

Gerry Murphy - IPPN Conference 2013 – Thursday 24th January 2013

A chairde, idir phríomhoidí agus aíonna speisialta – Friends, colleagues and welcome guests, cuirim céad míle fáilte romhaibh uilig chuig Comhdháil IPPN na bliana 2013.

Ár míle buíochas as bheith anseo ach go háirithe libhse nach bhfuair oiread agus lá ionadaíochta le freastal ar an Chomhdháil i mbliana.

We can now look forward to two days of professional development opportunities and inspirational keynote speakers, not to mention two great night's craic and entertainment in the company of old friends and new colleagues as we use this opportunity to recharge our batteries for the road ahead.

Today I have 3 topics for you and a concluding note.

To begin, I would firstly like you to consider some of the challenges that we now face as leaders in our schools. While literacy and numeracy are undoubtedly important and must be highly valued, it would be wrong to focus on them exclusively. At a recent conference, Andy Hargreaves asked: do we 'test what we value or do we only value what we test?' I believe it is at our peril that in concentrating on the three 'R's we neglect the 4th and critical new 'R' in education – Relationships.

Our children's ability to form and sustain relationships and cultivate their emotional intelligences is fundamental to their physical and emotional well-being and to their development as human beings. Today's child is faced with very complex social challenges with new forms of disadvantage – such as middle-class families losing their homes, cyber-bullying, early sexualisation, parental drug and alcohol abuse and its associated neglect of children. If our education model tests only literacy and numeracy, we must ask, how do we know if we are equipping our children for the life challenges they face?

A chairde, who would have thought that food poverty would be an issue in Irish schools in 2013? Children who are hungry going to school cannot properly access any one of the four Rs. Bearing in mind that in 2010 food poverty affected children in one out of every ten families, it would be shameful and irresponsible of policy-makers to ignore this reality. Our international colleagues place equal value on the well-being and resilience of children in their efforts to improve literacy and numeracy skills. We must do the same if we are to compete in the Literacy and Numeracy Premier League. I would also stress that if we want to finish in the Top 4 of that League then our schools will need the resources to compete at that level.

Ireland is increasingly becoming the European hub of the global IT industry and we are constantly reminded of our need to prepare our children for the 'knowledge economy'. How does this vision for the future blend with the reality for those children, who every day in their classrooms watch their teacher manually entering data into the Leabhar Rolla? Why are schools in 2013 still manually completing the Leabhar Tinrimh and the Clár Leabhar as they did in 1922? The answer is that only those antiquated ledgers are acceptable to the Department as official school records – I know this to my cost, because our school secretary spent six weeks transferring data from a very efficient electronic system into the Clár Leabhar following an incidental visit from the inspector. It would be cost negative for the DES to trial and test the electronic school management systems already in use in some of our schools. This is something that would actively involve the child and teacher in the knowledge economy while also creating a saving of thousands of wasted hours. It would provide a one-stop source of accurate data and save the inspectorate the embarrassment of enforcing outdated rules for National Schools. I have to remind you that we still have the situation as highlighted by the then IPPN President Tomás Ó Slatara in 2006 that we have a database for almost every farm animal in the country but nothing for our school children.

Secondly – I would like to share with you some of the initiatives IPPN is involved with. Initiatives we hope that will help to develop policies and strategies to address some of the

challenges facing us. As IPPN President, I'm particularly proud to have represented our network on two such initiatives.

Healthy Food for All is an all-island initiative seeking to combat food poverty by promoting the availability and affordability of healthy food for low-income groups and families. IPPN has served on their Advisory Committee for Breakfast Clubs. This we feel is particularly relevant today. In the recent IPPN survey, more than one-in-five respondents reported an increase in the number of children coming to school hungry.

Today I wish to acknowledge those principals and school personnel who act voluntarily in providing Breakfast Clubs for our most needy children. This is yet another example of the great humanity and generosity that has distinguished our primary schools long before talk of Croke Park agreements. The same survey also raised the challenge of the increase in the number of children presenting with emotional and behavioural difficulties in classrooms.

