

An education for the future

Views from North Belfast

compiled by

Michael Hall

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Introduction

When the Minister for Education asked for responses to what has become known as ‘The Burns Report’ (more accurately *Education for the 21st Century: Report by the Post-Primary Review Body*), as MLA for North Belfast I wanted to bring together as wide a range of expertise and opinion on education provision as possible – including not only school principals but those involved in community-based education, youth training schemes, parents and others. I felt that such a breadth of opinion was necessary because, whatever the Burns Report might have to say about the future structure of post-primary education, for many of the children living in deprived areas of North Belfast –on both sides of the religious interface –the impact of social disadvantage has already made its detrimental impact on educational achievement long before they reach post-primary age.

This is not a party-political document; it represents views and opinions on our education system which were expressed during the course of two evening meetings held in late April/early May 2002 (supplemented by separate discussions with young people). The discussions were not restricted to the Burns Report; if there was one overriding theme it was ‘access to education’.

To provide an adequate platform for the views of all those individuals who play a leading role in education provision in North Belfast would have required a full-day conference. The organisers assumed, however, that it was unlikely that the intended participants could have taken this time out of their busy schedules. Furthermore, it was felt that a smaller-scale discussion might more effectively facilitate a dialogue. The decision, therefore, was taken to invite a selected number to participate in the discussions, whilst acknowledging that other important voices would go unheard. We apologise to the latter – their omission is in no way a reflection of the value we place on their contribution to education in North Belfast. Those who were invited to attend, however, very adequately represented the different school sectors –nursery, primary, secondary (both Catholic maintained and ‘Protestant’ controlled), grammar and integrated – as well as those involved in community and youth education and training schemes.

As the organisers felt it was important to take the education debate to the widest possible audience –particularly into those communities who are currently so educationally disadvantaged – Michael Hall of the Fasset Community Think Tanks Project was asked to compile this report and to make it as accessible as possible to that wider audience.

Billy Hutchinson, MLA North Belfast

An education for the future: views from North Belfast

Opening up the education debate

It was conceded right at the outset that the discussion could not be restricted to an analysis of the Burns Report.

One of the problems we will face in this debate is: where does it start and where does it end? The Burns Report was written because there was a specific brief concerned with the structure of *secondary* education. But you cannot look at that in isolation, without looking at the primary sector, for example, or indeed, without looking at the whole purpose of education.

The suggestion was also made that the wider debate currently taking place on Burns might not be fully informed.

As part of a community consultation process I sampled the views of a number of young teachers who teach in our secondary and grammar schools. Their primary reaction to the Burns Report was that it was far too complex, it was going to add even more layers of bureaucracy to what already existed and would involve a tremendous amount of change. And the attitude of some of them was: if it's not broken why try to fix it? But the most interesting aspect to me was that *none* of the teachers I talked to had actually read the entire Report; they had read the recommendations, but not the report itself.

However, some principals had certainly given Burns careful consideration.

I think we have to go much wider than Burns and look at other countries, and see what lessons are there and not just narrow it down. So let's look at Sweden, England... other places... and try to get something that is exciting. There is a great danger of chucking something out and going half-prepared into something new. I think we need to focus on other things first, such as primary education and curriculum, before we make a lot of changes which could prove to be damaging.

No, don't restart what has already been done. Burns has done all of that; they've gone out and looked at other education systems. This is a playing for time ploy. Post-primary education is too important to leave in a vacuum.

I agree. I really do believe the time is well past, we don't have that time. And, in fact, I think a lot of looking *has* happened so we don't *need* the time.

I am totally against Burns, there are so many things that are unworkable in it. I believe in young people getting the best chance, and if you look at the statistics, something like 50% more young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds go to university in Northern Ireland compared with England.

There are a lot of facts like that which we have to put forward. It is easy with a sweep of the hand to say we're not doing so well, and from time to time the Minister for Education will rubbish what we have here, yet *what* we have here is a quality product. Okay, somebody, somewhere needs to pick up the gap which has arisen in technical skills, for that has been lost and needs to be taken up – whether by grammar schools, secondary schools, whatever. I say: let's celebrate what we have; let's determine where the weaknesses are and let's tackle those weaknesses. We mustn't run down our secondary schools, we mustn't run down our grammar schools. I believe I am able to look at this objectively – it's not a case of holding on to what I have. I genuinely care about the young people in the Province, no matter what school they attend.

Others shared this positive assessment of the value derived from the current education system.

The education system in Northern Ireland is significantly better than in England and Wales. Northern Ireland is a significantly better area to be educated in, in both grammar school *and* secondary school. Whereas a disastrous situation is found in the area comprehensives in England, that's where the problems occur, particularly in working-class comprehensives.

Yet in a recent report Northern Ireland was *eighth* in Europe, beaten by Finland and also by England...

When you look more closely at that report, in particular topics – scientific literacy, mathematical literacy and literacy – Northern Ireland is actually right up there at the top end, and in one of them actually leads. I know we shouldn't get bound up by statistics, but I do think we have to look at them. At least it gets us away from the emotional arguments used around the education debate –the Minister uses them all the time. I'm tired people rubbish the system in Northern Ireland, the quality of provision that we have – not just in grammar schools but in secondary schools. Put the two together and we have a quality product. Blair and others are saying 'one hat fits all', but it doesn't. We don't want something imposed from the top that statistics clearly show will leave us ending up with less than what we have now.

If we are all here representing children and to put learners first, why are we still talking about a two-tier system, why are we talking about statistics, why are we not talking about the child – unique and individual –and about each child's individual needs? Children are not statistics, education is not about statistics, it is about making an education system that each child can buy into along with their parents, and one that each child can come through successfully.

Many people assume that if you talk about other systems or statistics then you don't care about children, but looking at other things doesn't cut children out of the picture, because what we want is the best for all of them.

What, then, was at the core of the education debate?

Maybe it would help if we tried to focus on the *purpose* of education. And it might be helpful to reflect on what CEA, in terms of the proposed curriculum, identify as that purpose. And it has three distinct components: the development of the individual, the development of the individual in society, and the development of the individual to play a part in the economy. I assume that would be a purpose we could all live with. However, in this society our employment aspirations are driven by social perception, and unfortunately in Northern Ireland such perception is dominated by what might be termed the ‘traditional professions’ – which provided social respectability – and everyone then measures any other kind of career –and by implication the educational route towards that career –in terms of those professions. As a consequence we’ve lost the skills-base in Northern Ireland, we’ve lost by implication the manufacturing base, we’ve lost an economy which produces.

Others felt that the fundamental economic changes which had taken place in society had in their turn forced changes upon the education system.

When I was growing up on the Shankill I remember my uncle, who left school at 15, getting a job in Shorts and becoming one of the top men there. He didn’t get educated in school –he got educated at work. He went to ‘Tech’ on day-release and then at night, and he became a manager. And there were other people I know who did the same thing; they got City & Guilds and other qualifications, and that helped them get them a career. The difficulty is that all that is now gone, and the Protestant working class especially – who valued apprenticeships above education –are being left behind.

When I took the ‘Quallie’ in Derry I applied for Foyle. Now, I could never have gone to Foyle but for the 11-plus, for my parents could never have afforded it. Some others went another route, and elected to go that route, because they didn’t want anything which was purely academic. But in those days there *was* another route for them, there was the Intermediate school as it was called then, but it was the ‘Tech’ that they had their minds on, they wanted to go there because of what was on offer. There was a quality thing which was offered in those days and that has all been lost.

