THE EYE OF THE STORM
Educational change; insightful or chaotic?

A Summary of the Initiative’s Journey (with close reference to the Archive as described in the 17 folders on the Timeline www.21learn.org/the-timeline), written by John Abbott

The 21st Century Learning Initiative grew out of the merger in 1985 of the theoretical/policy driven views of the Education 2000 trustees (a national body established two years earlier under the Patronage of the Duke of Edinburgh), with the more broadly based practical understandings of change described in a local Feasibility Study known as ‘Hertfordshire 2000’, and the new insights into the learning process emerging from biomedical and cognitive research. Both groups were “... concerned that the normal mechanisms for change within education were insufficient to meet the challenge of equipping young people to lead creative, purposeful and responsible lives as they face unprecedented technological, economic and social change”. In other words, they were more concerned with process than content.

In structural (political) terms, the disastrous decision in 1902 to remove the locally-elected school boards and to limit state-funded education to below the age of 14; the scientifically unreliable intelligence tests supposed to underpin tri-partite secondary education in 1944, and the equally unworkable compromise of 1965 meant that the late ’70s and early ’80s were a time of great social and economic uncertainty. Old structures were becoming increasingly moribund yet there was little agreement as to what should replace them. Prime Minister Callaghan sensed that much of the fault lay in a flawed education system, and in 1976 invited the Public “to explore the Secret Garden of the Curriculum.” Educationalists, believing themselves to be over-stretched, but lacking any clear vision of what would better serve the needs of young people, simply struggled to hold on to the status quo. The briefest possible ‘Summary of English Schooling up to 1985’ can be found in appendix 1 of this Paper.

Into such a stalemate waded Education 2000, determined to show, as a demonstration for the rest of the country, what could happen when a self-defining community pooled all its resources to create a richer set of both formal and informal learning opportunities for all its young people.

While agreeing in principle with the aims of Education 2000, both the statutory Local Education Authority (Hertfordshire) and the Department of Education in London, saw the Trust as something of a cuckoo for which neither would accept any responsibility, nor offer any meaningful support. Yet, from such a ‘standing start’, Education 2000 attracted sufficient attention within the first two years, including raising over a million pounds, that I, as its’ Director, was invited to give the Opening Speech to the 1987 National Conference of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI).

What follows is an EXECUTIVE SUMMARY of subsequent developments, which in many ways are exciting, but are far from triumphant. From the perspective of 2013 none of us – Westminster politicians every bit as much as the reformers – had anything like a clear enough understanding of the muddle we were then wading into 30 years ago. Understand this story as it unwinds, and you will hopefully come to appreciate how, ever since the disaster of the 1902 Education Act, the English had put ridiculous levels of energy into treating the symptoms of such dysfunction, rather than rectifying the root causes of complex issues. First Aid never had been, nor could be, a substitute for life-creating surgery. Years later I describe this ‘Heart of the Matter’ in an audio blog (1/02/2013).
2. Education 2000’s Hertfordshire Project

The Hertfordshire project aimed at re-vitalising all the secondary schools in the town of Letchworth, as a possible model for wider replication. Much emphasis was placed on community involvement in understanding the relationship of formal to informal learning; on extensive teacher professional development; on the opening up of more dynamic forms of learning through the provision of one computer to every seven pupils (when the national average at that time was one to 120), and the reordering of the curriculum to better prepare youngsters for adulthood in a period of rapid and complex change. Within a year this acted as a focal point for those who felt that public education needed ‘seed capital’ if it were to successfully invest in new ways of doing-things.

Speaking at the CBI Conference I said, “We have to move away from an overemphasis on teaching. Primary schools encourage children to want to learn, to explore relationships.... Secondary schools have been saddled with the artificiality of single subject disciplines...pupils do as they are told, ‘because it is the only way of covering the syllabus. The integrated view of knowledge is easily lost...very many lose interest... they do as they are told because “teacher knows best... not because they any longer feel responsible. A vital attribute, that of responsibility, is destroyed. Many never recover...Learning is associated with failure and this bugs them for all time”.

They loved it, for these were ideas that they could readily appreciate and agree with. This was the speech which, repeated many times over the next few months, was to put Education 2000 well on the map. But it also caused Education 2000 to out-grow its own strength for, with great enthusiasm, eight other communities sought to start comparable projects, but as each started to approach the same sponsors so the Trust struggled to manage the new opportunities.

A bigger problem then arose. Sitting in the front row at the Conference had been Kenneth Baker, the new Minister of Education. No sooner had I sat down than he proposed a deal – I should combine what he saw as Education 2000’s obvious success in galvanising sponsors, with his own political intentions to establish 20 City Technology Colleges. These were to be set up as partnerships between central Government and individual private sponsors but with absolutely no involvement of the Local Education Authority. Here was a direct challenge to the 1944 agreement which had specifically separated the powers and responsibilities of Central from Local government. This was totally in contravention of the aspirations of those who supported the democratic principles that were at the core of Education 2000, and represented the beginning of the struggle (which actually had very little to do with the nature of learning) that was to grow progressively worse, until following the General Election of 2010, most forms of local democratic responsibility had been replaced by private sector control.

3. A Local project to pioneer National Change

The challenge to the Education 2000 projects in the late 1980s was to show how our belief in the partnership between formal and informal learning (Home, School and Community) could create more energetic, imaginative and thoughtful learners. To do this (while English schools were being battered by all the requirements of Baker’s Education Reform Act of 1988) the Trust sought to create a Synthesis of the research emerging from the social, bio-medical and cognitive sciences into the nature of Human Learning. Fortunately, as a result of the interest that had generated internationally in the ideas of Education 2000, I was invited to speak at many international conferences in the US (especially those convened by the UN
Development Programme in New York), and across Europe, particularly in Scandinavia.

At such conferences I worked with a number of outstanding individuals seeking pedagogies more compatible with what was by then becoming better understood about the nature of the learning process. Foremost amongst these were Howard Gardner of Harvard; the Nobel prize-winning neurologist Gerald Edelman from San Diego; the redoubtable Al Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, and that team of researchers who produced the seminal work on “Cognitive Apprenticeship; Making thinking visible” in 1991.

In 1992 Education 2000 defined a Learning Community as, “This is our place. These are our solutions to our problems. We are proud of our achievements, and together we will invest in our future. We expect success. We will not accept failure. We will work together actively to educate all the young people in our community, inside school and outside. Learning is our future. We will use all our resources to support all our schools; they are an integral part of our community, and their pupils are our colleagues of tomorrow.”

In February 1993 Education 2000 submitted an important Research and Development Proposal to the DES for “A Project to demonstrate significant improvements in pupil performance by mobilising the full resources of the community to support Learning”. This stated ... “Ways have to be found therefore to increase significantly the outcomes of the education system, at no extra cost....To effect further improvements a way has to be found to mobilise the huge potential resource of the community and of the new technologies . It is the community which has to become the ‘Unit of Change’, not the school. This require a radical re-thinking of the present structures and strategies of schooling....formal schooling has to start a dynamic process in which young people are progressively weaned of their dependence on teachers and institutions, and given the confidence to manage their own learning using a range of learning resources, situations and colleagues.” The proposal concluded... “We would like the opportunity to experiment, in communities, with greater emphasis on learning, rather than teaching fewer constraints on current structures of organisation radical changes in the role of teachers, and community issues and alternative use of resources”.

Eventually the Deputy Secretary delegated by the Minister to respond summoned a cross-department meeting of some 20 people. He started by noting that no meeting of this kind had ever happened before so the Department had no agreed system for dealing with an issue that crossed so many sub-department responsibilities. In introducing me he then made a disclaimer to the effect that what he thought I would be talking about left him as something of “an Agnostic.” Discussion was, not surprisingly, sterile. Afterwards one of them explained... “You can’t expect any of us to say anything publicly... after all what you are saying, if implemented, would mean that some of us would gain departmental status, and others would lose it.”

Education 2000 heard nothing further about its Proposal (which looks as appropriate now as it did twenty years ago, and more desperately needed). Used as policy makers were to sub-dividing any proposal into bits which could be separately managed by different sub-departments, Education 2000’s proposal was just too all embracing for anyone within the department to know how to respond. I knew that if this were passed up to the Minister without support from his Departmental officials, he would simply ignore it.
4. Persuasive and topical

So persuasive and topical were these ideas that between 1991 and '93 Education 2000 was invited to present its thinking widely across the UK as well as in Brussels, West Germany, Copenhagen, Adelaide, Paris and across the US in Alexandria, Annapolis, New York, Seattle, Washington, Boston, and New Orleans.

Under the title “Learning Makes Sense; recreating education for a changing world” (LMS) the fifty or so slides used in those lectures, together with a helpful Bibliography, was published in 1994. It observed:

“Much of our present education system is out of date. It relies on the traditional classroom as the main place of learning. It does not use much of the recent research evidence on how the brain can function much more effectively. Unless these assumptions are reversed, the future generation will under-perform.

Education 2000 does not believe that this system need continue. A new ‘Model of learning’ is quickly becoming available; all the parts for this are already known. To draw these together and create learning opportunities that match natural learning strategies, and exploit the potential of the new technologies of information and communication, is the challenge which can now be taken up. It is now possible. Someone will do it soon – in some country. This book sets out the argument for change, and shows why these ideas should be pioneered in Britain.”

LMS started with a definition of Learning as “that reflective activity which enables the learner to draw upon previous experience to understand and evaluate the present, so as to shape future action and formulate new knowledge”.

LMS called for fresh thinking in order to look at familiar issues from new perspectives. “It's not people’s ignorance you need to fear, it's what they know which darned well ain't true any longer that causes all the problems!” (Josh Billings). The book concluded with quotes from the US, Britain, and Australia: “To blame schools for a rising tide of mediocrity is to confuse symptoms with disease. Schools can rise no higher than the expectations of the communities that surround them....The education system has outlived the society which created it....we need to give control over learning back to students as only then will this engender self respect, respect for learning and respect for others”.

5. Going Direct to the Prime Minister (1996)

At a presentation to the Haberdashers’ Company, ‘Becoming Me and Being Useful: Education in a changing world’ (October 1995), I emphasised two recent statements. The first made by one of our trustees, the Bishop of Leeds, at a House of Lords debate when he said, “Learning to succeed?”... But for what? I understand the need for economic growth but, as a goal in itself, surely it stands as barren and arid. Education stands in danger of seeing people only as tools for economic progress, unless it is accompanied by a vision of individuals as creative, responsible, spiritual and society as the matrix within which genuine fulfilment is the goal for all... (I fear that) at this moment our society is in danger of wasting people.”

I then elaborated on the work of the Nobel-winning neurobiologist Gerald Edelman; “Get rid of that damn machine model. It's wrong. The brain is a biological system, not a machine. Currently we are putting children with biologically shaped brains into machine-orientated schools. The two just don't mix. We bog the school down in a curriculum that is not biologically feasible.”
I then explained Education 2000’s ‘Central Thesis’ which we were about to send to John Major, the British Prime Minister. This stated, “We are starting to know far more about how human learning occurs – particularly the development of those higher-order skills which are becoming of increasing importance in the Knowledge Society – and how these can be effectively developed. The political debate however remains locked into a conflict between ‘experiential learning/discovery methods/thinking skills’, deemed to be the traditional preserve of left-wing thinking, and rigorous study of the disciplines through didactic teaching and a memorising of the facts, deemed to be the preserve of the right – now enshrined in the National Curriculum, testing, etc... However, it is becoming clearer (to those who can see it) that there is a solution emerging. It is this. If teachers consciously and quite explicitly get young people not just to learn, and understand through specific subjects, but at the same time to reflect very carefully on how they achieve their learning, then the child develops skills which are transferable. In other words it is not good enough just to know something, it is through knowing ‘how you come to know something’ that higher-order skills are developed.

“To achieve this, the formal schools system, and its use of resources, has to be completely reappraised, and probably turned upside-down. Early years learning matters enormously; so does a generous provision of learning resources. This means that if the youngest children are progressively shown that a lesson about learning something can also be made into a lesson in how to know how they ‘learn to learn’ (as well as remember), then the child, as he or she becomes older, starts to become his or her own teacher. In highly industrial terms, therefore, the child ceases to be totally dependent on the teacher as an external force, and progressively becomes part of ‘the learning productivity process’. In this model the older the child becomes, the more the child as a learner becomes a resource that the school has to manage, additional to that of the teacher.

“So far Britain has failed to recognise the key relationship between the development of the process of learning, the curriculum which this needs... and the assessment process which should follow from it. I would always argue, as I did at the CBI conference in 1987, that it is the destruction of a sense of personal responsibility for learning in the very earliest years of schooling that is such a major factor in the ultimate creation of a dependent, and sometimes lack-lustre society. It is therefore frustrating that politicians do not see in this argument a way of breaking out of the culture of dependency, and recognise that better results really could be gained from a redistribution of resources linked to a better appreciation of the learning process.”

This did get a positive reaction, and we were invited to meet for more than an hour with the Prime Minister’s Policy Unit in Downing Street. I felt this was a good and rigorous discussion, but was shattered when the Head of the Unit gave his devastating conclusion, “Much to my surprise I can’t really fault your theory. You are probably educationally right; certainly your argument is ethically correct. But the system you’re arguing for would require very good teachers. We’re not convinced that there will ever be enough good teachers. So, instead, we’re going for a teacher-proof system of organising schools - that way we can get a uniform standard”.

These words have returned to haunt me time and again in the subsequent 18 years.
Ten years after its halting start Education 2000 had attracted the attention of numbers of significant people in England, in North America and in other countries, especially Canada, Australia and in Scandinavia. An invitation from the Johnson Foundation of Wisconsin, USA, enabled Education 2000 to use their resources to draw together some 60 world class researchers, educational innovators, thinkers and policy makers from various lands to meet for a series of six conferences under the auspices of the 21st Century Learning Initiative (the international version of Education 2000).

The Conferences noted that at all levels society is undergoing massive economic, technological, social and political changes which reflect the move away from the analytical and reductionist era in science towards the beginning of a more integrative and interwoven understanding of natural phenomena and social structures. The overriding need facing the world’s advanced economies is to use all of its imaginative powers to create a vibrant way of life that treats neither whole sectors of society as “mere unthinking consumers,” nor wreaks havoc upon the environment. Democracy itself is facing a crisis. Ironically, as the formal structures of democracy spread around the world more and more, citizens are opting out of their responsibilities to make democracy work.

Where the old science focused on breaking the world apart, the new science is all about dynamic relationships. The insights offered by the 60 participants at these conferences came from four different branches of science. In mathematics, models based on self-referring systems reveal incredible complexity arising from simple algorithms. In physics, the study of energy flows in open-systems reveals that emergent order – the compliment to the Principle of Entropy – is a central feature of cosmic and terrestrial evolution. In biology, many are coming to believe that co-evolution and collaboration are as important as, and inseparable from, competition and the survival of the fittest. Studies show that evolution is not simply random, but is driven by natural principles of self-organization heading towards increasing complexity; that genetics don’t determine everything, and that the role of mind (both individual and group) is critical. In brain-research, scientists are also discovering that we are not simply selfish grasping creatures of Darwinian theory but, rather, we have two deeply embedded cultures, one mutualist and one hierarchical and defensive.”

While it was seen as essential to understand the molecular details of brain chemistry, for all practical purposes it is the science of complexity that enables us to make greater sense of the numerous layers of organization within the brain that act together, apparently miraculously, to handle not only memory, but also vision, learning, emotion and consciousness. The human brain, in all its structures and processes, is a direct response to the complexity of the interaction of all those factors in the environment that man has had “to know what to do about” since the beginning of time. The human brain and the interconnectedness of the natural environment have evolved together.

The brain handles this complexity through several layers of self-organization whereby vast interconnecting networks are established; it is as if the brain is interconnected and full of living qualities constantly “re-tooling itself” to work effectively in new and emerging situations. Once established, traces of these networks appear to survive almost indefinitely, and are frequently used as solutions to new problems. It is these earlier traces that give the brain its ability to build new ideas.

The current crisis in learning has its origins not so much in the failure of teaching in the classroom as it has in the failure of the community at large to capture the imagination, involvement and active participation of young people. Formal schooling as we know it is largely the creation of the last 100 years. Its achievements have been immense, and it has been widely replicated around the world. Yet, for all its achievements, it is eventually limited by the technology of the classroom, formal
instruction, uniform stages of progression, prescribed knowledge, and a curriculum of self-contained bits. “The limitations of the traditional factory model of education have become manifest and, they are crippling.”

The Synthesis concluded: “A society motivated by a vision of thoughtfulness, developed through a model of learning that genuinely extends natural learning capabilities beyond ‘what comes naturally,’ will quickly recognize that, in developing the learning skills of the young, the life of the whole community will be revitalized as it changes and grows. This is the transformation for which we are now reaching. This involves finally escaping from the 19th century assumption that learning and schooling are synonymous. Good schools alone will never be good enough. This is about communities that think differently, work differently, and are even designed and built differently. Human kind is about to discover a more purposeful, more creative, more sacred place in the Universe.”

7. To Be Intelligent (1997)

As the Synthesis became better known, my colleague Terry Ryan and I were invited to lecture extensively across North America, and to give a number of presentations in England and also in Porto Rica, Portugal, Poland, Indonesia, Namibia, Colombia and Norway (1996 and 1997). One stands out particularly - a conference in Estonia. A Russian speaking Estonian woman of intimidating Amazonian-build grasped me after I had spoken, “Who are you?” she demanded. “When we tore down the Berlin Wall, we did so because we wanted to be free. But you in the West thought it was because we wanted to buy into your system of Capitalism. Now it seems that we have replaced one tyranny with another... so I ask you, what do you stand for?”

We were invited to contribute an article to a leading US education journal entitled ‘To Be Intelligent’. This article was subsequently selected as one of the four best articles on Cognition published in the US by “Psychology 1997/8”. “Patterns and relationships, emotions, the need to make sense, intrinsic interest, formal and informal learning, history dates, and mathematical formulas – these elements in a child’s learning defy any logical structure”, we wrote. “The process of learning is wondrously spectacular and messy, and it does not easily fit within a closely defined, classroom-based curriculum – particularly for adolescents.

The brain can handle many situations simultaneously; historical facts are fitted into mathematical patterning when the brain is comfortably challenged in a non-threatening situation. Psychologists and cognitive scientists call this a state of flow – a state you reach when you become so engaged in what you are doing that all tasks seem within your capability (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). Through magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), they watch specific patterns of activity within the brain light up on a computer screen. To the researchers’ surprise, memory exists in many locations in the brain, not just one place. Some people liken memory to a hologram where the whole exists in all the parts. Memory traces seem to follow neural networks that the individuals – at the time of original thought – found most to their advantage, even if only for a short time.

All brain activity occurs spontaneously, automatically, in response to challenge. The brain does not have to be taught to learn. To thrive, the brain needs plenty of stimulation, and it needs suitable feedback systems. Effective learning depends on emotional energy. The brain is essentially a survival system, and emotional well-being may be more essential for survival than intellectual well-being.

The ability to think about your own thinking (metacognition) is essential in a world of continuous change. Through metacognition, we can develop skills that are genuinely transferable.
These skills are linked to reflective intelligence, or wits. As never before, the human race needs all the wits it can muster.

Being able to step back as a specialist and reflect — to honestly re-evaluate what you are doing from a general perspective — is naturally developed in the rich, collaborative, problem-solving, and uncertain world of the apprentice, as opposed to the tasks, schedules, and measurable activities of the formal classroom. Expertise requires much content knowledge — and combined with reflective capabilities, this is what helps us develop new possibilities.

A model of learning that could deliver expertise is ours for the asking. In such a model, we should create smaller classes in the early years of elementary education (using developmentally appropriate styles of teaching) and progressively provide children with an ever richer array of learning resources and situations. Learning need not be confined to an institution — it must become a total community responsibility. It is not merely teachers who can teach, not just pupils who need to learn, and certainly not just the classroom that can be the major access point to knowledge, information, and skills.” (This article was selected as one of the four most important articles on cognition published that year by the US Journal of Psychology.)

Subsequently I was invited to meet with Dick Riley, the US Secretary for Education (formerly Governor of North Carolina, who was much engaged by what we said, and offered two clues as to why Americans would find our proposals so difficult to put into practice. Firstly, because we argue our case on the evolved nature of the human brain, something between 25 and 30% of all American’s would dismiss this out of hand for fundamentalist religious reasons. Secondly, by advocating a more effective and systematic form of schooling this would weaken the US universities’ argument as made over the past 50-60 years that because the quality of high school education was not good, US undergraduate degree courses needed to be four years, not as in the European three-year model. American tertiary education would never subscribe to a form of pre-university education, he suggested, that would deny them the chance of growing rich on the revenues of four year primary degree courses — the universities would only see an enormous economic downside in improving the quality of high school education.