Archways is a not-for-profit organisation working with local and national agencies to promote and research evidence-based programmes that support children, parents and teachers. Together with the National Parents Council-Primary, Early Childhood Ireland and IPPN, Archways is developing a proposal for government. This proposal includes strategies to address mental health issues for children, the development of self confidence among children and the active engagement of parents in their children's education, particularly at preschool and early primary level. The partnership has also proposed strategies to combat issues such as children presenting with emotional and behavioural difficulties and the provision of parenting and classroom management programmes.

In my own town of Dundalk, entire school staffs from eight primary schools and some of their feeder preschools have been trained in Teacher Classroom Management which is one of the programmes within the Incredible Years suite of programmes. Associated parenting courses have been delivered and a formal evaluation has pointed to very positive outcomes for parents

and children alike. Dr. Paul Downes, director of the Education and Human Development Centre in St. Patrick's Teacher Training College has said that this approach **is** the alternative to medicating our children.

Thirdly, following on from the challenges and opportunities, I would like to focus on you, the principal and leader of your school. Because I believe that principals are the key to sustaining an effective school. You and your teachers are often the sole advocates for children at risk. For many of these children, schools are their only safe havens. Since September 2012 on RTÉ 1, we have had a bird's eye view of the daily lives and interactions of five Irish primary schools. As President of your professional body, I viewed those programmes with an enormous sense of pride in the generosity and professional concern of both principals and teachers towards the children. It is the mark of the true professional that, despite cut-backs and salary reductions, the education and welfare of the child remain central to what we do.

I congratulate those school leaders and their staffs, in the knowledge that they reflect the quality of good practice that is the reality in the majority of schools. We salute Pat Goff, Owen McLoughlin, Helen Kelly, Colette Ann Campbell and Michelle Cashman. Good schools are led by good leaders.

The task of the school principal today is one of leading in challenging times. It would be so easy to lose heart and to forget or neglect the core skills of leadership. We must try to remember to balance the challenges of the role with the privilege we have to lead our school communities.

The foundation of good leadership is built on the quality of that 4th R – the relationships that exist within a school. We know, as teachers, the importance of pupil-teacher relationships in children's learning, especially ensuring that the voice of the child is heard and valued. Building and maintaining relationships within the entire school community is equally important. Within that context, a key relationship is that between the Principal and the Deputy Principal. Also hugely important is the relationship of the Principal with all other staff members.

Great leaders know the importance of communicating the value of a colleague's work and how it matters in the context of the whole school. Communication is a two-way process and it's important to have systems in place that provide for that constant flow of information. In my own school, we had a practice of sharing recent and upcoming events and news with the entire staff at a 5-minute session before school began each morning. Knowledge is power and knowledge shared creates common ownership and responsibility.

Skills are learned or acquired. As a staff, we valued and practiced the protocol used by the late Concepta Conaty, former Director of Home School Community Liaison Scheme. She began staff meetings by eliciting good news of what was going well for us individually or as a school before addressing the gaps or deficits in the system. It is another tool for positive school team-building.

As a school leader it can be very difficult to communicate tough messages effectively but we must not avoid it. It requires the leader to communicate with the team in an honest but balanced and fair manner. Issues that are not addressed in this manner are very much like a superficial wound that is plastered over, they can fester and grow more ugly and painful.

Celebrating success is a vital part of how we sustain relationships within our team and the entire school community. The celebration of occasions in the life of the school community, whether big or small, helps to maintain a high level of morale. We are all human and respond to that word or gesture of recognition. I recall one day getting a phone call from a friend asking to meet him after school to discuss an issue he couldn't mention on the phone. Later when I walked into a small pub I was greeted by my entire staff who were gathered to recognise my then 50th birthday. Even today that memory still inspires me.

Celebration need not just be confined to the big occasion or to peaks of attainment.

We should also celebrate those who consistently contribute to the school community, week in and week out. We all know them. The person who works with the sports teams, the choir, the band, the quiz team, the concert, the Board of Management and the Parents Association, the person who, in essence, goes above and beyond. These team members need our affirmation. They need simply to be told that their contribution is always appreciated.

