SHORE (Sydney Church of England Grammar School) Staff Conference
Crowne Plaza Hotel, Terrigal, Sydney

1st Presentation The Biological Roots of Learning

2nd Presentation Evolving ideas about Learning

3rd Presentation Children of the privileged and inclusive community

John Abbott
President, The 21st Century Learning Initiative
www.21learn.org - mail@21learn.org

Sydney Australia
20th and 21st July 2008
Session 1  What kind of world for what kind of education; Battery hens or free-range chickens?

Session 2  Can the Learning Species fit into Schools

Session 3  Adolescence – Problem or Opportunity

Session 4  Overschooled but Undereducated?
Education… from the Latin “educare” meaning to “lead out”, as in a sense of a general preparing his troops to go out of the security of the camp onto the uncertainties of the battlefield.

In this sense education is an evolving process of leading a child out from the security of the home and the classroom, by way of the drilling grounds of early learning, to face on its own the challenges and turmoil of adult life. As the growing child develops newfound competencies so the role of the school has to change; ‘teacher’ nicely defines the relationship in early days whereas ‘tutor’ (the medieval meaning was a watcher, or guard) is more appropriate to adolescents seeking to take responsibility onto their own shoulders.
Subsidiarity; it is wrong for a superior body to hold to itself the right of making decisions which an inferior is already able to make for itself.

“It is a bad teacher whose pupils remain dependent upon him”.

Nietzsche
I know of no safe repository 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 it from them, but to inform their discretion by education”.

Thomas Jefferson, 1820
“Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe”

H.G. Wells *The War of the Worlds*, 1920

Civilised society can never be taken for granted since human passions are complex, contrary and potentially self-destructive.

**Umbuto** – how goes it with the children. This is a traditional African greeting essentially about the ‘state’ of the next generation. It is every bit as much to do with rearing in the home and community as it is with formal schooling. It is about preparation and nurture of young people to take over from their aging parents. It is nothing short of a life and death issue, for on that depends the continuation of a way of living, of a civilisation.
To those of us living in First-World countries the early twenty-first century appears rich in opportunity, yet paradoxically the immediate future seems full of uncertainty. Individuals oscillate between exhilaration and anxiety; families fracture and communities have ever less cohesion and substance. The more confused people feel themselves to be, the more concerned they become as to how decisions about the future are to be made. In times of uncertainty the practice of democracy is put to the test as it struggles with the contrary nature of human instincts.
Recent findings in bio-medical and socio-economic research help explain these contrary instincts, the resolution of which has concerned philosophers and spiritual leaders for millennia as they sought to establish the basis for civilised behaviour. Rather than seeing behaviour shaped exclusively by inheritance and “selfish genes”, or entirely by social or physical environments, we have come in the last few years to understand better the interplay between nature and nurture. There is no escaping the fact that without commonly-agreed value systems, human behaviour quickly slips back to “the survival of the fittest”, and the law of the jungle.
Democracy, it has been observed many times, is the least imperfect way so far devised for reaching decisions that concern the whole of society and which, for their implementation, require the support of everyone. Democracy is also a fragile concept. Critically the mass of the people must possess what the ancient Greeks called “nous”, something today we would describe as “applied commonsense”. If the decisions to be made by the people’s representatives are to be more than responses to whoever shouts loudest, then the electorate need an education in their youth that unites thinking with doing, the logical with the intuitive, and which recognises the ongoing conflicts between a private gain, and a public good.
The more complex the society, the better the electorate needs to be at sifting through crooked thinking and perceiving the long-term implications of decisions, often outside their original context. Democracy simply can’t function where the people’s thinking has not been well-honed in working things out for themselves. Neither can democracy be effective where there is no sense of community within which individual aspirations can be merged to achieve the common good. Being a territorially-aware species humans are best able to act collaboratively when the group is small and inter-related, but easily becomes highly competitive when resources become scarce.
The Industrial Revolution represented social meltdown on a scale never before experienced, or anticipated. Men who had learned an apprenticeship from their fathers now realised they had neither a craft skill, nor a set of social and moral values to offer their own children. Men lost faith in the value of fatherhood. Adam Smith, who argued in *The Wealth of Nations* for the financial benefits to be gained from mass manufacturing processes also warned that, should this happen, the earlier “alert intelligence of the craftsman” (the attributes of their fathers and grandfathers before them) would be replaced by factory operatives who would be “generally as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become”.
Politicians have, in effect, plunged education into a deep hole of their own making out of which they now seem incapable of digging themselves. The public, who have been told by politicians for many years that the crisis in education was due to the slovenly performance of teachers and schools, are now beginning to turn and are putting the blame for the inadequacies of education onto the politicians. Here is the danger; when the electorate really begin to lose faith in politicians, democracy is in grave danger of collapsing. That is the problem which England now has to face.
A question of democracy… or why the problems of bringing-up young people will never be solved simply by school-based solutions.