



## **Guiding Policy: Separating the wood from the trees**

**John Abbott<sup>1</sup>**

Director, The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Initiative – [johnabbott@21learn.org](mailto:johnabbott@21learn.org)

John Abbott, globally acclaimed education thinker, poses a challenge: What kind of education do you feel is appropriate for what kind of a world? As academics, can you help your countrymen see the wood for the trees? It really is over to everyone with the power to think through these issues to give your country, and others, the necessary intellectual lead to overcome generations of inertia, and sloppy compromises. Abbott explores the premise of this challenge in this article.

---

<sup>1</sup> Director, The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Initiative – [johnabbott@21learn.org](mailto:johnabbott@21learn.org)



A week before completing this article a flurry of media interest was generated by the OECD's "Survey of Adult Skills" which highlighted (shockingly) that in my country – England – those aged over 55 had better numeracy and literacy levels than those aged 16-24. Knives were out; heads had to roll (if they were still alive).

This survey may not have caused much of a stir in Australia for you came reassuringly in the middle band of 24 countries (7<sup>th</sup> for literacy and 14<sup>th</sup> for numeracy). But here, the place in which I have generated so many of the ideas that you have invited me to talk about, the effect was traumatic. England came 22<sup>nd</sup> for literacy and 21<sup>st</sup> for numeracy<sup>2</sup>. My countrymen were undoubtedly the 'dunce' in the OECD corner with only the United States (the home of much of this policy muddle), Spain and Italy beneath us. Truth is we English have been in that corner not simply for decades, but as the work I have been producing over the last 25 years has shown, for generations. Having worked and studied around the world throughout that task, I feel like an intellectual refugee from my own country.

What can I say from that perspective that could be helpful to you Australians?

### **Battery Hens or Free-range Chickens?**

Statistics only tell part of the story. Speaking in Melbourne and Adelaide some 20 years ago, and more recently in Sydney, I cast my argument around the question, *'What Kind of Education for What Kind of World; Do we want our children to grow up as battery hens or free-range chickens?'* To ask whether an education system is like a battery hen farm or a free-range farmyard raises significant questions. To an accountant the exact measurement of inputs given to battery hens can give the farmer a more apparent real return on his investment than the less precise practice of leaving hens to wander around the farmyard. But if, for any reason, the farmer got the shape of the wire cages wrong and the hens had to be released they would, through lack of exercise, hardly stand

---

<sup>2</sup> "When this is weighted with other factors, such as the socio-economic background of people taking the test, it shows that England is the only country in the survey where results are going backwards - with the older cohort better than the younger" (BBC news, 8<sup>th</sup> October 2013).



on their own feet, or flap their wings. Lacking the natural adaptability of a free-range cockerel who can always flap its wings and escape to the nearest beam or branch, the over-bred battery hen becomes a perfect morsel for a predatory fox to gobble up.

Whether a farmer decides to invest in a battery hen plant, or a free-range farmyard, is ultimately a question of the kind of chicken (meat and eggs) he wants to produce, and the market he is seeking to satisfy.

The same has to be true of education. To develop a system of education that reduces the individual's adaptability so as to enhance a set of special skills – and so opt for a battery hen-type schooling – requires a dangerous certainty about the future. If there is any doubt about the kind of world our children will inherit, then a free-range approach that encourages adaptability and creativity is not only desirable but essential.

To me everything I have learnt over the past 15-20 years about the multiple forms of innate human predispositions to do things in certain preferred ways, has always to be subsumed to what I once heard an eminent neurobiologist say, “*in terms of our everyday decisions what matters most are the value systems of the society in which we live*”. In other words, although it seems that in the long term we have strong internal mechanisms to balance our competitive instincts with collaboration, and our material ambitions with our need for human affection, in the short term if everything around us urges us to be ultra-inquisitive then the most aggressively competitive person will win through. But that is only in the short term; for a surfeit of acquisition, so the systematic study of the evolution of human behaviour shows us, inevitably wrecks a society.

