The Canadian Council on Learning
21st Century Learning Initiative (Canada)

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Workshop Report

“Turning Things Around”—Creating a New Story

An Overview

“One of the first stops I made after visiting here (Canada) was an extraordinary visit to the city of Luanda, Angola—which is only just recovering from a civil war. (This is) talking about learning in a country where the average wage is less than $700 per year; where 3 out of 5 children don’t make it to their 5th birthday; where the horror of seeing the Oil Industry coming into a very third world deprived country and insisting that all their workers have to live at standards comparable to California meant the dynamiting of one of the shanty towns outside Luanda and building a wall 12 feet high around the outside—And within it building California style ranch houses each with their own private swimming pool—and then providing an international school 5 miles away, and the children being transported in American style schools buses from the entrance of the enclave where they live to the school compound. One 17 year old girl fresh from Texas, said to me, “It is so terrible I just don’t want to know. I close my eyes when the bus leaves our home compound. I don’t open them again until it comes into the compound of the school because I can’t cope with what I am seeing on the outside”.

(John Abbott—Excerpt from Introductory comments)

A 2 and ½ day workshop with John Abbott is as much a journey into evolutionary psychology, cognitive science, neurobiology and cultural anthropology, as it is a chance to look directly into the face of the present and to fully confront the startling realization that human inventiveness in plundering the environment has brought us to the brink of natural disaster. No matter how disturbing that fact is—nor how important we fully grasp its meaning —this realization is not where the message ends. Rather Abbott challenges us to see the relationship between this situation and our internal human world. We are not only depleting the natural world of non-renewable resources we are, through institutional and community failure, missing the opportunity to properly nourish and support the spiritual, emotional and intellectual development of our young. Without a commitment to “turning things around” —both externally and internally—in our natural world and in our communities and schools—we are, in fact, contributing to the depletion of the human rainforest, the non-renewable resource that is our future—our children.

This workshop is a critical wake-up call. It offers us as educators, parents, members of communities, and citizens of the world, an opportunity to connect to the ‘big view’; to understand at a deep and practical level that which we need to do to support real and sustained change. It is an opportunity to see differently those things that we think we already know, but have felt powerless to change. It is a workshop about reclaiming our stories—uncovering the collective ‘truth’ about ourselves and the world in which we live.

This is accomplished through drawing on scientific fact and human ‘truths’. By looking at where ‘we’ have come from and where ‘we’ are going we can develop a synthesis or wisdom for how understanding the past can contribute to a range of different possibilities for the future. Along the way John Abbott plays the role of provocateur and guide, helping us find the compass we need for re-directing the trajectory of our collective human journey. In the process he places learning and how we guide and support the intellectual, emotional and spiritual development of our children, squarely in the centre of the work we need to do, identifying the urgent need for re-balancing the relationship between home, school and community as the

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1 John Abbott indicated at the opening of the workshop that the title he offered was “The Dimming of the Lights: Where have all the Story Tellers Gone”. He suggested that someone might want to come up with another title. This title is offered as fitting with the gentle tone of optimism and return to dialogue that characterized the workshop.
critical element in turning around a confused and confusing world and establishing hope—for the survival of the species.

It bears saying that the message John Abbott brings is not only urgent but also profoundly important. While we may readily agree with the logic of the synthesis... we should note that Abbott is asking us (participants in his workshops) to do no less than join ‘the unfinished revolution’. Abbott is asking us to play a part in the complete transformation of the educational system as we know it today. He requests that we take an active role in developing a new way of educating our young—one that is committed to enhancing learning—not teaching or institution building—in the many ways that learning occurs throughout (and across) our lives. He is asking us to make a commitment, on both a professional and personal level, to pay much closer attention to the quality of relationships among us, especially those between parents and young children and between adolescents and adult mentors and role models. He is asking us to question a culture of values driven primarily by economic considerations, to support the authentic development of communities and the vibrant self-organizing of our young people. Most importantly he is asking us to see adolescence as a critical form of evolutionary adaptation necessary for the survival of the species... rather than a problem to be controlled. This request is made all the more dramatic by the sobering awareness that we have a very limited time in which to ‘turn things around’.