The Policy Paper was written to prompt powerful changes to current educational arrangements. Firstly, as pupils grow older they should progress from an intense relationship with teachers towards more open, interactive learning situations (weaning). Secondly, the role of teachers has to change as they progressively develop the skills for pupils to take greater responsibility for their own work, which depends, thirdly, on the continuous professional development of all teachers. Fourthly, communities need support in re-discovering their vital role in informal learning and fifthly, significant pedagogic changes are needed to reflect the importance of modern technology. The evidence for such changes is drawn from the best research and practice from around the world. It has been categorised as follows:

1. The evidence for the Biological Nature of Learning comes from recent findings in the evolutionary sciences, and the brain sciences. Many of our current arrangements for learning are based on misunderstandings about how the brain functions, how learning takes place and how young people naturally mature. It is clear that humans are born with an inherited set of predispositions to learn key skills and attitudes throughout childhood which should prepare them for adolescence.

2. The evidence in the Science of Learning comes from cognitive science, anthropology, and developmental and evolutionary psychology. These show that a more effective model of learning could be based on better.
3. The evidence in Culture and Nurture comes from a convergence of findings in the biological and social sciences, and economics. These show that the environment in which schools operate is currently moving away from an over-emphasis on established systems towards a greater emphasis on personal responsibility and creativity.

4. The evidence in the section on Technologies comes largely from best practice around the world. It shows that the tools now available to children in both the home and school offer powerful learning alternatives to a reliance on classroom-based instruction.

5. The evidence for Spontaneous Informal Learning comes from anthropology, the history of inter-generational cultural transfer, and from the social sciences. The evidence accumulated shows that schools are simply incapable of equipping children with all the skills and behaviours necessary for a rapidly changing society.

The Paper argued that when all this evidence and experience is taken in the whole, the Western model of education is largely “upside down and inside out.” The Paper shows that better informed, and more effective, models of learning could be organised through a redistribution of expenditures and responsibilities, at a total cost no greater than current levels of expenditure.

The conclusions to such policy considerations will profoundly shape the future. National systems now confront a stark choice well illustrated by the title of a recent Initiative presentation: Do we expect our children to grow up as battery hens (constrained by a system shaped in all aspects to be economically efficient), or do we wish them to resemble free-range chickens, who through being free to roam are able to survive in any environment?

Modern society can’t have it both ways. If we want to induct our young people into adult life in ways which will give them the wisdom to solve problems that older generations have not solved, then we cannot continue to pursue those goals which deny us the time and the energy to educate our children fully. We simply can’t have our cake and eat it – it is impossible to bring children up to be intelligent in a world that does not appear intelligible to them.

9. “If you can meet with both triumph and disaster.....”  (1999)

During 1999 I was invited to come back from the US to address the most important of the educational conferences in England – the annual North of England Conference. In my speech I showed how conventional learning theory and contemporary schools remained firmly based on earlier assumptions about the brain and human learning that recent research was showing to be of restricted value. Currently, I argued, we were putting children with biologically-shaped brains into machine-oriented schools. That lecture lead to an enormous number of requests to work in many parts of England (and other countries) in the following 6 or 7 years.

The Conference had been unnerved by the undiplomatically late arrival of David Blunkett, the Minister of Education whose recent, simplistic statement that “the work of the Department For Education and Employment fits with a new economic imperative of supply-side investment for national prosperity”, which seemed to denigrate the Initiative’s wider expectations for a quality education. By now it was a thinly-guarded secret that Ministers were systematically planning to abolish both the position of Chief Education Officer and the LEAs for which they had responsibility. It seemed to me that few such administrators could think beyond present arrangements and grasp the exciting financial implications of reversing the premium that had for so long been extended to secondary education, in favour of shifting more resources to primary education. This could enable such a pedagogy to
be developed in the early years of schooling that would finally blast apart so much of conventional secondary practice.

Such a conclusion resonated with those Canadians, Estonians, Indians, and many in Africa, South America and South East Asia that I had visited in the preceding, 18 months. “What we need is the Initiative’s help in transforming education, not simply reforming it”, the premier of New Brunswick (Canada) had said several months before. An international banker had also commented, “what you are trying to do for education is what people in finance are beginning to do with the global financial system... developing a new form of Bretton Woods (Conference 1944). What you are saying challenges the current system head-on. I doubt whether any country alone can deal with this. It needs a vast amount of transnational collaboration, and a high ranking US policy-maker had said, ‘politics just can’t deal with what you are saying’.”

So, as 1998 gave way to 1999, the Initiative started to plan for an Institute for the Advanced Study of Human Learning so as to disseminate new ideas about learning that would assist policy makers, community leaders, educators and the general public in understanding the strategic and resource implications of new models of learning. Such an Institute should, we argued, be based in a country that had a tradition of working with transnational, humanitarian, scientific programmes and was seen to be politically neutral and have a reputation for solid scholarship. For several reasons Dublin seemed a possible location. I had several early meetings both with the Provost of Trinity College, Dublin and with a senior official of the Irish Ministry of Education, both of whom were highly supportive. This would not be cheap, but so significant would the potential influence of these ideas be that it was important to secure firm funding from the start. Consequently, encouraged by the strong responses I had both from the North of England Education conference, and from policy makers in other countries, in early in March I asked for a meeting with the agent of a big US based charity who for a number of years had been supporting our work with an annual grant of £100,000. I briefed him in advance by letting him have both a copy of the Policy Paper, and the memo on the proposed Institute.

Within a half hour the agent virtually blew the whole idea out of the water, in ways which would completely change the Initiative’s future. “We just don’t like your Policy Paper. You are just becoming too broad. We now intend to concentrate on Further Education and no longer on the 5-18 age group. Our community projects have to be separate to schools....getting them mixed up together makes it all unmanageable (which, of course, was exactly what we were proposing when arguing that it should be the total community that should be the unit of change, not the single school). “I have sent your Policy Paper to the Professor of Education at the University of Cork, who has read what you are proposing with considerable reservations and so, rather than supporting you in setting up such an Advanced Institute, we have decided to terminate our support completely at the end of the year”. I was dumfounded. I had never met the Professor, communicated with her, ever read anything she might have written, nor visited her University.

There was more going on here than I have ever been able to understand. When a copy of the Professor’s Report reached us days later (all 26 pages, almost as long as the Policy Paper itself), I was then even more dumb-founded. Much of it made little sense. We responded as best we could, but then suffered the final indignity of having absolutely no response from either the sponsor’s agent, or from the Professor herself. The next few months were to be the most demanding and difficult of my professional life (from how the Initiative survived, restored its financial base, and published its first book, ‘The Child is Father of the Man’

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With the arrival of a new millennium, there was much talk about what the future held for mankind. A BBC radio interviewer asked Sir Martin Rees, soon to be President of the Royal Society, what chance he gave the world of surviving the next thousand years. ‘I am not too sure about the next millennium’, Sir Martin replied carefully, ‘but I think I give us a 50-50 chance of surviving the next hundred years’. The interviewer, obviously shaken asked, ‘Why?... why do you say that?’. ‘Well’, replied Sir Martin, ‘I fear that the speed of man’s technological discoveries is outpacing our wisdom and ability to control what we have discovered... what happens here on Earth in this century, could conceivably make the difference between a near-eternity filled with evermore complex and subtle forms of life, and one filled with nothing but base matter.”

Could it really be as grim a prospect as that? Although it was to be a further four years before Ronald Wright’s ‘A Short History of Progress’ expressed all this in quite unequivocal terms, from the earliest days of the Wingspread Conferences the Initiative was beginning to see it as just that. It was here that the macro hit the micro – our tiny Initiative, and a world-challenging agenda.

The first months of the year 2000 were extraordinarily busy. Far from the ideas of the Initiative being seen as irrelevant, which had been the conclusion of the international sponsor when they withdrew our grant, the ideas set out in the Policy Paper spread like wildfire. In that year alone lectures were given in Paris, Cumbria, Saskatoon, Ealing, Torfaen, Harrow, the Yukon, Kentucky, Hammersmith and Fulham, Ottawa, Teignmouth, Wiltshire, Stirling, Seattle, San Diego, Chichester, West Lothian, New York, London, Caerphilly, Dudley, Johannesburg, Dublin, Merthyr Tydfil, Morpeth, Quebec, Toronto, Southwark, Norfolk, West Sussex, The State of the World Forum, Seoul, Jakarta, Borneo, the Cambridge Union debate, and the British Commonwealth Education Ministers in Nova Scotia. The cost of each of these was borne entirely by those organising the individual conferences. It was an enormous reversal of fortune... the Initiative earned nearly £300,000 in fees.

These prompted several requests to run extensive training programmes, similar to the five day programme we ran that summer in Quebec for the Canadian Education Association (CEA), to strengthen key people’s understanding of these ideas as a precursor to taking local leadership in their implementation. The impetus came from the lecture I gave on behalf of the Campaign for Learning at the spectacular Millennium Dome, ‘Learning... Seeing the Big Picture’.

Humans have been using their brains to think for as long as we’ve been using our stomachs to digest food. Both are perfectly normal, uncomplicated processes. So what’s all the fuss about?

This is a good analogy but let’s think a little deeper. Over the past 30 years medical science has discovered so much about the nature of the digestive system, and the chemistry of food, that on average we’re living longer and far more healthily than our grandparents. We have, as it were, a better ‘users’ guide’ to the human stomach. The same thing is starting to happen to our knowledge about the human brain. With the discovery of the bio-medical technologies of CAT and PET scans, and functional MRI, medical science is poised to make equally spectacular discoveries about how the brain works over the next 5 or 10 years. Whether we use these discoveries is a matter of judgement. In a sense it is, like so much else, a political decision; does this information support what we want to see happen?

The first of these was in Wiltshire where a seven-day training programme for 200 people – governors, head teachers, local employers and further education folk drawn from across the county was sponsored by the LEA as a stimulus to new thinking. This then led on to seven other such programmes: two in Dudley and two in Birmingham, one in Manchester and later others in Harrow and Tameside. The justification for all the work put into the Training programmes was to enable the participants to use these new ideas in
cascade models to develop such programmes more widely within their own areas. This we hoped would eventually be linked to a network across the country working through, hopefully, an Advanced Institute for the study of Human Learning.

Early the next year we again submitted a carefully worded Aide-Memoire to the Downing Street Policy Unit...but times had changed four years on and although we were again invited to the Unit but this time we only met a very young, recent appointee whose most thoughtful comment was “this so reminds me of what I have so often heard my mother, a Primary Head teacher has been saying for several years.” We heard nothing further, either from Downing Street, or from the Department itself. I should have been quicker to realise that such ideas, rather than having gone further up the political agenda, were now falling off the bottom.

11. The Messiness of Human Learning (2001)

2001 was to be a pivotal point, after the traumas of previous 18 months the Initiative was again building a base on which to continue pushing these ideas. A few months before, largely due to the unflagging energy of my colleague Terry Ryan, we published ‘The Unfinished Revolution’ which argued that the cumbersome industrial model of education still followed in the West was out of step with the needs of modern business and society, and was itself littered with political paradox.

Nothing revealed this paradox more clearly than the discussion in London which followed my presentation to the Institute for Economic Affairs which, under Margaret Thatcher was a highly influential ‘think-tank’ dedicated to promoting free market economy. Having given my lecture, which I sensed had intrigued many, to my surprise the Director of the Institute claimed that my presentation had been “highly messy. Teachers lacked sufficient focus to their work,” he said, “and by setting out such a range of factors, you make education seem very messy, and encourage teachers to be practitioners of a craft, not a science. Unless teachers cleaned up their act they would never be taken seriously”.

A Primary Head teacher argued that to recognise that learning was indeed messy was an essential first step in appreciating the complicated relationship between emotion and intellect in, between formal and informal learning, and the role of different forms of motivation. The economist was unmoved; schools needed to be held accountable within a clearly defined set of criteria and every teacher should be evaluated in terms of their pupils’ progress. Both were deeply frustrated; the economist, the audience knew well, had the ear of Ministers and senior civil servants but she, the teacher had 30 years’ experience and knew deep-down that if teachers slavishly followed prescribed curricula they would destroy children’s vitality and creativity. Yet try as she did that teacher she just could not explain this in ways that the economist was prepared to accept. Kenan Malik’s book on human nature (2000) sought to explain such different interpretation as “the triumph of mechanistic explanations of human nature (which) is as much a consequence of our cultural loss of nerve as it is of scientific advance”. Teacher and Economist were simply living in philosophically different worlds and could never draw the same conclusions. With people starting to think like that, surely disaster was in the air?

Between mid February and early April I gave a further 30 presentations in Britain and North America. I received a sad email from a Principal just ending a lifetime’s teaching career in a tiny secondary school on the coast of the Hudson Bay in Canada, close to the Arctic Circle. “[The problem] is all very simple,” he wrote. “What it means basically is that those educators who are
actively searching for better ways of understanding children and learning, i.e. how we learn, are so tied up with bureaucrats and educational administrators that we’re too tired to keep on trying to improve the lot of children. As a principal I can see what is possible, but paperwork, apathy, discipline problems, refusal to accept responsibility for actions, seriously undermine the entire process. After 44 years I am retiring this year. Teaching Inuit children has been a joy. But I am tired and I sometimes wonder just what I have accomplished.” I quoted that at another conference. “But that is exactly how I feel!” exclaimed a teacher from Reading, “I couldn’t have said it better... our surroundings are obviously different, yet our feelings are identical. Why oh why are our jobs being made so difficult?”

Just reassuring teachers of what they already knew – that successful teaching really is necessarily messy, and that no one should have to apologise for this – was not enough. Another enormous issue was pressing for attention; “Please use all your influence to show politicians that it’s not so much that schools are failing, it’s much more to do with a crisis in childhood itself. Far too many children come from homes where there is little coherence, challenge or affection; putting all the blame on schools is simply a failure to accept an unpalatable reality that society, in its hurry to buy more things, has just given up on children.”

In every presentation (I made nearly a hundred that year) I stressed that no child can ‘learn-how-to-learn’ in isolation from actually learning about something. All too often it is easier for people who want to find quick and effective ways of making education accountable to measure simply the things which are learnt, rather than assessing the process of learning. The two are not necessarily the same thing. There may be short cuts to learning something enough get through an exam, but that doesn’t develop those transferable skill that young people will need to deal with a lifetime of continuous change.

Only two years after the debacle with the big sponsor I was invited to give the equivalent of the Reith lecture on Irish Radio (R.T.E.). It was the first time I used the provocative title of “Overschooled but Undereducated” I concluded the broadcast by saying, “In all societies since the beginning of time adolescents have learned to become adults by observing, imitating, and interacting with adults around them. The self is shaped and honed by feedback from men and women who already know who they are, and can help the young person find out who he or she is going to be”. I warned that as formal education was becoming increasingly detached from a real understanding of how the brain works, and how human maturation develops, secondary schools were in serious danger of trivialising adolescence.

It was a theme that I was to develop when in November, only six weeks after the terrorist attack on New York, I addressed the 3,500 members of the European Council of International Schools meeting in the National Convention centre in The Hague. “We humans are born with empathetic techniques that enable us to get on with each other. Under the right circumstances we can become good at collaboration. Watch children on an infant play ground, they know all about forming teams. That is good...they learn when to collaborate, and when to compete. But these predispositions can be rewired very early in life for those youngsters growing up in violent environments. Evidence is accumulating that youngsters as young as 18 months who grow up in extremely violent communities, lay down chemical pathways that see aggression rather than conciliation as their first response”.

Flying to Adelaide ten days later to address a major ‘Learning to Learn’ conference set up by the South Australian Dept of Education, I began to speculate on the book that I would need to write if conference participants were to follow up to the ideas started at these conferences. Returning to England somewhat wearily ten days later, and considering two invitations received since The Hague to visit both South Africa and Japan, I was startled to read that the newly appointed Professor of Psychology at Trinity College, Dublin, had taken strong exception to my claiming that the present system of western education was largely ‘Upside-Down and Inside-out’. John is wrong he
told another audience, “what we need is more schooling, not less”. He described my suggestion that there should be more community involvement, “As a pious aspiration – in modern times we are all too busy for that to be possible”. There would be much to write about in any new book, for 2001 was indeed a turning point in very many ways.


The implications of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre were to be felt by the Initiative in ways as profound as the political and strategic considerations that have shaped the international agenda ever since. As societies exerted their energies to the limit in pursuit of material possessions, so individuals isolated themselves from the kinds of mega-narratives so vital to our survival. It was in sober mood that I addressed the conference of Catholic Head Teachers on the subject of “Faith in the Future”. The ‘double entendre’ was not lost on anyone. I began by quoting an email from a school psychologist in Jakarta; “The tremendous social changes of the last hundred years have stripped modern society of that which gives us meaning...young people are consequently facing a Crisis of Meaning. Without such anchors young peoples’ lives are filled with a pursuit of money, and temporary ecstasy. These goals are unfulfillable and result in a misguided frenzy in the pursuit of the next thrill, or in depression.” I subtitled that speech ‘Prophets of a Future not our own’.

These ideas recurred many times in 2002; at the Dundalk Institute of Technology where I spoke about ‘Richness and Diversity; reconstructing Civil Society’. Later I orchestrated the International Baccalaureate Organisation’s first ever world-wide electronic conference on the theme of ‘Individualism, Community and Learning’. This went far beyond cognitive scientists’ infatuation with prescribed learning outcomes and I quoted the contemporary philosopher John MacMurray; “Since individualism misrepresents our nature, it follows that communal life is the normal state for human beings. But human life is not organic; a shared existence is a matter of intention, not of fact. Community has to be created and sustained by conscious purpose, and the more successfully this is done, the more we fulfil our personal nature”.

That international audience became most engaged in such ideas, but they weren’t even on the agenda when I addressed the summer conference of the old Society of Education Officers, by now reconstituted as ConFed, reflecting an attempt (unsuccessful) to regain the ever-decreasing influence of Chief Education Officers. I prepared carefully saying, “Your people - the up to a million or so living in your Authority – assume that you are the ultimate authority on Education. Intuitively they may sense difficulties...but they don’t know what to make of it all. They trust you to understand how all the bits come together.”

Under contemporary pressures, many of them had lost faith in what they were doing... and trust was in short supply.

That statement went down like a lead balloon. The difference in morale and self-esteem between when I had addressed the North of England conference three years before, and now, was simply staggering. I tried desperately to stir their collective imaginations by saying “Previous generations would have given their right arms to be where we are right now. But what an awesome responsibility! If you are the visionary leader I imagine you wish to be – a person who enables your community to articulate its future – then I have no doubt that your community will ensure you have a substantial future. However, if you see yourselves simply as Managers then your jobs are only as secure as the next spate of reorganisation. And the children – your community’s and our Nation’s children – will be leaderless. It is you who have the responsibility to shape the Big Story”.
I remember that afternoon all too clearly. There were few questions and little conversation. And then I saw that an increasing number of people had entered the hall expecting the Minister shortly to come and tell them what to do next. Literally and metaphorically they were sharpening their pencils ready to take down the latest round of instructions.

Shortly afterwards at a small conference in Lorne, New South Wales, and then later in various conferences in England and South Africa, I focused specifically on the idea of ‘Subsidiarity,’ the doctrine first articulated by the Catholic Church in the early 1930s and stated in a Papal Encyclical as "It is wrong for a superior body to hold to itself the right to make decisions which an inferior is already qualified enough to make for itself"... in other words the more you can do for yourself, the more in control of your future you know yourself to be. That theme was taken up many times that summer, especially at the conference on "Values and ethics – can I make a difference" held in County Clare and at the "Developing the Potential of all Pupils” Conference held by the National Teachers Organisation in Mullingar.

As the year ended I was scheduled to address The Technology Colleges Conference in Birmingham on just these issues. Late the evening before, I was told, as were others, that I had to cut the length of my speech as the Prime Minister wanted to speak. He spoke well, but afterwards I felt that I should write to him. “As Prime Minister you head up the nation’s political strategy, while through your role as a leading member of a democracy, and as a father, you also help shape this country’s sense of values. Could I respectfully urge that the emphasis that politicians currently place on encouraging parents to hold schools accountable for the education of their children shifts to a recognition that however good schools may be, they alone can never be good enough to provide youngsters with all they need.” (Letter of 6/12/2002)

Realising the size of the PM’s mail bag I hardly expected (much as I would have liked) a personal response, so I added an addendum; “In seeking any cross-referencing to such ideas as these might I suggest you consult practicing teachers (especially at the primary level), parents and community leaders – people who see ‘children in the round’, and whose agendas are not confined to solutions which perpetuate an institutional approach to learning that does not reflect the socially responsible knowledge society in which both you and I believe our future lies”. I heard nothing from Mr Blair, but got three letters from civil servants extolling the government’s institutional proposals, but by then the Prime Minister was on count down to the invasion of Iraq.


