The Route Map

Executive Summary

One. Background.  Up to the late 18th century, when Bristol enjoyed the riches of its colonial trade, there was little formal schooling in the city and most youngsters learnt on the job through structured apprenticeships. Yet so skilled were these men that Bristol contributed greatly to the English leadership of the Industrial Revolution, then later paid the price as mass manufacturing destroyed that social cohesion upon which apprenticeship depended. Eventually, churches and other charities were set up to do in classrooms what had previously been learnt through practice, and in 1870 the Bristol School Board was empowered to raise taxes to institutionalise this in elementary schools. In 1944 schools were split into primary and secondary, and I.Q. tests further split secondary into grammar, technical and modern schools.

Twenty years later (1965) selective schools were replaced by comprehensives. While I.Q. tests were abolished, the split at the age of eleven remained. Most parents were content for their child to attend the local primary school, but then began to struggle to get their child into the ‘right’ secondary school either on the basis of social prestige, or assumptions about a school’s ability to get high grades at the age of sixteen. In 2000 Academies started to be set up as independent secondary schools able to compete for pupils across the whole city. In a city as small and compact as Bristol these strands over-lie each other in a confusion of administrative structures.

Herein lie the muddled origins of Bristol schools, and what has become the dominant system in English schooling; age-related classes assumed to be progressing at a uniform rate; skills and knowledge delivered through subject-specific disciplines; a custodial role for social development confused with the degree of willingness with which a child accepts the ethos of school; more funds allocated to the education of older pupils leaving the youngest children to be taught in the largest classes; a disregard for practical skills often dismissed as simply ‘vocational’; the increased marginalisation of home and community as an integral component of learning; the retention of teenagers at schools to ‘save’ them from the turmoil of adolescence, and the training of teachers being more concerned with the preparation for subject-specific instruction than with the development of pedagogic studies informed by philosophy and research into the nature of human learning.

Over recent years Bristol has become ever more socially divided; ancient prejudices and inherited pride still stalk the streets, and the cost has been horrific. Within seven miles of the harbour are some of the richest, and some of the poorest, of English electoral wards. Bristol comes second from the bottom of the League Tables of Authorities gaining five A* to Cs at GCSE (including Maths and English) with its highest achieving state school (St Mary’s Redcliffe) is placed between 400th and 500th place nationally.

Two. Problems.  How to deal with the difficulties created by Transition between primary and secondary at such an inappropriate age of eleven was addressed by the Initiative’s Parliamentary Briefing Paper in August 2009, and were picked up by Bristol University’s Report on Transition (commissioned by the Merchant Venturers) in February 2010.

The Bristol University Report expressed surprise at the extent to which the dominant system (see para 3) continues to reinforce, after several generations of potential change, what they called the ‘two tribes,’ the tribe of secondary teachers with their emphasis on teaching subjects, and the tribe of primary teachers with their emphasis on personal development. The Report also noted that there is a significant reduction in confidence in many learners at the point of transfer, and they fail to progress as expected. In some cases it triggers a disengagement from formal education while many pupils who had developed an independent approach to their learning in primary school appear to have this compromised, or even reversed in the larger, more complex environment of secondary school. This Report notes the various tensions within the system, and gently, perhaps too gently, seeks to avoid political contention by simply “questioning how the rhetoric of school choice seems to be
increasingly muted by a less spoken desire for community based schooling.” If this is so, the Report states perhaps “it is time to shift the rhetoric and talk much more about schools and their role in their communities.”

The Initiative insists that rectifying this design fault is the essential first step towards creating a contemporary system for schooling. This will involve:

- Rejoining the practice of primary and secondary education;
- Developing a pedagogy based on what is now known about how children learn most effectively, and take control of their learning;
- Transforming secondary education so that adolescents become far more involved in their own learning and progression, and
- Developing a model of teacher-education that combines the highest understanding of subject content (the secondary model) with equally demanding knowledge of pedagogy and child development (the primary model).

Such actions have largely been dismissed by Parliamentarians as being too complicated, too difficult and far too long-term to be at the forefront of a new government’s agenda.

However, what cannot be done at a national level could surely be done at the level of a city the size of Bristol. Not driven by duress (the old Local Authority could not do this) but by an independent and well-respected third party who, setting all this within a vision, could offer its support to the first well-defined community within the greater city as a whole prepared to take on all these challenges concurrently, and so act as a pilot project for the entire city.

Three. Solution. In the light of the twenty-year study the Initiative has made of international research on how the brain works and how children learn, we believe that the dominant English system is simply upside-down in terms of its distribution of resources; inside-out in terms of its excessive dependence on school-as-place, on formal as opposed to informal learning, and on the teacher as instructor rather than as facilitator.

These assumptions have not changed much in more than half a century. Most of the schools that today’s children attend, be they in Bristol or elsewhere, conform to the dominant system that assumed that children were born to be taught, rather than to learn. Making such a distinction between teaching and learning is far from easy. While it is a fact of life that children are born curious, it is also all too obvious that this can be knocked out of a child by insensitive schooling. The essence of this is, as Confucius once said, that if we simply give a child an answer that satisfies us (the adult) but which means nothing to the child, the child will take no notice and simply forget it. However, if we take time out to show a child why something is as it is, the child will most likely remember it, but – and here is the critical thing – if you allow the child to experiment for itself it will not only remember what happens, but understand it as well. This has a technical name, Cognitive Apprenticeship – in the simplest terms it means learning in the way that apprentices learnt in pre-industrial times by mixing theory with practice. This is the way we now understand from neuroscience that the brain is structured to operate by constructively mixing theory with practice.

