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COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

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Ladies and Gentlemen, when Mr Conway asked me to speak to Anton Trant's paper he asked me to draw out, and bring together, emphasize, or disagree with, some of the remarks made by Professor Copcutt, Fr Andrews, Sean O'Connor and Anton Trant. This I am delighted to do.

There are, in particular, three areas I would like to take up:

1. Why Community Schools? And I would like to take up both words - both "Why Schools?"; what are we trying to achieve in education? And "Why Community Schools?"
2. Why pupil-centred learning? and
3. What are the consequences of school size? You will recall that Fr Andrews asked "What is the optimal size of school?" and I would like to take up this issues which, I think, markedly overlaps with the other two and is inclined to obscure discussion.

Let me first recapitulate what some of the earlier speakers have said in my own words.

As I understood him, one of the things that Professor Copcutt said was that education should be pupil-centred, i. e., project-based, and that such projects should be important to the individual pupil or student. Both he and Anton suggested that one thing that was very important to pupils and students of all ages, and which involved a very diverse range of skills ranging from physics, biology and mathematics through English, Irish and history, to civics, sociology and the development of personal competency skills, was community planning. People of all ages had something important to contribute to the planning process, which was too important to leave to planners, and, in the process of making worthwhile contributions, people of all ages could learn a great deal that would be to their advantage in other walks of life.

Let me first stress all ages: five year olds have a great deal to tell planners about their needs from a community. In the process of doing that they will need to learn to read, write, talk, count, and observe, make contacts outside their school and local community and learn something of how society works.

So: education should be based on individual and group (community) project work; it should be concerned with something of interest to the individual, important to him, and also of social importance. As Anton Trant has said students should be involved in real tasks, not in the language of the middleman. In the process of learning one should also contribute, and the contribution should be to a shared goal, rather than on a competitive basis. One should learn skills of working with others, rather than against them, and one should learn to select socially important and useful tasks on which to work rather than agree to work on trivial, boring and useless tasks (such as schools have traditionally set their pupils). One hopes that, in later life, pupils will then continue to select jobs that are socially important and reject opportunities to work at irresponsible tasks which would nevertheless bring satisfaction in terms of money, personal status, or personal power.

Similarly one hopes that pupils will learn how to study on their own, how to frame questions, how to locate resources which will enable them to solve the problems they have formulated, how to tolerate the frustrations which impede one when one attempts to work on something socially important, how to communicate, how to collect evidence, how to persuade others, (and not only one's peers, but also councillors and those in positions of authority), and how to work with others as a team. Furthermore we would hope that each pupil will end up with a very different educational background; with a very different configuration of knowledge, skills and attitudes, and therefore in a position to make a very distinctive contribution to society.

So far we have already said something both about "Why Schools?" and about "Why Community?" - education should be relevant to pupils' real needs, needs determined by their relevance to the society in which the pupil is to live, the career he is to follow, and the satisfactions he is to obtain from life.

In fact we know nothing like enough about the knowledge, attitudes and skills actually required in various jobs and careers, or what patterns of satisfaction and frustration are consequent upon having certain knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

And it seems to me that until we have this information we are going to be designing our educational programmes very much in the dark.

Furthermore it is not until we can supply parents and pupils with material which outlines the consequences of a variety of educational systems for the lives of the people concerned that we can really be said to be giving them any real choice in this matter of education.

In fact one of the reasons for advocating community schools is precisely to force educationalists to provide choice: to be able to choose between schools all following basically the same curriculum and providing the same courses aimed at the median level of similar classes is not choice.

But when teachers are faced with hoards of children who do not fit the mould they are used to, or when they are confronted with parents who angrily resent what the school is doing to their children, either because it is crushing them into the ground and teaching them things which they can see are never going to be any use to them, or because it is teaching them to be individuals, to think for themselves, and to show initiative and individuality, or because it is NOT doing these things, then teachers may be forced to sit up and take note and provide choices.

And this effect is even more likely if the community school provides courses for adults (perhaps the parents we have just mentioned), and still more likely if, dare I say it, one tries to involve adults in the same courses as one provides for younger children - in order to develop numeracy, literacy, the ability to communicate, the ability to relate to others, or other more specialist skills.

Thus it seems to me that, unpleasant though the prospect may be for some, a move toward community schools of the type envisaged here may have very definite advantages in the area of choice.

