

Things Take Time

Knowledge transfer

It was in the early 1980s that several business people and educationalists came together to consider whether there was a role they could play in helping education become more relevant to the needs of a technological age. They had noted with dismay the findings of a recent Engineering Council report which showed that, on average, all the components for significant technological change had been known for at least twenty years before somebody found a way of combining them into a single innovation. Thinking that they could speed up this process as far as schools were concerned, they established a Trust optimistically called *Education 2000* – the target year to bring about a fundamental shift in the practices of English education. In 1985 I was appointed the Trust's Director.

Eight years on, and having done much to draw educationalists' attention to what neurological research was revealing about the grain of the brain, I found myself facing John Patten then the Minister of Education. "Now, Mr Abbott, what's all this you go on about international research? What is there that we don't already know?" I tried as best I could to explain to a man who couldn't relate any of this to his political framework. Grudgingly he closed the meeting by saying, "I'll get my people to take a look at it."

Six weeks later I found myself in a cramped room with some 18-20 Heads of Sections from the Department. "I must thank you for sparing the time to come this afternoon", said the Deputy Secretary in his introductory words, "You've all read John's Paper. This is an unusual meeting. I doubt if we have ever met as a group before. I have talked with John several times about these issues, but I have to confess that I'm still not clear in my mind what all this actually means." He gave me a weak smile: "Put me down, John, as being agnostic rather than an atheist!"

Trying not to be daunted by the studied looks of indifference on their faces, I set out my stall as best I could, but I achieved little. The lecture over, there were few questions. One of the last to leave opened up a little bit: "Please don't be surprised if none of us is anxious to ask any questions. You see, what you said would mean that some of us here would be losers, and some winners. Obviously we don't want to antagonise our colleagues by suggesting we know in advance which way this will go." Institutions, I was forcefully reminded, are about self-preservation.

After a further three years I received a surprise request to describe these ideas to the Policy Unit in Downing Street. The six or seven people sitting around the table gave me a good hearing and asked some good questions. Then the Prime Minister's Senior Advisor moved to close the meeting. "*I can't fault your argument, you are probably educationally right, and I would think certainly ethically correct. But the system you are arguing for would require very good teachers. We don't think there will ever be enough good teachers, and so we are going for a standardised way of running schools. That way we can get a uniform standard.*"

And that, spelt out so clearly in 1996, is why in 2009 the average teacher leaves the profession in just over nine years. Policy makers still haven't caught on to what is the root of the problem – teachers teach because they like being creative, not being told what to do; likewise, pupils do well when they are with teachers who don't try to squeeze them into pre-formed, standard shapes. (*See Parts Eight and Nine and Action 1 of the Briefing Paper*)