The first three months of 2003 contained experiences and emotions enough to last a lifetime. Long before the start of armed conflict around the Gulf I had agreed to spend four days with the Heads of the British Schools of the Middle East, meeting in Dubai. As it turned out this was to be the very time the Americans, supported by the British, were preparing to invade Iraq. The Conference had been expected to study issues of transition between junior and secondary school but, given the tenseness of the moment, more fundamental questions were to be raised about the underlying principles of Western education.

“Presently the challenge in England is that we know we need quality education, but most people don’t recognise what this will actually involve,” I explained. “Both English and American politicians may say that education is at the top of their agenda, but unless their constituents know exactly what that entails, they will never hold their politicians accountable. Unless we, as
knowledgeable members of Democracies, are prepared to tell people what is needed to rectify the situation, we shouldn’t be surprised if politicians simply stick with the status quo.”

It was a good conference and eventually the Headmaster of the British School in Muscat closed the conference; “I’m a pretty conservative kind of person, otherwise I wouldn’t be a headmaster,” he said deprecatingly, “I like my comfort zone. However since coming to the Oman I realise that you don’t have to go into the dark, but if you want to see the stars in all their glory you have to dare to go deep into the desert, away from the light pollution of civilisation. Only then, when your eyes become acclimatised to real darkness, can you begin to appreciate the sheer brilliance of the stars. Then, and only then, will you see which way to go. John you have shown us the reality of the vision, now it is up to us to get on with it, however difficult.”

Two days later I was back in London, experiencing the utter dismay at which, after all the passionate enthusiasm of some two million “Stop the War” marchers, the Cabinet continued to take the final steps into war. In the long term such disillusionment with democracy was to have more of an effect on the English, than the war itself; “the 15th February 2003 will go down in history as the final moment that Britons demonstrated a touching faith in parliamentary democracy...this mass protest defined a generation...mainstream politics brought public contempt with the blood of millions” (The Guardian).

Shortly I flew to Tanzania where I was to given an almost unique opportunity to note the similarity between the way modern man has become accustomed to live, and the way the Hadza still retain a Stone Age way of life which could help us, today, develop systems of learning that better go ‘with the grain of the brain’.

I stopped off in Istanbul on the way home so as to address the Middle Eastern branch of the Young Presidents Organisation. It was the last day of February 2003 and a snowy morning shrouded a deeply divided and confused society, as the Allies were poised to invade Iraq. “We Turks are demeaning ourselves,” I was told, “we think we’re driving a hard bargain with the Americans for the use of our bases for a possible war with Iraq, but we are really disreputable beggars”.

As I waited for my luggage at Heathrow, a Turkish business man got highly excited as he took a message on his mobile phone. “Splendid”, he said, “the Turkish parliament has just voted against accepting the enormous bribe from the Americans to let them use our bases for their war. I am so proud of my country because I can now tell my children that money really isn’t the bottom line. Maybe Turkey is starting to turn its back on a culture based on bribery”.

Two weeks later, 19th March, the invasion of Iraq began. I flew to Singapore with my plane making a wide detour around Iraq and neighbouring airspace. I was to address the postponed annual conference of the International Baccalaureate Organisation which five months previously had been postponed following the deaths of some 30 their members of that conference killed in the al-Qaeda attack on Bali. This conference with some 350 people, was to be a most sober affair. The conference was entitled ‘Terrorism, Tolerance and the Human Spirit: the challenge for international education’xiii. I was to be the opening speaker and I entitled my speech ‘Surely we can do better than this?’

“I wish to address you not solely as teachers, or as parents, or as administrators, or even as diverse members of educational communities. Specifically, I address you as citizens of various democracies, united in our concern to build a world in which there is no place for, or need for, terrorism. And that comes down directly to the way we bring up the next generation of young people worldwide – not just in the privileged schools that you represent, or the advanced economies that you come from, but unless the world starts to bring up its young people to think and behave in a way which would support an equitable world society, I would suggest the world faces a grim future. I have to remind you that you are more powerful than you think you are, for in your classrooms are the
young minds and brains that will either make or destroy the planet. That is what this conference is all about; can the human spirit ensure that tolerance and understanding outwit terrorism.”

“Your schools will have to change,” I said, “I therefore make three suggestions. Firstly, if our pupils are to become qualified to act as stewards of our humanity then we need a curriculum that ‘joins things together’ rather than splits them apart.

“Secondly, you need to honour the principle of Subsidiarity. It has been the failure to do this over recent years that has given us a strangely ‘detached’ intelligentsia – people who know how to make all the right arguments, but never feel themselves competent enough to do anything about it.

“Thirdly, we need to ensure that our young people really do know what it is that makes us humans tick. We are indeed a wondrously ingenious species, but the confusion about our moral values also makes us extraordinarily dangerous.”

“We really can do all these things providing we strain every sinew of our imagination and daring to do what inertia has so often prevented us from doing in the past. As Chief Seattle said, ‘We have not inherited this world from our parents; we have been loaned it by our children’.”


A spate of lectures early in the year culminated in two especially significant presentations – the first beneath the magnificent painted ceiling of the banqueting hall in Whitehall, and the second in a packed lecture theatre on the side of the Pacific in Vancouver. “Any system of schooling has inevitably to be based on a perception of how children learn,” I said then, and on many other occasions. “Despite Charles Darwin’s assertion in 1859 that the human brain, both in its structures and in its processes for learning, was as likely to have been shaped by evolution, as the rest of the body, psychology took a hundred years longer than medical science to appreciate that the brain was infinitely more than ‘a blank slate’.

Behaviourists had asserted that with the appropriate teaching it was possible to condition people in any way specified. Despite the insights of many perceptive educators from the mid nineteenth century onwards, national policy makers have found it extremely difficult to refute such an approach to formal schooling. The technologies which now enable scientists to study the details of how the brain functions only became available with the invention of PET and CAT scans in the late 1970’s, and of functional MRI as recently as the mid 1980’s.

Three ‘new’ disciplines, when taken together, provide initial evidence that refutes the Behaviourist approach. Cognitive science, which has grown out of the study of the possible similarities between the way in which computers operate and the structures to be found in the human brain, has caused scientists to refute the nineteenth and twentieth concept of the brain as a ‘blank slate’. Neurobiology, using the new brain scan technologies, was able to study the amazing interconnectivity between disparate parts of the brain. Evolutionary psychology is a hybrid of evolutionary sciences and psychology together with genetics, archaeology, anthropology and biology.

There is a continuing need, as fresh research becomes available, for an updated Synthesis that shows how these ideas can inform policy makers of the political, strategic and resource implications of what should be a new model of learning.

We now know that brain development is in no way completed by about the age of twelve (with only the sexual hormones of adolescence being responsible for what often seems the bizarre, irresponsible and irrational behaviour of teenagers). Neurobiology is showing that, far from
such behaviour being just the result of tempestuous hormones, the physiological changes taking place in the adolescent brain are so profound that they rival the growth spurt of early childhood. “The teenage brain, far from being ready-made, undergoes a period of surprisingly complex and crucial development. The adolescent brain”, wrote the most recent commentator on the primal brain “is crazy by design”. Being ‘crazy by design’, now seems to be a critical evolutionary adaptation that is essential to our species’ survival.

Those structures that had earlier enabled the young to learn easily as toddlers, through intense emotional connection with older people, have to be balanced by internal mechanisms that prevent children from becoming mere clones of their parents. In other words, unless those close bonds which had characterised the earliest years were ruptured (forcibly if necessary) the young would never grow to be adaptable to new situations. Adolescence is that deep-seated biological adaptation that makes it essential for the young to go off, either to war, to hunt, to explore, to colonise, or to make love – in other words to prove themselves – so as to start a life of their own. As such it is adolescence that drives human development – it is adolescence which forces individuals in every generation to think beyond their own self-imposed limitations, and to exceed their parents’ aspirations.

The implications of such conclusions are immense. They imply that by contemporary schooling continuing to see learning as a pre-eminently institutional activity, it is the process of schooling itself which is exacerbating the difficulties which contemporary societies experience, rather than alleviating the problem. A model of learning is needed that gives every support possible to the youngest learners (both to the children themselves, as well as the range of adults who support them) so that, as the child grows older, it takes more control of its own learning. Such transformed systems of schooling would match exactly the neurological progression of the brain of the young child as it transforms itself into the adolescent brain.

Young people have always learnt through constantly having to face challenges somewhat beyond what they think is within their own reach. Society has to capitalise on what millions of years of fine adaptations have bequeathed to our young people, namely that learning is most effective when it is done collaboratively, on-the-job, and when it is directed to the solution of real problems. Youngsters who are empowered as adolescents to take charge of their own futures will make better citizens for the future than did so many of their parents and their grandparents who suffered from being over schooled but undereducated in their own generations.”

It was an extraordinarily busy year. In some frustration I released a paper ‘When Will We Ever Learn?“ sensing that too many people were content to listen to what I was talking about, but then simply not know what to do about it, a problem made much worse by increasing central government pressure for ‘Building Schools for the Future’. This was a kind of ‘turn-key’ operation; authorities were told to say in broad terms what they might need, and then central design teams approved by The Dept. Of Education would work out the details. Education Officers were afraid to avoid the offer of money, but desperately wanted to shape their proposals to their actual needs. “The last thing we should be focusing on at the moment,” said one senior officer “is responding to an urgent government directive about which of half a dozen designs we would prefer. We know that we have to be far more creative than that. We have to collect our arguments about creating whole communities that are rich in learning opportunities, rather than concentrating all our thinking on glass, concrete and steel replacements of shopping mall kinds of schools that reflect a worn-out model of secondary school invented in the ‘50s, and which didn’t even work then.”

All the while I was also struggling to complete the book that I knew was needed to extend these ideas beyond the lecture hall. Fortunately I had considerable help from my son whose PhD on John Milton gave me the essential clue that I needed to show how a quality education had to be the pre-requisite to a functional democracy. I also had
significant encouragement from the feedback to my lectures. One Scotswoman teaching in an international school wrote, “We are becoming a sad and cheerless race. Nowadays childhood is so confined. There are no risks anymore. Smothering safety-consciousness is killing the spirit of childhood. The virtual world, of which children and most teenagers are wise, but not practically street-wise, creates artificial realities based on fictions, not experienced fact. Young people have ever less basis from which to make informed or intellectual decisions about how to behave in the physical world.”


Northumberland – that most northerly of English counties where once the Emperor Hadrian had built his wall to keep out the Scots, and where sheep outnumber people by five to one – had long impressed me with the arrangements they had made for an appropriate education for such a thinly scattered population. Small junior schools in nearly every village enabled all the youngest children to attend a local school up to the age of 9; then a fleet of buses daily took them to medium sized middle schools normally no more than half an hour’s bus ride away. Here they stayed until embarking on much longer bus journeys at the age of 13 to get to senior schools which they would then attend up to the age of 16 or 18. Over many years such carefully provided for youngsters were in the top 10% attainment levels of all British pupils. All this cost local tax payers a premium; a premium they were happy to accept. But a central government elected on the basis of cutting taxes, was resolved to cut back on such expenditure. A long battle ensued, and eventually London-based officers over-ruled locally-elected members to force through a conversion to the standard English model of primary/secondary schools with a single point of transfer at the age of 11. This was to mean closing half the village schools, and putting very young pupils on buses each day.

Four times between 1999 and 2003 I addressed conferences in the Northumberland, progressively appreciating the growing tensions. In March I spoke at the Governors’ Conference, as good a cross-section of responsible middle-Englanders as you could find anywhere. As I entered the hall it was obvious that the officers had taken all the front seats. The next 3 or 4 rows were empty, with the hundred or so governors squeezed in the back. The tension was palpable. The officers made a point of ignoring what I was saying, preferring, very obviously, to study their papers for another meeting. In my speech I expressed my growing scepticism about the desirability of ever larger secondary schools… “When, years ago, most people went direct from school onto large factories where for a lifetime they would be small cogs in large machines, to create large high schools might have seen a smart move”…. There was an obvious scraping of some half dozen chairs as the officers pointedly left in a hurry, and a gasp of approval from the audience. Their relief was short-lived for by the time I was next back in the county for a privately organised meeting, the reorganisation had already been forced through and most of the officers had been appointed to other Authorities where they were probably to carry out the same surgery again.

A long account of what might have been an isolated incident….but it wasn’t. Scenes like this were being played out to my knowledge right across England from the smallest of local authorities to counties as large and prestigious as Devon and Norfolk.

I travelled much that year, addressing conferences in Nigeria (where all foreigners were impounded in their hotels for three days because of riots), in Hungary with the George Soros Foundation, as well as in Korea, Japan, Angola, Australia, and twice back in Canada. At a fascinating conference in the West of Ireland (Killarney) on the unusual topic of educating Travellers’ children I was introduced to the 18 year old daughter of one of
the organisers – a top student in her school, who had driven/been driven so hard to get top grades in Irish Higher that she was now in clinical recovery after three unsuccessful attempts at suicide. She sat with her mother, listening carefully to what I said. Afterwards she offered to show me a copy of a poem she had written (“from a dark place”) that can be found in the Appendix to this paper.

That summer I was invited to consider the question ‘Can the Learning Species fit into schools?’

“The obvious answer to such a question,” I said “the answer given by educational policy makers from London to New Zealand, from Mongolia to Patagonia – is, of course, a resounding ‘yes’”. If we humans are the planet’s pre-eminent learning species surely none but the most obdurate of young people should readily accept the benign conditions of the classroom? They should welcome the way in which the curriculum designers have delivered to them, on a plate, all they need to get good grades. Obvious answers are not, however, necessarily the right answers.

Maybe schools in England need more than additional money or institutional solutions to persuade a sceptical nation that real learning gets to the heart of what it means to be human. Through learning we become able to do something we were never able to do before. Through learning we extend our capacity to create, to be part of the generative process of life. That sounds really exciting, but to the sceptic, as to the realist, that is not what large number of pupils believe that they experience in schools.

In our over-institutionalised world, a world driven by an economic imperative not to waste a single moment in unnecessary speculation or personal enquiry, there is a growing temptation to assume that ‘wrap-around schooling’ can efficiently provide youngsters with all the experiences they need. In such a world teachers are encouraged to take themselves too seriously, and politicians think they can legislate in areas which earlier generations assumed were the personal affairs of the home. Learning is increasingly coming to be seen as a logical, sequential, planned activity. But it isn’t, is it? Learning often takes us unawares – an insight triggered by some chance happenstance enables us to make sense of what earlier had seemed incomprehensible.

As we think of the tensions felt daily in so many classrooms by teachers and pupils alike it’s not too hard for us to appreciate the statement from evolutionary psychology made eight years ago, “You can take man out of the Stone Age, but you can’t take the Stone Age out of man.” The ‘classrooms’ of those stone age times were messy, unpredictable, challenging places where youngsters needed a multiplicity of skills and attitudes if they were to survive. Sitting still and being instructed is not what the brains of today’s pupils have evolved to expect. Children need more freedom, more experience of reality than even the best teachers in a classroom can provide. “Classes are boring, ‘cos we don’t have to think about what we’re doing”, said some Canadian seventeen-year-olds last autumn, “We’re just told to copy stuff down off the board or from what the teacher tells us. It makes us lazy… in fact, sorry to say this, but it’s you teachers who make us lazy.”

“I’ve been convinced for some time”, wrote Keir Bloomer of the Scottish Qualifications Agency, “that the dysfunctionality of the contemporary secondary school and the inappropriateness of many of its goals are major causes of youth alienation and all of the social problems which that brings. Modern western society seems to be uniquely incapable of turning the energy and enthusiasm of adolescents to constructive purpose”. It takes a man of the stature of Bill Gates to state this unequivocally; “High schools are obsolete... by that I mean that, even when they are working exactly as designed (they) cannot teach our kids what they need to know today”, he told a conference of State Governors in America in February 2005.

It seems that the brains of the youngest members of the Learning Species can too easily be trivialised, not inspired, by the classroom – and that is as obvious in Toronto as it is in York, in Melbourne as it is in London or Manchester. It’s time to stop thinking of primary and secondary education as
being separate entities, and to start being sceptical of accepting Key Stages as anything other than administrative constructs. Lump all their monies together and, if you’ve started to understand the message of this paper, work on the rough and ready formulae that in future class size should never be more than twice chronological age; classes of ten at the age of five, twelve at the age of six, twenty at the age of ten.

Do this, not to make the task of the teacher easier, but to develop a pedagogy that genuinely empowers youngsters from the youngest ages to take responsibility for their own learning. Treat them like young apprentices. Here is the revolution that we need, a revolution that has been waiting to happen for nearly fifty years. It is a revolution that has faltered badly in recent years, despite the billions of pounds invested in so-called innovations. Right now we seem to have got to the worst of all possible worlds... we have produced an overschooled but undereducated society”.


While English teachers were having their enthusiasm dampened by increasingly prescriptive government regulations, many other English-speaking peoples were talking these ideas and running with them. Two countries in particular stand out – Australia and Canada. I had been invited to visit Australia five times and was asked to return to address a celebratory dinner of the Wesley College Institute for the Study of Human Learning, especially during the adolescent years. At a dinner the evening before Sir Gus Nossal, formerly President of the Australian Academy of Science and the World immunology Association, asked me what I’d be speaking about. “Making sense of the new research,” I responded. He paused; “That’s probably the biggest challenge of our times. It’s relatively easy to work out and follow through the logic of scientific research. People in their human relationships don’t work in the same linear, logical way as does scientific research.”

The following evening I began my address with a useful analogy to illustrate the difference between managing mechanical and organic processes. “If you were seeking to improve the functioning of a factory it was rather like an athlete bending down to pick up the shot. The athlete feels the weight of the shot, calculates the energy needed to throw this so that it lands in the exactly specified location, and then pitches it accordingly. Depending on how well the athlete completes this exercise we describe, as with factory production, his efficiency. Human, organic systems — such as schools or hospitals or universities — are different from factories. Let me expand the analogy; instead of picking up an inorganic shot, he picks up a very organic bird, correctly feels the weight, calculates the energy needed, and pitches it into the air. He gets his calculation exactly right but — unfortunately for him — the bird has a mind of its own; midway, the bird decides it doesn’t want to go there, flaps its wings, and goes elsewhere. To stop this happening the athlete binds the bird’s wings together. Next time the bird will land exactly where he, the athlete, wants it to land. But because the bird can’t flap its wings at the last moment to de-accelerate, it breaks its neck on impact. It lands in the specified place, but it’s dead, useless, even though it’s in the right place. Systems can squeeze the life out of what they are supposed to be sustaining.

I suggested that, “You have defined the Institute in a wonderful three-fold way; as an Observatory of what is going on elsewhere; as a Laboratory where your own ideas are developed and tested, and as a Conservatory embodying all that is best about your past. You probably realise that such a three-fold process also describes the basic functioning of the brain as it guides our actions from moment to moment; we observe what goes on around us, we relate this to what we thought ought to be
happening next, we identify any inconsistencies, and then go on to decide what to do next.

“The Institute will have to become the ‘brain’ of the College, breathing through the lives of pupils and teachers, trustees and parents.

“It is in your dealings with adolescents that the work of your Institute could be enormously important. Everything we are now learning about the changes in the adolescent brain suggests that they are struggling to break away from the kinds of learning that they perfected in their pre-pubescent years. Put at its most simple... if youngsters were to remain as clones of their parents or teachers they would not have the skills to deal with the world very different to that of previous generations. Learning to ensure one’s survival has to go far beyond simply being taught the accumulated wisdom of the older generation.

“There is something else. The rational, post-modern world in which we tell ourselves we now live has almost succeeded in persuading us that we are in this society of apparent super-abundance because we have escaped from the constraining (some would say restraining) influence of nineteenth century religious dogma. In a sense that is right — but nineteenth century religious dogma was something of a caricature of both Christianity, and the great religions in general. John Wesley knew that. So did many of your Australian ancestors who strove to break away from the social constraints of old Tory England. Wesley, in an anthropological sense, constantly reminded his audiences of the contrary nature of our human passions — we can be both extremely altruistic, and persistently selfish; we can defend our homes, yet bring mayhem to other people. Wesley understood this in terms of Original Sin, a concept which in our more enlightened age, we are most uncomfortable with. But there is no escaping the fact that it is easy for our passions to get the better of us; even brothers kill each other, and even St. Augustine in his old age was plagued by adulterous thoughts.

“It has been said that, “The future sanity of the world depends on the coming together of two great disciplines which have not spoken together for more than a hundred years — Biology and Theology”. It is a challenge both for the Institute and for the College. It’s where the three parts of the Institute’s mission come together — Observatory, Laboratory and Conservatory. Be careful that, in your annual “spring cleaning” you don’t throw the spiritual baby out with the bath water.”

