 

 **REPORT**

**‘Towards a More Creative Education System’**

**Creating a Movement for Change**

 **8 October 2020**

The 2020 Symposium in the series ‘Towards a More Creative Education System’ migrated to an online format due to the constraints of the Covid-19 pandemic and, in place of the previous 2 – 3 day duration, it lasted just 90 minutes with an added 60 minutes for those able to stay for a more leisurely tea-time chat. While this condensed format allowed for little of the mental and spiritual spaciousness of the preceding events in the Burren it felt important to gauge the pulse of the education system six months into the pandemic. Could this moment of profound disruption be the opportunity for fundamental change?

**Opening:** We were invited to imagine that we were back in a Burren state of mind and to respond to the poem by David Whyte - Start Close in. What might be the ‘next step’ for each of us ‘the step you don’t want to take’ in relation to education? As might have been expected intimations of change were close to the surface.

**What might ‘starting close in’ mean for you?**

* The importance of **deep listening**;
* Being **creative** is a great compass for directing that first step;
* Give a platform to students to have teachers be in **real relationship**;
* Thinking about the **values** we need for a better world;
* Change must **involve everyone** from the centre out;
* Change in education is a massive and overwhelming concept. **We can only ‘start close in’** where we are. It’s like tidying your room – you start close in! Once your room is tidy you can move outwards to the world;
* Through my GAA role it means grounding our educational contributions in **appreciation of place and community** in the broadest sense;
* Learning and **living exploringly/authentically**;
* It means **less frustration** and more flexibility, you are less likely to miss something; in one big step many things can be missed;
* Uncertainty - how we are **re-inventing** **ourselves as well as the system**!
* The only way is **forward**;
* **Challenge our assessment systems** in education;
* Smaller **class sizes**, mixed between elders, young and younger;
* I believe the poem refers to how we should approach difficulties and how we can narrow them down to get to the **source of the issue** the community experiences;
* What really matters and what is the **key priority for us as people** and then in education terms;
* Start with **what you know**;
* Start with what you have, work with what’s around you. Often needing to be **resourceful on the spot** in teaching. Winging it sometimes! Trying to stay afloat of all the online extra workload and being kind (to myself too);
* The importance of **partnership** between families and school in creating richness that school communities offer children as they grow and mature into adults;
* **Being kind** to everyone – change in complex;
* The first step should be **communication** between students and teachers;
* ‘Live exploringly, be kind, include, start close in with what you know, what you have, what’s around. Assessment??!!??

**The Story so Far**

To provide context for those new to the process there followed a brief review of the initiatives prompted by the symposium process to date:

* The BEACONS process being championed by the Teaching Council;
* The **Citizens Assembly for Education (Café)** which was committed to in the most recent programme for government, viz: We are committed to supporting the development of a shared understanding of the value of education, which addresses how education can prepare people of all ages to meet new societal, environmental, technological, and economic challenges which face us all. We will: Establish a Citizens’ Assembly on the Future of Education ensuring that the voices of young people and those being educated are central.”
* The hosting in the Burren of SIFI’s (now Reimagine Ireland) Gamechanger Dialogue showcasing innovations in inclusive education;
* Cooperation with the GAA on a wellbeing initiative in schools, currently on hold due to Covid-19 and
* Supporting Burrenbeo’s Place Based Learning programme which is pioneering excellence in pedagogy in active learning by students through and about their place.

The Citizens Assembly process – date still un-determined - provided a context within which to build a movement for change that could overcome the forces of inertia and vested interests that were present in education systems everywhere. Was it time to start a conversation at scale using the potential of online convening? What other possibilities did the ‘Covid-19 moment’ offer us?

**Thought Piece by Professor Tom Collins**

To provide a stimulus to the online conversation the distinguished educator, Professor Tom Collins, was invited to offer some reflections on the times we were in and what might be possible. He didn’t disappoint as this synopsis of his comments makes clear:

* I’ve spent most of my life trying to effect change in the model of schooling but with limited impact - second level schools today look very similar to what my own secondary school, St Flannan’s, looked like when I left in 1972;
* Not much has changed in spite of many initiatives in the meantime due to the assessment system; in my six years as chair of the NCCA we invariably looked in the first instance at the syllabus content and only then moved on to assessment. It would have been interesting to have started out with the assessment issue and allowed the content to emerge from that position;
* With regard to the Covid-19 pandemic, we are the first generation in Ireland in a millennium to face a pandemic without a Christian God on our side;
* The pandemic calls attention to the dangers in inequality for the society at large;
* Covid-19 has **undermined the higher education model**;
* Covid-19 has undermined the neo-liberal economic model with former free marketeers seeking higher government spending;
* The **Leaving Cert** is a proxy for the socio-economic status of parents and, in this sense **was always unfair**. It transformed inherited advantage into ‘achieved advantage’. This year has called attention to this inequity;
* Schooling, as we now know from the lockdown, is about much more than the syllabus. It’s about being members of a community, making friends and enhancing well-being;
* **Assessment**, the untouchable, has been changed by Covid-19. The leaving cert has three functions: (i) Assessment of learning in senior cycle; (ii) Certification of learning and (iii) Access to 3d level. These three purposes do not need to be conflated and can be disconnected from one another in three separate processes. This is particularly the case in terms of access to higher education.