### **Pilgrim or Customer?**

Another way of challenging ourselves to think about what we are doing, is to ask whether we see children as pilgrims or customers? ‘Customer’ surely defines a specifically materialistic concept of life. John Bunyan's Pilgrim<sup>3</sup> is a man making his troubled way through life with a heavy load upon his back, beset on all sides by temptations and threats to belief. A very human kind of being who could see beyond him the House Beautiful, yet could still flounder in the Slough of

---

<sup>3</sup> Bunyan, J. (1678) *The Pilgrim's Progress*



Despond. A Pilgrim moved by the story of the Good Samaritan to know that, however rough the going was for him, there were always others who were worse off. A man who grew stronger with every obstacle that he learned to overcome.

Pilgrim or customer? A creator of his own eternal destiny, or a purchaser of a range of goods and services as defined by someone else? A thinker able to take responsibility for his own actions, and willing to accept responsibility for working for the common good, or a man who, in his frustration that nothing he has so far pulled off the shelves of a supermarket quite suits his taste, searches for yet another perfect brand? That one has to raise such a question about who we think we are - pilgrim or customer - has to be a sign of the moral confusion of our times.

And these are confused times, as Tony Judt explains in 'Ill Fares the Land'

### **Ill Fares the Land**

Writing in 2010, Judt as he was dying from motor-neurone disease, captured this dilemma, when he quoted Adam Smith, "No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable". Judt elaborated:

*"Something is profoundly wrong with the way we live today. For 30 years we made a virtue out of the pursuit of material self-interest: indeed, this very pursuit now constitutes whatever remains of our sense of collective purpose. We know what things cost, but have no idea what they are worth. We no longer ask of a judicial ruling or a legislative act: Is it good? Is it fair? Will it bring about a better society or a better world?..."*

*"The materialistic and selfish quality of contemporary life is not inherent in the human condition. Much of what appears 'natural' today dates from the 1980s: the obsession with wealth creation, the cult of privatisation and the private sector, the growing disparities of rich and poor. And above all, the rhetoric which accompanies these: uncritical admiration for unfettered markets, disdain for the public sector, the delusion of endless growth."*



*“We cannot go on living like this.<sup>4</sup> And yet we seem unable to conceive of alternatives....If young people today are at a loss, it is not for want of targets. Any conversation with students or schoolchildren will produce a startling checklist of anxieties.....but accompanying these fears is a general sentiment of frustration: ‘we’ know something is wrong ....but what can we believe in? What should we do?<sup>5</sup>”*

As the British Coalition Government was finding its feet, and co-terminus with Judt’s writing, I drew much of this together and circulated it as a paper entitled ‘No Small Matter’.

### **No Small Matter**

This takes us to the world we are now living in. Read today’s papers carefully, listen to the radio or watch television and ask yourself, with the contrasting vision of the battery hen farm or the free-range farmyard firmly in your mind, which way do you see politicians trying to lead us? Then put the focus on yourself; which way do you think we should go? And is there a compromise? In terms of education can we bring children up to experience both tightly-prescribed experience, and the open world of exploration and discovery? And, if so, what are the difficulties? If there were easy answers to this I doubt whether we would be in our present predicament.

The spectacular rise in standards of living in recent years especially within the English-speaking nations, has created an extraordinary paradox. The busier and wealthier we have become the less time we seem to have for each other. This has created a crisis in how we educate our young people. It is a crisis of many parts that threatens the very basis of civilised life.

We undoubtedly live in extraordinary times, rich in opportunity yet loaded with uncertainty. While it is predicted that a healthy child born today in the UK has a 25% chance of living to the age of one hundred, only a decade ago the then President of the Royal Society gave humankind only a 50-50 chance of surviving that same hundred years... because, he argued, our technological knowledge is outpacing our wisdom, and our ability to make balanced judgements: a most dangerous mismatch.

---

<sup>4</sup> “Ill Fares the land, to hastening ills a prey, where wealth accumulates, and men decay”, Oliver Goldsmith, *The Deserted Village*, 1770.