It seems to me that one cannot emphasize enough that the great need in education is to provide a wide variety of different types of education for students who come from different backgrounds, have acquired different knowledge, skills, and attitudes, have different interests, want very different things out of the educational system, and want very different things out of life.

It cannot be said too often that we do not wish all our pupils to emerge from the educational system cast in the same mould; we wish them to emerge equipped with very different patterns of knowledge skills, and attitudes, and able to easily

re-enter the system in order to quickly change the configuration of their knowledge, skills, and attitudes as their interests change and as the needs of society change.

Also, and again this cannot be said too often, different children, coming as they do from different backgrounds and being equipped with different knowledge and aptitudes, acquire the same knowledge, skills, and attitudes through different programmes of instruction.

Not only is there no one best programme of education; there is also no one best programme to teach the same material.

Another reason for thinking in terms of community schools, which has already been mentioned, is to involve adults and parents.

Not only do parents need opportunities to re-train and re-create themselves, not only do many parents need to acquire the basic skills of the three Rs, not only do they need opportunities to learn the social skills of working with others that come from serving on committees (e.g., parent-teacher or school board committees), many also have a great deal to offer.

Community schools could imply programmes of community development in which parents, and other adults, could contribute toward the improvement of their community, and through seeking to do so, recognize their own need to take specialist courses in order to acquire certain knowledge, skills and attitudes.

They, just as much as pupils, may need to learn effective skills in relation to communicating, acquiring necessary information, understanding the way society works, and understanding, and being able to cope with, group processes involving relating to others, listening to what they have to say, learning to handle conflict, learning to obtain the support of others to attain a goal of mutual benefit, learning that one is not oneself the fount of all wisdom and how to tolerate and integrate the ideas of others.

Adults, just as much as children, may need to learn how to relate to people outside the community and handle differences of opinion and differences in values without disruptive conflict. Adults just as much as children may need to develop their own self-images and feelings of competence and efficacy if they are to achieve goals which are important to them.

It seems to me that all of this is common educational ground between adults and children, common ground which is central to education in any real sense, but common ground which has been sadly neglected in recent years and in which the relevant educational inputs, learning experiences, are only now being explicitly generated and explicitly tried out and evaluated. As Brunner says "the main criterion of the appropriateness of an educational course is not age but the individual's background and what he needs to get out of the course".

And mixing classes across ages may have definite advantages in reducing discipline problems, cutting the dead-wood out of educational programmes, promoting respect for others of different ages and backgrounds, and promoting maturity in pupils.

I will have more to say about these areas of education later, but let me first return to some of the other points made by Professor Copcutt.

Another point raised by Professor Copcutt concerned the physical organization of educational institutions. He said:

1. That school buildings need to be highly flexible.
2. That some large specialist institutions offering a wide range of specialist courses aimed at developing particular knowledge, attitudes, and skills were essential if economic use was to be made of the specialist teachers and equipment involved, i.e., if these essential specialist courses were to be offered at all.
3. That small local units were also essential if parents were to get to know their children's teachers and were to have any say in the education of their children, and, equally important, if teachers were to gear the pupils' education to the background from which the children came and, in fact, take appropriate steps to educate the pupils' parents so that the pupils would respond to education.

He therefore suggested, at any rate to my ears, that these local educational-cum-counselling institutions, which the children would attend for, say, two or three days a week for their basic guidance and supervision, and in order to make their selection of an appropriate balance of specialist courses (which they would mainly take in the larger centres, although computerised programmed learning will

increasingly make it possible to make at least some specialist courses available in decentralized institutions), should be diffused far into the community, perhaps in converted private houses, such that parents would be involved in their children's education and teachers would know the parents.

It seems to me that these suggestions of Copcutts also go far to solving the flexibility and denominational issues raised by other speakers and also serve to by-pass the problem of "optimal size" of school; it seems that we need both small schools and relatively large specialist centres.

Let us just digress onto this business of optimal size for a moment - a digression which will lead me to digress still further - onto another issue of major importance.

Barker and Gump showed that while large schools did provide a much wider range of courses than small schools, pupils in small schools in fact:

- . participated in a much wider range of specialities and activities
- . performed a much wider range of different roles
- . developed higher levels of self-confidence
- . displayed more initiative, and
- . were more enthusiastic.

This was because, in small schools, if the pupils who attended the science club did not also attend meetings of the literary societies, there would be no such societies. Similarly the small numbers in the schools meant that a much higher proportion of the pupils were office holders.