Scientists give the world a 50/50 chance of survival over the next 100 years. Half the rainforest is already gone—it is going at a rate equivalent to losing two football pitches the size of Manchester United every second of every day. It will at this rate all have gone within forty years... “If civilization is to survive it must live on the interest and 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%” (Wright)... Current estimates suggest that we are now at 150% — a third of this use coming from non-renewable resources. We are not just using up resources; we have upset the balance... (Ronald Wright, a Short History of Progress 2004, with comments from John Abbott)

It is also worth noting that the workshop focused on dealing constructively and practically with the high degree of complexity and uncertainty that is now part of every day life... and not on any simplistic notion of reclaiming a ‘golden past’. While it may be easy to slip into melancholy about the state of the world and proclaim ourselves powerless to affect change, Abbott describes himself as a “glorious optimist”. The tone of the workshop is one of a practical optimism; connecting us to reality and requesting a constructivist approach. Questions such as “exactly what do we think we are educating young people for? What kind of education for what kind of world?” emerged as fundamental to ongoing dialogue. The recognition that we have a profoundly flawed, upside down and inside out system was widely accepted... as was the realization that we will not be able to change it overnight. The practical question that remained was how do we make responsible and lasting change? If the purpose of education is not to make our children clones of ourselves, as the present system aspires to do, exactly how will we assist them in preparing for an even more complex future than that which we have experienced?

The workshop ended with a call to extend dialogue among participants and their communities, and to find the opportunity to meet with Abbott again... as a mentor and partner in building strategies and creating a new story of learning and community for young people, their families and their schools across the province of New Brunswick.

The Workshop

Synthesis is the drawing together of ideas from different fields of study. "The coherent whole that results is considered to show the truth more completely than would a mere collection of parts". (Encyclopedia Britannica). It is the opposite of the dominant academic methodology of western society, namely reductionism, which is the solution of a problem by reducing every issue to its separate parts.

Focusing on the relationship between learning and the community, John Abbott, President of the 21st Century Learning Initiative, led participants in a process of exploring new research on the human brain, the nature of learning, and the implications this research holds for how we organize our educational system and support the development of our children. A number of related themes were explored as a means to gain insight into the larger 'coherent whole'...the human educational and ecological story and our place in it.

Fifty four people, Managers from the New Brunswick School Board and Department of Education, accompanied by a small number of interested individuals and educators from other provinces, gathered in Fredericton from March 15th to 15th for the workshop with Abbott. The purpose of the workshop was to explore the relationship between learning and the community, and the implications a synthesis of ideas and research on the topic might have for the future of the province. John Abbott’s approach was one of presenting ideas and encouraging dialogue. Participants listened, reflected on what they heard and offered their views. It was clear from the tone of the discussion that participants took this challenge to connect ideas with reality—very seriously, and began the process of opening dialogue among themselves about what was going on in their own schools and communities and just what they could do... in contributing to the vital need for supporting learning and a new way of educating our young.

As a means to encourage a free flow of dialogue, the conversations ‘jumped around’ from one topic to another. It is not attempted here to do justice to the full flow of ideas. For purposes of reporting, a summary of key ideas expressed in the presentations and conversations is offered under the topics of 'Themes' and 'Discussion/Reflections'.

Themes: Making Sense of Some BIG ideas

1. The Nature of Learning and the Human Brain

Some sixty thousand years ago the evidence suggests our ancestors simply started walking out of Africa. After nearly seven million years of becoming finally adapted to life around the waterholes of the savannah our ancestors used this experience to colonize the world. This small group species made up of extended family units of between 15-20 people, loosely organized into clans of probably no more than 150 people adopted the skill sets they had developed on the savannah to fit a vast variety of very different environments, all within fifty thousand years.... Foremost among those risk takers—the scout out in front of everyone else—would have been the adolescents. Those adolescents that survived would have been hard tested by the experience, and become the leaders of the next generation. (Adolescence; A critical Evolutionary Adaptation, prepared by the 21st century Learning Initiative)

A synthesis of new research on the brain and how we learn makes the case that our current approach to education is fundamentally flawed and not in accord with how the brain works. John Abbott offered a number of scientific facts that served to contribute to that picture. First among them is the fact that every one of us is related to a small group of 4,000-10,000 humans who lived on the savannah in Africa 60,000 years ago. This suggests that the current world population is only 2500 generations away from a common ancestry. We are then, all the result of ancestors who had their wits about them—at least enough to make sense of the changing environment and pass on their genes. It can be drawn from this that we are shaped by a deep and common evolutionary experience and successful learning strategies.