<sup>5</sup> Judt, T. (2010) *Ill Fares the Land*, pp 1-3.



The truth has to be that, the more confused adults feel themselves to be about the big issues of life, the less willing they are in their turn to give their adolescent children the space in which to work things out for themselves. Uncertain adults breed uninvolved, inexperienced adolescents: a society that has to rediscover reasons for its faith in the future is simply a mean place in which to bring up our children.

Such uncertainty stems from the competing Customer and Pilgrim narratives and their critical differences – the first argues for the rights of the individual, the latter for interdependence and community. Beyond this even, the struggle is being fought over the remains of much older narratives, well-known in their different guises to our ancestors. These older narratives had been about moderating and civilising the competing drivers of human behaviour that would otherwise bring chaos to individuals and societies by establishing a sense of the common good. In today's "let's have it all now" society we have forgotten the social significance of those spiritual traditions (referred by many as ethical and philosophic) which in the past sought to "bind"<sup>6</sup> the individual and community together for mutual benefit and create a sense of meaning.

With the weakening of commonly agreed codes of behaviour and morality, governments have seen it necessary, even desirable, to describe in ever finer detail what individuals must, and must not, do. What has life become if we are so reduced to doing only what we are told to do, that we no longer have it within us to rise to the challenge of being personally responsible?

A whole new way of doing things has to be found. It is not just the political realm, or the economic, or even the scientific or the spiritual realms, but it is all of these elements of human experience that have to be considered. And considered in their entirety, not separately. Some self-selected group of dedicated individuals in Australia, or elsewhere, has to have the foresight, energy and imagination to transcend the comfortable rules and procedures of self-defining disciplines and embark on a synthesis of facts and theories that, however inconvenient this might be, seeks to appreciate the entire situation. Like an Impressionist painting composed of thousands upon thousands of apparently disconnected dots, we only understand the brilliance of

---

<sup>6</sup> The word '*religion*' is derived from the Latin word '*religio*', which means 'to bind together'.



the artist when our focus shifts from seeing the separate dots to suddenly appreciating the picture as a whole.

Even when we have the whole picture nothing can be achieved without a fundamental change of heart on the part of the people themselves. To activate a population – be it in England or Australia – involves constructing a persuasive, alternative vision which is so compelling that the contemporary narrative is shown up for what it is – something shallow, utilitarian and demeaning to the grandeur of the human intellect<sup>7</sup>.

A campaign to reverse an overschooled but undereducated society cannot be masterminded by any single, brilliant strategist. Here is the rub, for it requires distributed leadership, and for that to be effective everyone needs to be really knowledgeable about why they are involved and the rightness and urgency of the cause.<sup>8</sup>

Our post-modern societies have done their best to convince us that there is no such thing as a shared moral code. But without such commonly held beliefs simplistic, politically-correct statements that reflect only the lowest common denominator, squeeze the life out of education by dulling the vigour of pupil and teacher alike. For young people to utilise their innate predispositions to the full, they need both a formal, rigorous curriculum and a whole experience of life that will later sustain and make them strong enough to deal with all the vagaries of life. John Milton, a man of towering intellect and much practical common sense, spoke in the midst of all the turmoil of the English Civil War in 1642, from a time before reductionism sought to undermine the glory and complexity of what being human could mean. He gave a definition of education nearly four centuries ago that I would argue we need to rediscover;

*I call therefore a complete and generous education that which fits a man to perform justly, skilfully and magnanimously, all the offices both public and private, of peace and war.*

Ponder those words – an education that was *complete and generous* (no half measures here), that *fits* (like a tailor making a bespoke suit), so as to *perform* (not just talk) *justly* (so requiring a fine appreciation of ethics) *skilfully* (Milton's definition of skill included the practical as well as the

---

<sup>7</sup> See 'The Brilliance of Their Minds', proposed TV script available on [www.born-to-learn.org](http://www.born-to-learn.org)

<sup>8</sup> Under the banner of Responsible Subversives, the Initiative seeks to build an ever more influential network of people able to draw all these ideas together. See [www.responsible-subversives.org](http://www.responsible-subversives.org).



theoretical) and *magnanimously* (with a big heart and empathy with others), *not only in his private affairs but publicly* when things were going well as well as badly. The rounded person, the adaptable, free-range person, not the efficient and single-purpose battery hen. People who can think for themselves, however complex the situation.

