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## **Introduction**

By John Abbott

Two questions have fascinated me for years: how do children learn; and why do some adults carry on learning for a lifetime and others don't? As director of the Education 2000 Trust in England I was fortunate, in the early 1990s, to meet and work with educators, researchers and policymakers from many countries. In early 1995 I approached several English businesses to sponsor the 21st Century Learning Initiative in Washington, DC. The group we set up comprised some 60 educational researchers and practitioners from around the world. Between 1995 and 1997 we held six conferences at the Johnson Foundation's Frank Lloyd Wright mansion in Racine, Wisconsin.

The Initiative focused on learning, not schooling, for the obvious reason – at least to us – that if we weren't clear about how people learnt, we couldn't begin a proper consideration of educational reform. Our standpoint was that the crisis in education stems from misunderstandings about how humans learn rather than any generalised failure of schools and teachers. In other words, we quickly realised we were dealing with a crisis in childhood, not simply a crisis in schooling. The conferences echoed the more widespread problem of how society at large can convert disparate new findings on learning into useful route maps for the future of education. We found many of the Initiative's more academic delegates were stronger at setting out the details of their own specialisations than finding any agreement on what the totality of their combined work might mean. When an array of esoteric opinions surfaced, I began to appreciate why politicians and the general public find it so difficult to understand professional educators and researchers. I also realised that within the mass of discussion were ideas that would influence children's learning if properly articulated and understood. It was left to me and my colleague, Terry Ryan, to synthesise the conference

proceedings into something that could be useful to people wanting to transform the way their communities educate their young people.

I am a one-time geography and religious studies teacher at Manchester Grammar School, headmaster of an old grammar school being reorganised into a comprehensive school in the 1970s and, for a dozen years, director of the Education 2000 project in the United Kingdom. I have a passionate interest in improving youngsters' ability to take control of their own learning. I often repeat the Catholic doctrine of subsidiarity that states that it is wrong for a superior body to take upon itself the right to make decisions that an inferior body is well qualified to make for itself. That doctrine has to apply to students as well as teachers. It also applies to those with the power to direct local communities when those communities already contain untapped resources that could regenerate community life and lift academic standards beyond anything conceived and delivered by outsiders. All this I wrote about in my earlier book *The Child is Father of the Man: How humans learn and why*. This subsequent book explores these issues in greater depth and focuses on setting out their possible strategic and resource implications.

I met Terry at an international conference he organised for the Polish Ministry of Education on education in a democracy. He is an American half my age and is an ideas sleuth who loves to try and understand all things political and economic. He is passionate in his search for understanding why things work (or don't) the way they should or could. After getting his masters degree in political economy, he received a fellowship from the American Federation of Teachers to work with educational reformers and students in Poland from 1994 to 1995. His mentor was the former Solidarity leader Wiktor Kulerski, whose family did as much as any during the 20th century to create a free and independent Poland. His next book is a collaborative work with Kulerski on 20th century Poland entitled *The Shadows of the Past*.

Both Terry and I are as conscious of our roles as parents as we are of our roles as interpreters of educational policy. Both of us are much concerned, as citizens, with the increasing fragility of our communities,

and our planet. Over the past five years ours has grown from a master/apprentice relationship to an equal partnership where each of us brings a different generational, national and cultural perspective to our work. Our fundamental shared view – and one which informs every word in this book – is that there should be a constructivist and apprenticeship-based approach to learning which takes full account of recent neuroscientific research. These themes are enlarged upon in the first chapter and returned to throughout, so it's enough to say here that constructivism expands on an old idea expressed by the Chinese philosopher who, more than two thousand years ago, said: 'Tell me and I forget; show me and I remember; let me do and I understand.'

We draw heavily from our direct experience of living and working in both the United States and the United Kingdom. In a book intended for an international audience we make no apologies for this fact. What is currently happening in English schools puts them at the forefront of conventional school reform movements. We believe that the world in general would benefit from a better understanding of the unintended consequences of these efforts. The United States leads the world in its commitment to uninhibited economic expansion, and again we believe that citizens of other countries need to understand the impact this has on social structures, and in particular on those that are central to children's learning. Our extensive involvement with other countries, especially Canada, makes us realise just how beneficial it is for policymakers and educational practitioners alike to use international experience to temper their own more parochial strategies.

Our work has revealed a mismatch between what scientists and researchers are saying (and what very many parents and teachers know through intuition), and the current political mantras which stress centralised, standardised, accountable systems of formal learning based exclusively on classroom instruction. It is a potentially dangerous disconnection because the welfare of nations – especially when set against changing social and economic backdrops – is increasingly dependent on the intellectual capital of their citizens. The shift in our understanding of learning has already started, but is all too frequently