So influential had the work become in Canada, that in late 2008 I was asked to present to a special two-day conference of the entire Ministry of Education. This Paper ‘Schools in the Future: What has to change and why’xvi, became the basis of a new Education Act. Already far advanced in their thinking, the Canadians were quick to appreciate that they were still operating an ‘upside-down and inside-out’ system. They readily understood that, “Once the entire system is redesigned on the basis of Constructivist and enquiry-based practice, then student dependence on teacher and school will begin to decrease with age. This will allow a growth in student choice and responsibility so escaping from the present dilemma of squeezing out-dated systems to perform in ways which truly release human potential at hitherto unprecedented levels.

“Constructivist learning, with its progressive deepening of earlier understandings, joins together what had earlier been separate, disconnected ideas. Through reflection humans weave their own experiences and knowledge of the world into unique patterns. Constructivists see the role of the teacher as ‘guide on the side’ rather than the conventional ‘sage on the stage’.

“Cognitive Apprenticeship takes constructivism a stage further by showing how our brains, over vast periods of time, have become conditioned to learn through a process of (1) Showing – the “teacher” or parent, craftsman or artist captures the imagination of a young learner who becomes sufficiently intrigued to want to know how to do it for itself; (2) Coaching – the “teacher” shows the novice learner how to identify the sub tasks that
have first to be completed, each with its own particular form of expertise; (3) Scaffolding – the ‘teacher’ provides sufficient temporary support as learners go beyond what they had earlier thought were the limits of their skills; (4) Fading – the ‘teacher’ has to be as proficient at removing the scaffolding when it is more appropriate to the individual to struggle to stand on his or her feet, as they had been when putting the scaffolding in place; finally (5) Dialogue – through the whole of the apprentice / master relationship the novice learner shares ideas with other learners as they try to describe what they are doing and reflect on the outcome. ‘Learning is not time-out from productive activity; learning is the very heart of productive activity’.

“Within a cognitive apprenticeship both the task, and the process of achieving it, are made highly visible from the beginning. The student understands where they are going and why. Learners have access to expertise in action. They watch each other, get to understand the incremental stages and establish benchmarks against which to measure their progress. These are the processes that are at the heart of apprenticeship. They have evolved over thousands of generations as parents sought the most effective way of helping their children to understand the world. It is what Confucius understood intuitively when he advocated going from ‘telling’ to ‘showing’ to eventually ‘understanding’.”

17. Overschooled but Undereducated (2007-2008)

As 2006 ended I recognised the need to collect all the ideas and experiences I had gathered from research, and everything I had learnt from discussions around the world since publishing the Policy Paper (1998), by explaining what I meant by ‘overschooled but undereducated’. This had to be written in such a way that a publisher would surely see its significance, and market it accordingly. Note that I use the word ‘see’, for I wanted to construct this very much as a mega-narrative in the way Jacob Bronowski had 30 years earlier with ‘The Ascent of Man’.

It started with a conversation with Heather MacTaggart, my Canadian deputy, while on a lecture tour in New Brunswick in January 2007.

The writing of the chapter ‘The Wonder of Learning’ came so easily as to be almost cathartic. I drew upon material that had fascinated me for years, and had lectured on so widely. The chapter on ‘Human Nature; a Brain for All Times’ had been great fun to write.

The ‘sting’ came in the last chapter: “Society has to remind itself that society is ‘an aggregate (something formed from a mass of loosely-connected fragments) of people living together in more or less orderly communities’. To learn that lesson well is the social justification for investing in schools. It holds together through its own natural procedures, and is impossible to manage in a logical and legalistic way. Being an aggregate is society’s strength, or put another way, society is the aggregate of what people think for themselves.

“Civil society is about the quality of human relationships implied by covenant; it is where people have to accept responsibility for the consequences of their actions, and it’s where the small-scale meets the mega-issues. Civil society is where one can find the human face – not in the laws, and not in the operation of economic theories of life, nor in nebulous philosophies. Civil society is essentially down-to-earth. It is the seat of our greatest ambitions, and it inevitably has to balance on a three-legged stool. Civil society is comfortable; it’s where we want to be, because it feels right. Civil society has become a greatly weakened concept, and because education has now become micro-managed by the state so as essentially fitting ‘with a new economic imperative of supply-side investment for national prosperity,’ the revitalisation of education has to proceed in sequence with the recovery of civil society. We are driven to think for ourselves; it’s how we survive. Remember that, and we have everything that we need to deal with the problems facing world society.”
Yet this book, too, was nearly not published. As is common practice amongst publishers, two references were sought by them from people whom they respected. Later we learnt that one referee, someone whose own book was already a great success, responded most enthusiastically, urging that the book should be got out as soon as possible, but another – a Professor of Education at an English University – wrote, “... this book is a disappointment. It does not work on a number of levels. The tone of the book is polemical and often very personal – too many anecdotes and personal diversions... I am not sure about the intended readership – it is too simplistic for most professional audiences... As it stands I am not sure that the text is publishable – it requires too much editing and development”.

The Times Education Supplement was even less encouraging: “Yet, for all its grand aims,” the reviewer wrote “its conclusions too often appear obvious, vague or contradictory.” This was desperately disappointing. We had to spend much time collecting enough supportive statements from readers to persuade the publishers that it was worth publishing. The clincher came with the reference from Sir Gus Nossall. Sir Gus wrote, “Having spent a professional lifetime of 54 years in health, I confess to the nagging concern that education is at least of equal importance – if not even more important. From that point of view, the fact that the literature on the theory and practice of education is highly technical and largely impenetrable comes as a great disappointment to a layperson like me. What a joy, then, to find Overschooled but Undereducated, by John Abbott with Heather MacTaggart, which analyses current educational systems and trends within the context of modern evolutionary theory and neurobiological knowledge, in a beguiling and non-threatening way, illustrating key points by accessible examples. The rich pattern of John Abbott’s life and experience in education shines through but never once overwhelms or patronises the reader. So we can learn, imagine, agree or disagree, as if involved in a long and exciting conversation, all the while absorbing historical perspectives and philosophical background almost imperceptibly. The book places special emphasis on the problems of adolescence, but it is so very much more that – reflections on adolescence meld seamlessly into a broader examination of where we have been in education, where we are going, and how we could do so much better.

“Intelligent reform of educational systems must take note of new knowledge concerning the functioning of the human brain. The book presents a wonderful brief overview of evolutionary theory, the origins of language, the varied nature of human intelligence and the inherent plasticity of the brain. Far from being a hard-wired computer, the brain is extraordinarily adaptable, making neuronal connections and undoing them again according to the dictates of sensory experiences and internal reflection. Rapid development makes the first five years of life particularly important. The next profoundly critical period is adolescence when many neural connections are literally torn asunder and new connections are created, coinciding with the time that the adolescent is experimenting and working things out for him or herself. Education must encourage, not thwart, this new assertiveness.

“While evolution and genetics are important, so too are nurture and culture. The book presents a brief scholarly overview of the history of culture, concentrating on our Greek, Roman, Christian and eventually British heritage. It gives a detailed picture of the history of the English school system and makes the point that the creation of elite public schools, particularly as they developed in the Victorian era, frustrated the egalitarian expectations of the founders of Elizabethan grammar schools and constituted a powerful force for the perpetuation of a class system. Indeed, argues Abbott, the power of the group of public school headmasters was a major factor in limiting the education of the “lower classes”. Elements of this dilemma persist to the present day. Key turning points and crises in English education are clearly described and the conclusion is reached that the system has largely lost its way. Too much of education is geared to servicing a consumer society – “a curriculum for battery hens” – and this factory model of education ignores the fact that learning must be active and that children learn in different ways and at different rates.

“Right throughout, Abbott makes good use of the analogy of education as a three-legged stool. The
legs are the home, the school and the community. Schools must not take over the roles of home and family, or of community. “Children are children first; they are only schoolchildren second”. It is only “when, and if, these three parts come together in equal partnership that a complete education becomes possible”. The three legs support emotional growth, intellectual growth and inspirational ideas. Part of the current crisis among adolescents comes from time pressures on parents, particularly fathers; there is a lack of inter-generational chatter. Part also derives from a lack of social order and sense of community. Even enthusiastic teachers cannot make up for this.

Life seems to be more and more about acquiring things. But Abbott is convinced that high standards of morality give groups an immense advantage, and this applies to education as much as to anything else.

“This remarkable work, so individualistic and peppered with fascinating reminiscences and asides, deserves the widest possible readership. It is at the same time profoundly scholarly and eminently accessible. It is nothing less than a tour de force, and it is a privilege to recommend it unreservedly.”

18. Design Faults that wreck havoc on English education (2009)

As a student I had been much impressed by Thomas Jefferson’s statement, “I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take that responsibility from them, but to inform their discretion”.

As Britain began to get excited in the lead up to the May 2010 General Election, I became anxious that the ideas developed in the book would reach the general public too late to influence the Election. In a paper of July 2008 the Initiative stated, “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... democracy only works when the electorate really understands the issues, and can see through simplistic proposals.”

In November 2008 I had the opportunity of addressing a meeting of the Bradford Head teachers (then administered by a private company, SERCO) in Harrogate. I had virtually the whole day to express the complete argument that was soon to be available to the public when ‘Overschooled but Undereducated’ was published. Sitting amongst those head teachers, but unbeknown to me, was Dominic Cummings (DC) who came up immediately afterwards and introduced himself as Michael Gove’s (then Conservative shadow spokesman for education) newly appointed political adviser. He expressed considerable interest and sympathy in what I was saying, and we agreed to meet for lunch the following day in London. We talked long and hard, and while it became very clear that he had little factual, or historical, appreciation of how English education had got into this muddle, he was very keen to learn. We agreed to meet early in the New Year, and had several productive meetings, and I thought politically open discussions in January and February.

Most surprisingly, in the light of what has happened subsequently, DC went on to suggest that we should stimulate genuine cross-party discussions (which I believed at the time was what he really wanted), and that the Initiative should produce a Briefing Paper on the Design Faults at the Heart of English Education and send this to every Member of Parliament. He then offered his help and advice, which I drew on extensively, seeing such a document as being something potentially very significant. There was to be much
work involved between then and early August when separate copies of the Paper were sent direct to every MP, and every Director of Children’s Services across the country. I put an enormous amount of energy into the subsequent production of this Briefing Paper. The Paper opened by stating,

The basic function of education in all societies and at all times is to prepare the younger generation for the kind of adult life which that society values, and wishes to perpetuate. Those values change over time so that the present structure of English education is a result of numerous decisions taken in times past by educationalists and politicians as they reacted to social and economic environments very different to today. Those earlier decisions were coloured by the philosophic, religious and psychological understandings of past generations about how people behave, how intelligence is created, and how those in power thought society should be shaped.

Contemporary research in the bio-medical, social and cognitive sciences into the relationship between innate human nature, and socially-constructed nurture, shows how misinformed and inadequate were many of those earlier decisions. Unfortunately, so deeply entrenched have these assumptions become that, given Parliamentarians’ pressure to find solutions to urgent and current problems, few policy makers have the time (or the depth of knowledge) to question the validity of such ‘foundational’ assumptions. They fail to question whether such assumptions are rock-solid eternal truths or shifting sands that compensate for their lack of substance by their sheer bulk.

Which raises the key question – does contemporary educational policy simply react to symptoms, whilst failing to address underlying design faults? If the answer is “yes,” how can future policy avoid such faults and build its programmes on firmer foundations? The truism is stark – those who fail to understand their history simply live to make the same mistakes again. Unravelling the relationship of nature to nurture, and then coming to terms with those misunderstandings from the past that colour contemporary judgements, is not easy. Yet to fail to do this is to undermine new policies, and perpetuate under-performance.

Part eight of the Paper, entitled ‘Failure of knowledge transfer’ stated,

A prime reason for Britain’s sluggish economic performance in the 1970s had been the slowness of knowledge transfer between scientific research and industrial innovation. Knowledge transfer between educational theory and practice was even slower. Policies in the 1980s, especially the much hyped Great Education Reform Bill (GERBIL), were shaped virtually exclusively by political theories concerning free-market choice coloured by the antipathy of national politicians towards local government, anything that resembled progressive education, and a deep distrust of teachers. Not only was no attempt made to interpret recent biomedical and cognitive research (based on functional MRI scans) on how the brain works, and how humans consequently learn, such research was actually dismissed as politically motivated. Which was crazy, for much of the tension between politicians and teachers centre upon the tricky distinction between learning and teaching, for while good teaching most obviously stimulates learning, the wrong kind of teaching or the wrong set of circumstances, all too easily destroys a youngster’s confidence in thinking things out for itself.

Having been told ten years before in Downing Street that government was aiming for “a teacher-proof system of learning”, it seemed that instead of staffing schools with “broadly educated” teachers each with sufficient knowledge and professional competence to be able to plan their own work, teachers were instead to be given ever thicker rule books, and required to follow more tightly prescribed instructions. The net effect has been to limit a teacher’s perception of the total role of education (rather like an over-dependence on a GPS system in a car limits the driver’s inquisitiveness as to what is going on around him). Teaching has been reduced to a job, rather than a craft or a vocation.

The Briefing Paper continued,

New Labour’s belief in “performability” meant that management by objectives would permeate every
aspect of public life. Especially education. If results did not improve it meant that the system needed further refinement. To this end the regime of endless testing was bent to demonstrate to an ever more anxious public that it really was safe to assume that schools could do it all.

Those battles radically reshaped the social landscape. Parents, having been told that they should hold the school responsible for the education of their children, so set parents against teachers that the stuffing was knocked out of what good teaching, and good schools, were all about.

Having once been one of the world’s most creative, enterprising and apparently self-confident people, the English now seem exhausted partly by the weight of their historic legacy, and partly by the economic, ecological and social turmoil that as swamped us all. A society that has to rediscover reasons for its faith in the future is a mean place in which to bring up children. Schools are simply a barometer of the nation’s well-being, and at the moment the arrow is stuck at “stormy.”

Part nine of the Briefing Paper reads,

Rather than clarifying the relative responsibilities of local and national government, Parliament has persistently tinkered with the symptoms of dysfunction and, in so doing, has undermined public confidence in the role of local government making it increasingly difficult to find able and responsible citizens ready to stand for local office.

Democracy involves much more than making one carefully considered vote every five years; it depends upon being thoughtful and respectful of other people’s ideas both in public and in private, for our real authority comes from our personal example of living together within an interdependent community.

In April 2009 the Chairman of the Common’s Select Committee appealed to MPs of all parties “to lead by example and send their children to the kinds of community schools that their constituents send their children to. Education is not a commodity; it is our preparation for a democratic society.”

19. The Phoney War* - run up to the General Election of 2010

*An expression devised in the early months of 1940 where the British public, recognising that they were already technically at war, were terrified as to what war would actually be like when it eventually came... as it did with Dunkirk and the opening of the bombing campaign in the Spring of 1940.

The publication of the Briefing Paper unfortunately coincided with the massive distraction caused by the Parliamentary Expenses Scandal. As a result there was little national discussion of the Ten Action Points; less than 10% of MPs even acknowledged receiving the document, and only one of the 150+ Directors of Children’s Services made any sort of response. With so much ‘urgent trivia’ around, these issues were just too big to fit into their agendas. Fearing that we might lose any momentum in these critical months, the Initiative focused its attention on producing regular blogs that cross-referenced topical issues with our writings.

‘Stand Firm’ (23/08/09) touched on a delicate issue; as ever less money was available from local authorities to fund training programmes, the Initiative’s finances got really tight, and so an approach was made to one of the largest foundations in the country – Esmée Fairbairn. Having argued our case most carefully in ‘A multi-strand strategy to prepare home, school and community for forms of learning that “go with the grain of the brain”’ (14/11/08), we were dismayed that within five days we received a letter saying, “You make a powerful case for what is wrong... and what ought to undermine (present) policy in this complex and inter-related area... but the breadth of your remit – necessarily so, I accept – (means) the impossibility of identifying outcomes in the medium term...” Having dismissed us in such cavalier fashion, it concluded apologetically with “best wishes as you begin to generate the national and political debates that are so vital.” A devastating putdown but, as we were soon to see, a sign of things to come.
As politicians talked ever more about Academies (a topic only mentioned twice in Overschooled but Undereducated, published at the beginning of 2009), the blog, ‘Bigger is not necessarily Better’ (08/09/09) warned that unless their pedagogy were to change significantly, “such innovation” would remain rooted in earlier structures, and might quickly end up “in the breaker’s yard as an expensive out-of-date technology, irrelevant to the needs of tomorrow”. Two other blogs ‘End of a Partnership: Collapsing democracy’ (17/09/09) and ‘Head Teacher: Leaders or managers?’ (28/09/09) made a vital distinction between the role of a Head Teacher, and that of a Chief Executive. increasingly it seemed that politicians were regarding ‘Super Heads’ as being the agents of central government, so minimising the professional responsibility of teachers; it has been well said that managers do things right, but leaders do the right things.

In early November ‘The Cambridge Primary Review: an incomplete diagnosis weakens the case for change’ (06/11/09) noted with great foreboding how Mr Gove as Conservative Spokesperson for Education cleverly dismissed this Review with the attention grabbing headline in The Times, “Another academic exercise divides opinion”. He instantly dismissed the recommendations that formal classroom studies should not start until the age of 6 and that excessive testing was undermining pupils’ creativity. The Initiative regretted that the Review paid scant attention to how recent findings in human learning could transform pedagogy. Mr Gove, by not properly understanding the relationship of nature to nurture, and emphasising a Darwinian survival-of-the-fittest concept, just did not understand the emerging cognitive and biomedical research that was now showing the need for a better appreciation of the balance between collaboration and competition; “selfishness beats altruism within groups, altruistic groups beat selfish groups every time”.

Specifically the blog ‘Chief Bureaucrat’ (13/11/09) noted that, “By sweeping away all the local authority arrangements for creating a fair balance of resources, Michael Gove could find himself having to sort out the endless contentions that will inevitably arise between all the warring factions. With so much at stake they will appeal to natural justice, not to the laws of economic survival. Even Solomon, in all his wisdom, wouldn’t want to do that job”. The blog urged “Gove in his crusade to enable schools to think for themselves must not destroy all the middlemen (locally elected officials) or else he will be driven crazy by some 20,000 head teachers banging on his door, all at the same time, pleading that they are special cases. The last thing he wants (or we need) is for him to be Chief Bureaucrat”.

In the same vein, ‘Compliance: Death by inspection’ (10/12/09) was stimulated by the Chief Inspector’s cynical comment that, “fear is an excellent motivator in school improvement”. Trust it seemed to be fast going out of the English education system. I recalled with sadness the late redoubtable Al Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers, when addressing an Initiative conference in London: “The more you trust people, the thinner the rule book, while the less you trust them, the thicker the rule book becomes”.

‘The Urgent and the Important’ (15/03/10) went back to the very heart of the Briefing Paper when it stated, “For a democracy to be fully functional, the state cannot simply be defined in terms of a government that makes and administers laws in which individuals are then free to do their own thing. Just to live within the law means very little; but to live within the law and have a sense of civil society, is to create a great place in which to live”.

‘Competitive, or collaborative: what are we?’ (18/03/10) concluded, “Those learning structures that are moving towards a new empathetic approach to education show a marked improvement in mindfulness, communication skills, and critical thinking as youngsters become more introspective, emotionally attuned and cognitively adept at comprehending and responding intelligently and compassionately to others. Civilisation increasingly depends upon mutual understanding; the world is too small a place for alpha males (and females) to ‘strut their stuff.’
That is the challenge to all of us, especially as we educate children for the world which is hurtling towards us”. John Milton was right, magnanimity is undoubtedly the essence of a responsible society, but it does not show up mathematically.

In March the Initiative was invited to develop a proposal to involve a significant private sponsor, the Merchant Venturers of Bristol (the descendent of the early Trade Guild responsible for opening up transatlantic trade, especially in slaves and sugar), in what could become a ten-year programme. This would build upon work started by Bristol University into the problems of transfer between schools in the city. ‘The Route Map’ is well worth careful study, outlining a programme to put the ideas of the Initiative into practice, especially issues of transition between primary and secondary education, working collaboratively across Bristol. To our dismay this Proposal was rejected almost immediately by the Merchant Venturers and by a significant local sponsor, on the basis that each had already pledged possible funds to support Michael Gove and the Conservative Party’s determination, should they be returned, to bring about change by the introduction of Free Schools. Storm clouds were beginning to gather.

