

The Initiative in Changing Times

BY JOHN ABBOTT

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THE ESSENTIAL PURPOSE of the Initiative was well stated in 1995 as “facilitating the emergence of new approaches to learning that draw upon a range of insights into the human brain, the functioning of human societies, and learning as a self-organising activity. We believe this will release human potential in ways that nurture and form local democratic communities worldwide, and will help reclaim and sustain a world supportive of human endeavour”.

That remains the Initiative’s essential purpose in 2008. The need to release human potential to create strong families and communities is even greater now than it was fifteen or so years ago. Greater still is the need to find ways in which individuals can live creative and responsible lives that are self-sustaining, equitable, and just, and to do this before our scientific ingenuity overtakes our wisdom, and civilisation ends up destroying life itself.

Initially the Initiative believed that such an improved understanding of human learning could help reform the entire education system from the inside. To this end the Initiative published *The Child is Father of the Man* in 1999, and *The Unfinished Revolution* the following year. The Initiative followed that up with a massive lecturing programme (averaging a hundred or so lectures a year held in many countries), and training programmes for teachers and communities leaders as they worked out the implications of a model of learning that “went with the grain of the brain”. This network of informed and thoughtful practitioners is supported on an on-going basis through this website, first set up in 1996.

CHANGING TIMES. It was concern that the western world’s infatuation with materialism, global markets and free trade might progressively undermine conventional social structures (especially the family unit and community coherence) that led the Initiative to stress the need for systems of education that created genuinely thoughtful, not superficially “clever”, people. In 1995 it was still possible to believe that the practices of successful teachers, schools and school districts would play a significant role in influencing the way policy makers shaped legislation. Consequently, the Initiative adopted the concept of ‘responsible subversives’ to stress to teachers and all those involved with young people their direct personal responsibility to develop best practices, even where – as often – this went against conventionally accepted practice. Children should be educated to think for themselves, not simply to fit into society, but to be ready to reshape it when necessary.

Since the mid ‘90s the environment has changed dramatically, both the social and cultural environment as well as the political agenda. Fifteen or so years ago audiences instantly warmed to the analogy that a balanced education was like a three-legged stool which, if the legs were of the same length (the home, the community and the school), could find balance however uneven the surface on which it stood. For many people that analogy is no longer useful and is seen as utterly unattainable because, in vast swathes of the country, home and community have become so dysfunctional as to be no longer seen as part of the educational equation.

As the voluntarily accepted responsibilities within families and communities have weakened, so governments have sought to compensate by extending the role of the school. There are three aspects to this; firstly, the purpose of education has shifted away from the development of the all-round person, to a narrow focus on schooling to “fit with the new economic imperative of supply-side invest-

ment for public prosperity¹". Put simply "greed" has become the acceptable 'driver' of both personal and national economies. Secondly, the curriculum is now defined centrally and arrangements made for its delivery in bite-sized pieces, each of which are so exactly defined that it is possible for them to be taught by someone with little in-depth knowledge of the subject. Such bite-sized components of the subject can be assessed quickly and easily by defining in advance what are the exact correct answers. More than ever before the curriculum has become that which is taught – not the structured opportunity for motivated learners to make sense for themselves. Good marks in an exam can no longer be taken to mean a thorough understanding of the subject.

Then thirdly, the whole structure of education has been centralised. As recently as 1988 central government made overall policy, and left it to local government to create local plans appropriate to their individual circumstances. All that has changed as central government has progressively and determinedly undermined the power of local government, especially the role of local education authorities. Education has become a politically-charged activity fraught with politically-correct statements, and a charge of heresy if anyone criticises them. Headteachers now find themselves in the invidious position of having far more control over their budgets, but tied ever more closely to running their schools in ways as defined by central government than ever they were previously by their local education authority.

AS FAR AS THE INITIATIVE WAS CONCERNED IN 1995 it was appropriate for it to work with separate local authorities and to seek to influence their solutions in ways that might influence national policy. Fifteen years later with all power having been taken to the centre, there is no mechanism left for community-wide, as opposed to school-located, solutions. When, in the year 2000, the senior educational advisor to the then Prime Minister delivered a Paper entitled "Fusion; how to unleash irreversible change²" , few really understood what that meant. But to our cost we do now. Eight years later it has become all too obvious that a Minister of Education has now so many powers heaped upon him or her, and so few people with the authority or the intellectual stature either to question him, or to propose alternative and radical different ways of doing things, that his Department has become the home of an inexhaustible supply of sticking plasters, for the trouble with irreversible change is that if you got it wrong to start with the system just can't cure itself. That is exactly what seems to have happened in England.

WHICH HAS MEANT THAT THE INITIATIVE HAS NOW TO REPOSITION ITSELF. Having made a most careful study of the biological processes involved in the learning process, and being well aware of recent developments in cognitive science, psychology and evolutionary studies, the Initiative finds itself no longer able to offer advice on how to reform the present system, which seems stuck – without an engine – against the buffers on a sideline. Rather the Initiative feels it essential to offer an alternative approach to the bringing-up of children which is far more in line with the needs of the twenty-first century, and which understands the child's learning experience as being infinitely broader than the world of the school.