Going back to the idea of social attitudes to education, I think it is clear that there are perceptions about ‘better’ and ‘worse’ in this community and many parents move heaven and earth to get their children into what they perceive to be the ‘better’ schools, i.e. the grammar schools. And I think some of the opposition to the current system relates to the social divisions it creates in society. We started off by saying that education is about the development of the individual within society, not solely the need to equip them academically for creative life. And I think that people are dissatisfied with the present system for those reasons – its impact on society – and there are real and genuine fears that this impact is highly detrimental. Many people see the need for an education system that *doesn’t* separate children out at 11, but does more to integrate them, to create broader social mixes. And, beyond that, to bring better religious mixes together within the system, as a way of creating a better society.

All I can speak for is my own [grammar] school, and we do have a good social mix; we have ones who are very poor and ones who are very well off. But something which I also value is that there is a religious mix, in that we would have about 25% Roman Catholic children, which is something I treasure.

In terms of your free school meal percentage, what would that be?

I think it's about 100 children out of 1400.

That's very low; in my school 87% of the children are on free school meals. The reality is that we have a two-tier system, and we should be talking here about getting rid of the Transfer Test which perpetuates it. The present system doesn't work, it fails the majority of children that I work with. For we're talking here about human rights for all children to get the same education. We should be looking at something that we can bring into the middle that we all can buy into, in order to move this discussion forward. Children are individuals with equal entitlement, and the current system does not provide equal entitlement. Very few children from my school will get to grammar school. That's not saying we're not going to celebrate the success of grammar schools; of course we should, but the reality is that 80% of children don't get to grammar school. What we are really talking about is parity of esteem, and we don't have that at the minute.

Parity of esteem

This relationship to the wider society was considered to be central to the whole debate on the future of education.

Some people have expressed the belief that our education system is a system of excellence. But, if so, why then has it failed so many of our young people?

Education is fundamentally a social justice issue, and unless we tackle it as such all we are doing is perpetuating the system of class division in which the have-nots are continually put in a position of inferiority by the haves.

In whose interest is the current system? You don't have to be a genius in sociology to know that if you come from a middle-class background you have got possibly twelve times more chance of passing the 11-plus than if you come from a working-class background. Now, the thing about North Belfast which fascinates me, is that on a scale of 1 to 10 –from poverty to riches –we have both extremes. And there is absolutely no question that the people who inhabit that 'rich' end have got every single advantage in terms of going through the current system while everybody who inhabits the other, parallel universe, which is the inner cities, has got every single *disadvantage*.

We may have to think in terms of positively discriminating in favour of

disadvantaged areas. That has been attempted in other countries; in the States some years ago you positively wanted single-parent blacks to enrol in your university or college, because they were worth three times more cash than white middle-class kids. But whatever method we use, we can't simply turn around and condemn entire swathes of areas because they then become even *more* disadvantaged.

The people who are presently disadvantaged need to be given an advantage, and if they don't get it from birth we are not going to succeed. On the Shankill they have tried an 'enriched curriculum' and the data that has been gathered so far has shown positive gains. That's what we need to be doing, so that when a child gets older it does have some sort of advantage rather than a disadvantage. Statistics show that if you're born into a Protestant working-class background you have a one-in-eight chance of getting into a grammar school; whereas if you're born into a Catholic working-class background you have a one-in-three chance of getting to grammar school. There is something drastically wrong; we can't say that Prods are thick. I heard some MLAs saying last week that there is nothing you can do in disadvantaged areas because 'you can't teach these people'. That's an indictment of those politicians. There has to be some sort of environment that provides children from these areas with an advantage.

I think it comes down quite often to the nature of communities; Catholic communities tend to have more social cohesion – religion, church, family – whereas there is greater fragmentation in Protestant communities. And if a school reflects and reinforces the values which are out there in the local community you get an improvement in social capital.

I think Catholics felt that they needed education to work their way up through the system, whereas many Protestants felt that education wasn't that important because they didn't need it to get jobs and therefore it wasn't built into their system. I would also feel that in Catholic areas the relationship between the community and the school tends to be better, because many of the teachers actually come from the local community or similar communities, and they can make the linkages.

One of the issues which has to be addressed is the underclass. I believe that it does exist and unless we can deal with this problem life's not going to change very much in North Belfast. So I think that when we're looking at what's best for each child, we would be well served focusing time and effort on those who are most disadvantaged at the moment. Not to hurt those who are not disadvantaged, but we have to sort that issue out.

I am increasingly convinced that at the end of the day the fundamental role of secondary education, as perceived by the Department of Education for quite a number of years, is basically a 'holding' operation. Now, that wouldn't be a very popular view to those who employ me, but I increasingly believe that that is our function. And I have a distinct impression that there are a considerable

amount of people in the secondary sector, including those in leadership positions, who are becoming increasingly cynical. And if this argument is lost and there is not significant change in the education system they will vote with their hearts and their feet. Because they are fed up 'holding'.

I heard that in the Greater Belfast area the number of children who are not at school at the moment has risen threefold within the time that the new Executive has been in place.

The question you have to ask yourself is: why are some kids so disillusioned with education that they don't want to go to school? And I genuinely believe that schools damage children. They damage them because they have a set of expectations which are often totally and utterly inappropriate for a particular child. And day and daily, in *some* schools which don't have a caring face, that child is reminded not only that they are a failure but that they will continue to be a failure. There is simply a lack of recognition that each child –and this sounds trite –is different. There must be space found to celebrate the achievements of *all* children, in all aspects of schoolwork. And that means us getting our heads round a new mindset and learning a new language.

Mention was made there of the money we pour into schools just to keep them 'holding'; why not free up those resources to provide an alternative education for those kids, where you would have far better staff to pupil ratios.

Maybe what we should be saying is that in the 21st Century we need an alternative education for *all* children.

We should actively try to involve young people in school life so that they develop a sense of belonging to the school, and a sense of value in the school and for what they get out of it. And for me a young person who has a sense of belonging to their school and confidence in their teachers is not going to need an alternative education.

Could I offer another way of coming at the same problem? What's wrong with the children who cannot fit in with our education? One of the things about them is that they have no *value* to people in education. That sounds like a really cruel word to say, but that is the truth of it. If you've got a girl of 15 years of age who is prepared to work and get 10 As in her GCSEs and 3As in her A-levels everyone can see a value for that child. But the child who is going to come in and be difficult is going to cost time, and cost teaching. And one of the things we should consider is: make that child valuable to the school [in the form of cash incentives]. If a child has a problem, it is *our* problem as well, it is an *educational* problem, and we should be prepared to fund those things which can assist that child through their education. Either put sufficient money into providing an alternative education, or, if we want to achieve this through mainstream education, make it financially worthwhile for schools to bring these kids in. That's preferable to labelling them as useless and shoving them off into special schools.

It was pointed out that it was often training schemes and community programmes which were left to pick up the pieces of a failed education.

I just want to give some examples of children who came out of school damaged, but who under an alternative method became successes. They're all from North Belfast. The first one came to our centre referred by Probation. When we did a training needs analysis for him he expressed no interest in anything; he was only there because Probation sent him. But our training officer looked on him as her own son, took an interest in him, and within five years he was building computers, and he's now an IT manager. Second person was a young girl, sent to us for work experience, and a note in her portfolio read: 'just go through the motions'. Again our training officer looked upon her as her own daughter and she has now got a diploma in software engineering. But she came out of school with the attitude that she would become pregnant – probably to some young drug dealer. The third was a young person who had left school without any qualifications and without any prospects. During an interview for a training programme she was doodling and, when asked if she liked drawing, said that she loved art but had never received any encouragement at school. We arranged for her to go on an art programme and to gain some practical experience. Since then she has exhibited her work and received a commission. What I am saying is that these young people came out of school damaged and failures, all from inner city working-class areas, but with a bit of love and care, concern and compassion they moved forward.