Evidence shows that although there has been cultural speciation the actual biological structure of the human brain has changed little in 60,000 years. Although the human brain is described as a 'work in progress', constantly evolving at the individual level, it takes 30,000 years for genetic mutation to make a change in the structure of the human brain. This can be extrapolated to mean we are operating with brains that were
actually designed to work effectively on conditions of 30,000 years ago. The human individual is both empowered and constrained by the experience of his ancestors.

The human brain is the most complex and finely tuned organism known in the universe... and as an organism it reflects the natural complexity inherent in all living system. As far back as 60,000 years ago it had the ability to perform deep intellectual exercises—to synthesize information—to trace out connections and make sense of what went before. In fact research suggests that the human brain actually knows how to learn; it has strategies embedded in it and looks to find which to apply in response to the environment.

Gerald Edelman (a Nobel Prize winning biologist) compares the process of human learning to the immune system, noting that we are born with an array of biological methods for dealing with viruses. The body does not create new anti-bodies, they are already there. It grows the antibodies in response to the virus. Just as the human immune system operates through the body, responding to a new virus by searching through its naturally constructed set of antibodies, the new brain grows through responding to a variety of different kinds of challenges. The brain is constantly trying to make sense of its environment and draws from its many inborn strategies that which will be most useful in responding to the environment.

Evidence suggests that below the age of 5 young brains are going through intense continuous change. Like sponges they are picking up on a broad range of stimuli and connecting those dendrites that are activated by the environment. (Dendrites are neurons or nerve cell branches that form receiving surfaces for synaptic input from other neurons). Used intelligently the young brain can grow very quickly as demonstrated by the capacity with which young children pick up language, learn effortlessly and without concentration. At this stage affection shapes the human brain. Abbott used the example of breast fed babies to illustrate the connection between learning and affection. Research suggests improved learning in babies is related to baby/mother eye contact, with best results found in the ‘exact’ distance between mother and baby in breast feeding. Abbott provided further examples to suggest that education is as much about emotions as about intellect. Medical research (MRI) suggests that the individual who is ‘happy’ shows a higher level of brain activity... and that babies start to connect their emotional hardware by mimicking their parents. The parents’ emotional state and behaviour affects the baby’s development.

By age 8 or 9 learning through affection ceases, and learning through action commences. The young child is breaking dependence (weaning) from the parent at a deep biological level. The pre-pubescent and adolescent brain differ again —preparing the child to take on a different role—that of intelligent rebellion, moving out of the savannah, seeking a new life for themselves, independence.

Adolescence: ‘Crazy by design’

Fascinating new research on the adolescent brain shows something quite contrary to what had been previously assumed. Up until now it had been believed that the adult brain had formed by age 12. A program of MRI research on the adolescent brain by the National Institute on Health shows that this is not so... that the adolescent brain is going through as many changes as that of the 5 year old and that these changes continue until age 22!

Below age 12 the human brain is full of the most intricate dendritic connections—70,000 miles of dendrites—and as the young person enters adolescence 1-1.5% of these dendrites are forcibly broken. These dendrites are seemingly wandering around in space trying to re-connect. Abbott suggests that the quality of learning in the early years conditions the ability of the teenager to do something very different, i.e. to take on a new role. Research suggests that the two agendas are interconnected.

“It really is this internal mechanism that keeps us from becoming clones of our parents...an evolutionary adaptation that forces the adolescent to learn on its own—to climb the next mountain, cross the stream, go out into the unknown—like our ancestors we are here because we knew how to deal with our mistakes... It is out of human biology that we start off absolutely dependent on other people...how much we build.
networks (in the brain) gives us the mechanisms for rebelling later on... Adolescence is a fundamental part of the human story. " (John Abbott)

Adolescence and Schooling

People consistently under perform when driven to live in ways that are utterly unconnected to inherited traits and predispositions. Adolescents were not born to sit in lecture rooms; they like to be interactive learners. There is a ‘grain to the brain’. (J. Abbott)

Some historical comment helped broaden the picture of adolescent learning—giving us a sense of the origin of schooling for adolescents in current society. Abbott pointed to the fact that it has only been in the last 200 years, that we have separated learning from community life. It was the Industrial Revolution in England that took learning out of the communities; before the Industrial Revolution adolescent energy fueled work in communities. Abbott pointed to the writings of Alex de Tocqueville in surveying the development of colonial America as pointing to a better alternative.