Two shrewd American observers, writing at the same time as these blogs, exemplified the comment of the Rand Corporation in the 1990s: “Research that challenges the workings of the system is ignored or ridiculed, and that which can be used to strengthen the power and efficiency of the system is incorporated accordingly”. Dianne Ravitch’s ‘The Death and Life of the Great American School System’ and Spencer Well’s ‘Pandora’s Seed: The Unforeseen Cost of Civilisation’ converge from diverse perspectives to describe the serious and disturbing implications of our current educational and social trajectories for future generations.

Ravitch’s book is of particular importance as a ‘view from the inside’ that reflects an increasing scepticism of the panaceas and miracle cures thought to accrue from top-down innovation, such as Charter Schools.

Now a well-regarded academic of Democratic loyalties, she had earlier surprisingly been invited to become an Assistant Secretary responsible for School Reform in George Bush’s Republican administration. She has been heavily involved for some 15 years, but now concludes that, “At the present time public education (in America) is in peril. Efforts to reform public education are, ironically, diminishing its quality and endangering its very survival. We must turn our attention to improving the schools, infusing them with the substance of genuine learning and reviving the conditions that make learning possible”. Such prescient advice, for the British Government, placing much hope in the American Charter Schools and on which its Free School experiment is modelled, should study her advice most carefully.

Spencer Wells’ ‘Pandora’s Seed: The Unforeseen Cost of Civilisation’ , when read in conjunction with the more recent work of Jared Diamond ‘The World Until Yesterday’ (2013) gives powerful substance to the Initiative’s belief in the importance of intellectual and mental predispositions so fundamental to the ‘grain of the brain’.

**Outside England – parallel developments in Canada**

I had visited Canada more than a dozen times before being invited to give the major speech on Adolescence in Vancouver in 2004. Since then, with the sponsorship of the Canadian Council on Learning, I had made another 20 visits and had spoken very widely from the Atlantic maritime Provinces of Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island through Quebec and Ottawa to Toronto and on across Saskatchewan and Manitoba to the Yukon. Since 2009 I had been heavily involved in British Columbia and in January 2010 I was invited back at very short notice by then Minister of Education, Margaret MacDiarmid, to address the 400 staff of the Education Department. This turned out to be an extremely important meeting for the Province and initiated some Province-wide policies based on those discussions. The Initiative subsequently produced ‘Schools in the Future: What has to
change and why’ (May 2010), which eventually resulted in a new Education Act which stressed increased student engagement through personalised hands-on learning, guided rather than directed, by teachers – a splendid demonstration of the Initiative’s principles widely applied in practice.

20. **The Perfect Storm** (2010 – present)

The Perfect Storm, popularised a dozen years ago in the highly acclaimed dramatised version Sebastian Junger’s book, vividly demonstrated what happens when two or more storms, each separately generated by very different circumstances, coalesce to produce a ‘perfect storm’ of terrifying propensity that follows no known previous trajectories; no rules apply, and everything is chaos.

The Initiative went into the British General Election of 2010 basing its case on the Ten Action Points as stated in the Parliamentary Briefing paper of nine months before. This urged an incoming government to take the lead in showing the country “that the task of education involves far more than producing good pupils able to pass exams. Rather it is to equip every child to become a fully functional adult, so as to do wisely and responsibly whatever it is they will eventually have to do. Parliament has to encourage schools to begin a dynamic process through which students are progressively weaned of their dependence on 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 situations.”

From this, Action Points followed:

- the need to reassert the multiple natures of intelligence;
- the critical importance of informal learning in the home;
- as the influence of family and teachers decreases the influence of informal learning opportunities increases;
- recognising that the prime task of the curriculum is to develop in every child the ability to progressively work things out for themselves;
- quality education is everything to do with teachers, not much to do with structures, and very little to do with buildings;
- an incoming government faces a breakdown in trust between central and local government, and therefore a breakdown in trust in democracy;
- historically, secondary education has been seen as more important than primary, and by attracting a disproportionate share of resources and so minimise the significance of early-years learning.

From these seven action points, the case is easily made for the construction of ‘all-through schools’ (as is so successfully demonstrated in Finland from the age of 5 to 16) well grounded in their communities.

Finally, most day-to-day activity has nothing to do with the law; it is about getting on with our neighbours based on trust and collaboration. Just to live within the law means very little. But to live within the law and have a sense of civil society is to create great places in which to live. Education is not just about individuals; it is how those individuals pull together for the common good. It is about understanding how things relate to each other, so that no one of these points stood alone.

The British General Election took place on 6th May with no party gaining an overall majority (The Conservatives won 306 seats with 36% of the vote; Labour won 258 with 29%, and the Liberal Democrats with 23% of the vote only won 62 seats). It was to take several days of hard bargaining to create the Coalition and the subsequent task of creating a programme for education was apparently done rapidly and ‘on-the-hoof’. In the next two months with extraordinary energy Michael Gove took through the Commons an enormous legislative agenda (that almost confused newly-elected Members who found it difficult to criticise), instigating specific contracts with individual sponsors to take
control of newly-established Academies and scrapping the Building Schools for the Future programme (originally costed at £15 billion and only one third completed). This released funds for the creation of a string of Free Schools and to speed up the transfer of Secondary Schools from local control to Academy status.

Within weeks the fault-line between ourselves and government became stark; the Initiative emphasised the community (ie those schools serving particular populations) as the natural unit of change, whereas the Coalition saw individual schools (all 20-30,000 of them) as separate units of change. The Initiative believed that balanced education as like a three-legged stool – home, school and community – but the government saw education as an institutional, tightly-defined and self-contained process. This was obviously anathema to the Initiative. The harder the Coalition pushed its Academy and Free Schools agenda, the more segmented, the Initiative argued, the whole of society would become.

The contrast in our perspectives was terrifying, two storms arising from somewhat different perceptions of the problem and colliding in ways which make dialogue between the two very difficult – ‘the perfect storm’. While the Government was trying to reconstruct the existing system to suits their political agenda, the Initiative was arguing for a total reform of that system to reflect what we now know about how the child’s brain develops and learns. Better and smarter implementation of the existing process fails to address the wholesale change that the Initiative argues is required in order to benefit from our recent neurological understanding.

So different are our starting points that it has proved difficult to establish an agenda for a common discussion. The Initiative argues that the very methods used in schools need to change to properly support what we now understand the brain’s existing learning process, the entire pedagogy urgently needs to be reformed. We have discovered so much more about how the brain works that we shouldn’t be using ineffectual outdated methods; a deep change in the process is desperately needed. The Government, however, is saying is that there is nothing wrong with the schooling system other than it has gone lazy; it need nothing more than being jacked up; what is wrong is that the people aren’t delivering the process well enough and needs tighter regulation.

Three of the most longstanding trustees, including our brilliant Chairman of the past 14 years, and himself a generous sponsor of our work, announced their retirements as the results of the Election were declared. Two new trustees with recent experience of the financial services sector and legal structures joined the remaining six.

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Three Documents prepared for the Initiative’s trustees describe those difficult times: ‘Stormy Weather’ (May 13th 2010), ‘Seeking a Safe Haven’ (20th May) and ‘Thoughts from a Safe Haven’ (15th June). Everyone, especially the new trustees, found it difficult to come to terms with this dramatic shift in political leadership, and arguably the most uncertain time for English education in more than 50 years. According to David Priestland, writing in the Guardian (2nd January 2013), Britain’s education system was being tested to destruction by a “dated management dogma” driving Gove’s education reforms, and not evidence of what works. Newly appointed Ministers were “ideologues” he argued, products of the late 1970s and 80s when neo-liberalism appeared fresh and exciting, and it is this outdated dogma that is creating the “weirdly dysfunctional British education” system (both Left and Right seem to be enamoured of this).

Priestland, with 2 ½ years’ hindsight, claimed that what was needed was “an intellectual revolution”... exactly what the Initiative had been setting out. However, if our voice was then to be heard we had to survive for at least another 30 months, and that was going to be very difficult.

In June 2010 we found ourselves in a ‘Perfect Storm’.

To conserve our limited funds we had to relinquish our seven-room office in the centre of Bath, and relocate our most valuable archives and library in two rooms together with additional storage space in my own home, and I felt it only possible to replace what had been my full-time personal
assistant with Jim Robinson on a 3/10 basis. We effectively destroyed between two and three tonnes of paperwork, having almost miraculously retained 90% of the important pieces. Help started to come from unusual sources. Late in the day the Head Master’s Conference (the Association of Public School Heads) became most interested in thinking through the implications of the Parliamentary Briefing Paper to the extent that I was invited to address their prestigious annual conference to be held at St Andrews in October 2011. Jeff Hopkins, the inspirational Superintendent of the Gulf Islands School District in British Columbia joined me in making a major presentation to the staff, governors and students of Atlantic College which triggered a whole series of discussions about how better to publicly promote the basic thinking of the Initiative as an alternative to the dogmatic proposals emanating from the English Department of Education.

It was during this visit that an initial conversation between Jeff and David Abbott, the Initiative’s website manager, introduced the possibility of creating animated cartoon documentaries, loosely based on the powerful American example of ‘The Story of Stuff’. The opportunity for such dynamic and direct communication of complex ideas was an inspiration, and quickly caught some of the trustees’ imaginations. Such was the potential for the Animations to answer the ongoing need for a publicity and fundraising boost that in December it was eventually agreed to commission ‘A-Productions’ of Bristol to produce the Initiative’s first animation, to be called ‘Born to Learn’ (www.born-to-learn.org). Not everyone was happy about this, as this diverted a significant chunk of our rapidly diminishing resources, but as this came together in the New Year, we received a timely boost when the actor Damian Lewis (of Band of Brothers and Homeland fame) agreed to provide the narration free of charge.

I was beginning to rebuild my confidence that the Initiative could find a well-structured way forward. The difficulty of both understanding and working with new government policies were exemplified, however, when over the turn of the year I was given an introduction to Rachel Wolfe, the 25 year-old former internee with Michael Gove, by then responsible for running the New Schools Network, and enticing as many schools as possible to become either Free Schools or Academies. Armed with Diane Ravitch’s book, I attempted to put to her that the research on the Charter Schools in the United States suggested that whatever improvements these might have brought about, they were almost exactly balanced by the damage they wrought on the rest of the system. Her only response was, “Oh that turncoat.” I couldn’t resist saying that Winston Churchill had once crossed the floor of the House of Commons on principle. She remained silent.

I was excited with the progress being made with the Born to Learn animation, and with the several conversations I had had with Tony Little, the Headmaster of Eton College, who had read Overschooled but Undereducated. He offered his help to develop these ideas and we started to plan what became known as ‘the Eton Conversations’... a proposal for a series of high level discussions based on the Initiative’s ideas. Just before leaving for British Columbia in February, I accepted the recommendation that work should start on a second animation (‘Class Reunion’) so that this would be ready to release some three or four months after the first one. Before leaving on a three-week tour of Western Canada I wrote to the Trustees expressing my increasing confidence but saying that the management of all this depended critically on three things:

1. keeping our electronic shop window fresh and alive,
2. maintaining a good administrative control of the whole operation, and
3. keeping me ‘out on the hustings’ looking keen, enthusiastic and positive.

To achieve all this, I suggested that between them the Trustees appeared to have over 50 possible contacts who, if properly approached, a quarter of which might make a significant financial contribution, totalling perhaps £100,000. Such donations would only be made if I could make a personal presentation to each of these and explain the delicate balance between what the Initiative was arguing for, and what current politicians...
thought was desirable. I left the trustees to consider this issue while I was away, as to keep me ‘on the road, and out on the hustings’ might mean that I would clock up expenses of £1,500 a month, or £9,000 over six months. Without this financial assurance I could not commit myself to such a level of fundraising as well as doing everything else.

To my surprise and dismay, I returned in early March to find that some trustees had on their own initiative taken preliminary soundings of these contacts. They had then concluded that there would be no point in my approaching any of these people as, on the basis of the conversations they had held, it was highly unlikely that anyone would support us. Overly influenced, I thought, by their experiences in the financial sector, some of the trustees lost faith in the idea of charitable donations to support our work arguing instead that I was failing to give them anything that was ‘saleable’... something that could virtually guarantee to a future sponsor a certain set of definite outcomes, and publicity.

Frankly I was devastated and recognised that unless we dug ourselves out of this situation the Initiative was facing closure within a very short time. This was the third of the Initiative’s near death situations. Challenging the trustees to rethink this conclusion I wrote a paper, ‘Do We Believe In Ourselves’ and followed this up with a ‘Memo to All Trustees’ on 14th April. Doing my best to ride above the financial worries in early May I wrote a possible statement of intent for those people likely to join the Eton Conversations, and with Tony Little’s agreement called this Paper, ‘No Small Matter’. In the 18 months that have elapsed this paper has only been slightly modified. It clearly and succinctly explained the nature of the dilemma facing British society and the possible role of education in providing a solution. We were advised to make a further application to the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, which we did with great care and, reflecting on our present situation and the maelstrom of ideas flowing around us, we entitled ‘Nearly There but Not Quite’.

This application gave an honest appraisal of the Initiative’s expectations for education and the conflict with present education policy. Invited to London to discuss this in detail we were then invited on several occasions to produce supplementary material over a 2 month period. When this was taken to their committee it was eventually rejected on the basis that, although they liked the ideas they did not think we were sufficiently strong enough to bring these about, and therefore the whole approach was rejected. For a second time we received nothing.

“Persistence Matters; fourth time has to be lucky,” I wrote in a paper to trustees in June 2011, “A functional democracy is forever dependent upon a populace sufficiently well-educated to be able to make informed judgements, and stick by the outcomes. To those of us with long years of working with young people, the Prime Minister’s concept of a Big Society, which he has now launched for a fourth time, should be the cornerstone of the British way of life. Such a claim stems from our belief – a belief, it seems, that David Cameron shares – that the proper education of young people is as dependent as much upon the loving care children should experience in the home, and the stimulation they should get from growing up within vibrant communities, as it is upon the formal learning of the classroom”.

Three weeks later, together with one of the trustees, I wrote a paper specifically for Oliver Letwin, the Minister without Portfolio in the Cabinet, said to be responsible for advising David Cameron on any future Conservative manifesto.

It is worth quoting in some depth:

“It is taking England a very long time to realise that schools alone cannot provide young people with enough learning opportunities that, once experienced, lead to the development of a range of skills necessary to create and live responsible lives. For too long policy-makers have forgotten that home and community are as integral to a balanced education, as are the schools and their curricula.
In 2011 it should at last be politically feasible to draw together four strands of Coalition policy – Big Society, Regionalism, Local Financial Responsibility, and the structure of Education – to open up presently untapped opportunities to create a nation of responsible, thoughtful and enterprising people. A successful melding of currently disconnected Departmental policies will however require a better appreciation by all involved of the dynamics of human learning, of the motivators of behaviour, the origins of social capital\(^1\) and the functioning of civil society\(^2\).

Such a joining-up of policy needs to happen urgently across the whole country. But it won’t happen anywhere unless government, communities, and the private sector work in partnership. By pulling together all our resources in a spontaneous, voluntary covenant – homes, communities, schools and voluntary associations – the UK could transform the way society nurtures its young people. This would galvanize national life by releasing the personal creativity of millions of people to create and support a functional democracy both able to look after itself and make informed judgements over complex issues, and subsequently stick by the outcomes.

‘Since individualism misrepresents our nature, it follows that communal life is the normal state for human beings. But a shared existence is a matter of intention not of fact. Community has to be created and sustained by conscious purpose, and the more successfully this is done, the more we fulfil our personal nature.’ (John Macmurray, 1891 – 1976)

Under the pressure of contemporary life, weakened communities have done young people – and themselves – a grave disservice by separating the world of learning from the world of work and its immediate concerns.

The Paper to Oliver Letwin then re-emphasised points made previously in the Parliamentary Briefing Paper before commenting,

“So rapid has been the collapse of social capital that an increasingly individualistic culture is robbing communities of that which once gave them their vitality and made their pavements, town squares and backyards the locations for intergenerational discourse. It was here that children learnt intuitively and spontaneously the interdependence of learning, to working and living. It is social capital, not institutional arrangements, that bind people together in their daily lives, and which is so essential in the future. This proposal revolves around the premise that through a joined-up education system, social capital and the fundamentals of civil society would be reinvigorated, and make Big Society a reality.”

It then went on to suggest what needs to happen,

“The reality is that the premium the UK’s model of learning places on secondary over primary education, and of the school over the home, is nothing other than ‘upside-down and inside-out’. A full transformation, reversing this model of learning, would take many years. However, an approach based around pilot communities could deliver tangible benefits, much more affordably, within as little as three years. With the immediate benefits this would demonstrate, it would be much easier to mobilise more communities.

Ten Pilot Communities (representing one third of one percent of all the schools in the country, with a cost of change element in each community being an additional 10% per annum, decreasing to 0% by the 7th year),

\(^1\) Social Capital refers to those tangible substances- good will, fellowship, sympathy, and mutual support that enables a community as a whole to benefit by the cooperation of all its parts (Putnam 2011).

\(^2\) Civil Society is about the quality of human relationships implied by covenant, not contract as in when John F Kennedy said “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.” In a covenantal relationship, no amount of shoulder shrugging, no anguished appeal to politicians, no recourse to blaming other peoples inertia, can ever excuse the knowledgeable individual’s responsibility to get up and do it for themselves (Sacks 2007).
selected to reflect a variety of socio-economic conditions, and based on already discrete communities, could pioneer both a revitalised education system and a vibrant demonstration of civil society itself. Each would need:

- Committed champions, such as eminent citizens, representatives of professional and commercial interests, leaders of faith communities, as well as locally and nationally elected politicians,
- A School Board, with Trustees directly elected for the sole purpose of devising and administering the most appropriate education for all children within their community,
- Access to funds to support the change process. Funds could be raised directly through a local tax levy (local taxation with full local responsibility), or by offering tax relief to local contributors (both individual and corporate, with significant contributors encouraged to participate in governance).

**Intrinsic to the success of such communities is the incorporation of the following ideas:**

- The work in the pilot communities has to start with a reconsideration of how learning takes place, the relationship of children to their communities, of the responsibilities of communities to ‘their’ children. This ‘responsibility’ would appear in the mobilisation of the community to provide more in and out of school support to what they would increasingly come to regard as ‘their young people’.
- A quality education involves far more than simply producing pupils able to pass formal exams; rather it is to equip every child to become a fully-functional adult, able to do wisely and responsibly whatever it will be that each individual – as a functional citizen – has to do.
- As human development involves the growth of the emotions, the intellect and social sensitivity, so the role of the school has always to be seen in parallel with that of the home and the community, for it is social capital, not institutional arrangements, that bind people’s creativity and expectations together.
- The ability to learn, and keep on learning, is the critical skill for the future. “Learning is not something that requires time-out from productive activity, learning is at the very heart of productive activity.”(Shoshana Zuboff, 1988) Teachers must constantly be empowering children to understand how to manage their own learning.

So willing are good teachers to support this that, even within three years, the initial results of such pilot projects would encourage many other communities to embark on the same process themselves. The projects would act as highly visible catalysts to spark nationwide replication.

**What Parliamentarians must consider:**

- National survival depends more upon the development of the people’s applied common sense (wits), and their ability to pull together within communities comprised of people with disparate skills and interests, than it does on abstract intellectual knowledge.
- While Britain prides itself on being a democracy it frequently forgets that such a fragile concept cannot flourish unless each new generation is well-nurtured in the affairs of the nation and of the mind, and appropriately inducted into the responsibilities of adulthood.
- Parliament serves the country best when it creates the conditions for people to put their personal creativity into action, for the good of the whole, rather than sectional interest. It would be too much to expect of any government to attempt to pilot this project nationally without first testing it out rigorously in some pilot projects, and this is what is needed if the creativity of ordinary people is to be released, and challenged.

The measure of the ultimate success of this transformation would be a national recognition by all that it is the community which has to be the unit of education, not – as is currently seen to be the case – the individual school. It will only be in those communities in which school, home and community are really truly
connected that civil society will best operate, and where children will learn from the nursery the value of that interdependence. By progressively ‘front-loading’ the system (the reversal of the present upside-down system of funding), and fully involving the voluntary contribution of home and community (so reversing the inside-out part) this would result in young people being infinitely better educated, far more able to stand on their own two feet, and more responsible for their neighbours, at no more expense than at present.

I, and one of the trustees, met Oliver Letwin at his constituency office on 23rd September. It was a most insubstantial meeting; almost as if he hadn’t read the paper. He started the conversation by saying how wonderful Michael Gove was, how important the removal of the local authorities had been, and persisted in describing school pupils en masse as ‘kiddywinkles’. He finally dismissed us by saying, “try me again in six months’ time”. (only a matter of weeks later he was caught on camera as throwing large numbers of his papers away in a public litter bin).

