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**REPORT**

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

**Creating a Movement for Change**

**Part II - ‘Going Deeper’**

**12 November 2020**

This two-hour online conversation was an opportunity to pick up on the threads that had been left dangling after the 3rd annual symposium in the series ‘Towards a More Creative Education System’. With a broad spectrum of participation from the policy and academic sectors to parents, teachers/principals and students It was an opportunity for participants to decide on what themes they felt were most important to focus on.

**Kindling the Flame**

In opening remarks it was noted that school communities had performed remarkably in the context of returning to classroom in the midst of Covid-19. Nonetheless, with the World Economic Forum highlighting creativity and critical thinking, technological mastery and resilience as key skills required for the world of 2025 (see Annex), it was disappointing to hear anecdotes of junior cycle students preparing for a series of mock pre-Christmas exams preliminary to further mocks in the Spring before taking what should be a non-high-stakes exam.

It was reassuring to see that in Wales GCSE’s would be significantly modified for 2021 while, at home, the Chief Inspector was speaking of the possibility, within the review of the senior cycle, of modules of assessment over the two years leading up to the Leaving Certificate. This chimed with the call, at the previous online conversation, for a fundamental rethink of assessment as well as for the reimagining of what education could be. We needed deep listening as well as the creation of a strong mandate for change from parents, teachers and students alike.

The invocation for this time, in the words of John O’Donohue’s ‘In Praise of Fire’, was to unleash the ‘hunger of fire’, to ‘breather new urgency into our love of life’ and ‘burn away what is false’.

**Key Takeaways**

(JC = Junior Cycle/Cert; LC = Leaving Cert; CBA = Classroom-based Assessment)

Participants had the opportunity to choose the topics they wished to discuss and invite others to join them. They were also invited to outline the key insights from the conversations and to suggest what might contribute to creating a movement for change.

Key takeaways from these conversations –elaborated in greater detail below – included:

* **Assessment** needs to be broadened to reflect individual lived experience and achievement and decoupled from entry to the third level. It needs to address potential rather than performance. Approaches to more creativity in assessment include: continuous assessment as in the JC’s CBA’s; a balanced portfolio of learning recognizing all forms of learning (profile of achievement) and dual assessment as in the HPAT;
* The **Junior Cert** was dropped this year and the world didn’t end; change introduced by necessity should be maintained by choice - let’s **entrench this change**;
* The strangle-hold of the **Leaving Cert** makes second level dysfunctional and needs fundamental reform; the promised citizens assembly could be the vehicle to tackle this;
* The **potential of IT** is huge and allows us to imagine the school of the future; properly exploited it can transform school and free up the role of the teacher for what’s most important;
* At its core **education is a social/community activity**: ‘We must cherish and hold our teachers who are holding so many of our young people.’
* How do we recognize/capture the education taking place **outside the formal school setting** and how do we enhance outdoor and experiential;
* **A movement for change** requires **changing the discourse**: away from exams and assessment; towards enquiry about the purpose of education and assessment and a positive focus on the possibilities being opened up by Covid-19.

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**The Conversations we need to have now?**

**Conversation 1:**  **How best to support Learners within school**?

* **Student Voice**: Develop the student’s voice; widen the conversation and listen to learners at the moment; bring the learner centre stage;
* **Reimagine School**: As best as we try, the system is not flexible enough; so do we need to reimagine school fully? People and system have the capacity, maybe?
* **Student challenges**: Students have far greater challenges today;
* **Portfolio of Learning**: We need to create a more balanced perspective on what learning is; it is not all about the curriculum; so a portfolio of learning that is moderated by school;
* **Assessment**: assessment drives learning; assessment should be a way to credit achievement; the problem is the system is too narrow;
* **Relationships** are fundamental and what’s valued.

**Key Insights:** (i)Flexible learning opportunities; (ii) Recognise all forms of learning;

(iii) Make school meaningful and accommodating.