While it is true that "small" by American standards is large by Irish standards, and while it is true that, in large schools, steps can be taken to offset consequences of this sort, it is worth reflecting on the results.

They suggest that one should explicitly create small institutions carefully engineered to generate:

- . initiative taking
- . the taking on of a wide variety of roles
- . participation in diverse activities, and
- . avoid feelings of "trained incapacity".

But it should be stressed that smallness in itself will not necessarily lead to these things. The internal structure of the small institution also has to be explicitly engineered if the objectives are to be attained: it is necessary to go to considerable efforts if small schools are to provide a wide range of behaviour settings, clubs and societies. And it is necessary to avoid the emotional attachment to smallness which one so commonly meets, an attachment which probably stems from their assured cosiness and their assured controlability. But, in fact, one can not control small organizations without controlling the outside forces which operate upon them. Most of our problems can only be solved by looking outwards and learning to cope with large organizations. Paradoxically the skills needed to cope with large external organizations are best learned in appropriate small organizations. But one has to practise applying these skills and one has to deepen one's specialist skills and knowledge in large organizations; one has to alternate one's experiences, broadening one's range of competencies, one's flexibility, in small organizations, and deepening one's knowledge and skills in large organizations.

The need to acquire specialist knowledge and competencies must never be forgotten. A common mistake of some "progressive" educationalists has been to assume that pupils should learn everything through "discovery" methods. But pupils and students cannot re-discover for themselves all the knowledge of the past. What they can do is learn where to find the knowledge and how to get on top of it, and they can and should, through "discovery" methods, develop the skills of noticing problems, clarifying their formulation, inventing explanations, inventing ways of testing hypotheses and inventing ways of summarizing descriptive data.

Let me turn now to saying something more about the non-cognitive goals of education, the goals which Sean O'Connor termed the effective goals of education, like:

- . Willingness to take initiative.
- . Creativity
- . Persistence to see a difficult and frustrating, but worthwhile task through to completion.
- . Personal effectiveness
- . Diversity of roles learnt - ability to cope with any situation.
- . Ability to work with others
- . Tolerance for ways of life other than one's own.

- . Willingness to get one's satisfaction from seeing one's activities move a group of which one is a member move towards its goal, without necessarily obtaining personal recognition for doing so.
- . Ability to put oneself in the position of others, and hence show consideration for others and willingness to learn from them - a tendency toward seeing that what is relevant to them is relevant to oneself - and hence basic characteristics like innovativeness and creativity.
- . Ability to understand social situations - the commitments which cause people to utter statements that they do not believe in, the social pressures which groups bring to bear on individual behaviour, the way people are likely to react to interventions of one's own and so on.
- . Ability to handle conflict effectively.
- . Understanding of the way committees and councils in fact function - as distinct from how they are supposed to function - and hence how to deal with them, etc.

If we are concerned with these things, how do we go about achieving them? Let me just take one or two examples, because I do not believe them either.

- i. simple verbal assent to the importance of these things, or
- ii. global cure-all solutions - such as "Community Schools", "Comprehensive Education", or "Un-Streaming" provide the answer.

I think it is necessary to be quite specific about these goals and generate specific learning experiences in order to achieve them. Let us look at:

- . Personal effectiveness
- . Respect for others from different backgrounds, with different levels of ability and who will enter different walks of life, and
- . Willingness to work with others.

I have chosen personal effectiveness because it is one of the few things we know something about. Effective people tend:

1. To enjoy what they are doing.
2. To invest a lot of emotion in what they are doing - they look forward to the pleasure that successes will bring, and they mentally rehearse the agony of failure.
3. Allow themselves to enjoy success and give vent to displeasure with frustration.
4. Enlist the help of others to achieve their goals.
5. Have thought about and clearly verbalized what they want to do, rather than drift along where they are pushed.

6. Make plans to reach their goals and anticipate, and try to circumvent, obstacles to their achievement - obstacles arising both from the outside world and from their own limitations.
7. Set themselves specific and challenging, but realistic and measurable, goals to achieve, rather than goals which are too difficult or are easily attainable.
8. Track on their progress toward these goals, that is seek feedback concerning how well they are doing.
9. Have confidence in their own ability to cope with situations and, when difficulties crop up, place themselves in a position where they can control things.
10. Seek out situations in which they can exercise their skill and discretion.
11. Use money as an index of how well they are doing their job, how well they are exercising their skill and discretion, rather than as something desired in its own right or for the uses to which it can be put.
12. Be persistent over a long period of time and put up with frustration in order to achieve a goal they have set themselves.
13. Refuse to work at boring and routine tasks which have no interest for them and do not move them toward their goals.
14. Be resourceful, inventive and creative, willing to research the environment for the opportunities they need and the materials and ideas they want, able to create the resources they need.
15. Be task-oriented and concerned to work with experts to get the job done, rather than with friendly people.