That's because you have the time and the resources to spend... In the mainstream it doesn't work like that, that's the problem.

You *can* do it in mainstream; I'll give you three examples. Boy came to us, his brother had been expelled from school, and the first two years were absolutely horrendous. Second boy, told by a primary school head – now retired, thank goodness – that he was useless, that he would never make anything of himself, and there was no point him staying on in school. The third one was a school refuser; we couldn't get him in in year 8, eventually got him in. And he swore at me, I never witnessed anything like it in my life. Yet yesterday I interviewed the three of them for head boy; they have all done brilliantly at GCSE and are doing their ASs and going on to do A-levels.

As far as I know my primary school on the Springmartin Road is the only primary school in Belfast which has the word 'inclusive' in its prospectus. We have successfully worked with kids with Asperger Syndrome... I teach a class of 12 kids with ADHD. That's where we're putting the resources, to simply get to the kids before they blow. It's exhausting, but education has got to be flexible, it's got to look at those kids in real terms.

When we're talking about young people failing at school, it can't be just the education system; for me it must come from the home as well. A child needs

to be getting the proper guidance at home. And this isn't about trying to tell parents how to be parents, this is about informing them what it will be like for their child if their child *doesn't* get a good education –should that be academic or otherwise. We need to keep parents informed, and make all the information accessible to them, so that they know exactly what the benefits will be to their child.

I believe that in the Greater Shankill we are getting it right somewhere with the enriched curriculum. I can talk as a parent because my son is going through it at the moment and I can see the benefits of it. In my community we have many parents who do not value education and this is being passed on to their children. That needs to be addressed. These parents need to understand and need to get the information as to why we want the education system to change: so that we don't have young people growing up feeling the way they're feeling at the moment. And there needs to be more resources put into primary education. If a learning need is discovered at primary school but isn't getting any help until secondary school by then it is too late, because the child has already become disruptive, already begun to see themselves as a failure. We need to help the child whenever the problem starts.

In some cases we're into fourth generation failure in the 11-plus –four generations of failure by the system. Why wouldn't those parents send their children to abuse the system back?

Yes, if the parents don't feed into the education debate we're not going to succeed. I have worked with parents, mainly mothers, over the past 12 years and 99.9% of them want the best for their children. That's why when they see the pink slip the first thing they think is: where is it I can get him or her into grammar? Because they want the best. Parents are the primary carers, so we really need to bring parents on board here.

We really have to look at the needs of the most excluded section of our community: those kids who can't stay even in secondary schools, who are falling through the net. Regardless of all the human rights legislation and the Education Act which says that everyone has an entitlement to education, these kids are getting about three hours a week if they're lucky, in a very limited curriculum. On the Shankill figures for suspensions and expulsions are four times higher than the average. And it is something which effects many working-class areas.

I work with young people and I can see their lack of self-esteem and confidence. We have all failed them, and this society has failed them; what we need to do is all work together – with a collective voice –and get rid of the 11-plus for a start, for two 1-hour papers do not really tell us what our children are capable of. It is true that some children do achieve academically, but what about the rest of the children who are out there now feeling worthless?

The 11-plus debate

The most emotive issue within education at present –and one which has been around long before Burns – is clearly the Transfer Test, popularly known as the ‘11-plus’.

In lower primary education we have a very open education system. One of the most fascinating things for me in my experience in education was looking at a nursery curriculum to see how you could interpret that curriculum in English, Maths and Science. And this was in a nursery school with children who couldn’t read and write, and it was a curriculum based on hands-on experience. But then, as children work their way through the primary school, because of the influence of Transfer that openness diminishes.

Can any of the principals here tell me why it is that children start off in a mixed-ability class, and then when they get to P7 suddenly find that they have to decide what their future academic route is going to be? Why did somebody decide that this cut-off point was so important?

The current system was based on research done by Sir Cyril Birt, even though in 1953 it was revealed that his findings were actually concocted. But the question I would like to ask is: what kind of social forces have *sustained* this system? How come it is still in place, if 50 years ago it was shown that the proposer was actually a charlatan? Now, I have my own answers about that, and ‘education’ is not one of them. We’re caught up in a scam, the most successful show which has been running since Birt’s research in 1953, and people believe that the best form of education is grammar education. But the current system just isn’t appropriate for a significant number of children, and an alternative needs to be found.

People say all the time that our young people should value education. I agree, but I think our education system in turn has to value the young people who are in it. And if there is almost universal acceptance that the Transfer Test fails in what it is meant to do –access a child’s true abilities – for you can’t do that with two tests an hour long, then how come it’s still there? A system that has failed is allowed to remain, while the people who are failed by that system are thrown onto the scrapheap. And I think that until you look at how we overhaul the system so that it values young people and puts them first and foremost then we will have this self-fulfilling prophesy where many young people feel they are not suited for education, or education is not suited for them, and it will fail them and they in turn will fail themselves.

Because our education system has been set in stone with regard to the Transfer Test, it means that very early on teachers begin making judgements on children as to their capacity to pass the Test, and very early on start writing off many children. In response, children then start turning off school.

And because the expectation is that 'X' percentage go to grammar schools and therefore can be educated in this elite education, the education for the rest is devalued, their expectations of their teachers are lower, and the expectations of the children and their parents are lower. I think the value of the Burns Report is in discussing how you can open up that system so that you do have an equality of opportunity, and equality of expectation for children. And I think if we want an education system in which teachers see their children as individuals with a range of abilities, *all* of which are important for them and their development, then our aim should be to determine what structure of education best suits or encourages that type of development.

The Transfer forces schools to teach towards the Test and by implication narrows the curriculum.

That depends on how it is managed. I think there is also pressure from parents, or a desire from some parents who want to send their children to a grammar school. And the primary schools have to respond to that, especially if parents in P7 return that pink form saying they want their children to enter for the Transfer procedure.

I have no doubt that as long as we maintain the current selective system then the whole grammar/secondary thing will be the only game in town. I did a focus group last week in Ardoyne, and I was surprised to find that parents were concerned that this issue would not be 'messed up', because they believed the Transfer Test might give their child a chance to get on. And I was trying to explain to them that it doesn't, it actually positively discriminates against their children. But the question is whether we can convince parents – and ourselves, never mind the parents – that we can produce something which is not only more 'just' for North Belfast but which is actually better.

The Transfer Test forces schools to do things in a particular way to try and push as many kids across that particular line as possible, and parents will push you as long as that system remains. My point would be that if you change the system, then you change the context in which children are learning.

It was said that there's too much emotion in the current debate. And I would welcome emotion being taken out of the debate... in the real sense: the emotion far too many householders in Northern Ireland have experienced since 1947 on the first Saturday in February!

I said earlier that having been 30 years in this game I'm coming to the conclusion that schools are devices for damaging children, by having the same goalposts for every child and saying that first past that is the best... while the one at the end is left feeling vilified and humiliated. And I have seen it happen – I hope I haven't done it –but I've seen kids coming into school with bright, eager faces and emerging in P7 as children who hate and detest the learning situation.