De Tocqueville observed that the transition from child to adult appeared to be seamless in America (as compared to the more fractious approaches in Europe) and he attributed this to the role of the adolescent in society. Adolescents worked as apprentices, learning and working alongside adult mentors. The energy of adolescence was harnessed for the public good and the young apprentice received the opportunity to build independent skills in a supportive environment. However by the 1900’s governments in America started to rethink how to deal with adolescents. By 1930 legislation was put forward 1) to put adolescents in school, 2) to create jobs for teachers... why? For economic reasons, it created millions of teaching jobs and “because we can’t imagine what else to do with them”. Abbott noted that no one asked if this was the right way to encourage learning for young people.

In discussion, the point was made that schooling does not equal learning, and that the community and family are centres of significant learning for young people. It was also suggested that an overemphasis is placed on the institution rather than on the individual and his or her learning. “We are at risk of over-schooling and under-educating our children”.

Given what we know about the significance of brain change and development in the earliest years of life and the child’s predisposition to learn through affection, as well as the adolescent’s need for independence and control –space to do things for themselves—John Abbott asked: “Do we not have an upside down inside out system?” Based on the evidence presented he suggested that we need to completely reassess what we are doing. We put too many children of young ages in large classes and insist on rigid classroom approaches for the education of our teenagers. To get it right in early years no class should be greater than twice the chronological age or up to 10 students at age 5. For adolescents it is critical to create opportunities for them to work on their own, i.e. to be given realistic challenges within a safe environment. Abbott suggested that this will require deep approval by the community at large... as it is the job of everybody to do it.

Learning is essentially a social, collaborative, problem-solving activity. People learn best through interaction with others and these interactions strengthen both the community and the individual. The work of the world gets done in groups. We form our own understanding through a multiplicity of interactions and adapt continuously. (J. Abbott)
Tiger. This is a story of amazing economic growth and distressing social and human results; an example that was cited as ‘being careful what you wish for’. In this story economic development brought with it a loss of community and a diminished sense of its spirituality. Described by the storyteller as a kind of spiritual wasteland, the community’s need to acquire became synonymous with its definition of success.

May I remind you of a Chinese proverb about the definition of hell? Hell is a large room full of starving people—in the middle is a great big cauldron of absolutely glorious bubbling food and the most wonderful smells—the only utensils are chopsticks that are so long that in trying to reach their mouths individuals cannot help but throw the food over their heads. The people are starving and miserable. Heaven is the same place—the difference is that people are feeding one another. (J. Abbott)

Participants commented that what was interesting about this story was that it is not the one we hear about Ireland. Rather Ireland’s success is envied by most other Western countries, who strive to emulate it. The question was posed—where does globalization meet our needs as people? And where have all the storytellers gone?

Have we all lost the ability to synthesize, to see the big picture... or have we so bought into this definition of success that we have missed what is happening? Is there a crisis of meaning in our communities if we believe economic success equates with happiness? Participants (as well as the storyteller) noted that a community’s greatest strength is in knowing who it is—culturally, spiritually, historically—and that in losing that it loses a great deal.

One participant noted that we once marched in the streets in protests against injustice, we now face an even greater challenge and no one is marching. Abbott suggested that we are just beginning to wake up to the fact that we have created hell out of what was supposed to be heaven and in doing so we have produced so many (environmental destructive) byproducts we really will produce hell unless we turn this around quickly.

Abbott linked the story of economic growth and development to environmental devastation: “We are still building motorways and closing railways. We have at most 30-40 years to carry on with this same inverse relationship between resources and output. We also need to think about overexploitation of resources—we are using twice the world’s food output; three times it fresh water supplies—and taking water out of deep water supplies—we are living on the world’s capital, not its interest. — The scale of turnaround needed is going to be phenomenal—we are going to be challenged at every twist and turn of our imaginations and our energy to get people to wake up and realize there is a very good life for everyone around the corner—providing we are not wasting everything around us”...