When I say that effective people demonstrate these characteristics I am thinking primarily of people who are effective in relation to achievement, but many of the characteristics apply equally to people who are effective in exercising power or in being friendly.

Where in our educational system do we seek to foster these characteristics?
And how could we if we wanted to?

One could:

1. Encourage pupils to seek out important and worthwhile tasks to perform.
2. Encourage pupils to recognize their emotions rather than try to suppress them.
3. Encourage pupils to set challenging but realistic goals for themselves and monitor progress toward these goals.
4. Encourage pupils to think about themselves, what sort of person they want to be - and if we are to do this it means providing a vocabulary for them, a set of concepts which enable them to think about themselves.

5. Provide opportunities for pupils to practise behaviour of this sort.
6. Present the pupils with role models so that they can see how this sort of person operates in practice; people learn a great deal from observing the behaviour of others, particularly if they have an opportunity to practise behaving in the way that they do.
7. Encourage pupils to enlist the support of others in achieving their goals.
8. Encourage pupils to examine the tasks they have to do in order to discover obstacles to achievement and find ways in which to succeed.
9. Encourage pupils to build on their strengths and not measure themselves against others in areas in which they can't compete, but rather to do that which they can do, albeit paying attention to some areas of weakness that it is necessary (and I stress the word necessary, because I do believe that much education is not necessary) that they pay attention to.

Finally let me take two areas that have been less worked over.

If we are concerned that pupils learn to respect people with other abilities, from different backgrounds, and who will enter different walks of life.

And if we are concerned that pupils learn to listen to the ideas of others, not condemn what they say out of hand, search for that which is worthwhile and needs to be developed, rather than search for flaws on the basis of which to mount a campaign of abuse, to support other members of a group, to understand how difficult it is to put forward different ideas in a group, to tolerate committee work, recognizing that the solution is usually better than the solution one had first thought of.

Then it is no use advocating global solutions like Comprehensive Education, Discussion Lessons, or Small Schools.

Things have to be much more structured. In the first case (that of encouraging pupils to respect others from different backgrounds and with different values) it is necessary to structure situations such that pupils really do make contact with others, work with them, and have a real opportunity to get to know them and their strengths and weaknesses. In practice this may mean getting the pupils to take part in group project work structured across class and ability lines, such as Sr Moira Brennan reported to the Teachers' Study group last year.

The second means structuring learning experiences such that:

- i. the various behaviour tendencies of people-in-groups are highlighted.
- ii. pupils are given an opportunity to reflect on group and individual behaviour tendencies.
- iii. pupils are given an opportunity to reflect on their own behaviour tendencies and given a vocabulary with which to do so.
- iv. pupils have an opportunity to practise thinking, feeling, and behaving like others with whom they would not normally have identified.
- v. pupils have an opportunity to practise and try out new ways of thinking, feeling and behaving in situations in which the personal consequences of mistakes are not so serious as they are in the everyday world of real life.

Summary

To summarize what I have said in this paper: if, in our curriculum development work, we are to pay more attention to the real goals of education we have:

- a. To make our objectives clear.
- b. To generate specific learning experiences geared to these objectives, and
- c. To carefully assess whether the innovations we have introduced in fact lead to the achievement of these objectives, or have some negative, unanticipated and undesirable outcomes.

We have to avoid:

- a. Blaming our buildings, our examination system, or our school management system for our failures: if we take parents and pupils into our confidence we can overcome the problems which stem from all three sources and, in the long run, remove the causes themselves.
- b. We have to avoid the notion that cure-all policy changes such as:
 - . a new curriculum
 - . comprehensive education
 - . community schools
 - . local school boards
 - . parent-teachers' associations, or
 - . raising the school leaving age

will, of themselves, do anything at all to help us to clarify and achieve the second three Rs of education, by which I mean the goals to which we have paid so much attention today, let alone make sure that we cease to output large numbers of people deficient in the traditional three Rs.