We all talk a lot about the 11-plus, but we have an area in this country which

has not done the 11-plus since 1960 – that’s the Craigavon area. The argument being repeatedly made is that primary education is being badly damaged by selection at 11, but here we have a selection system in Craigavon which *doesn’t* select at 11, it selects at 14. But can you show me an inspection report which says that the education there is significantly better than the rest of Northern Ireland? In reality, reports done in the 1970s and 1980s actually went in the other direction.

These kids that I have are the future dads and future mums; you’ve got to break into the circle somewhere, not only to give today’s young people their entitlement but to end the generational nature of it, so that 30 years on we’ll be away out of it. People say that the education debate is about more than the 11-plus; it is, certainly, but this is the big one! This is such a huge injustice that you can’t get at the rest of the problem until you damn well get this out of the way. And we really need to stand back and put children first and forget the goddamned statistics because I don’t accept them. And this is fanned by those who want to hold on to these awful divisions of children just to make sure that in the fullness of time we continue to have a two-tier society; and to me that’s the *big* division in Belfast, and we need to get away from it.

I accept that you have got to try and lift people out and improve people’s chances – I don’t think anybody is arguing against that. The difficulty you have is with the process. What is the alternative to the one we have? And basically the argument I am hearing here is that *we* will tell parents where they send their children; *we* will have an area comprehensive and *we* will make a decision... but it will not be the parents who make that decision. We argue about the current system; certainly there is poor choice for many people, but the alternative we are getting in its place is one of *no* choice for most people. Now, this is an argument about people who know best, and I find that very difficult: that we will bring in a new system, we’ll build these schools, and we will tell parents where they will send their children. But the basic question is: shouldn’t people have a choice?

Grammar school – a place apart?

Discussion on grammar schools engendered some strong responses.

As someone who teaches in high school, I feel emotional about the children I teach, because they are equal to anybody. But they are certainly not getting an equality of opportunity. Having gone to grammar school myself it’s shocking to see the difference in resources. Take sport, for example: I went to a school which had this massive sporting set-up and I now work in a school where the children haven’t a single blade of grass to run around on. I don’t blame the grammar schools; they’ve been given a remit and they have succeeded in that remit. We need to widen the remit so that they can play a role alongside everyone else in the improvement of educational provision.

People often try to tell the boys in my secondary school that they are second class –and that’s what they’re saying, let there be no coddling about that – and the teachers that I have are, by implication, second class too. But our boys are not second class, and our teachers are not second class and I’m not second class, and nobody working outside the grammar is second class – although that’s the implication. Please don’t think for a minute that in an all-ability school anybody is being disenfranchised from what is supposedly happening in grammar schools. I worked in the grammar sector for seven years before moving into a comprehensive, and the girls doing A-level Physics in my class were getting exactly the same teaching from me as the boys in a grammar school in North Belfast.

I think there is a need for change, and I think it is the system which needs changed. That is not an attack on the grammar schools. I went to Regent House, I was the first member of my family to go to a grammar school, and I found it the most mind-blowing, stimulating experience that ever happened to me and I am in great debt to those teachers and I can still remember every one of them, they were brilliant. And I would love every child to have this experience. But the system *does* need changed.

There is a group of kids who are very often forgotten about in this debate, and it is the grammar school children. We all say that the non-grammar school kids have been disenfranchised. Yes, they have; they maybe haven’t had the chance at school assembly to hear the quality string quartet, or the wonderful orator who’s going to hit the top, or the super debater, or maybe the good athlete, because very often he might be in the grammar school too. Yes, my kids are disenfranchised, but so is the future doctor in the grammar sector who hasn’t had the opportunity to be educated alongside a broad social mix of his fellow man. So too has the future priest, minister, be he Presbyterian, Catholic or whatever, or the future lawyer or politician; they have been disenfranchised too.

In my [grammar] school we would have a fair proportion of kids from a working-class background. I have looked at it, 25% maybe, that sort of level. So we do have a social mix and I think that’s the way it should be. Coming from a working-class background myself I am very keen on it.

I would say that 30 years ago the grammar schools in North Belfast were educating 20-25% of the student population. Today, they are educating what? 35? 40? 50%? The figure across Belfast is something like 55% of all children going to grammar schools; grammar schools have become progressively comprehensive. Because of demographics.

I think we will get there. In the future there won’t be any grammar schools, or secondary schools – just good schools, properly managed, with all the children wearing the same uniform and the same rugby or football jersey, and growing as a community. It is possible, I believe, if we turn our energy to creating quality arenas, with quality teaching, where *nobody* will suffer.

That notion about football is a lovely notion, but a bit unrealistic at this time, and you just have to look at the Holy Cross and the Boys Model... we can't run about in the same uniforms, we have to take this society stuff that's going on very very seriously.

One thing which annoys me about grammar schools is that as the population has decreased the population in the grammar schools has stayed the same because they are taking lower and lower ability kids and the secondary schools are getting smaller and smaller because they are losing out.

This is the Department of Education's fault. They insist on micro-managing the schools; insist that the schools have intake numbers, and insist that they take up to these intake numbers from those who apply. If a voluntary grammar school is faced with taking Ds they may want to refuse. But if they do that then their quota is cut the following year and so within seven years they will have a redundancy. And no school wants to contemplate that.

But I worry about the demographic trends, and if the grammar sector does take the same number of children then more and more secondary schools are going to be merely 'holding', and it will get worse. The whole of Northern Ireland is going to suffer if we go on the way we are going.

We have spoken tonight as professionals, but as a parent, if our child gets a grade A, where do we send that child to? And it is most likely to be to a grammar school. So, are we being consistent in our philosophy?

As a result of a request from the Shankill Women's Centre we embarked on a community consultation about the Burns Report. And certainly people, by and large, were rejecting the old 11-plus. However, the contradiction was that they were also saying: yes, but we'd like some other form of academic selection because you can't simply put everybody in together. Can you?

The Collegiates – pathways to the future?

To some, the answer to that last question is contained in the suggestion, promoted by Burns, for all schools within a geographical area to group themselves into a 'collegiate', within which they would share resources and pupil intake.

When Burns came out it looked awful complicated; then I began to get a better picture of it. Let's suspend disbelief in Burns for a moment and its complications and its difficulties – and we could point them all out: for a start, how are you going to get seven principals to work together and come to an agreement? But let's pretend Burns came in the way it suggests and had been working for 10 years – what could it actually be like? And I think we need to have some vision of that kind, to either accept or reject. For me, if you implemented it, every school would be running a comprehensive system dealing with mixed ability, mixed background, mixed areas; that's what it

could be and that's quite exciting for me. And then the schools –whether B.R.A., Bearnaghaeha, the Boys Model, or wherever – responding to that challenge with the traditions, the skills, the resources they have, to provide a bigger, wider, more relevant range of education, in conjunction with parents... there's something there I find really exciting. I would love someone who is against Burns to produce another vision of what the future could be and how it could be better, because I haven't heard that yet.

I looked closely at the collegiate idea too and I think that there could be some mileage if the present Education Boards were to disappear overnight, and people were brought in from all sectors to try and work on the delivery of comprehensive education for all children within a geographical area. At the very least it could bring a bit more sense of shared responsibility from each of us. At present if I was, let's say, a grammar school headmaster, that's all I am going to focus on, whereas if we reform the way education is administered it might open up debate within an area as to how we can *collectively* deliver education provision. At the moment everybody seems to be working in tiny structures separated from each other.