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**Conversation 2**: **Alternative Assessment** - Sarah

* Considering alternatives to the traditional Leaving Cert;
* How do we shift focus from a terminal exam taken in short period of time?
* What other models should we look to?
* Do we need to talk about the schooling that precedes LC - is that the real question?
* Any broader discussion of LC needs to present alternatives;
* Possibly need to look at dual assessment model, akin to LC (continuous assessment though) and HPAT;
* Must ensure partner buy-in to any discussion as well as alternatives;
* Proper communications to support alternatives - including influencers to broaden reach?

**Key Insights**: (i) LC measures performance, not potential - different backgrounds mean that lower points can actually represent better achievement; (ii) Need to de-couple LC from 3rd level entry; (iii) Could we look at dual streams, with some form of measurement to enter each, academic and vocational; (iv) Must involve students - unique insight; (v) Need to move conversation on from LC.

**Movement for Change**: (i) Examine other international models, not just Anglo models; (ii) Capture lived experience – lived experience is crucial.

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**Conversation 3**: **Using Technology to increase creative Engagement**

* IT is good in ways with assignments online; it can also be annoying - a **blessing and a curse** at the same time;
* The importance of **the social**; ‘Cruinniú na nÓg’ online shows us what you can do and Dancing by Distance;
* Where is **creativity**...starts in the heart, leads to the head, engages the soul;
* While it can expand **access** and **choice** hugely it is **exhausting and drains energy**; can we do it again next year – we’d give anything to drive to the Burren? I feed off the energy in the room; I’m missing the hug;
* What **games** can help learning? So much **learning outside school hours**;
* What **drudgery** can be taken out of teaching - what could we “strip out” of school and learn on line? Google any subject;
* We should revisit the curriculum – what would school be like then? What would teachers become then?
* **Reimagining** the school of the future with a base in civil society.

**Key Insights**: (i) There are huge benefits; (ii) How do we measure the things we have learned in a “human context”? (iii)We need contact!

**Movement for Change**: (i) Visit local super-market – social contact; (ii) Use technology in a balanced way; (iii) Optimise benefits of remote involvement and engagement.

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**Conversation 4**: **What is School for and the Role of Teachers**?

* As a parent & teacher, I really appreciate the **real nature of teaching** when it comes to learning. It’s so much better being in school and being present;
* The role of the school is more than the curriculum and the formal aspects of education - a **care role** that has always been there is now more explicit. The things outside the formal academic space are missing now, given they are not ‘top priority’. School can (must?) offer more. These are the things that form **community** that holds all its members (including the teachers);
* This idea of what school is, is a contested space. Schools generally have been caring places but the **emphasis is on outcomes** and is driven by a loud, vocal, sector of society. The caring role of school has been more explicit of late;
* The role of the social in learning has become more obvious of late, as we mourn its absence;
* Associated with the above, the **expectations on teachers and principals** is enormous (and too much). Teachers are trying very hard to maintain a culture of joy and care.
* There is a **vulnerability** at the moment.

**Key Insights**: (i) School nurtures and cares; (ii) Outcome-focused education is crushing learners and teachers; (iii) Learning is social; (iv) We must cherish and hold our teachers who are holding so many of our young people.

**Movement for Change**: (i) **Humility** - none of us has all the answers: we must be able to listen and speak softly with our school communities; (ii) pause in the onslaught of negative external forces that only add to the stress students and teachers; (iii) create a sense that we all belong (**appealing to our common humanity**). Reject a culture of blame and let it loose a bit; (iv) **allow** others to be - it makes us human and is at the foundation of better connections between teacher and between teachers and students. Adults might be the ones who are brave enough to start this process.