Just before setting out for Scotland to address the 300 members of the Head Masters’ Conference in St Andrews I received the resignation of two of our trustees, one of whom had only recently become Chairman of Trustees.

21. Fractured democracy – brave new world?

September 2011 was an extremely difficult time. I was determined to do my very best with the keynote speech I was to give to the Head Masters’ Conference (HMC) meeting at St Andrews that year, but at the time was struggling to hold the trustees together with what I saw were the essential steps to take if the Initiative were to remain alive. Much of this centred on the expressed wish of some of the trustees that, rather than appealing for charitable donations, we should develop a programme that was eminently ‘saleable’... i.e. to demonstrate a whole series of steps which, if once taken, could prove all our points. What I found it almost impossible to show to the trustees was that there had been such a shift in political expectations by the Coalition government over what we had thought we had successfully articulated in the Briefing Paper (which, after all, had been written in the closest collaboration with Dominic Cummings, Michael Gove’s then Chief-of-Staff) that there was really no way of demonstrating this within the current arrangements. This was why I made the proposal to Oliver Letwin (quoted in ‘20’ above), as discussed at the meeting with him on 23rd September, and which he subsequently ignored.

It was therefore with very mixed emotions that I received the inevitable resignation of the recently-appointed Chairman of trustees, together with one other newly appointed trustee, the night before I arrived in St Andrews. To many people HMC was regarded as being a side issue, but I had long held that the private education system had a key role to play, always providing that they were working to an agenda that really was to the country’s good. Suspecting that the Coalition was seeking to show that it was the independence of the public schools that gave them a freedom which public education did not have, I hoped to persuade the heads meeting in St Andrews that we were all operating in the same country, and all were presumably aiming to equip young people to help the country pull together rather than pull apart.

The substance of the speech. I had one other concern and this applied as much to those in the private sector as it did to those in the state schools. “We live within a culture where our everyday activity is shaped by producing more than we need,” I said tentatively addressing the unchallenged tenet of our modern economy. The origins of this go back to the immediate months after the Second World War. Maynard-Keynes, in setting out his plans for economic recovery had said, “The day is not far when the economic problem will take the back seat where it belongs, and the arena of the heart and the head will be
occupied or re-occupied by our real problems – the problems of life and of human relations, of creation and behaviour and religion”. That was the dream of the men who had taught me in the ’40s and ’50s, who had struggled to defeat Nazism and fascism, and now they feared that we as the next generation might well have to defend democracy against the encroachment of Communism. But there was an unintended consequence to all this, as stated in the late 1950s by the American manufacturing associations, “Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego-satisfaction, in consumption... We need things consumed, burned up, replaced and discarded at an ever accelerating rate”.

That was all of 50 years ago. So successfully had the mental perceptions of the British people been shifted by such a materialistic expectation that only four weeks prior to my lecture to HMC, the largest shopping centre in Europe had been opened as the only gateway to the Olympic Park scheduled for use the following year... so vast was this megastore that it had a floor area 20 times the size of St Paul’s Cathedral. The implications of this shift were being felt everywhere. “British family life is in crisis. It is parents who are to blame who by working like pit-ponies to house our offspring, feed them and keep them in with the latest digital cameras and micro-scooters, it seems we have created a generation of miserable children who are wallowing in materialism. We spend £7.3 billion on toys in children’s bedrooms, when what they really need is to play outside with friends and family” (The Daily Telegraph, September 2012).

I then extended my argument by going back to the warning given a dozen years before by Sir Martin Rees: “Ecologically we live within a ‘closed system’ of a depth of some twenty miles from the top of the stratosphere to the depth of the deepest mines, stretched around a globe with a 35,000 mile circumference at the equator. It really is true that “no man is an island entire unto itself”. If one part is too greedy the rest suffers; if the perceived gap between the rich and the poor gets too great most of us start to feel miserable; if one of either the Old or the New economies so upsets the climate we will all freeze, or all burn up. With two and a half times as many people on the earth’s surface today as the day I was born in 1939 we have ever less living space”. Ronald Wright, the Canadian from Vancouver Island writing in ‘A Short History of Progress’ (2004) ably demonstrated the scale of the problem. “If civilisation is to survive it must live on the interest, not the capital, of nature. Ecological markers suggest that in the early 1960’s, humans were using 70% of nature’s yearly output; by the early 1980’s we’d reached 100%; and in 1999 we were at 125%”. Recently he had updated the figure to nearly 150% by 2010.

It looked as if we had become too clever for our own good. What should we as head teachers say to students in our schools next week? Surely it is way past the time to tell it as it really is. By only looking at exam results in isolation we are in danger of preventing our students from looking at the world in a holistic way. We could be in grave danger of manufacturing a world unfit to live in.

I had packed years of thinking into that 45 minutes, and was aware of a tremor both in my voice and in my hand. Polite men and women as they were, the conference gave me a good round of applause, but few wanted to talk with me later as I circulated through the conference hall, and I was painfully aware that I had raised issues which were far away from their daily urgent concern as to how to fill the places in their schools at the ever-increasing level of fees which they were now imposing.

Coming down from Scotland, and with a short stop-over to address an environmental conference - ‘Green is Global’ - organised for schools in Cornwall, I flew to Vancouver four days later to address, for the second year running, conferences of several hundred Principles and Associate Principles of schools in British Columbia meeting in the sumptuous surroundings of the Whistler (skiing) resort. There the reception could not have been more different for the Canadians in the Pacific North West were daily aware of the impact of the desperately changing climate both on the
nature of the storms that were sweeping the coast and in the way that the Pine Beetle, spreading rapidly as average annual temperatures went up, was decimating the forests (with one estimate suggesting that all forests would be dead within 20 years). My presentation was followed by endless questions, and invitations to address a number of the separate School Districts that comprised British Columbia, and at which I had not earlier spoken.

Meanwhile, despite the excitement of this, I was increasingly troubled as to how I could hold the Trust together when there seemed to be little agreement between myself and the trustees as to how to fund our activities. Having gone from a monthly expenditure of some £14,000 a couple of years before, it had now plummeted to some £2000 or less a month, thus leaving me largely relying on my own initiative to keep the trust in business.

Directly after the Whistler conference, I flew on to Vancouver Island where I was scheduled to give a further dozen lectures (the fees from that and the Whistler conference would provide funding for 6 or 7 months). I had worked well with the previous Minister of Education, Margaret MacDiarmid and was keen to meet her successor George Abbott, a man well regarded for his political acumen and his intellectual status as a university academic, who had been the unsuccessful runner up to the post of Premier. We got on splendidly and very quickly discovered that it was highly likely that we were in fact third cousins twice removed through one of my ancestors who I know had left Devon in 1870 and had settled in Saskatchewan... which tied up with George’s own understanding of his family history.

So successful were those conferences in Canada that Jeff Hopkins and myself started to draw together all the contacts we would need to suggest that British Columbia could, either in a television documentary or a book, be used to show what could have happened in England had the 1902 Education Act not destroyed the relatively small locally-elected School Boards. George and others claimed this remained the reason why the schools in British Columbia continue to do so much better than the schools of England (personal email, George Abbott, 11th August 2012).

Excited by these ideas and refusing to be daunted by the sheer horror of the Initiative’s financial situation, I returned to England resolved to do two things. Firstly, to produce a paper that could be used both in England and Canada entitled ‘Why is School Reform Difficult, and Frequently Problematic?’ Secondly, I set about producing a draft script for what I hoped would be a series of perhaps six episodes on television that traced the Initiative’s thinking about human learning (and subsequently formal education) entitled ‘The Brilliance of Their Minds’. With 46 separate ‘scenarios’ I projected that this should be a narrative, similar to that produced more than 30 years ago by the brilliant scientist Jacob Bronowski. This was an exciting activity. ‘The Ascent of Man’ had comprised 13 one-hour programmes and was so popular across the country that it even affected the domestic use of electricity! We had to make the whole history of English education, and the way in which this had influenced the evolution of schooling in various other English-speaking parts of the world, so interesting that viewers would willingly ‘struggle’ to hold these ideas together long enough to understand the whole picture. The last 8 or 10 scenarios of our script would draw directly on illustrative material from British Columbia.

Initial conversations about this were interrupted by the need to address a very interesting conference in Prague by the European League for Middle Education (ELMLE), only four weeks after the death of Vaclav Havel whose statement “education is the ability to perceive hidden connections between disparate phenomena” had so inspired me. Then began a four-week period as Academic-in-Residence at the University of Victoria which was interrupted by an invitation to George Abbott and myself to make a joint presentation to all the Superintendents and senior staff of British Columbia at their annual conference held in Vancouver.
Academies and Free Schools. Back in England I was increasingly horrified by what Graham Clayton described at the end of April 2012 as the “alarming democratic void emerging at the heart of our school-system” due to Michael Gove’s determination to finally destroy any vestige of local democratic control of education (Local Education Authorities), replacing it with direct control through contract law by himself, rather than statute law by Parliament. Schools that had earlier been maintained by a local authority were invited to make individual contracts with the Secretary of State which would offer them enhanced levels of funding in exchange for central Westminster control. At the same time any individuals were invited to establish ‘Free Schools’ that would again draw their funding and their legitimacy from a contract with the Secretary of State.

The use of the word ‘free’ is critical yet cynical. Free Schools were promoted by government as being ‘free’ of what the public had come to understand as the unnecessary ‘unhelpful’ politically-challenging ‘interference’ in the plans of central government by the locally-elected and accountable Local Education Authorities (LEA). Sir Peter Newsam was undoubtedly right when he stated in his paper of November 16th 2011 that, “If local government withers, the roots of democracy dry up” (see Appendix 4).

A little more background. When the very basis of selective tri-partite secondary schooling was successfully challenged in 1965, neither central government nor local authorities (neither Conservative nor Labour) really had any deep thought through conviction about the nature of comprehensive secondary education (the country was, and still is, content with Primary education). This led to Prime Minister Callaghan’s plea to investigate the “secret garden of the curriculum”, which catastrophically was never acted upon. Yet again politicians dodged the issue, believing it enough to deal with the symptoms of a problem not with their underlying cause. As Clayton described, “The changes to the education system made in the 1980s were based on a belief that local government management of schools through local education authorities... was inefficient and failing. That presumption could do with some re-examination”, which is exactly what the Initiative has been arguing for since 1985. “Whilst local authority structures as they impacted on education might have been in serious need of reform, the belief that the solution lay in separating education from local democratically accountable authorities was only doctrinaire...” and has caused the problems that this Paper has been all about; the clash between those who believe that education for everybody is an essential part of a functional democracy, and those who believe that that is an impossible dream and that what is needed are a variety of options to enable the best to succeed in whatever way they can.

When I wrote Overschooled but Undereducated in 2009, there were only three references to Academies; two of these related to what Milton had said about higher-level education and only one referred to a New Labour scheme to take the worst-performing schools and turn them into Academies. The Coalition government, under the direction of Michael Gove pursuing the programme started by the previous government (largely under the direction of Andrew Adonis, now Lord Adonis and a major spokesman for the opposition on education), reported on the enormous pressure that its officers had exerted on individual schools and governors, claiming that over half of England’s secondary schools had now become Academies. Schools had been persuaded by the Minister’s special political advisors (neither answerable to an electorate nor to parliament itself) to abandon the principle of local democratic responsibility (the essence of what Milton had stood for), and the very core of the Initiative’s thesis as expressed to Oliver Letwin.

My thinking was thrown into sharp focus (and horrified) in August 2012 by the brilliantly and meticulously choreographed opening session of the Olympics with its stunning use of music, light and the extraordinary use of stage props to recount highlights of our cultural history. But it was a selective treatment, especially as far as the role of English education was described, or rather not described. There was no reference in the
Olympics’ Celebration to the achievements of English State schools, especially to the developments in English primary schools which in the 1960s were the object of much international acclaim, including the development in Boston of the Education Development Center with the specific intention that the ideas developed around British primary education should quickly infuse work in the United States. Away from the Velodrome, the running tracks, swimming pools, rowing courses, judo etc., the journalists were at work seeking to analyse how much Team GB was indebted to the education provided not by our state schools but by independent schools (and by inference, though certainly not always born out by the results themselves, the weaker achievements of state school pupils).

This paralleled comments made by Niall Ferguson in that year’s Reith Lectures entitled ‘Civil and Uncivil Societies’. Ferguson advanced the neo-classical economist’s view that human beings can be best motivated when given the opportunity to be self-maximisers of their own interests. He extolled those private sector initiatives which seek to reduce the power of locally-provided state education. He commended strongly Michael Gove’s Free Schools and Academies as a way to break what he saw as the monopoly of state education.

Yet many of us understand state education as representing the ultimate responsibility of local people within a democracy to shape their futures. That this hasn’t been done as well as it could have been in many instances is down to historical circumstances, rather than a fault in the theory.

Ferguson’s take on civil and uncivil societies is that the prime role of education is to equip as many people as possible to be so concerned with their own self-interest that by creating wealth the standard of living will rise so benefitting everyone. What Ferguson’s argument forgets (as do other neo-classical economists) is that human society, both at the individual and community level, is made up of people pulling in all kinds of directions. His argument is that individuals should be as free as possible yet I hold to Milton’s conviction that the prime role of education is to equip people to be able to understand and engage with issues so well that a democracy can eventually work.

Two trustees, in different ways, urged that I move very carefully on the issue of governance; one suggested that I should not even bring it up as the Initiative is primarily about pedagogic change, while the other applauded the way that I was trying to bring in the experience of British Columbia and its locally-elected School Boards, as an illustration of the way the UK might go. Both trustees suggested that I should play down the political issue, particularly as we move into the possibility of a television documentary. Tony Little and I are both determined to throw such light on contentious issues that the public will relish having to think evermore deeply about their own assumptions. This will be extraordinarily difficult to do. But we would totally fail if we didn’t do this, or we blow the opportunity of introducing more sense than prejudice into the argument. Which is why, in the script for TV, we lay such stress both on the history, the politics, and the possibilities for radical change as represented by British Columbia.

Lord Adonis and ‘Education Education Education’. It was in September that Andrew Adonis launched, to much public acclaim, his manifesto ‘Education, Education, Education: Reforming England’s Schools’ which was an uncompromising justification for the further extension of the free-standing Academies as a replacement for local democratic control. Some five years before I had had a most interesting exchange of views with Adonis on the subject of quality education, and was so disturbed by what I read in his book that I decided to write to him in some detail; “as both of us often try and call history as our witness, we each have to be extremely careful to avoid the curse of revisionism. I wish to make three observations. Firstly, about democracy and the relationship of education to civil society, secondly the impact on today’s schooling of the thinking behind the 1902 Education Act which was compounded by subsequent problems on the Act of 1944 and thirdly, what should by now be the challenge to the conventional assumptions about the ‘rightness’ of current school structures by the ever more...
convincing findings into effective human learning emerging from biomedical and cognitive research.”

It was a carefully structured letter and I concluded most carefully, “while you are certainly right to call for transformational change, I don’t think that you have yet got these three issues into their proper relationship. National survival (contentment?) depends more on the development of a people’s applied common sense (wits), and their ability to pull together within communities comprised of people with disparate skills and interests, than it does on abstract intellectual knowledge.” I then put in what I thought was the crunch of the issue...

“Parliament indeed serves the country best when it creates the conditions for people to put their personal creativity into action for the good of the whole, rather than into sectional interest.”

To my amazement and disappointment I didn’t even receive an acknowledgement of my letter.

Michael Gove, Professor Daniel Willingham and ‘Why Don’t Students Like School?’ In November Michael Gove extolled three times in a very public speech what he said was the ‘brilliant writing’ of Professor Daniel Willingham from the University of Virginia from which he had concluded that an ever-more rigorous testing regime was really in the national interest. I decided to read the book myself most carefully. It reminded me instantly of the argument that I heard frequently 10-15 years ago in Washington DC when cognitive scientists advancing theories which they claim could be substantiated numerically through tests clashed with evolutionary psychologists, philosophers, systems-thinkers and anthropologists, best summarised by Gerald Edelman, the Nobel-winning neurobiologist, “Get rid of that damn machine model. It’s wrong. The brain is a biological system, not a machine. Currently we are putting children with biologically shaped brains into machine-orientated schools. The two just don’t mix. We bog the school down in a curriculum that is not biologically feasible”.

Sensing how much emphasis Michael Gove was placing on Willingham’s conclusions I emailed him on the 29th January 2013 and received almost by reply a most insubstantial justification for his theories. Ten days later I wrote a fuller comment (see appendix 5 below) and suggested that I might be able to meet with him in the latter part of April on the way back from Vancouver. After a couple of prompts he expressed a willingness to meet in Washington, and that meeting is now in the process of being organised.

The last four or five months have been dominated by the need to make good sense of the half a million pages of documentation that the Initiative has produced and accumulated in nearly 30 years. With the opportunities provided by digital technology, this has been initially collected and classified into 17 folders, each one summarised by an overview statement and supported by up to 20 or so separate papers. To this will be added shortly a listing of all the key books, articles and research papers published within the parameter of a particular folder and more use will be made of the various slides introduced into presentations as the ideas grew. This was launched as www.ResponsibleSubversives.org when I addressed the annual conference of the British Columbia Business Council in Vancouver. In addition, this site is aimed at creating and supporting an interactive, enthusiastic community of Responsible Subversives looking to create a sea-change in the way people in general, and politicians in particular, understand the nature of human learning.

As of now (April 12th 2013), this task is probably two-thirds complete. It was overtaken some four weeks ago by the need to produce this executive summary immediately for the use of the BBC for the documentary; Bloomsbury for the ‘book of the series’ and for Tony Little as a complete, accessible account of the development of the ideas, together with the emerging strategy to create and connect large numbers of Responsible Subversives. Subsequently it will be of enormous value to all those people seeking various ways into the work of the Initiative and will have the splendid advantage of making it internationally and universally available, not just on the bookshelves and in the filing cabinets of a single place.
The best way of showing a conclusion to this summary is to quote the last four paragraphs of the last chapter of ‘Overschooled but Undereducated’:

Most day-to-day activity has nothing to do with law; it’s about getting on with our neighbours and creating a quality of life that depends on our access to people we trust, like, admire and find fun. Children need to learn this everywhere – from their mother’s knee, to the nursery and the playground, the school and in all their interactions with members of the community. Apart from the increasing clashes many of us have through ‘law-enforcement-by-speed-camera’, the vast majority of us don’t come up against the law, yet our lives are full of social interactions totally unmediated by government. That is a more glorious achievement than the law could, or should ever attempt, to deliver. Just to live within the law means very little; but to live within the law and have a sense of civil society is to create a great place in which to live. We have to remind ourselves that society is “an aggregate (something formed from a mass of loosely-connected fragments) of people living together in more or less orderly communities”\textsuperscript{xxxii}. To learn that lesson well is the social justification for investing in schools. It holds together through its own natural procedures, and is impossible to manage in a logical and legalistic way. Being an aggregate is society’s strength, or put another way, society is the aggregate of what people think for themselves.

Which makes civil society the location for ‘moral authority’. Society is about the quality of human relationships, it is where people have to accept responsibility for the consequences of their action, it’s where the micro meets the macro issues. Society is where one can find the human face – not in the laws, and not in the operation of economic theories of life, nor in nebulous philosophies. Society is down-to-earth. It is the seat of our greatest ambitions. It is where we want to be, because it feels right. It is the equivalent of our Stone Age campfire, where all generations share the stories of the past and their hopes for the future.

The state on the other hand is central and impersonal; it levies taxes, and provides services, but there is nothing voluntary about this – you can’t opt out because the state, by definition, is all-embracing. It uses power, not goodwill, to achieve this. It uses a metaphorical GPS system to find the way, not the individual’s skill in finding alternative routes through good map reading. If the role of the state grows it is always at the cost of reducing the significance of civil society. When taxes replace generosity, and social workers replace caring neighbours, something precious within the organic nature of society withers. Without that precious something life becomes colourless.

Civil society is about the quality of human relationships implied by covenant; it is where people have to accept responsibility for the consequences of their actions, and it’s where the small-scale meets the mega-issues. Civil society is where one can find the human face – not in the laws, and not in the operation of economic theories of life, nor in nebulous philosophies. Civil society is essentially down-to-earth. It is the seat of our greatest ambitions, and it inevitably has to balance on a three-legged stool. Civil society is comfortable; it’s where we want to be, because it feels right. Civil society has become a greatly weakened concept, and because education has now become micro-managed by the state so as essentially fitting “with a new economic imperative of supply-side investment for national prosperity,” the revitalisation of education has to proceed in sequence with the recovery of civil society. That may not be as impossible a task as it might have seemed a few years ago. The belief in “performability”, of management by objectives, is at long last starting to falter, and it’s faltering for very human reasons. Humans are a collaborative species – it is how we are. We are driven to think for ourselves; it’s how we survive. Remember that, and we have everything that we need to deal with the problems facing world society.
An Afterword

When I wrote to The Times on 15th October 1981 to criticise Sir Keith Joseph for his proposal “to cut the fat from the educational bone”, I was amazed to receive a phone call three days later from the Minister’s office saying that Sir Keith would like to call upon me sometime in the next two weeks to discuss my views. His secretary was quick to explain that the Minister had already checked with my Chief Education Officer if this would be in order, and he had approved. We met for nearly two-and-a-half hours, the Minister met a number of staff and several pupils. Several days later he was still bombarding me with questions and references to what I had spoken about.