Of all the questions I had about the Burns Report the one I didn't get a satisfactory answer to was how the pupils actually get into any school within a collegiate. If there's no academic selection – and there's a lot of support for doing away with that because of the damage people believe it does to society – the only method seems to be by lottery or by birth dates or whatever.... But if post-primary children are allocated to a group of schools within a collegiate on a random basis, statistically the intake of *each* school should reflect a similar range of abilities. To deal with that *every* school therefore, within that collegiate, whether it is a grammar school or secondary school, has to provide a kind of comprehensive curriculum. And when the children come to make choices about their future, these schools also have to provide a range of development pathways for them. Now, I don't know how they do that unless the collegiate council representing all the schools within an area agrees that each of the schools will provide different specialisms, based on what each school does best –whether that might be liberal studies, music, art, drama, engineering, science, etc. Pupils can then move to one school for everything, or even move between schools. That's the only way I can see it functioning.

As to how you allocate children, I can think of one possible way. Let's suppose that each school within the collegiate would take an equal percentage of those children entitled to free school meals. That means, for example, that B.R.A. would take into their first year, let's say 20% of kids who are on free school meals, meaning that 20% of those who otherwise could have been in their first year are now going to be spread around the other schools.

Let's also remember those youngsters who are currently in no school. We all know children who are moved between schools, often with a host school reluctantly accepting them, or being forced to accept them, and one school will pass the buck to the next –and we are involved in that. Perhaps as a

collegiate we would have a much better chance of dealing with the very serious issue of those for whom going to school is just not relevant.

The community representatives reminded the teaching professionals that the education debate must not disappear from public view into a maze of complicated structures.

Most ordinary parents find it very very difficult to get a handle on any one part of this, let alone the whole complexity of the debate. And while I do believe that the debate which has been brought about as a result of Burns is a very necessary debate, there is a danger of it becoming inaccessible to many communities. For what is dramatically lacking at present is public confidence. In the whole debate there hasn't been enough getting together in communities where the *real* issues emerge, such as the fears people might have about collegiates, or the difficulty people have about the idea of their child having to travel away from their community.

Yes, I agree; I think we have lost the plot a bit. Over 160 women come through the doors of the Shankill Women's Centre each week, and none of them had ever heard of any of the consultations on Burns that were supposedly being held. I know they were probably advertised around the place, but they weren't being advertised in the right places, particularly community organisations. Yet when we ran a few sessions on Burns all their concerns came out: about their children's safety; about what would actually happen in these collegiates... It's fine teachers and other professionals making all these decisions about children's education –and there needs to be decisions made about children's education –but what about the parents? The parents are the most important people in the children's lives; I think we need to start talking about how can we inform the parents of the educational changes, and how we can give them a say in what happens to their children's future.

Just in response to this fear of travelling between schools: we have to remember Belfast is a net *importer* of children. Belfast has over 2000 children coming *in* to be educated, and 500 going *out*. When we talk about cross-collegiate movement 40% of the children who are in Belfast already do it, simply because they come in to Belfast or go out.

The community representatives were anxious that the grammar schools played a full part in this collegiate idea.

I admire B.R.A.; I think they have done a phenomenal job in looking at social mix, religious mix and I couldn't criticise the way the school is organised or the quality of teaching. My question is: in the next five to ten years could they – and other grammar schools –as well as reflecting a social, religious and ethnic mix, also embrace diversity of abilities and the different needs that some kids have? Can schools like B.R.A. develop their curriculum in a way that combines the very best of those things that we are talking about yet can start to offer different educational routes –under the same roof?

A broader picture

It was clear that the education debate embraced much more than the 11-plus, or the grammar/secondary dichotomy, or even the structures proposed by Burns.

The Education Minister is seeking a consensus, and my fear is that the only consensus that seems to be coming through at the minute is on one simple issue: the abolition of the Transfer Tests. But the abolition of that will not in itself advance the education debate, there's far more to it than that.

Can I suggest that instead of concentrating on systems and examinations, we start looking at children. We need to look at what we are actually doing to children by putting them into this system and trying to get them through this narrow little door of 11-plus instead of trying to turn them into independent individuals who think creatively, and who enjoy learning. Never mind any systems or examinations, it is children at the bottom of this.

I think this group has to make a decision as to what they think the function of education in the 21st Century is. That's where we need to lead the argument off from. I think we then need to underpin it with values and principles and from that turn it into a system of provision that would work for everyone.

How can we give *every* child equal access to the best education for that child?

We spend a huge amount of money on education, we've put an awful lot of people into doing it, we tie up our children from they're two or three years of age until they're about... I don't know, some of them up to 30 years of age... so why do we do it? Our society is not discussing what it is looking for in education. Or how we can supply the same to everyone, bearing in mind that providing everyone with the same is not necessarily the same as giving everyone equality. I think that we have to determine *why* we want to educate, and what we are going to do about those in our society who cannot make full use of the system that we currently have.

I think children have many gifts and we have to identify those gifts, and there are other gifts besides academic gifts, which need to be identified, need to be helped, encouraged. And when I look at the Province stuck where we are on the edge of Europe, competing in a world which is changing very quickly, we've got to do things that are right, we must not throw away elements that are very good in what we have. We have to look at where our weaknesses are. Where are the gaps in it all? The gaps are at the technical end, the skills end; those skills are not to be had. At the minute we have a curriculum which is very much academic in basis. I know that new proposals are in the melting pot, but if young people with maybe no academic gifts are required to do an academic curriculum then they're disadvantaged from the word 'go'.

The age of decision-making: 11 or 14?

When the participants set themselves the task of seeing if agreement could be reached on the way forward, discussion regarding the most appropriate 'age of decision-making' revealed the difficulties in the way of reaching consensus.

I debate with anybody that we have to select children at the age of 11, and put one group into this set of schools –which happen to have all the good fancy facilities and the nice gymnasia and the good playing fields, nice ambience, etc –and the rest into your secondary modern schools. I don't believe that's necessary. I believe that children can continue past the age of 11 in the same non-selective arena they experience in primary.

I agree. The evidence would seem to suggest that when children get to 14 they are so much more confident. It's not just a knowledge thing; they're so much more aware of the importance of their educational route.

I work with young people in youth centres, as well as in group work and personal development programmes in schools, and there definitely is a difference around the 13/14 age range in terms of young people's adolescent development, and it is starker than at 11.

Why don't we look at it then in terms of foundations years 0–6, then in terms of core years 7–13, and finally 14–18. So, at 14 you're looking at sort of gateways, like college clusters. Why can't we turn it on its head and move away from 11? At the moment children are already opting to pursue different subjects at the age of 14.

In America you have the 'middle school' system, and it is a natural thing for them; they go on to the high school at 14.

I don't think that present resources would allow such a complete transformation.

14 might well be a good age to make up your mind about what sort of educational route you are going to take, but I'm not sure about 7 and 14-year-olds being in the same institution. People are maturing earlier now, and also getting up to a lot of anti-social things earlier, so I would have great concerns about what younger children might pick up from the older ones.

I have three sons, and all I can say is that at the age of 11 they were ready to move on. Now, it may have been because they couldn't stick any more of what was being force-fed to them in the primary sector because of the 11-plus, that may have been the reason. And if you remove that you remove that reason and it might then be acceptable. But they were at the stage where they had outgrown it and wanted to move on.

If you look at it in terms of adolescent development, 13/14 probably does

have benefits, especially because young people are starting at that age to get a sense of their own identity.