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**Conversation 5**: **Taking School out of School**

* Early Years - using outdoor in **unstructured** way – ‘Aistear’ etc.
* Challenge is to continue that up the system;
* Real connection with Junior Cycle framework;
* **Outdoor Education** - exploring locality and natural world - bubbling at margins. Take more seriously;
* Also **learning outside of school hours** - how do we value this and maintain its informality, but bring those interests into school learning without killing it; JC Framework should **accommodate this in profile of achievement;**
* You learn so much from **clubs** in terms of **teamwork** and promoting leadership.

**Key Insights**: (i) Continuing good work of early years onwards; (ii) valuing informal education outside school equally within Profile of Achievement; (iii) the power of experiential learning.

**Movement for Change**: (i) Learn from pre-school experiences in Nordic countries - there are also Irish prototypes; (ii) Design a structured programme in outdoor education as a valid option in Junior Cycle.

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**Conversation 6:** **How to build Buy-in for Change**

* **Covid** presents **opportunities for change** and we need to **go beyond talking about it**;
* Absolutes have been suspended – JC suspended and school-based certificate for LC; **change introduced by necessity should be maintained by** **choice** – in particular the low-stakes JC;
* **Change the discourse**...look at people for whom the “new” system has worked and learn from the new possibilities that have opened; make these successes our champions for change;
* Change the discourse around **the purpose of the JC and LC; focus** on the **journey of learning** rather than the assessment - do we need this type of assessment?
* If assessment has to happen in LC how might it be **more flexible** – what else might it give attention to? Does it need to label students for life?
* **Change in education is very difficult** reflecting our own personal histories, requiring buy-in from lots of stakeholders and time – primary curriculum not changed since 1999; **place focus on future** and **student voice** rather than the past and what is wrong;
* Schools have much more discretion than horror stories of ‘mocks’ might suggest; however, teachers don’t know what will be asked of them next year (re assessment) and operate on the precautionary principle; there is **need for upskilling** of teachers;
* Can we **recognise the learning that is happening outside of the school**, can we record, value and recognise this in the formal system?
* Build on the unnoticed opportunity represented by the JC certificate of achievement - **hold this gain**.

**Key Insights**: (i) Change is slow in our current system….does it need to be, as current hierarchies are being broken and organisations and systems are becoming more agile

 Yes…..and? (ii) there has not been huge resistance to change at JC level, let’s not row back on this.

**Movement for change**: (i) Remove the focus on constant examinations! (We are so attached to the familiar); (ii) Change the discourse around the purpose on the junior and leaving cert

HOW? (iii) Focus on the positives; (iv) Get rid of our own hang-ups and perceptions of what school is like, listen to the voice of students; (v) Revisit the purpose of learning; (vi) Stop the labelling!

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**Conversation 7**: **What does creative Learning look like?**

* Creativity requires **time**;
* It is defined by **approaching things differently;**
* Technology is a part of it but it is a big learning cover;
* If it is about expression - where is the **space for each individual to be expressive**?
* **Classroom-based Assessments** (CBA’s) where students research and present on a choice of topics within a subject, are an opportunity for creativity - ownership of topics, media being used etc; some students overwhelmed and overburdened by these CBA’s
* Lots of creative **resources now online** via arts orgs etc

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**Plenary Discussion**

Perspectives derived from the group discussions were shared during the two plenary sessions:

* The importance of **flexibility in the system** to accommodate diverse student needs and trajectories as well as the importance of **student voice** and relationships to the process of learning;
* By **using the online** to strip out the drudgery from teaching what might the teacher’s role be like – and how might we measure what we learned?
* The Covid-19 moment reinforces the importance of the **relational aspect of education** between students and teachers and student with fellow students; this is an opportunity to see the broader role of school and teachers beyond the purely utilitarian; place is also important;
* The world didn’t stop because there was **no JC exam** this year; don’t let the opportunity slip to **embed this change**;
* **The strangle-hold of the LC needs to be broken** as it makes the second level dysfunctional; while it was never intended to be the entry route to third level, change is complex and one shouldn’t make excellence (overnight elimination of the current system) the enemy of the good – the Citizens Assembly could be the forum to secure change in this area.