I am giving you this not to be pessimistic but as a wake up call. The enemy is us; not somebody somewhere else. We need to learn to tell the story of what we need to march for. At the heart of this is—where have all the storytellers gone? What is your power to project these ideas so people begin to rally to them and understand what we are talking about and go through that awful moment that some must go through every day: “Where the hell do we start?”

“We have become a nation that places a lower priority on teaching its children how to thrive socially, intellectually, even spiritually than it does on training them how to consume” (Juliet Schor, “Born to Buy” 2004)

3 “Imagining the Future – An Irish Perspective” Address by Ms Emily O’Reilly at the Annual Céfín Conference, 3rd November 2004


“What are we doing within the structure of formal and informal learning to ensure the youngsters coming up will be better able to deal with the issues that we have almost created by our inability to handle them?” (John Abbott)

As a first step in ‘turning things around’ John Abbott offered that we need to reclaim our school curriculum from the dominance of the western university academic model. To design a new curriculum we need to examine the reality of our internal and external worlds and ask: What is driving the curriculum? What is our model of success? And how can this new curriculum be designed to fit with the ‘grain of the brain’?
According to Abbott, the curriculum for the future needs to support the ability of the learner to see the hidden connections between phenomena—and act as a steward of the environment. We need to assure that the next generation knows that their job is to not harm the planet or other people.

He suggested that a curriculum is needed which:
- Values synthesis as much as analysis; that honours intellect, emotion and individual experience, and spiritual values
- Honours a process of learning that ‘goes with the grain of the brain’ (Subsidiarity) and balances Thinking with Doing
- Enables young people ‘to understand what makes other people tick’ “We are indeed a wondrously ingenious species, but our complex ‘drives’ and the confusion about our moral values also makes us potentially extraordinarily dangerous”

In summarizing the discussion Abbott observed that the information in the workshop has been headed towards responding to a single, critical question. “What curriculum are we (in NB) putting explicitly and implicitly to our young people? Is it that happiness comes from the ability to learn more to buy more—or does it go back to the deepest values that Aristotle would have understood—that curriculum is preparing people to lead the good life without getting into other people’s way?”

**Discussion and Reflection**

This is something more extensive than our formal responsibility—getting our minds around something very big—how we share in community. Something is beginning to come towards us — how we begin to shape stories to respond — how do we pull what we know individually into a community voice?

(Workshop Participant)

Following the presentations participants engaged in some lively discussions about the role of the school in community and the issue of leadership.

1. **Role of Schools**

“I was brought up to see education as a 3 legged stool. There was the home, the community and the school. If any one of the 3 legs got too long then you could not sit comfortably, if 2 were too long and one too short, you were overbalanced. Everything we have talked about at the moment is to get the balance of these 3 ‘right’. It is not just in the world of schooling that we have got the balance wrong – actually we have shifted the whole nature of the ground we are trying to balance on. To do that in many senses we have started to define schooling as if schooling can do the 3 parts. As if schooling has the academic part, the socialization part, the control part. And in a sense we kid ourselves that we can handle all those things within an institutional setting”. (John Abbott)

Participants commented that the issues we are confronting are much broader than those of schooling and the relationship between community and school. As important as those connections are what do we do about the fact that the fabric of the community has broken down? “How do we make connections when the various parts (school, community and home) are broken?” “Where do we begin?” “Have we designed the community out? Have we made school too self contained… and what are the implications of it?”

The discussion led to the 3 legged stool analogy and the suggestion that schools should do what they do well, that is, partner with communities and parents in delivering intellectual development. It was suggested that the issue for educators has been that schools try to do too much and this has resulted in the other partners pulling back, not fulfilling their roles, and in confused boundaries. Learning is a messy business and it is absolutely critical that all 3 partners play their respective roles.
"I think the picture we need to hold in our minds here in NB as in other parts of the world is that children are more than just pupils and if we are responding to them only as pupils and trying to squeeze all these 3 bits into it—we get confused, the children get overloaded, and the challenge to the province brave enough to take on this issue is actually to say that the confusion in this room among 48 people (about role boundaries) probably reflects the confusion out there among the population (3/4 million)." John Abbott

2. Leadership

"Education should in fact be leading society...be the engine, not the caboose"... "In the interest of having enough people wise enough to keep us from running off track—we educators need to revisit our understanding of the paradigm" (Workshop Participant).