Surely the period 7-13 gives additional time to use as your core base, building up in the young people the skills to become informed decision-makers. If one of the goals of education is to have learners become responsible decision-makers, you are providing a four/five year period where you are working on those key skills so that they can make informed choices at 14.

I still think you have to consider role modelling. If you look at your typical 13-year-olds and all the hormones buzzing around, they're not the best role models for 7-year-olds. But if those 13-year-olds are in a school where there are 18-year-olds then even though they might not be that interested in studying at the moment, they will see these older ones doing their A-levels and maybe realise that there *is* a reason for them to be at school.

There are also bad role models at 18-years-old as well, and the younger ones could just as easily say: I want to be like them.

In my experience, 11 is too young for them to go through the process of Transfer.

But Transfer should be a gentle, natural, seamless process. At the minute it is a traumatic experience for all children – including those who pass.

Is a child at 11 able to make an informed decision about their future?

The whole point is they shouldn't *have* to make a decision, there should be a natural post-primary arena, that's what the collegiate should be – a post-primary quality school with partner primary schools.

Whether it is 11 or 13, the question is how you're going to do the move. I know the Minister is in favour of parental choice, yet he's also very keen to get rid of academic selection, so I would be very keen to hear from him how he sees us moving to the next stage, because we need to get that right.

We will just have to accept that there is no consensus on this issue. I suggest we park the '11 or 13' issue, and concentrate on the core principles of whatever system it is we are looking for.

Looking to the Future

There was agreement that there were both positive and negative aspects to the present system.

By and large, we do have good quality education, but the structures of education diminish its impact. If an education system is not aligned to the economy then the purpose of that education in the minds of those being

educated is diminished. And this is a problem that many of us have in the secondary schools: many kids do not have a vision of their future. And very often the vision for the more able children unfortunately is not within Northern Ireland. I agree that it is important to recognise what has been achieved, but it is equally important to quantify just how much of that actually benefits us here in Northern Ireland. Particularly on the Protestant side, many children work through our grammar system and leave Northern Ireland, never to return. That is a serious issue. There is another serious issue: that 30% of the unemployed in Northern Ireland have A-levels or better. So, we educate people to this level and then leave them on the scrapheap. Many of those are people who might well have benefited from the former technical form of education, but that technical education was for an economy which is long gone. What we failed to do was to build our technical education towards an economy of the future, and that deficit still exists.

There are some grammar schools in the city with children with D grades, so in effect they have moved to a broader learning environment, and some grammar schools are to all intents and purposes non-selective schools. I don't believe it is necessary to send them to different buildings to get this academic education. It is possible to put children into a single building but give them choices *within* that building – not a choice of building. And rather than throw out any of the positives, I think we build on the strengths that are there, and that means recognising that within both grammar and secondary schools there are positives, and we must blend them together. In terms of moving forward, my personal preference would be to take the children from primary schools into schools which are 11-14 or 11-16 schools, linked to other schools which will provide, particularly at the age of 14, a much broader range of learning. And you build from strengths that are within our system in that kind of environment.

We also need to make education exciting, we need people to engage in education, and we need people to have a vision for what that education is going to deliver for them. And if in Northern Ireland we have a programme of government which talks about inclusion, equality, a social vision, an economic vision, then education must be the driver of that, it must not be something which sits on the side. Northern Ireland has to move forward as one society, and it can only move forward if things like its education system are in line with all of the other agenda which are on the table. And the one thing which differentiates our education system is social division and that social division is frankly much more insidious than the sectarian division.

It is very important to use language in a way which frames the discussion, and how we move forward; because if we use the language of the past –the grammar schools, the secondary schools, the pecking order of schools –I don't think we are going to get anywhere. However, if we are saying that the way we want to move forward is by focusing on social justice, then we need to use the language of the future, which is equality legislation, human rights legislation, children's rights, a Bill of Rights....

We are dealing with a new situation in Northern Ireland, and hopefully a new peaceful situation, a new attitude in people... and rather than looking over our shoulders at history, at different countries and how they deliver their education, we should have the confidence to believe in *ourselves*. We have to keep this out of party politics; and we have to break the mould which has existed since 1947. We have to highlight the social injustice of what has been going on. Our aim must be to empower people, particularly parents, and particularly parents who have been disempowered in certain areas across Northern Ireland for very many years.

Historically, post-primary schools have always said the children coming in at first form are not up to scratch; primaries have said those coming into P1 aren't up to scratch; the nurseries are saying we're getting children in with speech and language difficulties, developmental difficulties... so we need to look even before education, we need to look at the children from birth, that's where the answer lies. We need to look at the parents, giving the parents the ability to have their children ready for the education system.

This throws up another point. When we say that children are 'not up to scratch' it's partly because our schools have a particular set of expectations, based upon a particular vision of what a child is. And when a child doesn't measure up to those expectations, we try to change that child. And if the child still doesn't fit in, he or she often ends up as damaged goods, because *we're* not able or flexible enough to change to meet that child's needs.

One of the problems is that from a child is born until it's four it's the responsibility of the health service, then when it becomes four that responsibility falls to the education service. What we need is a seamless join between care and education, starting at birth and going right through.

We spend huge amounts of money on nursery education –why? Because we perceive that parents don't understand what they should be doing, in terms of preparing their children for nursery. Yet when it comes to parents we have a real captive audience in young mothers who are more anxious than any other group in this society to do the best for their children. If they were told how they could assist in this preparation, I have no doubt that they would do it.

I think there needs to be a holistic approach to learning; we need a strategy – like lifelong learning – which allows us to develop a curriculum suitable for young people from no age right up to they become parents themselves.

We need to look at how we transform our schools so that all children have a better chance, especially post-primary, and then look at what arrangements are best for transferring our children from one stage of their education to the next. And we must bear in mind –and nobody ever discusses this –that we are talking about competition: we have all been out fighting each other to find kids to get into our school, to get the finances to deliver an education for our kids. There are a *falling* number of children. Now, if you put together the

demographics and all the various sectors which exist, we have to ask the question: how do we rationalise in a way which serves the interests of all?

But demographic change also presents us with an ideal opportunity. Here we have a time when our student population is falling. If we put the same amount of money into our education system, we will have a better pupil-teacher ratio, and other benefits. We have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity now to say: these are the things that we want to do, and we have the time, the teachers and the money to do it. But we need to be careful that we don't take a mad charge at changing things in a way which we then live to regret, just as we did with the secondary schools in the 1980s and then in the 1990s we had to allow the secondary schools to take their A-levels back again.

I have been trying to put a picture to the issues that are emerging from this debate. The starting point is *purpose*. Someone summed that up as relating to the child's development, and seeing that child as part of the wider community, and fitting them for the commercial world. Then we need the *resources* to achieve this purpose, and if we start fighting amongst ourselves –as grammar schools versus secondary schools, or whatever – we are not going to use those resources well. That leads us on to *structures and systems*, which really means the manner in which we use our resources to fulfil the purpose. And linking all these elements together are the *relationships* which exist, or don't exist, within the education system. These relationships can either help or hinder the pursuit of our goals. My personal dissatisfaction with the present system is that despite all the good work and achievements this system still leaves big gaps in society, leaves a lot of young people disadvantaged, which later means that a lot of older people are left disadvantaged. So, despite its achievements it is not doing well enough – that's my view. Another thing which worries me: I keep reading in the papers about all the demotivated, dissatisfied, low-morale teachers. I don't know how the system can work if that is the reality for one of its major resources. We have got to do something urgently to ensure that people working in education begin to believe in it.

The search for a 'joined-up' action plan

What ideas did the participants feel could be taken forward?