To establish such a national vision of education for our own times, in terms comparable to Milton, has to be the starting point for a strategy in the English speaking world that would reverse our increasingly overschooled but undereducated societies, and recognise that real education has to start far away from the gates of the school.

It should be self-evident that the better educated people are, the less they need to be told what to do. Unfortunately, the reverse is equally true, for the less educated people are the more government feels it necessary to issue larger rule-books. As regulation is extended quickly it becomes self-perpetuating, for the more people accept being told what to do, the less they think for themselves. Which is the tragic point that many English-speaking countries now seem to have reached. We have become so over-taught that we have lost the art of thinking for ourselves.

The second part of the strategy involves exploiting the findings from neurobiology, cognitive science and cognitive apprenticeship<sup>9</sup>. This will give us a whole new way of looking at the evolved grain of the brain, and calls for a pedagogy that works to progressively wean the growing child away from its dependence on instruction.

That pedagogy has to honour the principle of Subsidiarity;

*It is wrong for a superior to hold to itself the right of making a decision which an inferior is already qualified to do for itself.*

Just as parents have to let go of their children as they grow older, so subsidiarity necessitates a relationship of trust, not control. If, as an adult or an inquisitive young person, we equip ourselves to be able to do something and are then constantly over-ruled or micro-managed, we fast lose our motivation as control slips away from us (which is exactly what happens to teachers subjected to too much micro-management).

---

<sup>9</sup> See Abbott, J. (2004) 'Lieutenant Peter Puget, the grain of the brain and modern society's failure to understand adolescents', available at [www.21learn.org](http://www.21learn.org)



Thirdly, Australia as with many other nations that took their initial design from England, needs an education system that will reverse the priority first gained by Dr Arnold for secondary education in the mid-nineteenth century and further extended throughout the last century. It is imperative to see the primary sector as the time and place where the essential foundations for lifelong learning are built. Once that essential design fault has been recognised then the senior years of education would involve teachers and schools sharing with the greater community the responsibility for providing adolescents with a range of in-school as well as community-based learning opportunities.

A clear vision that links self-starting individuals to the needs of dynamic communities, based on a form of learning that goes from cradle to grave and is practiced as much beyond the walls of the school as it is within classrooms, would rapidly reinvigorate the youth of the English-speaking world. Your own fifth Governor of New South Wales, Lachlan MacQuarrie, when asked years later how he had managed to bring such a sense of order and effectiveness to the new colony, harked back to his own youth in the Hebrides, saying, *“If you are born on a mere speck of land in the middle of the ocean you quickly discover how things work, and why people do as they do. Learn that lesson well, and you are equipped to become a citizen of the world.”* Such emerging citizens of the world would accumulate the skills and wisdom necessary to direct mankind’s technological discoveries in ways, as proposed by the then Sir Martin Rees (now Lord Rees) at the Millennium, that *“would lead to a near eternity filled with evermore complex and subtle forms of life”* rather than *“one filled with nothing but base matter”*.

At a conference in the United States some 15 years ago to discuss these issues, an American participant said with obvious passion, *“Knowing what we now know, we no longer have the moral authority to carry on doing what we have always done”*. To Americans with their philosophic tradition deeply rooted in 17<sup>th</sup> Century Puritan thought such high-flying sentiments come to them more easily than they do to us English. A century and a half later when Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence he had in mind the kind of covenant the Pilgrim Fathers had signed aboard the Mayflower: *“We whose names are underwritten... solemnly and mutually in the presence of God and one another, covenant and combine our services together in a civil body politic.”*



