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QUDWA 2017

Inspirational Stories

Saturday October 7th, 2017

Speaker

Aggeliki Pappa, Founder, I Love Dyslexia

Moderated/Facilitated by: **Alice Cornish**, Head of Education, Varkey Foundation

Summary Paragraph/Key Points

The philosophy behind Ms. Pappa's educational organization I Love Dyslexia is in the name. "I think it is high time we speak about love," she said. "Science is about love. It is a way to communicate that is comfortable."

This might seem like just a nice sentiment, except that it is rooted in neuroscience, which Aggeliki studied before starting her first school. What she discovered was that our knowledge of how the brain works is evolving; we used to think the left side of the brain controlled logic while the right part was for creativity, but we now know the two hemispheres interact all the time. "The left hemisphere is all about symbolic language and that the right is about visual," Pappa said. "So if we put them together we can boost literacy and transform the human brain."

Another thing Pappa learned was that the limbic system of the brain is where much of our emotional life emanates from. When the limbic system feels threatened it shuts off, making certain types of learning such as reading or writing more difficult.

"Students with learning disabilities feel pointed at," she said. "Only when they are embraced with love can they learn."

The journey for this innovative teacher, however, was not always surrounded by the love she so abundantly gives to others. She was inspired to study neuroscience after one of her first dyslexic students committed suicide. She studied under the expert Marina Wolf, a pioneer in the study of neuronal plasticity in drug addiction, who taught her that the brain is not meant to read. "It is natural to speak, but it is difficult to learn to read and write at a high level," Pappa said. "We need to create new ways to create synapses to learn."





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When Pappa first started applying her new-found knowledge in the Greek public education system, she was fired. “Do not be afraid of being fired,” she said. After eight years, she had developed a methodology and was ready to open her first school. She started small, in a tiny garden. But two years later she had 12 teachers and a brand new school. “I wanted to create a school that does not look like a school to celebrate the power of the human being.”

Her success stories are many, but one she mentioned in her seminar was the student who was the worst in his class. After joining “I Love Dyslexia”, he improved — to the point where he was accepted into Birmingham, one of the world’s leading universities. But teaching students with dyslexia was not enough for Pappa. She wanted to apply her techniques to everyone; she now teaches English as a Second Language (ESL) to refugees with dyslexia.

“I realized the greatest gift of my methodology was that it was not just for ESL or dyslexia but for everyone,” she said. “It is based on the involvement of whole human: heads, heart and hands. We aim for a harmonious connection between science, technology and the arts.”

Although her methodology uses creativity and storytelling to learn - to teach how “c,” as in “cat” and “h,” as in “horse” make the “ch,” as in “chocolate” sound when placed together, Pappa asks the student to imagine the horse is allergic to the cat so the sound it makes when it gets near it is “a-choo” - Pappa balances that with scientific rigour. She volunteered to go to schools to collect research data on her methods, and believes scientists should be more involved with teachers and vice versa.

“Be bold enough to connect with neuroscientists, physicists,” she advised Qudwa teachers. “Academia and teachers should be connected. When I am in university, I should be better prepared for the classroom instead of sitting and being lectured at for hours. And vice versa. Teachers need to be equipped with science. Too many teachers are reluctant to speak about neuroscience and quantum physics instead of the pedagogy they learned at university.”

Takeaway: In order to learn, the brain’s limbic system must feel unthreatened.