**Tea Time**: After the formal end of the event, discussion continued among those who remained for a more leisurely chat:

* More students are entering the third level through non-LC routes – **access programmes** – but there remains some stigma as to the route by which they got there;
* How about **using radio and TV to tell stories** about change in education, creating a different vehicle for the conversation?
* What if education were more like the ‘Gaisce’ model with powerful stories;
* We **need a new discourse** – the current system doesn’t work even for the academically bright students;
* A key question is **getting buy-in** for change.

**Comments from the ‘chat’ function**

In parallel with the formal conversation participants contributed their emergent thoughts using the zoom chat function to generate a second-track conversation:

* **Questions emerging**: What could a ‘sense-and-respond education’ look like … as oppose command and control?
* I would like to talk about how we talk (and listen) to each other in the education realm. Can we be more open?
* The new world of work and play - how can we enable our learners best?
* How can school be more fun?
* How to show best practice?
* Can we be less about outcomes, and more about the process of learning?
* ‘It takes a village’ - what does this saying mean in terms of school?
* Purpose of school?
* **The role of the Virtual**: I feel that the virtual nature of our connections at the moment is causing us to think more about the nature of learning (as we are starting afresh). I have to say this virtual teaching world is showing how important the ‘real’ is in teaching. It’s a social activity. However, the virtual suits shy introverted students.
* The race to upskill in digital learning space - incredible pace of change in the last year; where is it going? I feel like I need to digitally upskill and become like a ‘YouTube’ star to be effective online as a teacher these days....
* With digital we are better able to harness the immeasurable wealth of knowledge around the globe;
* **Creative Education**: The willingness to be open and fluid to what emerges in the group, freeing the agenda;
* Creative education - a process that is uncertain;
* Demands a language of learning that is understood within society;
* Building creative forms and formats to support learning;
* Creative education has implications for power;
* **Alternative forms of** **assessment** to leaving Cert; would like to see people thinking about how our assessment in education helps with learning rather than measures one’s performance; how to acknowledge all forms of learning? Learning is not just measured in points; stop analysing the LC Papers every year; seeing students as whole people;
* **Equality of access** to education using our learning from 2020, tech and other options;
* **Student Voice**: Diversifying the curriculum for a diverse demographic of learners. Who should be responsible for learning, the student or the teacher? If it’s the student should they drive the agenda with the teachers in service of this? In terms of the voice of the students, Hub na nÓg is a national centre of excellence and coordination for giving children and young people a voice in decision-making. https://www.hubnanog.ie/what-is-hub-na-nog/
* How to foster love of learning; how to make teaching be about learning again;
* **Use of media** - have a plan to educate the media on learning; more ‘lived experience’ stories of people’s journeys through education; champions and leaders advocating for change; I would like to see the assumptions our system is based on debated on a public stage; fewer school league tables or University ranking; a focus on positives from the Covid experience, changing the discourse around the 2020 leaving cert and focussing on the successes; communicating the importance of and potential for change in education at this time; breathe oxygen into the conversation about education fit for this moment - remove stickiness on Leaving Cert.
* **Relationships between 2nd and 3rd level**: decouple LC from access to HE; reinvent the matric? I think we should look at all transitions - speak to students about their experiences; entry requirements to university; disentangle entry to third level from second level enabling broader curriculum and learning experience at second level; Look at alternative routes from 2nd to 3rd level; what might 2nd level look like in the absence of a filter process for the 3rd level? 3rd level run their own admission processes - break the direct link; develop entry competencies that are achievable within school; acknowledge that the exam culture has migrated from second level to third level - where will it end? UCAS system might offer some ideas; Consider alternatives to one terminal high stakes exam- modular smaller exams/ practical’s etc throughout the years of the course.
* **Onward**: Wish we could be in a room together but **thanks** for making this happen. One of the ways to keep the momentum is to **keep our own conversations going**.

20.11.20

**ANNEX**