In a covenantal relationship, no amount of shoulder-shrugging, no anguished appeal to politicians, no recourse to blaming other people's inertia, can ever excuse the knowledgeable individual's responsibility to get up and do it for themselves. Later the 1662 Prayer Book, the work of literature which stood only second to the Bible in the formation of American philosophic thought, which to the modern mind may seem extraordinary, said;

*“We have left undone those things which we ought to have done;  
And we have done those things we ought not to have done;  
And there is no health in us.”*

To fail to do something which you are required to do is one thing. But not to do something which you know ought to be done makes a person equally culpable, in a covenantal relationship, of letting other people down. Even if we can see no clear 'higher' purpose to life, Tony Judt, reflecting on Pope John Paul II from his own non-practicing religious background, comments, *“We need to ascribe meaning to our actions in a way that transcends them. Merely asserting that something is, or is not, in our material interest will not satisfy most of us, most of the time.”*<sup>10</sup>

Now, in 2013, this remains the critical point. Six years ago evolutionary psychologists<sup>11</sup> reinforced what Darwin had acknowledged a century and a half earlier that while high standards of morality give slight or no advantage to individuals, research now shows that altruistic behaviour most certainly benefits the genes of the whole group. They summarised this as *“selfishness beats altruism within groups; altruistic groups beat selfish groups every time”*. To evolutionary psychologists, as to sociologists, head masters, house masters, chief executives of corporations as well as to politicians, the concept of “group size” is critical.

Recent research underlines the psychological demand on primates of living in large groups means that the preferred group size correlates closely to a species' brain size ... and it has been demonstrated over and over again around the world that this for Homo Sapiens means a group of around 150 – be it in living on a housing estate, a member of a company of soldiers, or *actual* friends on Facebook ... “friendship” is defined by those people we actually know, and who know us, and amongst whom there is a sense of positive reciprocity. Over history successful empires were always those with the highest levels of collaborative behaviour... that is why those who

---

<sup>10</sup> Judt, T (2010) 'Ill fares the Land', p180.

<sup>11</sup> Wilson, D. S. and Wilson, E. O. 'Evolution: Survival of Selflessness', *New Scientist*, November 3, 2007.



enthusiastically sought to embrace British PM David Cameron's concept of 'Big Society' can't, at the same time, advocate social policies overtly based on competition and hierarchies. They simply don't mix.

This has nothing to do with regulation or performability (the concept much favoured by previous British Premier Tony Blair). Policy-makers have frequently forgotten that most day-to-day activity has nothing to do with the law; it is 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, to the playground and in all their interaction with members of the community.

Society is an 'aggregate' (something formed from a mass of loosely connected fragments) of people living together in more or less orderly communities, held together through its own natural, organic procedures. Being an aggregate is society's strength; or, put another way, society is the aggregate of what people think for themselves. Through the sharing of our thoughts we come to appreciate the diversity and the collective of society as a whole.....and are the richer for that.

Many of us will have assumed for the past 25 years that we are beset by a "crisis in schooling", but what we have been extraordinarily slow to recognise that this is only a symptom of a far deeper, more insidious, problem. It is the way in which market efficiency has become, for politicians, the determining factor in so many aspects of social policy. Writing in 2004 a journalist<sup>12</sup>, a self-confessed atheist, commended two bishops for being concerned with, "*the yearning for happiness and fulfilment ... and for an ethic of human flourishing that is rooted in human nature.*" She went on to observe, "*it has become almost unthinkable to go to politicians for this kind of language or ambition. [If they told us] that their main intention in public life was to make us happier, or to challenge us to rethink our values we would laugh in their faces. The political arena has shrivelled drastically, back to a technocratic promise to use our taxes to provide services a bit more efficiently than the other lot.*"

Herein lies the problem which now infects every aspect of our schools, homes and communities. It is the way in which the meaning of efficiency has been perverted to become an end in itself –

---

<sup>12</sup> Jackie Ashley, The Guardian, May 2004.



not a means to a more significant set of ends. Efficiency is a concept dating back to the Greeks, but the Greeks defined efficiency in a significantly different way to early 21<sup>st</sup> Century advocates of open markets. To the Greeks, efficiency was a means towards achieving virtue, both for the individual and the state, it was about the best combination and utilisation of human resources to achieve the ideal state.