Animated by these words, participants broke into groups to discuss what might be possible now and what was needed to create a movement for change. Their views, captured on Mentimeter in the following plenary, suggested a real appetite for change:

**Question 1. What’s possible now?** (Covid-19 context and after listening to Professor Tom Collins)

**Concrete Suggestions**: (JC=Junior Cert; LC=Leaving Cert; CBA=Classroom-based assessment)

* With success of this year’s non-JC exams don’t rush to bring them back – try without;
* LC review needs to ask the hard questions;
* Just tackle the LC; Focus on assessment; New forms of assessment;
* There needs to be a review not just of the method but the purpose of assessment;
* 2nd and 3rd levels need a conversation;
* LC needs to include skills and interviews;
* A project-based LC; LC needs to be based on CBA;
* A blended approach to learning based on needs of students and families;
* Focus on one or two issues such as JC assessment;
* Connect to the cultural institutions
* Support Teachers; teachers need lots of Continuing Professional Development support to be comfortable with change.

**Process Suggestions** (What’s possible now?)

* Attitude shift; A rethink of education altogether;
* Anything is possible – the barrier is lower;
* With no LC this year the possibilities are endless;
* Conversations on both problems and solutions; allowing in alternative solutions;
* People in power listening; Government listening to student/teacher opinion;
* Listening and more conversation;
* Voice of young being heard; Interact with students – ‘it’s our lives – not theirs’.

**Q2. What needs to happen for a Movement for Change to grow legs?**

* Present a vision – offer hope;
* A strong mandate for change; parents, teachers and students are demanding change;
* Involve the general community;
* Lead by doing; Stop discussing – begin;
* Do something, not just talk - may get it wrong but MUST try;
* Mobilise parent and student support;
* Demand change of public representatives;
* Leadership from Government, Trades Unions and Management bodies;
* The Citizens Assembly can open the door; it’s a great start;
* Honesty about what’s not working; acknowledge that education system is not just not up to scratch but is counter-productive;
* Listen to the less heard voices; Listen respectfully;
* Focus on environmental concerns – new eco-social values;
* Make visible that there’s much more consensus for change than is generally realized;
* A social media campaign.

**Q3. What else needs to be said?**

* Separate ‘Education’ and ‘Assessment’ – like separation of ‘Judiciary’ and ‘Politics’;
* More slowing down with time to explore; self-care in a time of high anxiety;
* IR issues should not form part of conversation for change;
* Do serious extraction of student voice in Ireland;
* Challenge the universities and their views on the LC;
* LC should be about opinion rather than memorising; look to the LC Applied;
* Give salience to the arts;
* How can this community support each other to bring change about?

**Open Forum**

* Student: I don’t know what needs to happen but whatever it is it needs to start now;
* It takes bravery to make change in the classroom. As result of Covid-19 lock-down we’re more firmly rooted in our local communities;
* The primary curriculum is being reviewed and consultations are ongoing in relation to the senior cycle with student voice. So the change process is open and while change is difficult Covid will help.
* We need to look for the next step – metamorphosis from Covid to Ovid or the Void. Covid has brought separation and we need to seek what’s on the other side of the divide;
* I loved the poem – Ovid and Void as a brilliant insight!
* Covid-19 shows that the Humpty Dumpty of education is cracked beyond repair and all the King’s horses and men should be stopped from putting him back on the wall. Short-term crisis management however understandable should not disguise the need for in-depth strategic management based on first principles: what kinds of EXPERIENCES do we want our young people to have that will serve them well in the ‘now’ and for the future;
* Opportunity to reflect through a positive lens. What worked and how can we build on the success we have had. Our Irish psyche tends towards what didn’t work and commence an exhausting journey of trying to change;
* I am so encouraged by the amount of engagement and partnership between schools and parents during lockdown. I think those relationships can be strengthened and have the potential to become the basis for a new movement for change.

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Tea Time** (After the formal session concluded there was an opportunity for more informal chat for those who remained)

* Mobilise the parents’ voice.
* We’re trying to build relationships with the local community e.g. Larkin College. We want to be part of the conversation.
* I found the conversation beneficial – building communities of change. Assessment and the Leaving Cert were very dominant. Café can give us clarity about the future of education. When will it happen? DES preoccupied with Covid-19. We need to keep Café on the agenda of the Taoiseach’s department. With new department we need to have the 3rd level in the Café. Once the Café is announced open minds and hearts will be replaced by agendas.
* I loved Tom’s provocation; if something is untouchable we can’t go there – what else will this ‘Covid-19 Moment’ allow us to access? We need to approach the Café with open minds and open hearts – it’s a space for us to explore and ensure that noise doesn’t fill the vacuum; education gets to the heart. Perhaps the question should be ‘how would like education to feel?’ Two departments of education and higher education with very different ministers may bring change.
* It’s easy to say what we don’t want – more difficult to say what we do want; we need a sense of our preferred future and we need bravery to do something.
* TY projects such as visiting the law courts were stand-out moments for me – we need more project-based education;
* We need projects and community-linked projects and to disconnect 2nd level from 3rd level with recognition of skills. The new Department of Higher Education is an opportunity to distinguish 2nd and 3rd level education.
* I’m involved in more holistic approach to 3rd level in Monaghan involving disadvantaged. Café may open the door to allow other possibilities – pick and mix the best.
* Applied LC showed its merits this year even though regarded as inferior; something to be learned here about the way the current system perpetuates snobbery;
* There is much less resistance to change now. The static physical environment of schools hasn’t changed. The contributions to the Café need to be as diverse as possible.
* We need diversity of voice and safety such that it’s OK to articulate our feelings;
* For the over-ground to be different the underground needs to be different. We need to go into the underground of feelings. Primitive societies handled this better including ancestors as well as future generations.
* My work is concerned with ecological deterioration – Covid is a symptom.

**16.10.20**