Participants also commented on the role of education in leading change. There was a sense of agreement in the view that society is fractured and governments seem unable to capture the moment and take the lead. Abbott reminded participants that “this is an uphill battle; one that will require leadership, from all of us.” With regard to the role of middle managers in the education system he offered the following as indicative of the practical work and insight required:

“If you look to lead invest at least 40% of your time managing yourself; invest at least 30% of your time managing those with authority over you and 15% managing your peers ... Use the remainder to induce those you ‘work for’ to understand and practice the theory” ..."To be a leader in this you are going to have to be pretty rigorous on yourself and accepting that the people around you may be the biggest limitations of the lot. (Dee Hock, CEO Visa with comment from John Abbott)

Abbott further reminded participants that the quality of leadership now called for requires genuine collaboration. No one of us has the answers... “We are all vulnerable. No one of us has anything like all the answers. But together and being very human and understanding what motivates us and what motivates other people, I honestly believe we can get some levers in... that move things in remarkable ways and my clue to this is if it stops with just the 48 of us we are going to fail” (John Abbott).

Reflections on New Brunswick Realities: SIX Colleagues Speak Out

“We need to celebrate what we have that is us—to know our part or our identity in the world”
(Colleague/Participant)

Six colleagues from New Brunswick reflected on how information from the workshop applied to their work. The comments were diverse and broad reaching — and addressed both the challenges and the successes of working in the province. While it was acknowledged that there is much to do to support change — for example several colleagues cited an overemphasis on institutional problems and lack of focus on the individual — they also identified a need for continued dialogue among themselves as being crucial for sorting out how they might move this new paradigm forward. Issues such as the pressure for standardized testing, clarifying what constitutes ‘success’ and the need for new economic models and new models of assessment, were raised.

“God save us from an earth in which all men are the same. God save us from a colony where that is the goal or a culture which assumes that for its norm. Give me a thousand people speaking different tongues, worshipping different gods, dreaming different dreams and I will make of them a greater nation than you can make with ten thousand of your engineered duplicates. For mine will have the spark of greatness in them, while yours will live for conformity, worship mediocrity and take their carefully modulated delight in pre-digested dreams.” C.S. Friedman — quote provided by Workshop Participant.

It was widely acknowledged that there was much to celebrate in the NB school system — as for example the reputation the province (and Canada) holds for high quality education, equitably distributed. Numerous community partnership initiatives were cited including a wide range of mentor and reading programmes such as those with seniors and grandparents; a community aboriginal elders programme; student exchange..."
and coop programmes; programmes in technology such as the ‘lap-top’ programme and joint programmes for youth such as those partnered with the RCMP on topics like alcohol and drug use, and bullying. The Acadian Games was also given as an important example.

“If the only person who has any significant ideas is me—we’re sunk” (Colleague/Participant)

Strategically it was noted that “we need to talk about our successes” and build on the initiatives already in the system. The need to “re-establish a professional voice—to give a frame for politicians to follow”—and the need to build collaborative skills among those in the system were also cited as important considerations in going forward. Support for the professional development of teachers, and for the development of leadership skills throughout the school system and community were identified as important, as was a curriculum that would include such practical skills as management of emotions and conflict resolution. Parents, employers, the churches, Family and Children’s Services, and Mental Health Services were identified as critical stakeholders who need to be ‘brought on board.’

“What is the glue that will bring us together given our current restraints?” (Colleague/Participant)

Abbott suggested that the glue is... “Your understanding of what we are educating for and how that is going to inform every twist and turn of how decisions are made. It is all connected.” To make it work “we will need an informed community at all times”.