From the perspective of 2013, the observation of such courtesies now seems extraordinary.

The tension between Central and Local government has been building up for 25 years or more. Progressively central government has undermined the role of local government and Chief Education Officers, as has been clearly shown in the progression of this note, culminating in the abolition of the role 5 or 6 years ago. De Facto control over almost all aspects of schooling has now been assumed by Westminster, in effect meaning that whereas some years ago the Initiative was in close contact with many of the Chief Education Officers, nowadays the only person with any real influence is the Minister himself (and possibly some of his political advisers). So centralised has all this become that the Minister appears to be judge, prosecuting officer and jury all at the same time, and it appears that decisions are now made not solely on the basis of legislated procedure but on ministerial contract with any of literally thousands of so-called ‘contracting parties’. The legal basis of these arrangements has changed dramatically.

The account from The Guardian of 11th March (appendix 3) is only one of what seem to be a whole string of questionable incidents. Note that a spokeswoman for the Harris Federation blandly stated that the decision would be made Mr Gove himself. All checks and balances seem to have gone, and it would appear that there is no way in which an organisation such as the 21st Century Learning Initiative can make any impact, and is simply dismissed as a ‘political pressure group’.

It is this appalling situation that the Initiative, because it believes in the principle and spirit of democracy, would like to play its part in rectifying.

John Abbott
March 12th 2013
Appendix 1. The briefest possible Summary of English Schooling up to 1985.

By the early C17th England had probably similar proportions of pre-pubescent youth in what we would now recognise as schools (perhaps 10%) as any other European country. Despite the case made by John Milton (the leading puritan political philosopher) in 1644 for a national system of schooling funded by locally raised taxes as a pre-requisite for a functional democratic society, this never happened. Yet, not much more than a century later, Britain led the world into the Industrial Revolution. How did this happen? Victorians convinces themselves that this was due to some form of innate national genius. Only recently have historians and evolutionary scientists been able to recognise that this was far more to do with the high levels of applied practical skills to be found widely across the country based on intensive and wide-spread applied craft skills developed in numerous forms of apprenticeship; it had little, if anything, to do with what was taught in schoolrooms.

The phenomenal wealth generated in the early industrial age blinded contemporary thinkers to the reality that vast numbers of the children of these new factory workers lacked both parental nurture, or any induction into useful trades. As wild, undisciplined “hooligans”, such children became a massive threat to public order. With political thinking dominated by the concept of “laissez faire” Parliament simply left it to the Churches and other philanthropists, as acts of charity, to set up schools as a way of keeping children off the streets. Parliament made no financial contributions towards education until 1830, by which time Church Sunday Schools were providing some form of instruction to 1.5 million children (twice as many twenty years later) in some 17,000 separate charity schools. Not until 1870 did Parliament legislate for groups of citizens to bind together to establish School Boards (S.B,) empowered by Law to levy a rate on all households to fund the proper education of all children in locally-provided Elementary schools. So successful was this that within 30 years (1902) some 2500 separately locally elected Boards were educating more than half the countries children, some of which offered classes for up to sixteen year old.

Their very success antagonised the patrons of private and church schools (“why should I maintain my neighbour’s illegitimate child…who demands more than his parents can give him,” vehemently declaimed the Headmaster of what was to become one of the most elite, private, Public Schools…."School Boards promise to be an excellent example of public money"). The Board Schools so challenged the dominant conservative mind-set that Parliament abolished them in 1902 along with their locally elected trustees, and replaced them (leaving the church and private schools to continue as they were) by a national system of schools directly administered by Westminster, and limited any form of state assisted education to below the age of 14. It was a disaster from which English society still pays the price.

When World War 2 broke out in 1939 only 18% of 14 year-olds in England were still in school – the lowest proportion of any European country. Recognising that the country needed assurance if, for a second time in a generation, forcible conscription were to be the price of victory, Parliament pledged (once the War was over)to introduce a full national system of state-funded schooling through to the age of 15 (soon 16). To achieve this a tripartite system of secondary schooling based on a kind of intelligence test at the age of 11 would allocate roughly the top 25% of ability to grammar, the next 10% to technical and the remaining two thirds to secondary modern schools.

There were three problems; wisely R.A. Butler (the Minister) sought to limit the role of central government to general policy, leaving implementation to newly established Local Education Authorities (vastly expanded forms of the old School Boards abolished forty years before). Secondly in order to fund the creation of secondary schools Butler took three years off the earlier Elementary school curriculum while, Thirdly the reliance placed on dodgy research data into the actual predictability of IQ tests generated in the late 30s was later shown to misplace 20% of children. By 1965, with little apparent confidence in how these would work in
practice, LEAs were told to turn all secondary schools into non-selective Comprehensive schools. As the school leaving age was progressively raised this meant that many such schools became disproportionately large – yet no attempt was made to return part of the curriculum (and its resources) to the increasingly acknowledged significant early years. (Insights from evolutionary biology only started to become available in mid 1970’s.

It might have been that the arrangements which underpinned the 1945 Act might just have worked if applied back in 1902, and the legislation that brought about the introduction of Comprehensive schooling might just have worked in 1945. But as far as revitalising the local democratic control of schools Westminster politicians of all parties apparently cannot tolerate relinquishing power to “lesser” community control. It was into this maelstrom that Education 2000/The Initiative sailed in 1985.
Appendix 2. ‘From A Dark Place’

As I sit there the wind goes by
    Not moving anything.
The clouds slowly move across the sky
    With a feeling of departure.
I’m lost, I’m lost in this dark deep place.
I’m screaming from inside for it to go away.
    It’s too late.
I stand with a sharp object in my hand.
I feel I’ve been crying for years.
My face reflects this, swollen and red.
As I stand there motionless, I think: why stay?
I’ve hurt so many – even my own flesh and blood.
The sky keeps moving.
I stay locked within the dark circle, and life moves by.
    I look at the object that lies in my hand.
    I slowly move it to my heart and press hard.
    I feel a sharp stinging pain but I continue.
I continue to feel the sharp object penetrate my skin.
The suddenly I stop. I think: I can’t, I can’t do this.
    I drop to my knees, open my mouth to scream
    But nothing comes out.
I stay there, tears rolling down my cheeks, and a clean
    knife lies by my side.
    I feel ashamed, yet disappointed.
I wonder: why does life have to be so hard?
    Why do people have to feel so much pain?
    It’s so unfair, it’s so draining and confusing.
I’m tired of fighting; I’m tired of fighting with myself
    I just want it to stop.

Anne-Marie, aged 18
Killamey, May 2004
Appendix 3.

Primary school parents in row over takeover by academy chain

Parents of Roke school in Croydon say 'farcical' consultation did not even ask them about control by Harris Federation www.guardian.co.uk/education/2013/mar/10/primary-school-parents-row-takeover-academy

Peter Walker guardian.co.uk, Sunday 10 March 2013 17.43 GMT

Parents at a popular primary school threatened with takeover by an academy chain have labelled a promised consultation a farce after the main questionnaire failed to even ask them if they wanted the school to change status.

A group of parents battling plans to remove Roke primary in Croydon, south London from local authority control have also released a transcript of a meeting in which a Department for Education "broker" told them she believed the school was failing based largely on a half-hour tour during which she thought the children looked "bored".

The row over the DfE's apparent desire to push the primary into the control of the Harris Federation, against the wishes of governors, staff and seemingly the majority of parents, appears to run counter to Michael Gove's belief that academies are more responsive to local needs.

The DfE has faced parental anger elsewhere, notably over Downhills primary schools in Haringey, north London, which Gove made part of Harris last year despite 94% of parents telling a consultation they opposed it.

The significance with Roke is that it has no long history of under-performance, supposedly the only reason for forced conversion. Roke was targeted after Ofsted assessed it as "inadequate" in May. Governors and parents, however, said this was a one-off blip caused largely by computer problems which meant inspectors could not view data. Subsequent inspections found the problems had been largely rectified.

The DfE promised a consultation, albeit one run directly by Harris, set up by the Carpetright millionaire Lord Harris. This turned out to involve a questionnaire which only asked whether, when it became an academy, Roke should be sponsored by Harris, not if parents wanted an academy at all.

At a public meeting last week attended by Harris and some of his senior staff, parents were told the DfE had instructed the chain to redraft the questionnaire. But parents remain suspicious.

"To not even ask us initially if we wanted the school to be an academy, it's just indicative of a whole attitude," said Nigel Geary-Andrews, a parent and 39-year-old civil servant. "It really doesn't seem that they want our views at all. It's as if the decision has already been made – which we think it has. It's a bit of a farce."

At the same meeting some parents were angered when the "broker", a freelance contractor hired by the DfE to work with converter academies, described how she decided Roke needed help. Val McGregor said she had spent "about 20 minutes, half an hour" touring the school before meeting senior staff and governors, concluding pupils were bored and "not doing as well as we had hoped". Asked by a parent how she could reach such a verdict so quickly, McGregor replied: "We could spend longer but I don't think that is appropriate."
The meeting was also addressed by Dan Moynihan, chief executive of the Harris Federation, who was knighted last year. At another consultation meeting last week, parents said, Moynihan spent half the hour-long event making a phone call. One parent challenged Moynihan afterwards for this perceived rudeness.

Geary-Andrews said: "Again, this seems to show an attitude that Harris aren’t really interested in listening to parents and our views."

A Department for Education spokesperson said Harris was seen as the best sponsor due to a record of improving under-performing schools. She said: "The children at Roke deserve the best possible education, but any suggestion that there is a 'done deal' on a sponsor is wrong. Ministers will carefully consider all responses to the ongoing consultation and any other relevant factors before taking a final decision."

A Harris Federation spokeswoman said the final decision on Roke would be made by Michael Gove, not them.

She said: "Our report will not be making a recommendation, but will simply report what parents have said. We only had two responses before the meetings and we will extend the period for getting replies back to make sure everyone has plenty of time to consider the extra question. We have enjoyed hearing from parents and others, answering their questions and providing reassurance."
Appendix 4.
Towards a totalitarian education system in England - Sir Peter Newsam

Over the past forty years, the publicly-funded schools in England have moved from being part of a democratically managed system to what is now becoming a totalitarian one. A totalitarian system may be benign or otherwise. What it by definition requires is for all decision-making, other than the trivial, to derive from a single source. That in turn requires the elimination of other persons, such as the princes in the Tower, or institutions, such as, in this instance, democratically elected local education authorities, from anything more than a cosmetic share in that decision-making.

The transition to a totalitarian schools system in England, with the Secretary of State as effectively the sole decision-maker, has required the destruction of the balance of responsibilities between local and central government established in the 1944 Education Act by the wartime coalition led by the Conservative and Labour Parties. That balance was designed to prevent the totalitarianism against which a war was being fought. It did so by ensuring that neither local nor central government could exercise absolute control over any publicly-funded school in England. Heads and governors of schools, for example, had oversight of the curriculum; it was for local education authorities to propose to open, close or change the character of a school; and it was left for the Secretary of State to decide to accept or reject any such proposal. For his part, the Secretary of State could not himself decide to open or close a school; he had to await any such proposal from the local authority that had been or would be maintaining it.

By the mid 1960s, it had become evident that the structure of local government, outside London, needed strengthening. A Royal Commission was appointed to examine the matter. In 1969, after extensive debate and evidence from, local and central government agencies, the Department for Education, teachers associations, HMI and the public, the Commission published its report. This recommended, amongst much else, that the 260 existing local authorities with varied responsibilities for education (124 education authorities, 31 ‘excepted districts’ and 125 divisional executives) should be replaced by 78 education authorities (58 of them unitary authorities and 20 within three large metropolitan areas). Most of the Commission’s proposed local education authorities would be serving a population of between 500,000 and ‘not much more than a million’ people. HMI had reported that existing local authorities of that size were consistently proving to be more efficient than smaller ones, largely because only these larger ones could afford to appoint the specialist staff and attract political leadership of the required quality to enable them to carry out their responsibilities effectively. The 78 local authorities proposed would be large enough, the Commission considered, to be entrusted with the ever increasing educational responsibilities conferred on local authorities by parliament. The Commission had been made aware of the likely recommendations of the Seebohm report on the social services, to be published in 1970. It accepted that, to ensure that social services and education were managed by the same local authority, as Seebohm was intending to suggest, a local authority population of 250,000 would be acceptable. The boundaries of the local authorities proposed in the Commission’s report reflected this decision. Despite the institutional disturbance this would cause, the reasoning behind the Commission’s recommendations commanded widespread support from all who would be affected by it. The Commission had described its report as ‘the first attempt ever to examine the government of our towns and countryside from top to bottom, and to plan a radically new start.’ That report has also proved to be the last such attempt. The changes to local authority boundaries and functions since then have almost all been ill-considered and, in their effect on the education service, damaging. In 1970, a Conservative government was elected. Its response to the Royal Commission’s recommendations on the appropriate size for a local authority was to ignore them. Instead of 78 local authorities the government created 97. Many of these were far below the minimum size the Commission had proposed; so the opportunity to create a set of local authorities fully competent to share with central
government the responsibility for meeting the developing needs of the services entrusted to them was lost. The rejection of the Commission’s recommendations on structure has had particularly serious and lasting consequences for education as a local government service.

The second stage in excluding local government from any important share in decisions about education was achieved by local authorities themselves. In 1972, a group of legally qualified local authority chief clerks were attracted by a theory of management that placed them in a dominant position as local authority chief executives. The Bains Report reflected a widespread belief that better coordination was needed between the various services provided by local authorities. It also reflected pent up irritation within some local authorities at the role of their education committees and their chief education officers. The former had their own association, with Sir William Alexander as its formidably effective Secretary, that had direct access to Ministers of Education. Similarly, chief education officers were directly in touch with senior officials at the Department of Education. This manner of functioning was considered incompatible with corporate management. On the reorganisation of local government in 1974, direct contact with the Department of Education by education committee chairmen and their chief officers was discouraged or even prohibited by council leaders and their newly created chief executives. In some areas, chief education officers, administratively responsible for by far the largest service managed by a local authority, were downgraded and became corporately entangled in matters which had nothing to do with education. Corporate management makes good theoretical sense in local government but can only function properly if corporately managed local authorities are able to deal with corporately functioning government departments. But government departments, administering functionally framed legislation such as the Education Acts, remained resolutely functional. The result was predictable. When the Department of Education obtained money from the Treasury for some specific educational purpose, it could no longer rely on those funds being used for that purpose in a corporately managed local authority. The Department’s response was increasingly to act through agencies developed by central government, such as the Manpower Services Commission. These nationally funded and managed agencies, operating locally but outside the remit of the local authority, led to a sharp and permanent reduction in the contribution local authorities were able to make to decisions on important aspects of education and training in their areas. Corporate management, which has worked reasonably well for most services, has led to crippling and largely self-induced damage to the educational role of local authorities.

The third stage in removing local authorities from any important share in the decision-making process was to nationalise the curriculum. Between 1870 and 1895, the Board of Education’s Revised Code had acted as a tightly controlled and rigorously tested curriculum for elementary schools. Growing evidence of its failure led to its replacement in 1904 by a few statutory requirements accompanied by an annually published ‘Handbook of Suggestions for Teachers’. The Introduction to the 1927 version noted that these ‘remained ‘suggestions’ for the consideration of teachers . . .and should be regarded as a challenge to independent thought on the subjects treated.’ Between the 1960s and the early 1980s, the nature of the school curriculum became the subject of widespread public and professional debate. The Schools Council, which included representatives of the teachers, of local education authorities and of the Department of Education, had since 1963 been developing a range of suggestions on the school curriculum but their effect on what was actually taught in schools was patchy. During the mid to late 1970s, a ‘Great Debate’ was held in which all elements of the education service took part, many without much enthusiasm. Meanwhile, the Department of Education was becoming increasingly doubtful about the School Council’s effectiveness and had been formulating its own ideas about the curriculum. In the early 1980s, a report was commissioned on the future of the Schools Council. This recommended that the Council should continue its work. In 1984, the government’s response was to abolish it. By 1988, the Conservative government had decided that further work on the curriculum was to be undertaken without other than token assistance from teachers or local education authorities. The curriculum was to be nationalised. There were a number of different ways in which a national curriculum could have been created that had a statutory basis requiring a degree of compliance but would have left room for ‘independent thought’ on the part of teachers. Advice on the matter poured in from all directions, not least
from Lords Tebbit and Joseph. Both warned against an over-complex set of statutory requirements. All such advice was ignored. On notions of how learning ought to occur, not altogether dissimilar from those in the nineteen century’s Revised Code, a detailed, ten subject, curriculum was devised with measurable content and defined levels of achievement, for which schools could be held accountable. After more than twenty years of expensive amendment, that national curriculum has now reached an advanced state of disintegration but still determines the content of what schools in England are required to teach and on which it is believed a school’s merit or lack of it can be measured and judged. Only the Secretary of State can initiate changes to the national curriculum but he has so little faith in its merits that to be free of some of its requirements is being offered to schools as an inducement to enter into funding contracts with him as academies. Before the national curriculum existed, schools taught nearly everything that is now in it, arguably sometimes better and, arguably, sometimes less well but certainly less uniformly. What is also certain is that the principal effect of a nationalised curriculum has been to give the Secretary of State direct and statutorily enforceable control of what is taught and tested in every maintained school in England.

The fourth stage of the move towards a system whereby a Secretary of State effectively becomes the sole decision-maker for education in England has been a drive to nationalise all its publicly funded schools. This is to be achieved by the academy programme. Under this programme, all schools are to be invited, induced, or required to become directly dependent on annual funding, at any level that within reason he chooses, from the Secretary of State, under a contract he makes with the trustees of each school. Academies are regularly described as ‘State’ schools but the contracts are with an individual government minister and, unlike Louis XIV, an individual government minister is not the State. An academy should therefore properly be seen as a government school. From the point of view of the Secretary of State, one obvious merit of academy funding contracts is that he can give notice to terminate them as and when he thinks fit. He has no need to comply with any regulatory provisions that used to make it impossible either for a local authority or a Secretary of State to stop funding a school without the public being able to exercise a right to have its objections considered. The Secretary of State’s declared aim is for all 24,000 or so schools in England eventually to become academies. Funding that many schools by means of an individual contract with each of them is a uniquely extravagant and absurd way of proceeding. Funding by contract is, however, a highly effective way of establishing direct governmental control of each school’s annual expenditure and of destabilising local authorities in the process. That destabilising is achieved by diverting money from local authorities to provide inducements to schools to become academies and, in so doing, make it increasingly impossible for local authorities to finance or manage their other educational services effectively. The damage this arbitrary diversion of resources necessarily creates is already becoming evident. But the essential purpose of a system whereby all schools become academies is clear. As an academy cannot decide it would rather not continue to be one, the future of each academy is irreversibly placed in the hands of the present or any future Secretary of State, on whom each school is and has to remain wholly dependent under the terminable funding contract it has entered into.

English local authorities are now no longer described as education authorities and have been effectively removed from other than a cosmetic part in the decision making process in education. But a fully totalitarian system requires that all other potential obstacles to that process should also be eliminated. Parliament, as the legislative arm of the constitution, has for several hundred years been the bulwark against a totalitarian executive. It has even lopped heads off in the exercise of that function. But since the late 1980s, parliament has been required to deal with a blizzard of complex and often poorly drafted legislation. So far as it affects education, that legislation has had one underlying, never stated but ever present, objective: to confer on the Secretary of State, without the need for him to refer to anyone else, something close to absolute decision-making powers in relation to all aspects of education in England. During the legislative process itself, it has become evident that few members of parliament understand the significance of what they have allowed to happen or, when they do, apart from a few skirmishes in the House of Lords by peers with experience of the school system, have felt disposed to challenge the implications of an individual minister being granted
unfettered powers of this order. So far as education is concerned, parliament’s reaction to the unrestrained use of the executive powers it has granted to the Secretary of State has been feeble. As an effective bulwark against a totalitarian executive, parliament has legislated itself out of its historical role in the constitution.

