase for peace education.

The fifth blind person went to a place of consumption, read on the menu there of Jumbo burgers, Jumbo sandwiches, Jumbo pizzas; saw the waitresses, the pretty little maids there all in a row; saw beyond them the prairies and boardrooms, men doing there what men have to do; saw behind every good man Kirche and Kuche, temple and table, synagogue and sink, shrine and shine, mosque and mop, church and chore. Reading thus between as well as along the lines of the menu, the fifth blind person concluded that elephant education is another phrase for equal opportunities and anti-sexist education.

The sixth blind person looked at a distinctive literary form, slightly reminiscent of Old Testament poetry, in which statements about elephants are frequently expressed. It consists of a litany of interrogatives and responses. Question, why do elephants paint the soles of their feet yellow? — Answer, so that they can float upside down in the custard without being seen. Question, how can you tell when you’re in bed with an elephant? — Answer, because he has an E embroidered on his pyjama jacket. Studying this literary form, the sixth blind person realised that elephants must suffer from a negative self-image and inadequate social skills and concluded that elephant education is another phrase for personal and social education.

The six blind people went their separate ways, and polished separately their respective conclusions. Indeed, they damn near perfected them. They applied separately for money from charitable trusts and from central and local government; set up working-parties, standing conferences, associations, networks; formulated aims and objectives, and devised syllabuses and schemes of work; sent deputations to examination boards; made bids for the attention and commitment of influential teachers; lobbied and jockeyed for time and space in each individual school.

They failed however, completely, to achieve any of the values which they wished to promote; and failed also to avert any of the threats to which they wished to respond.

The fable is part of the paper “Culture, Race and Peace: Tasks and tensions in the Classroom”, published by the Centre for Peace Studies, St. Martin’s College, Lancaster and is available from the shop at the Development Education Centre.