Using Subsidiarity as a concept to define the evolving relationship between a pupil and a teacher, and between parents and children, is not a principle that appeals to advocates of the market economy. To them subsidiarity is too imprecise, messy, problematic, and individualistic to be applied to a system driven by known inputs and measured in terms of quantifiable outputs. Yet subsidiarity was the principle (even though not known by that name) that drove the craft ethic that gave splendid birth to the Industrial Revolution. Those men were entrepreneurs because they felt in control of their destiny.

The scientific management of labour that Fredrick Winslow-Taylor and others later set out had absolutely no regard for the Greek concept of the virtuous state. What these men offered was a process that had so many immediate material benefits that men in their tens of thousands forsook the concept of the equitable distribution of labour, for the benefits of the accumulation of capital for those with the money to do so, and the almost inevitable dumbing-down of those whose only role was to labour.

What the peoples of the English-speaking world have been appallingly slow to do, however, is to recognise that the industrial model of schooling with its heavy emphasis on control, prescription and uniformity simply enshrines efficiency as an end in itself. Under the guise of continually reforming the conventional model of schooling, English speaking countries have often failed to see the need to rebuild the process of learning around the way in which children actually accumulate and use knowledge. The nation that once prided itself on its practical approach to life has become blind to the need to empower people to work things out for themselves. In the name of empowering people it has substituted instead a crude system of uniform credentialism, and imposed on education – as with other facets of social life – the tightest regulated and heavily managed set of systems.



Writing in his book ‘Growth Fetish’ your fellow Australian Clive Hamilton observed; *“Today the compulsion to participate in a consumer society is no longer prompted by material needs (these have been largely solved) but rather by political coercion. It is prompted by the belief of the great mass of ordinary people, taking their cue from political leaders, that defined happiness as society, as with individuals, must be forever getting richer, regardless of how wealthy they already are.”*<sup>13</sup>

This is a basic contradiction of a profound evolutionary principle; to satisfy human basic needs increases happiness, but the ongoing search an ever-expanded set of “wants” as set out most persuasively by the advertising industry, is largely an illusionary journey with no end in sight. Robert Wright, one of the founders of evolutionary psychology, put it neatly and succinctly; *“we are born to be effective animals, not happy ones”*. It seems that we are at our most satisfied when we feel that we have genuinely earned our reward and are proud of the job which we have laboured to do. The basic problem in our society is that too many people don’t have that level of involvement with their work. A reward too easily gained (either in school or in one’s greater life) means little to us. Therein lies so much of our dissatisfaction with modern life.

Some while ago the President of the American Psychological Association, Martin E.P. Seligman<sup>14</sup>, attributed the massive rise in unhappiness, as defined by him as various forms of depression, to four factors; an excessive emphasis on individualism, the constant attempt to bolster self-esteem, the belief that any mistake is due to victimisation (and is not your fault), and the continuous cult of consumerism. Of course teachers have been sensing for a long time that the convergence of these four factors in children’s homes creates such deep tensions which are then transmitted into the classroom – many of which schools are totally powerless to rectify.

This is why Milton’s statement about a complete and generous education made all those years ago is so entirely relevant to our own times if, and only if, we can accept the responsibility of defining a society characterised by justice, skilfulness and magnanimity.

For the sake of the children, our children, other people’s children, this cannot go on any longer.

---

<sup>13</sup> Hamilton, C. (2004) *Growth Fetish*, Pluto

<sup>14</sup> See [www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu](http://www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu)



There is one key issue to address. In 1946 John Maynard-Keynes said “*the day is not far off 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 reoccupied by our real problems – the problems of life and of human relations, of creation and behaviour and religion*”<sup>15</sup>.

So successful were the Allies in following up Maynard-Keynes’ economic theory, that within 15 years, the American Manufacturers’ Association, in association with marketing experts, declared, “*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.*”<sup>16</sup>

That was a depressing 60 years ago.