Until the late 1980s, the civil service and HMI worked alongside each other in playing an important and creative part in the formation of educational policy. HMI were seen as ‘the eyes and ears of the Department’. Well led at Deputy Secretary level, HMI were able to offer informed advice to ministers and to their administrative colleagues. When a diminished group of HMI left the Department and became part of Ofsted in 1992, it was assumed that their advice would remain available and still be required by ministers and officials in the Department. That did not happen. When the close involvement of HMI with the Department ended, senior civil servants might have expected that, in the absence of HMI, ministers would rely on them for educational advice. That does not seem to have happened either. Instead there has been an influx of advisers chosen by successive Secretaries of State. Though there have been occasional exceptions, most of these individuals have been no more administratively competent or better informed on the workings of the education system than the ministers they have been invited to advise. That may be one reason why the published material emerging from the Department in recent years has increased in quantity but plummeted in quality. The reduction of the role of the civil service and of HMI in providing advice to ministers means that neither is now close to the core of decision making in education.

Teacher unions used to play an influential part in educational decision-making. That is no longer so. For several years, there have been systematic efforts by successive governments to diminish the role of the unions, sometimes by rather childish efforts to diminish the role of the unions, sometimes by rather childishly declining to attend their conferences but, more seriously, by assuming that anything teachers or union leaders write or say is out of self-interest rather than from a genuine wish to improve the quality of education. This is unfortunate and untrue. Now that the decline of local authorities’ engagement with education has left them with little to say, the thinking about the purpose and practice of education published by teachers’ unions has been consistently superior to the publicity material issued by the Department for Education or in reports from Ofsted, in its role as an agency designed to enforce what government requires schools to do.

Historically, the universities have influenced education by the examinations students are required to pass to gain entry to them. That influence remains strong. Universities also have the capacity to undertake research of high quality into educational matters. University-based research tends to have widely-framed terms of reference and to be peer reviewed. Its published findings sometimes conflict with assumptions on which existing government policies are based. In recent years, governments have, perhaps for this reason, found it more convenient to rely on research, with narrowly drawn terms of reference, commissioned from private companies. Over the years, universities have also been given increased responsibility for the initial and subsequent training of teachers. Recent governments have come to believe, encouraged by elements in the press whose journalists rarely visit or talk to students at the institutions they discuss, that universities are a subversive influence. The truth is that universities work closely with schools and colleges on how and what to teach and do so strictly in accordance with any current statutory requirements. But another main function of a university, when dealing with education or anything else, is to challenge students to think: in this instance to think about and discuss systematically why they are teaching what they are teaching in the way they are teaching it and then relating to how different children or students learn at different stages in their development. A teaching profession that is encouraged to think hard about what it is doing and to place it in some historical context does not sit well with any Secretary of State – and there have been several – who believes the position automatically affords insight into how and why certain elements of the curriculum are best taught. The present incumbent’s decision to remove much of the responsibility for teacher education from universities, though likely to affect the international standing of teacher qualifications obtained in England, is therefore not unexpected.

The law remains a bulwark against certain forms of totalitarian decision making by ministers. Totalitarianism is not just a constitutional matter, it is a state of mind. Judicial decisions against unlawful ministerial conduct
increasingly arouse acute ministerial displeasure. So too does dissent in any form. That same state of mind affects attitudes to the Churches. By reason of the number of the schools they sustain, the churches remain an important component in English education. Although England is no longer a church going society it is still one where important Christian principles are widely and sincerely held. That it is wrong to deceive people or to tell lies are two such principles. These conflict with the notion, evident in the pronouncements of some politicians, that the process of election entitles them to do whatever they want even when that conflicts with what they promised the electorate to do or to refrain from doing before being elected. When the archbishop of Canterbury recently pointed out the moral dimension of political behaviour that amounts to a deception of the electorate, he was criticised for so doing. The archbishop could have pointed out that the electorate has never been invited to vote for a government that seeks to induce or require all schools in England to become directly contracted to the Secretary of State as academies. The electorate were told that schools would ‘have the chance’ to apply for that status, but that is altogether a different matter. No political party has chosen to notice what has amounted to this deception of the electorate. That the archbishop was prepared to draw attention to it was greatly to his credit.

Recent events indicate how influential the press has become. Government is London based, and it is London based newspapers with a national circulation that cause politicians to believe that the whole country is swayed by the opinions those papers express. Exaggerated fear of losing the support of the Press affects the decision making process of governments. It causes them to refrain from doing what they know they ought to do and to persist in doing what they know to be unwise. As a class, politicians appear to have decided that the press cannot be abolished or ignored so it best serves their interests for it to be propitiated by being seen to be influenced by its opinions.

What of the future? England’s move towards a totalitarian form of decision-making in education has developed over the forty years since the early 1970s. That movement is now accelerating. In some areas of the country, it may be irreversible. In education, clustered round the dominant leadership of a Secretary of State, a small group of mostly unelected people have taken control. The distinguishing characteristics of the members of this group is that they have strong opinions, remain resolutely unaware of their own inadequacies and have little respect for the involvement of anyone other than themselves in decisions about education. The first problem this has raised has already been referred to. It is that none of the existing parliamentary parties seems disposed to arrest the rapidity of the move to totalitarian decision-making in education. The second problem is that, although totalitarian systems can sometimes have the merit of making the trains run on time, in England it has had the opposite effect. During the past forty years, the educational system in England has done a few things well: notably in its provision for early years education and in providing wider access to new forms of higher education. But schools and much of the other functions of the education service have suffered from a series of time consuming and poorly conceived initiatives, accompanied by a surfeit of pronouncements devoid of content. Mr Blair’s ‘Education, education, education’, the intellectual equivalent of ‘hip, hip, hooray’, was just one example of this. More seriously, the belief that competition always improves standards could not survive any experience of how competition actually works in schools or elsewhere. Competition between two broadly equal schools, teams or individuals can bring out the best in both. Competition between unequal teams, schools or individuals nearly always has the opposite effect. Competition between cities or whole countries can improve performance, but that in turn requires there to be a cooperative effort within those cities or countries. Over the past twenty years, the result of concentrating decision making in too few and too inexperienced hands has led to initiative by sudden impulse and a whole clutter of unexamined assumptions about what is important in education, all accompanied by a systematic unwillingness to admit error. It has also led to alarming levels of inefficiency. In the thirty years between 1944 and 1974, within strict cost limits, something like seven and a half million school places were provided by local authorities, supported by able officials within the Department of Education. The hugely expensive efforts national governments have made in recent years to provide a few thousand school places are compelling evidence of a collapse in administrative competence and of political leadership unaware of its own inadequacy.
A third problem is the potentially irreversible nature of what has happened. Even if a new government wished to restore a degree of local authority decision-making in education, in an increasing number of areas there is now no local authority system politically and administratively able to hand it back to. For this and other reasons, in some areas the educational services local authorities provide outside the school system, such as a careers service, a library service or an adult education service, are fragmented, inadequately funded and approaching dereliction. In such areas, there is no obvious way forward for the education service in local government as it is at present constituted. In 1870, parliament responded to a fragmented and inefficient education system in a major Education Act. Something of the same order may soon be necessary. The final problem relates to the future. Both the creation and the destruction of totalitarian systems have traditionally been accomplished by a rattle of gunfire. In England, the development of totalitarian decision making in education has been gradual and any rattle of gunfire unlikely. That suggests a deeply unsettled future. The present Secretary of State doubtless intends no harm while managing to do a great deal. But apart from the confusion he will be leave behind, his major legacy will be the virtually untrammelled power he will have put into the hands of his successors. How a less benign successor will deal with dissent is just one of many uncertainties. But the prospects for a dissenting school – or a whole range of schools of a kind that a future Secretary of State happens to dislike – look bleak. Henry 11 had armed knights to deal with dissent; a future Secretary of State, armed with terminable funding contracts, could find these quite as effective.

England is now well on the way to having the most totalitarian as well as one of the most inefficiently managed schools system in Europe. In the much maligned 1960s, people came from all over the world to learn from what was being achieved in the best of England’s publicly-funded, local authority maintained, schools. Few come now. In 1969 the Royal Commission on local government issued a warning: ‘if local self government withers, the roots of democracy grow dry.’ Over the past forty years, intentionally or otherwise, that withering of democratic involvement in education, both nationally and locally, is what parliament has allowed to happen and successive governments are now close to achieving.

PAN 21.09.2011

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1 Huxley, Aldous; (generally attributed to)
Appendix 5. Dan Willingham Correspondence

February 13th 2013

Professor Daniel T. Willingham,
University of Virginia,
Charlottesville, VA 22904
USA

Dear Dan,

Thank you for your response to my email. I feel however that these issues are too important to be passed over lightly, and I would like to explore our different viewpoints, if I may, on these issues, which have considerable influence on the intellectual and mental wellbeing of youngsters across the Anglo-American world.

I had the rare good fortune when I was very young of being introduced to the meanings of ancient fables, one of which made an enormous impression on me. No doubt you know it yourself. It was the Indian fable of the Three Blind Men who, when asked to describe an elephant, went up and began to feel it. The first, feeling the shape and dimension of the elephant’s trunk immediately concluded that it was a snake, and stopped any further enquiry. A second, feeling its enormous ear, concluded it was the leaf of a massive plant while a third, touching its leg, concluded that it was a tree. None of them bothered to explore sufficiently and so failed to understand what it actually was.

Some 30 years ago I came across Schrödinger’s seminal Paper of 1944 ‘What is Life?’ in which he pleaded for western epistemology to break away from its infatuation with analysis and seek to explore the much more difficult issue of synthesis. I am sure you know the quote;

“A scientist is supposed to have a complete and thorough knowledge at first hand, of some subject, and therefore is usually expected not to write on any topic of which he is not a master. This is regarded as a matter of noblesse oblige. For the present purpose I beg to renounce the noblesse, if any, and to be freed of the ensuing obligation. My excuse is as follows.

We have inherited from our forefathers the keen longing for unified, all-embracing knowledge. The very name given to the institutions of highest learning reminds us that from antiquity and throughout many centuries, the universal aspect has been the only one given full credit. But the spread, both in width and depth, of the multifarious branches of knowledge during the last hundred off years, has confronted us with a queer dilemma. We feel clearly that we are only now beginning to acquire reliable material for welding together the sum total of all that is known into a whole; but, on the other hand, it has become next to impossible for a single mind fully to command more than a small specialised portion of it.

I can see no other escape from this dilemma (lest our true aim be lost forever) than that some of us should embark on a synthesis of facts and theories, albeit with a second-hand and incomplete knowledge of some of them – at the risk of making fools of ourselves.”


My early career started as a geography teacher and leader of expeditions to work with the primitive tribes of the Middle East and Africa before becoming head of a large secondary school. For the past 27 years I have been Director of an international research foundation seeking to create a synthesis of recent research into the nature of human learning, behaviour and the structuring of societies. I am therefore extraordinarily fearful of
conclusions being drawn from too limited a perspective of the total situation. We are ‘blessed’ (if that is the right word) with now having access to many more areas of research than Schrödinger envisaged. I believe your own discipline of Cognitive Science was only acknowledged as a separate area of study in the early 1970s. The emergence of neurobiological and evolutionary understandings of the way in which the structure of the brain might shape certain mental predispositions that account for our everyday preferred ways of doing things, and which give us our unique species identity, only became possible with the development of functional MRI. More recently still has come the ability to extract ancient DNA from fossils and, through the evolved skills of archaeology, to relate this to the artefacts associated with specific periods in history. We (that is, the community of scientists from diverse backgrounds) now know very much more about the evolution of mental processes in the mind over vast periods of time.

The science correspondent for the New York Times, Nicholas Wade, in his book ‘Before the Dawn’ (2006), explores this most thoroughly, and many of those ideas have just been extended by Jared Diamond in ‘The World Until Yesterday’ (2012), all of which have to be understood in terms of the work of Gerald Edelman (the Nobel Prize winner), with his powerful concept of Neural Darwinism, published in 1989 and subsequently updated. I have gone on record as summarising this in the statement “we are enormously empowered by the experience of our ancestors, but we are also constrained as well, driven to go in ways which go against our inherited predispositions, simply drives people mad.” This ties up very much with Robert Wright’s conclusion in ‘Evolutionary Psychology and Everyday Life (1994) that, “we are born to be effective animals, not happy ones”...which presumably goes part of the way towards explaining the differences between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation? I would be very interested to know if you agree with this.

While I agree with you entirely that humans are naturally curious, I totally refute the idea that we are “not naturally good thinkers; unless the cognitive conditions are right, we will avoid thinking”. It was your views on this which I think so impressed our Secretary of State for Education when he several times described your work as “brilliant”. If what you said were universally true, and that culture was not continuously interactive with our evolved nature, then our species would never have evolved to its present position. Surely it is because in generation after generation enough people at all levels in society have personally innovated to find better ways of surviving. Again I would argue that Confucius got it so right when he said “tell me and I forget, show me and I remember, let me do and I understand”. A thousand years later St Augustine, whose memoirs show the horrible affect that excessive rote learning had on the schools of ancient Rome, went on in his old age to state magisterially, “I learned most, not from those who taught me, but from those who talked with me”.

Questioning the relationship between process and content goes back to the beginning of time (viz, the way the ancient Babylonians recognised that 60 was a more effective unit than 10 to calculate the position a circular surface). More than four centuries ago, Robert Ascham, private tutor to Queen Elizabeth 1st, urged the cultivation of what he called ‘Hard Wits’ rather than the superficial ‘Quick Wits’ of those youngsters whose memories were good, but who couldn’t work things out for themselves. "Because (as an old man) I know that those which be commonly the wisest, the best learned, and the best men also when they be old, we’re never commonly the quickest of wits when they were young”. ‘The Scholemaster’, (1570)

My own research into the origin of structures of education in England shows most conclusively that what led England to achieve universal leadership in the earliest stages of the Industrial Revolution was not teacher-dominated classrooms, but the rigour of a multiplicity of forms of apprenticeship in which high-level mental thinking was combined with practical problem-solving. I would respectfully remind you of a paper ‘Cognitive Apprenticeship: Making thinking visible’, by Collins, Holum and Seeley Brown (1991), and the very recent iteration of such ideas by one of your colleagues at UVA, Matthew B. Crawford’s ‘Shop Class as Soul Craft: An enquiry into the value of work’ (2009).
Cognitive Science attracts an excessive attention in a society overtly prone to value the significance of numbers, but when those numbers only relate to one discrete aspect of the whole they become extraordinarily dangerous. Which is why I personally respect Einstein (possibly extended by William Bruce Cameron) for cautioning that “not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.”

In your attempt to show the importance of knowledge, I believe you completely overplay the importance of memory, and you do this with a quite breathtaking assurance when claiming not only that Einstein had got it wrong but so had Skinner, Mark Twain, Henry Brooks Adams, Alfred North Whitehead and Ralph Waldo Emerson. These people were not simply saying that it is silly to know things – and to suggest otherwise is to so weaken your argument that many people who would be interested in the points you are making believe that you don’t really accept the extraordinary ability of the brain to work things out for itself.

May I recommend an extremely interesting book by Susan Greenfield, whose original doctorate at Oxford was in Philosophy, who changed to Neuroscience and became Professor of Synaptic Pharmacology at Oxford where she now heads a multi-disciplinary research group. The title of the book is ‘You and Me: The Neuroscience of Identity’. (2011)

Politicians seeking for a convergence between political dogma and selective portions of scientific research have always been extraordinarily dangerous (note the early research on eugenics in Germany in the 1930s). It is a drastic oversimplification to see human learning as if all that matters is the production of good students, rather than good citizens able to live responsible and fulfilling lives - for the benefit of society as well as themselves.

Maybe we should arrange to meet in the near future, as I think this is an issue that deserves to be opened up to the widest possible audience. I am to be back in Vancouver in the latter part of April, and would willingly arrange a stop-over in Virginia if this could be timed to suit our mutual schedules.

As I have already published several blogs commenting on Michael Gove’s utterances, I may eventually publish your response to this message, and to any discussion that we might be able to fit in should I be able to arrange that stopover in Virginia. I look forward to hearing from you, and hopefully to talking with you,

Yours sincerely,

John

John Abbott, President
The 21st Century Learning Initiative

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On Tue, Jan 29, 2013 at 10:43 AM, The 21st Century Learning Initiative <jabbott@rmplc.co.uk> wrote:

Dear Professor Willingham,

No doubt you have heard much from my countrymen about the influence, correct or incorrect, your book has had on Michael Gove, the English Minister of Education, and probably don’t want to hear more! I was away lecturing in British Columbia when his comments about the significance of your book hit the headlines...hence my delay in writing.
I am a former secondary school headmaster of an ancient Grammar School founded in 1588. Which is largely irrelevant in comparison to the fact that for the last 27 years I have led multi-disciplinary research team into the nature of human learning, and for four years worked with the Johnson Foundation of Wingspread, Wisconsin during which time I got to know well Bruce Alberts President of the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, and Rod Cocking who master-minded the NRC report “How People Learn; Brain, Mind, Experience and School”. From them I learnt that the specifically sharp focus on schooling came about at quite a late stage when it became necessary the financial sponsorship of your Dept of Education, a subject on which at a later stage the US Secretary of Education, Dick Riley, elaborated to me.

In England I am often assigned, by teachers and educationalists, a space to comment on the more extreme utterances of Ministers (which gains me no bonus points from the politicians!). I don’t know how much you know, or want to know, about English educational politics, but having lived in Virginia for four years and visited your country very many times over thirty and more years you ought to know that the tension generated by successive right-wing, or pseudo right-wing Ministers seizing the control of public education from the local Councils generates tensions similar to those over States Rights in Civil War days.

I have recently been asked to write the lead article for the National Primary Heads Association...that informal clustering of the majority of this country’s 30,000 elementary teachers feeling that they are fighting tooth and nail for their beliefs that education is about much than simplistic, quantifiable test results....i note that you don’t assign as much authority to Einstein as I do, yet I will rest part of my case on his declaration that,” not everything that can be counted, counts, and that not everything that can be counted ,counts”

In time, once you have had the opportunity to read the enclosed, I would be interested in your response. If you wish to follow up where all this thinking comes from might I suggest you go to www.responsiblesubversives.org , proceed to The Ideas, select the Timeline and go to Folder 4 and look at the Synthesis that emerged from the Wingspread conferences, and then the Policy Paper that summarised all this in Folder5. If you strayed into Folders 13 and above you would get a better feel for the muddy waters this side of the Atlantic.

If you have the time to respond I will then look forward to continuing the discussion,

Best wishes

John Abbott, President
The 21st Century Learning Initiative

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From: Daniel Willingham [mailto:dtwuva@gmail.com]
Sent: 29 January 2013 21:45
To: The 21st Century Learning Initiative
Subject: Re: Re; "Why don't Students like School?"

Dear John

Thanks so much for writing. You've asked for a response to the article you attached.
The article touches on a wide-ranging set of issues that would require a long reply in its turn to reflect my own thinking on all these issues. But briefly:

1) I don't think that the role of evolutionary theory in cognitive theory is settled or without controversy.

2) I think that even if it were and learning were deeply understood there's not a straight path to application of the knowledge in education. Cognitive science is a natural science and education is an applied endeavour. As such, education always entails goals, and the same scientifically sound conclusion can be taken to mean very different things in the classroom.

Best wishes,
Dan
End notes


ii http://www.responsiblesubversives.org/the-heart-of-the-matter/

iii http://www.21learn.org/timeline/up-to-1987/the-hertfordshire-project/


v http://www.21learn.org/publications/books/learning-makes-sense-2/


vii http://www.21learn.org/publications/internal-and-web-based/the-synthesis/

viii http://www.21learn.org/publications/featured-publications/policy-paper/

ix http://www.21learn.org/publications/books/the-child-is-father-of-the-man-how-humans-learn-and-why/


xiv See Folder 10 on www.21learn.org, forthcoming

xv http://www.21learn.org/archive/can-the-learning-species-fit-into-schools/


xix http://www.21learn.org/timeline/folder-16-2010-2013/stormy-weather/

xx http://www.21learn.org/timeline/folder-16-2010-2013/seeking-a-safe-haven/

xxi http://www.21learn.org/timeline/folder-16-2010-2013/further-thoughts-from-a-safe-haven/

xxii http://www.21learn.org/timeline/folder-16-2010-2013/memo-to-all-trustees/

xxiii http://www.21learn.org/archive/no-small-matter-2/

xxiv http://www.21learn.org/timeline/folder-16-2010-2013/nearly-there-but-not-quite/

xxv http://www.21learn.org/timeline/folder-16-2010-2013/a-complete-and-generous-education-creating-big-society/
http://www.21learn.org/activities/featured-presentations/hmc-conference-st-andrews/  


To be uploaded  
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See video www.responsiblesubversives.org/why-is-reforming-education-so-difficult  

www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/apr/26-democratic-void-school-system