Response from John Abbott

“We know there is a big challenge to solve... and that we can’t do it in a single generation—we need to empower the next generation to do things differently—to be as daring as they need to be. In the world before industrial revolution, everyone needed to use many parts of their faculties to survive day to day—we learnt very much on the job. We learnt from what we were doing—the industrial revolution changed that and the paradigm that developed from it was that children needed to be kept in a separate place and that adult life went ahead separate from them. As we have noted this paradigm is changing. We need a paradigm that now says the greatest thing we can do in education—is to be so damn good at the earliest stages that we progressively wean children of their dependence so that by the time they reach age 18 they are as strong as an ox. They are strong enough to feel that no problem is beyond them. But of course that means that the school is going to rely more on the life of the community as the resource that challenges the child... yet part of the industrial revolution has been to water down the concept of community. It is not for nothing is it that people say how wonderful it is to come to NB—in comparison the industrial nature of many communities (in Britain) make them not the sort of place you can get your arms around”—they bristle with tension. So we are talking as much about the re-creation of community as we are about the nature of the school. You might ask—who are we to talk about that? Great revolutions never started with more than 2 or 3 people with a vision... more than a vision... “All men dream dreams, but not equally. Those who dream in the dusty recesses of the night wake to find their dreams were vanities... But beware of the dreamers of the day, for they live to make their dreams realities” (T.E.Lawrence). We can do it!

The Princeton Example

The story of a community in the US was given as an example of where and how we might begin. It is an example of “creating a body of opinion around you... That begins to understand and resonate with the many things you are trying to do—then partnering in a practical way”.

In Princeton the school system was at the bottom of pecking order. Superintendents came and went. The population of the town was about 80,000 of which only a small number used the school system. A new recruit was interviewed and said that if he got the job he would want to go out and talk to people in the community to see what they thought ‘education was for.’

He didn’t get the job, but later when there were no other candidates the Town Councilors relented, called him back and offered him the position of superintendent. The new superintendent decided he would go out to at least 60 different communities to find out ‘what they thought education was for’... What he found through months of community meetings were vastly diverging views. There were however, some patterns and common threads among the many groups and he continued working with them in constructing a vision
of education for the whole community. In summary this vision included a belief in functional literacy and that comfort comes with knowing how to learn, think, collaborate, and make decisions.

It was widely believed in the community that these 4 skills (as listed above) helped to build an individual's confidence. The school curriculum topics stayed the same but over time the 4 skills were integrated and internalized to the point where they became part of the purpose of all k-12 courses. As a result students became more proficient at their ability to learn. They succeeded so well that they were measurably better motivated and able to master material.

The school then made a decision to increase teacher/student ratios—allowing 10% of budget to go to professional development. This in turn helped the teachers develop. The changes in this system were talked about by parents, employers, and all members of the community. The school system went from the 'bottom of the pecking order' to an item of great interest and pride for the whole community.

Next Steps

"Education will proceed well if it falls in the footsteps of nature... if the pupil is not overburdened... if progress is allowed to be slow". Comenius Czech philosopher (1638)

This process is like an onion skin... I am still un-wrapping the layers (Workshop Participant)

In closing the workshop participants acknowledged a number of follow up actions that would be important to them. These included taking time to reflect on the information that had been presented and finding ways to continue the dialogue. Individuals commented that success in this initiative will only come with working together and that the work of building community had already started "right here in this room".

I don't want to lose the connection. How do we move collectively? (Workshop Participant)

Why should meeting high challenges with high skills be something we enjoy doing for its own sake without extrinsic rewards? The reason does not seem to be that we were brainwashed as children or socialized into doing difficult things. It is more likely that we were born with a preference for acting at our fullest potential.

Perhaps enjoying mastery and confidence is an evolutionary adaptation just as it is adaptive to find pleasure in food and sex. In the development of the human nervous system a connection must have been established between hard work and a sense of pleasure even when the work was not strictly necessary. It is this connection that makes creativity and progress possible.

(Becoming Adult: How Teenagers Prepare for the World of Work, Csikszentmihalyi and Schneider 2000)

‘Work starts with our own families; with initiatives already begun, with supporting service learning, co-operative and youth apprenticeships; with building and improving the systems and structures already in place; and with sharing with other members in our home communities’.

The tricky point of change—would be balancing it with current system. “We can’t shift gears completely we need to balance how we approach this—it will not be by adding a new programme. We need to look at what we have and enhance it”.

John Abbott added that he did not want people to feel overwhelmed by the task, or to see this as additional work—it is not an initiative in that sense... rather this is about re-building a house with the same materials... We are trying to intellectually wean youngsters — so they will be as strong without us as with us.