We should take politicians out of it, pass the responsibility for the delivery of education to the collegiates and ask *them* to take it forward.

Is there not also a need for some 'joined-up' thinking in terms of all the government departments concerned with education and training –some way of pulling together all the threads that effect young people and their development, their education and their chances of employment. Furthermore, if you have a child of three or four years of age living in an area that is particularly disadvantaged there's also a need for support to the parents, to help them get their child the best life choices and opportunities, not only in terms of

schooling, but later on with regard to employment possibilities. I think there needs to be some joined-up thinking to inspire confidence in the community.

We need to put much more resources in at the earlier levels to offset potential failure, because the remediation of that failure becomes more and more difficult as children move through the system. But, equally, there are some children who will never fit into the strict academic model; there are certain basic things that they are going to need, but the context in which those skills can be developed can be varied. And that is why I think our system needs to be more open. And that is, may I say, not to reject the academic –I think there is a place for the academic –but even some very academic people would feel much more personally developed in a more practically-based curriculum. I think what Burns has done is that he has opened the prospects for a much more collaborative system, which will allow choices to be made at different times, and more appropriate choices. None of us in this room would in any way want to diminish quality, what we want to do is to raise that quality. And it's the mechanism to do that that we should be looking at.

In terms of educational underachievement, and the young people who fall through the net, maybe there is a need for a strategy that looks at the home, the school and the community and how we can all work better together. Parents are often equally disadvantaged in terms of education; something like 20% of the population have basic skills problems, and can't read or write. So we need a holistic strategy.

We have got to change the mindset in education, which –as had been pointed out – is *competition* between schools, and it has been like that for over 25 years. We need to change that mindset to one of *collaboration*, and that's going to be a hard thing to do. And yet we are all looking for the same thing, the same values, and we all certainly want the best for children. But we have to collaborate, we have to move away from competition towards collaboration.

What would go into an action plan if we could all agree to one? I think we are all agreed with 0-6 as the first stage....

All children in Northern Ireland should have a rich educational environment, centred around a developmentally appropriate skills-based curriculum....

We would have to have something in here about education and health coming together in this, because the education system doesn't come into contact with children from birth, so there needs to be something in there...

Joined-up government between health and education... inter-agency collaboration... And we should look at things like the Early Years approach on the Shankill, and Greater Shankill Sure Start.

And joined up training... When I worked in Youth Service we trained with health professionals, teachers and youth workers around child protection, and it was invaluable. And also parental support... picking up a point already

made... the links between the home and the school and health – there should be equal partnerships there too.

Whatever actions we come up with have to be informed by research into how children learn, which we haven't talked about here –the different types of intelligences. There is a volume of information there and it hasn't been informing the education debate at all or entered sufficiently into our language.

Yes, Queen's University are doing research and they're carrying out work in Holy Cross school using a programme called 'Brain Gym', and I have to say I have never seen anything which has impressed me as much.

We have a boy in school who is going through that and it has made such a difference; it is amazing.

Next stage 7-13. Do people agree with that?

No, I think that's a red herring. The reasons we have stayed with 11 as the age of moving from primary to post-primary were: financial, physical resource, physical plant and training. And if you are going to change the parameters so drastically then I think you're going to slow the process down considerably.

I disagree entirely.

I think it's important that we understand what the post-primary arena looks like, and we have to get rid of the old terms and think of a totally new arena.

I am sure that all the principals and others here are up to their eyes in meetings, etc, but it would be good if a natural forum could develop out of this gathering –perhaps involving other principals from other schools. At the very least, there would be more possibility of people understanding each other's agenda and therefore more possibility of co-operation.

We have to ask ourselves what kind of society we want to see in Northern Ireland in ten years' time? And once you determine that, then you ask yourself what type of education system will help you achieve this objective. And for me there's only one answer: co-educational, comprehensive integrated education. For example, tomorrow we have a workshop for our year 10s where those children are coming in to explore culture and identity and their role in their community and their role in school. Now, if that can occur and thrive in North Belfast in the circumstances we have had over the last two or three years, then I believe it *is* possible to build a new kind of society here.

If you agree that there will be parental choice then there will be a variety of schools. Some will be academic, some will offer different routes. That's one way of doing it. The other way of doing it is to say that there will not be parental choice, that *you* will make the decision and *you* will draw the lines on the map and say to parents: if you live in this area your children will go to this school. But out there there are a lot of schools –grammar schools, secondary schools, integrated schools, Irish medium schools, comprehensive

schools, bilateral schools –and lots of people in the community who will have quite significant commitment to those schools. And if we're going to offer them a change, we're going to have to offer them something which they feel will be better. And I'm not sure we have won the argument.

I would question whether we're moving from a situation of parental choice to one of no parental choice, or whether in reality we're simply moving from limited parental choice – in the context of a great number of already imposed rules and regulations –to a new situation where there will be different sorts of parental choice, with different limitations on that choice. I think to present it as going from parental choice to no parental choice is far from accurate.

Who is going to speak for those children who are underachieving, who is going to do something about that, and how are we going to make sure that everybody has social justice – in terms of equality of access?

Is there not a need for *all* the people currently involved in education to assume responsibility for those young people who are currently excluded and vulnerable... so that everybody puts a wee bit into the pile to make the whole thing better. I think everybody, no matter what type of school they operate, has something to contribute to this problem. All schools should target some of their funding to making a difference in their local community, to those young people, to the parents, so that it effects the young people in terms of their home life, their community and their own personal development.

Rather than spending money on retraining and rejigging plant to focus on different age groups, let us find the key to the mode of Transfer. One that allows every child equal opportunity and enables all schools to play their part in creating a socially more just society.

The Transfer process is a very aggressive, argumentative difficult process for both the children and the parents and the receiving schools... there's nobody gets an easy time of it. Let's think of ways of easing the process through. And what will help you to focus on that is: why are we doing this, why are we trying to educate children, what sort of curriculum should we offer? And we must also try to establish new ways of communicating to parents.

We need to dismantle the walls between us; whether at community level or educational level.

I found these meetings very useful, especially because of the range of views and experiences which have been brought together. And it doesn't have to stop here.

Yes, I think there is good news in the room this evening, and I think a positive contribution towards the future of education in Northern Ireland can be made by *everyone* here.

Conclusions?

Given the time constraints, a coherent ‘action plan’ as such did not emerge. However, certain important pointers can be drawn from the discussions:

- Some participants felt that the education system in Northern Ireland was greatly in need of an overhaul –not only for educational reasons but because of its socially divisive nature – while others felt that it was much maligned and its high quality in danger of being damaged by a too-hasty search for something new.
- There was a clear majority in favour of abolishing the ‘11-plus’. However, there was no consensus regarding the question of ‘selection’ itself, some believing that an alternative had to be outlined first. Most felt, however, that whatever method of selection/transfer was used should be made far less of an ordeal for children.
- As to the most appropriate age at which children should be expected to make important decisions concerning their future educational route – 11 or 14 – there was again no consensus.