### **The World Moves On...**

As the sense of civil society weakens so the social contract on which the bringing up of your own child is assigned to someone else can all too quickly lead to education becoming a matter for private gain, not for public good. When that happens civil society is still further undermined. Functional civil society and genuine democracy walk hand in hand, if they don’t, one, or each, stumbles. The belief in performability, of management by objectives, is at long last starting to falter, and it is faltering for very human reasons. Humans are a collaborative species – it is how we are. These are themes recently taken up by Professor Michael Fullan, well known to you for his work in Australia.

### **Can the Learning Species fit into (Today’s) Schools<sup>17</sup>?**

Fullan, commenting<sup>18</sup> on recent reform programmes in the US, Australia and Britain, asked the question that has troubled many of us in different situations – if you want to improve a whole

---

<sup>15</sup> Maynard-Keynes, J. (1946) *First Annual Report of the Arts Council (1945-1946)*

<sup>16</sup> Packard, Vance (1960) *The Waste Makers*, Penguin.

<sup>17</sup> Abbott, J. (2005) *Can the learning Species Fit into Schools?*, available at <http://www.21learn.org/archive/can-the-learning-species-fit-into-schools/>



system do you *build* this up slowly from the foundations, or do you *beat* it up from the top down, in the hopeful expectation that you will be able to pick up the bits quickly enough to build something better? Fullan accepts the truism that when dealing with schools the best teachers are just like the best pupils... they give of their best when they are captivated by the excitement of what they are doing, feel totally in control, yet confident enough to ask for help when they need it. Poor teachers, like poor pupils, however perform even more sluggishly when they are swamped by a veritable tsunami of instructions and directions that mean very little to them and to which they cannot emotionally commit (see Csikszentmihalyi's theory of "flow"<sup>19</sup>).

To Fullan, this is what whole-system reform involves – it accepts the moral imperative “*of raising the bar (for all students) and closing the gap (for lower performing groups) relative to higher order skills and competencies needed to become successful world citizens*”<sup>20</sup>. It is dependent upon using the combined intrinsic motivations of students and teachers in improving learning outcomes; “*Unless everyone can feel involved, and see the ideas as being valuable, nothing much will happen*”.

Those jurisdictions in a hurry often adopt what Fullan calls “*the Wrong Drivers*”, because initially these appear highly compelling, suggest that the leaders recognise the urgency of the problem, and have the necessary ‘clout’. They emphasise test results, teacher appraisal, rewards and punishments, and emphasise individual schools’ improvement rather than investing in the overall capacity of the whole system. They concentrate on individuals, rather than building group solutions, and invest heavily in digital technology rather than constructing the appropriate pedagogy. Fullan comments for the benefit of reformers everywhere, that, “*there is no way such ambitious and admirable nationwide goals will be met... for they cannot generate on a large scale the kind of intrinsic motivational energy. As aspirations they sound great but they fail to get at changing the day-to-day culture of school systems*”. Collaboration beats competition every time.

Fullan knows that getting the balance between concentrating on capacity-building and what can become an excessive dose of accountability is always difficult. He concludes; “*jettison blatant merit pay, reduce excessive testing, don't depend on teacher appraisal as a driver, and don't treat world-class standards as a panacea. Instead, make the instruction–assessment nexus the core driver, and back this up with a system that*

---

<sup>18</sup> Fullan, M. (2011) *Choosing the Right Drivers for Whole Systems Reform*, Centre for Strategic Education, Australia

<sup>19</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990) *Flow*, Harper and Row.