Here is the real challenge that faces English schools because it means that teachers need to be even better at getting children to think for themselves, rather than simply remembering the stuff they have been told. In the earliest years the nature of the young brain means that children learn incredibly quickly by following the example of people they admire. In a sense they are clone-like in their learning, something which has taken millions of years for our species to evolve and which means that we are able to learn very quickly. The second finding is not quite so obvious, and has only become clear through the use of expensive brain imaging technologies in the past ten years. It is this: the so-called ‘angst’ of the teenage blues is an essential biological adaptation whereby the teenage brain forces itself to rebel against simply being told something, and struggles (against parents and teachers) for the space to do it for itself. While it is natural for youngsters below the age of ten to sit still and listen to a teacher, it is unnatural for healthy adolescents to do that… and to over-pressurise them to do
this actually denies their biological need to start taking responsibility for their own activities. Overzealous teachers all too easily trivialise adolescents at the very moment they are seeking to stand on their own feet.

Bristol has to progressively redesign its schools to benefit from these insights. Formal schooling therefore has to start a dynamic process by which pupils are progressively weaned of their dependence upon teachers and institutions, and given the confidence to manage their own learning, collaborating with colleagues as appropriate, and using a range of resources and learning opportunities. This has to be a continuous and seamless process right through from the age of five to sixteen, provided and delivered by teachers who have both technical subject knowledge and considerable expertise in both pedagogy and child development. An all-through school, led by a team of teachers who work widely across the age range, will understand that they have a unique opportunity to redirect the more generous resources currently assigned to older pupils so as to front-load the system and create the smallest teacher-pupil ratios when children are young.

Four. Implementation. “Perhaps a language of collaboration and cooperation better serves the needs of our society than one of competition,” commented the Bristol University Report two months ago. Could this be best achieved by making the public so aware of what contemporary research is revealing about the nature of human learning, that this would activate public pressure for ‘research-led’ reform that would simply by-pass yesterday’s political assumptions, and today’s inertia? It is wisdom far older than Bristol that reminds us that a city divided against itself can never stand.

Who is best placed to challenge the citizens of Bristol to do this – all of them, not just the parents of a single school, or the members of a sub-community? Could it be the Merchant Venturers, either as a corporation or a collection of individuals, who could challenge the people of Bristol to show that it is only through altruistic, collaborative behaviour that the city can thrive?

Bristolians will have to understand that they have to replace the dominant system of schooling with its excessive ‘telling’ with a process of schooling that is much more about developing the ability of the individual child to learn, rather than simply to be efficient and conform to the practices of schooling. That is easy to say, but extremely difficult to achieve. No one can learn how to learn in the abstract; rather they learn to learn by learning something. Which is the problem that has beset schools for hundreds of years – it is comparatively easy to measure what is learnt, but very difficult to evaluate the process which led to that learning which is why we and our politicians drown in a deluge of statistics.

In all this Bristol is a typical city of the 21st century. It does, however, have the advantage of being a relatively self-contained ‘place’, and largely conscious of its own identity but, as with the English in general, Bristolians object if told what to do by somebody else. Successive governments have played to this natural instinct, and allowed the difficult task of the old LEA of trying to provide a level playing field for all children to be seen by individual schools as a force to be challenged. Having now, as it were, beaten that old enemy of the Local Authority, the generality of Bristol finds that there is now no one to balance the ambitions of individual schools with what is best for the city as a whole, (born out most painfully when thousands of families each year try unsuccessfully to find the school which they think would best suit their child).

There would be four parts to such a strategy:

One. This will require leadership from those ‘venturers’ skilled at acting outside the box for the benefit of the entire ‘Company’, citizens able to act collaboratively to achieve for the common good something that no one party could achieve on its own. This will be the most sensitive part of the whole project. It is far too sensitive to rush. Nothing will be achieved if it is thought that this is an idea parachuted in from the outside. Time will be needed, and much patience, firstly to identify the natural leaders in the community, and secondly to work with them to ensure that they each grasp the finest parts of the argument so that they
The 21st Century Learning Initiative and
Bristol

can become the knowledgeable and influential ‘home team’ – the people who ‘own’ this, taking over the leadership from the Merchant Venturers, other ‘venturers’ and The Initiative.

Two. A sub-part of the greater city will need to identify itself as being a place where a self-selective, determined group of insightful educationalists and community activists are willing to work with a community of schools to put all the elements of such an approach into place. The Initiative would support this with all its experience drawn from around the world and would put its well-tested training programmes at the project’s disposal.

Three. Partly separate to the main project would be the need for secondary education to come to terms with the reality that adolescence is an opportunity, not a problem, and demonstrate how this could best be implemented across not only Bristol, but the rest of the country.

Four. The development of a new model of teacher-education is essential, and is such a national issue that it will require collaboration with government. Bristol could speed up such a process as national politicians were shown the benefits of a pedagogy based on the appropriate research.

While the total cost could amount to £8.2m over ten years, the immediate requirement as set out on page 13 of the full Proposal, is for £225,000 in each of the first three years of Action One. It is this money which is urgently needed. Ultimately the more successful the programme becomes the more funds it will need, and the more ‘venturers’ will have to be found to extend the influence of the whole concept. (Below is the spreadsheet for the ten-year programme extracted from the full Route Map).

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John Abbott
27th April 2010