However, a consensus of sorts was voiced on a number of topics:

- The social justice issue –the provision of equal access and equal opportunity – must become a central focus of education change.
- Particular attention must be directed at those areas which had been disadvantaged for generations, and where a belief in education was low. All schools had a role to play in tackling the problem of young people currently excluded from education.
- Parents had to be engaged more fully in the education debate.
- Weaknesses within the system had to be investigated, in particular at the technical skills end, where education fed into the economy.
- It was recognised that grammar *and* secondary schools had strengths, and efforts must be made to blend these together, whether in the form of collegiates (which not everyone was in agreement with) or through some form of voluntary collaboration.
- Indeed, all schools were urged to move away from competition to collaboration.
- The primary sector had to be given all the resources it required to prepare children adequately for post-primary education.
- Education had a vital role to play in the creation of a peaceful society in Northern Ireland, and any new vision for education had to reflect that. This related to the social divide as much as to the religious divide.
- There needed to be a ‘seamless join’ between care and education, combined with a strategy for ‘lifelong learning’, starting at birth and going right through a young person’s life until they became a parent.
- That strategy should also embrace ‘joined-up’ thinking by all government departments concerned with young people, their development, their education and their opportunities for future employment.
- It was hoped that some of the participants could take this debate forward by setting up their own forum(s).

Appendix

The young people respond

An invite to hold their own discussion was taken up by a group of young people representing Protestant and Catholic secondary schools and an integrated school, as well as a school refuser.

All but one of the young people were against the 11-plus.

There was a lot of pressure on you. From parents and teachers.

Yes; there was too much of it. I was made to get extra tuition.

Everybody's talking about equality at the moment, but the 11-plus doesn't give people equality.

I just about passed; I was under pressure the whole time. And we had to do these practice tests all over the summer. We should get rid of it.

Three of the group had passed the 11-plus, but none had applied to go to a grammar school.

I think I've probably done better where I am. If I had gone to a grammar school I would have worried I wasn't up to the standard of everybody else.

They also felt there was a real 'divide' between secondary and grammar schools.

Grammar schools definitely have more resources. There's one on the Antrim Road and they've got good PE facilities, whereas in my school there's just one pitch and you wouldn't even consider it a pitch, it's just a bit of ground.

I have friends go to a grammar school and they poke fun at what they see as 'lower' secondary schools. At the same time, while some do act like snobs, others react differently –it depends on the person.

Did they like school?

Some will say they don't like it, but they might be saying that so their mates don't slag them. I think most people do like school because you get to mix with people your own age, and you feel you're in a safe environment.

I don't like school. I know I need it but I just don't feel happy in school. I don't get on with most of the teachers; it's partly their fault, partly mine.

I love school, and I like most of the teachers.

I was thrown out of school. I hated it; I didn't like the teachers, the lessons, I just liked being with my mates. I think it would be better if there had been less people in the class.

What did they believe was the purpose of education?

To get a good job, to get a better life.

I suppose it gives us better opportunities for our future.

Did it matter what school they went to in that regard?

Most definitely. The resources you have; the mental aspect as well. Because see people in grammar schools... they sort of look down at you. From the very start of the 11-plus you're seen as a failure, and you see yourself as a failure, so you're going in to school as a failure.

People in middle-class areas have got backing for their children's future. They can afford £500 a year, and all the books, but it's too expensive to send your child to grammar school in the areas we come from.

What did they feel should be taught?

Computers.... Things worth learning. I like word searches.

Subjects which are essential for you in life. For example, in maths you learn stuff which you only use while you're at school. You don't need algebra.

In first year you should be given a whole range of subjects, including those you will need for the future, like technology or whatever. And at the end of the first year you can make your choices then.

Lessons would be more interesting to the students if they were about things *they* wanted to know about rather than what the teachers think you should know. Things you could actually use in a day-to-day sense, more familiar.

Did they feel that approaches to learning should be widened to include more experiential or out-of-school activities?

We don't get any trips in 4th year, you have to concentrate on class work.

I think it would help; the practical things would help me concentrate better than theory alone would.

There needs to be a balance; you wouldn't want to be taken out every day.

Teachers should be more your own age. And it's easier to relate to them if they come from your area.

The school refuser admitted an interest in learning despite his dislike of school.

I like English and History. I would go back to school if I thought I'd like it.

A major concern was confidentiality, something raised in relation to bullying.

Teachers sit in the staff room and talk about you. They'll come up to you and say 'I heard about what happened earlier'. There is no confidentiality.

I agree. If something happened in the playground and I went and told a

teacher it would soon get around the school because the teachers talk to each other in the staff room. And the people that I've said something to or about would then come back at me and give me trouble. That's touting.

I can talk to the teachers, I'm not sacred to go to them. In some cases, I would tell them about bullying.

I used to get called names, for people sometimes try to hurt you. I would keep it in for a while then I would tell my friends, then the teachers.

What did they feel about their move from primary school when they were 11?

It was okay with me; I was getting bored by that time. I needed something new. My attention was drifting.

I really wanted to go to secondary school when I was 11, but then the first year there I wanted to go back! It was four times the size of my primary school, big classes... trying to remember where everything was. They should let you go to the secondary school on a few trips to get used to it.

We came up on the open night then when we were accepted we were brought up in the minibus. I also had relatives at the school, which helped.

What did the young people feel about cross-community schemes?

They're no use; it's just stupid, because everybody goes, then once it's over it's back to the usual. It's a waste of time; I think there's too much emphasis on it. People are going to riot, and there's nothing you can do about it.

Cross-community doesn't work. It's not safe in North Belfast. If you identify yourself [on a cross-community scheme] you could be in trouble if a crowd from the other side sees you on your own in town.

I never go into town by myself; I never leave my area.

I think it's a working-class thing. The riots are in working-class areas. There's no rioting in middle-class areas.

They're starting too late. If you're brought up together as young children, say at nursery school, it might work. But you can't start when you're 13, it's too late then.

What about Protestants and Catholics being taught in the same school?

Not a hope; you'll probably get someone stabbed.

What did the ones who attended an integrated school feel about all this?

They don't really talk about it [the sectarian divide] in class. But I think it's better than way. Before I came to this school I was on a cross-community scheme and I hated it, I really hated it. You had to put up a front while you were there, 'cause the people I was going with were just bigots. But you don't have to put up a front in our school.

Yes; you don't get much trouble like that at our school.

People think that there would be more fights over religion and things like that, because we're integrated, but it's not like that. It's just everyday stuff; wee lads acting up like they do in any other school.

I have changed by coming here. I'm from a trouble area, I came from an all-boys Catholic school. It does help you a lot, I see people in different ways than what I used to.

One major issue –on which they *all* agreed – was homework.

If there is one thing I feel should be changed, it is homework. We do six hours at school, and that's all work, work, work. Then when you get home you have more work to do.

Homework puts a lot of pressure on you. At the minute we're going to get 3 or 4 pieces of coursework to do in a short time. On top of our homework!

I would enjoy school better if there was no homework; I wouldn't mind going to it then. You have no free time at all.

I have got 3 GCSE coursework projects to do; it's harder than people think. I'm actually falling behind in English because of all the other coursework.

I get home at four and some nights I spend till about nine doing essays.

And you can get homeworks from every class, so that's about 30 homeworks a week. It's hard, like; you can get double homeworks from some classes, you can get triple homeworks; you can get coursework on top of homeworks....

What did they see as their future after school?

I would like to go to university and do something in law.

I am hoping to go to Queens to do a drama course.

I would like to become a teacher.

I don't know. You don't get enough careers help at school. Anyway, even if you fancied a certain career, you might need A-levels and there's no A-levels in my school.

I was only brought to the careers library once.

I am going to stay on and do my A-levels and then leave Northern Ireland, I want out of here, the whole background... the Troubles... I can't take it.

I would want to travel a bit but come back again.

And as for prospects for the school refuser:

Zero. YTPs and then when I'm 18 I'll go on the buroo.