<sup>20</sup> Fullan 2011, p.3



*mobilises the masses to make the moral imperative a reality. Change the very culture of the teaching profession... The essence of whole systems success is continuous instructional improvement, closely linked to student engagement. If the wrong drivers have their way they undercut intrinsic motivation and group development. If accountability and assessment don't kill you, individualistic appraisal will come along to make sure you are dead".*

### **Going With the Grain of the Brain**

Convening a multi-discipline and multinational team of specialists from all those disciplines involved in human learning in the late 1990s, the Initiative summarised its findings as 'going with the grain of the brain'<sup>21</sup>. This statement epitomises the extraordinary reform programme in Finland which has taken it from a country nearly obliterated by Russia in the concluding stages of the Second World War, to the point whereby it consistently heads the OECD statistics for almost every aspect of schooling (including the OECD's 'Survey of Adult Skills', October 2013). Their way of achieving this effectively demonstrates Fullan's argument and, in the words of their own recent commentator Pasi Sahlberg<sup>22</sup>, challenges those premises of the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM), on which so much of the western world is operating.

Sahlberg notes that "*Finland is the land of non-governmental organisations. There are 130,000 registered groups or societies in Finland, with a total of 15 million members. On average each Fin belongs to three associations or societies... many of which have clear educational aims and principles. Young people learn social skills, problem solving and leadership when they participate in these associations.*" To the Finns community really matters, and this is more than a pious hope. Sahlberg continues by stressing that competition-driven education environments are stuck in a tough educational dilemma as the excessive emphasis on schooling not only threatens the child's life in school, but weakens the community and social capital at the same time. Importantly he says, "*although the pursuit of transparency and accountability provides parents and politicians with more information, it also builds suspicion, low morale, and professional cynicism*".

---

<sup>21</sup> The 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning Initiative (2005) *Adolescence: A Critical Evolutionary Adaptation*, available at [www.21learn.org/archive/adolescence-a-critical-evolutionary-adaptation/](http://www.21learn.org/archive/adolescence-a-critical-evolutionary-adaptation/)

<sup>22</sup> Sahlberg, P. (2011) *Finnish Lessons*, Teachers College, Columbia University



'Finnish Lessons' seeks to set the Finnish experience in the context of a world-wide search for higher educational standards; "*This book*," Sahlberg wrote, "*does not suggest that tougher competition, more data, abolishing teacher unions, opening more charter schools, or employing corporate-world management models in education systems would bring about a resolution of these crises - quite the opposite. The main message ...is that there is another way.....this includes improving the teaching force, limiting student testing to a necessary minimum, placing responsibility and trust before accountability, and handing over school - and district-level leadership to educational professionals.*" That is the essential Finnish story. Outside observers are continuously amazed that "*Finland is an example of a nation that lacks school inspection, standardised curriculum, high-stakes assessment, test-based accountability, and a race-to-the-top mentality with regard to educational change*"(page 5).

Maybe Sahlberg had the English in mind for they have so very recently abolished all forms of local democratic control in favour of highly centralised, political decision-making, when he noted the advantages of those countries/jurisdictions that operate on federal principles. What can work in Finland with a population of 5.5m, can surely work in New South Wales (7.3m), Victoria (5.6m), Queensland (4.6m), always providing these jurisdictions have the freedom to set their own educational policies, and conduct reforms as they think best. But there is a caveat. Education in Finland has always been an integral part of their national culture, in a way I fear we English have never understood; we remain a land divided by split educational systems and social assumptions. Having enjoyed the hospitality of several wonderful Australian independent schools, Finland's leap to educational fame is at least partly linked to the virtual abolition of independent education in Finland... not abolition by law, but simply abolition because the quality of the national education system is so good, and so linked to what the Finnish national character is, that it is hardly needed.

### **So, the challenge...**

What kind of education do you feel is appropriate for what kind of a world? As academics, can you help your countrymen see the wood for the trees? It really is over to everyone with the power to think through these issues to give your country, and others, the necessary intellectual lead to overcome generations of inertia, and sloppy compromises.



International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change. [www.ijicc.net](http://www.ijicc.net)  
Volume 1, Issue 2, November 2013

*For more information about The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Initiative and the development of these ideas visit [www.21learn.org](http://www.21learn.org). In particular visit 'The Timeline' and its various folders. For comment on very recent educational politics see 'The Eye of the Storm', [www.21learn.org/timeline/key-post/the-eye-of-the-storm](http://www.21learn.org/timeline/key-post/the-eye-of-the-storm).*