He suggested that as much as we need to re-think our approach to young children—we need to keep adolescents foremost in our minds. They are the rainforest.

Abbott again reminded participants that adolescence is one of the most recent adaptations in the evolution of the human brain—and that this adaptation first occurred 60,000 years ago in response to the external environment. He noted that it is critical to recognize adolescence for what it is—an evolutionary adaptation that has allowed for the proliferation of the human species over the last 60,000 years. According to Abbott adolescence needs to be framed as a ‘bonus’, an ‘opportunity’, rather than a ‘problem’. The biological reality of adolescence forces individuals to think beyond self imposed limitations. It is the energy and attraction to hard work that is characteristic of this stage of life that, if properly nurtured and supported, offers humankind its best chance for meeting the next set of challenges proffered by the external world, our environment.
Last Words from John Abbott

In closing, Abbott returned to the theme of story-telling and to the realization that the ‘new’ stories we are learning to tell, while composed of human and scientific truths, are also and most importantly, spiritual stories. “We never want to solve the paradox of life or reduce young people’s search for themselves”.

Nonetheless we do need to wake up to the enormity of what is happening in our environment and to the ways in which we can respond to the challenges before us. “The crisis of our time may be knowing so much— but possibly not understanding it.” Abbott called us to make sense of the world around us...in the way that humans do, through individual and collective stories. He suggested that we can connect to our spirituality by becoming more aware of what it means to be fully alive to the challenges before us. Quoting Neil Postman, Abbott suggested that “We live by stories... our stories help us relate ourselves in time and place— we evolve stories as we go through life— every generation passes stories on”. Thus Abbott made the point that the route to change may lie not in monumental acts of heroism, but in the ancient and very human traditions of dialogue and storytelling. Stories are a part of us; they are how we learn the spiritual, emotional and scientific ‘truths’ of our generation and those before us.

“I don’t want anyone to go out feeling devastated by enormity of task... we can start with whatever we need to do— begin the process of extending a dialogue that progresses from community to community across the province.” (John Abbott)

Abbott sees each of us as having a role to play in more fully appreciating the present and in creating a new story—by sharing in dialogue and sowing the seeds of change. It is in sustained, incremental and small steps that he suggests we can enable a new way of being in the world, and become “prophets of a future not our own.”

“Imagine ourselves as gardeners— sowing the seed

“This is what we are about. We plant seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capacities.

We cannot do everything and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something and enables us to do it well. It may be incomplete but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord’s grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end result but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers not master builders, ministers not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.”

(The last prayer of Oscar Romero, the Archbishop of San Salvatore, just before he was murdered on the steps of his cathedral.)
From “Heaven and Helsinki”,

an article in the Guardian on Sep 16th 2003

In July Finland came top of the literacy tables published by the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment.

In September Finland takes its “usual place” at the head of the rank educational performance of countries in the industrialised world, p OEDC.

Only 3% of Finnish students end their schooling at 16; 70% go on secondary schools, 27% to a vocational school, for three years. 60

Higher Education.

John Crace concludes from his research in Finland “The guiding principle of Finnish Education is student centred democracy” and:

No streaming whatsoever
An extremely small private sector
Students choose what they study and which route to take
No national testing
Formal exams only at end of secondary school
Faith and trust in a teachers ability
Inspection to provide guidance not criticism
No league tables
No lists of good or bad schools
Freedom and autonomy are the Finnish way, not naming and shaming.
Creativity in pedagogy is encouraged
Being a teacher is something to be proud of
It is not about money, salaries are only moderate.
Teachers are not constantly monitored
Little government bureaucracy to comply with
Freedom to teach the way you want
Teachers are valued and respected
Children seem to understand instinctively that school is a place to work
Early intervention allows help to be given sooner rather than later
The Headteacher and members of staff appear relaxed
The atmosphere in the staff room stress-free, informal and professional
Schools have close links with the social services
The survival of the Presbyterian work ethic ensures that learning has not lost its value
The language is orthographically simple
The population is relatively homogeneous
Public libraries are second to none

And in particular debate and questioning of learning is not seen as political heresy

IMPROVING EDUCATION IS SEEN AS A SOCIAL ISSUE NOT A GOVERNMENT ONE.