In considering education (an issue which in England is fraught with political undertones) we are faced with questions about the proper functioning of democracy. Democracy is about choice. It is the best process by which the protection of the rights of the individual may be balanced with what the rulers of the day see as political necessity. However, it seems a reality that, to ensure their re-election, politicians always pay close attention to the most vociferous of their constituencies, and least attention to minority groups with few votes. Here is the rub; democracy only works when the electorate really understands the issues, and can see through simplistic proposals; a candidate who promises to raise more taxes (ideally from someone other than yourself) so as to legislate for an imposed institutionally solution, is more likely to attract votes from ill-informed voters than the candidate who is prepared to state bluntly that the problem will only be solved if every member of the constituency were to change

their behaviours. (e.g. Do you pay for more rubbish collectors, or seek to persuade everyone not to throw away litter? Do you teach your own children how to behave, or pay teachers and police to discipline them? Do you teach them to read before they go to school, or leave it for the school to do this for you at an age when it is more difficult for the child?)

SO, WHAT SHOULD HAPPEN NOW? At last people are beginning to see through the contemporary top-down educational policies which have been the fad for the last fifteen years and which have been said to raise standards by enforcing conformity. But conformity leads to a dull society that is forced to look outside, and beyond, itself for leadership and innovation. On the other hand forms of learning based on building up the competence of young learners in how to work things out for themselves, breeds an adult society of strong individuals who in their aggregate create a strong civil society, something that gives colour, vitality and energy to everyday life.

It is to help people appreciate that such a society will not be reached simply by going further along the present route that the Initiative is publishing John Abbott's latest book, *Overschooled but Undereducated: Society's failure to understand adolescence*. Taking his experience of working with all the experts who contributed to the thinking of the Initiative over the years, and combining this with his experience of giving hundreds of lectures, John has created a book of great authority, practical wisdom, and even charm. In this book he provides everything that is needed to feed an inquisitive nation's desire for a radically new approach to how we educate our young people, and prepare our adolescents to become better adults than we have often been ourselves.

"Civilisation can never be taken for granted", argues *Overschooled but Undereducated*, "for it depends on a constant supply of responsible and tough new adolescents to replace the worn-out skills of their elders". Unfortunately, however, England is experiencing a collapse in that civil society so necessary to nurture adolescents. "New forms of education have to start a dynamic process through which young people are progressively weaned from their dependence on teachers and institutions, and given the confidence to manage their own learning". *Overschooled but Undereducated* provides the agenda for the crusade that the Initiative believes has to be mounted; "individuals, communities, societies, national governments and international agencies", argues the book, "will all have to pull together, or else all of us will surely sink together as we pull apart. That is the absolute challenge; can we together create an equitable and sustainable future for everyone?"

HOW BEST CAN YOU PARTICIPATE? It may help you to know that the Initiative has defined five target groups that have to be addressed simultaneously. The FIRST is the general public, and the need to so market these ideas that they provide the opening text for a new national agenda. We will do this both through the publication of this book in an appropriate fashion, and intend to support this with a major television documentary series. More important than what the Initiative itself can organise is the spontaneous response of individuals and organisations to the bold claim that "adolescence is an opportunity not a problem". Understand that, says the book, "and that changes everything". We invite you to add your comments and suggestions to each chapter or to the book as a whole. We are looking particularly for personal responses to the issues raised in the text: how does your own story relate with the synthesis presented in *Overschooled but Undereducated*? How do the major issues play out in your community? What was your most powerful learning experience? These responses will be watched regularly so as to pick up the best ideas that are available and will eventually become part of a broader synthesis and a vital step in the strategy for implementing change on a large scale.

SECONDLY, we are currently searching for a hundred or more "key opinion formers" (broadcasters, journalists, politicians, and key opinion makers) who can help us shape the message, and disseminate it better. (Shakers and Movers).

THIRDLY, we always need financial support. In comparison to the hundreds of millions that are spent by government on marketing their interpretation of the country's educational needs, and their

proposed solutions, the Initiative is totally dependent on charitable donations and sponsorship.

FOURTHLY, the Initiative will continue to work closely with all those who represent one or other of the three legs that comprise a quality balanced education – the home, the community and the school.

FINALLY, the Initiative has a very special interest in the 18-25 age group who, more than any other sector of the population, have the most to gain if we get this right, but most certainly have the most to lose if these issues are ignored.

Any observations on this strategy, and any suggestions to how this could work better, and who might become involved, should initially be sent to John Abbott at the Initiative.

John Abbott, President
The 21st Century Learning Initiative
Bridge House
15 Argyle Street
Bath BA2 4BQ
United Kingdom

tel. +44 (0) 1225 333 376
fax. +44 (0) 1225 339 133

email. mail@21learn.org
<http://www.21learn.org>

References

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