Keeping people motivated means listening to them, asking them questions, understanding their issues and, above all, not leaving their talents untapped. Leaders who listen more can respond more effectively and get to the heart of issues much faster. I like the quotation 'Life is 10% of what happens to me and 90% how I react to it'. To me it means that I can choose how I respond to challenges. If I choose a positive response I do so in the knowledge that it has a much more positive effect on those who see me as their leader. We lead by example.

Leadership skills are acquired over time. Professional development is inextricably linked to personal development and together they are the lifeblood of the school leader.

As long as you're open to learning and to working with your team rather than apart from them, most people will be happy to go on the journey with you.

On a more serious note, having read through the survey responses you submitted and the very difficult and stressful situations some of you find yourselves in, I was reminded of the day, twenty years into my principalship, that Concepta Conaghty told me that my staff and I were on the verge of burnout and in need of both personal and professional development. This led to one of the most powerful and career-enhancing experiences in my time as a school principal. The following summer we organised an in-house 5-day course on team building and conflict management strategies. This course enabled me to see strengths in others, where I had only seen challenge. Embracing this learning changed the dynamics of our entire school for the better and enhanced my professional career thereafter. That course changed direction for many of us and yes, I too, had to change.

Nobody gets it right all the time. But if we have mostly the right people on our bus and can facilitate them sitting in the right seats and facing the same direction, then it can be a greatly improved journey for all.

Who sustains and supports you and your deputy in your leadership role? Who motivates and inspires you? For me, it was IPPN, both locally and nationally, that provided the support I needed. Before IPPN, the deputy principal and I were operating as an island, cut off from other school leaders. IPPN linked that island into a learning network. The leadership and inspiration skills I've mentioned are acquired over a lifetime for the solitary operator. Certainly in my own case, I acquired more leadership skills in my first two years within IPPN than I had learned in the isolation of a solitary school environment over the previous twenty years.

IPPN is greater than the sum of its parts. With the significant increase in newly-appointed principals over the last few years, there is now a professional responsibility on individual IPPN support group members to offer that same support locally to others. Sometimes a fellow principal needs the encouragement of an invitation to attend their first support group meeting, as was my own experience.

To conclude, I would like to take this opportunity to thank colleagues in the IPPN family. My sincere thanks to Gerry Byrne, now retired, who over ten years ago invited me to attend an IPPN County Network Meeting to hear Seán Cottrell speak about School Leadership. To the members of the local IPPN support group in Dundalk who sustained and supported my work as a school principal from that night onwards, I say thanks and also thanks to the IPPN Louth County Committee who elected me to represent them on the IPPN National Committee. My special thanks to the members of the many IPPN National and Executive Committees who shared their professional expertise and knowledge with me and who elected me to serve this highly-respected Network as President for a two-year period. I thank Immediate Past President Pat Goff who mentored me as his Deputy President.

On my own and your behalf I thank the team in the IPPN National Support Office led by Seán for all the services they provide on a day-to-day basis and for organising this Conference from start to finish.

Finally and most importantly I thank you, the members of IPPN, for your loyalty and professionalism to Irish education and to your professional network IPPN. My term as President will come to an end in August this year when Brendan McCabe, principal of Scoil Choilmcille i gCeannanas na Mí assumes the mantle. Meath, long a royal county, will then have a president as well. Brendan is an exemplary school leader who believes in the potential of professional networking. He and I invite those of you with a passion for the work of IPPN to become more and more actively involved in your own local network. So much good work is being done locally to assist new principals and those in need of extra support. These 'local networks' form the core of IPPN. I congratulate all of you on their success and urge you to help sustain, enliven and engage in this essential work.

I hope you use your networking time over the next few days to share with others what has worked for you in your leadership role. IPPN will continue to be there for you now and in the future. And as the title of our conference confirms, 'The Future is Now'.

Bainigí sult as an chomhdháil agus ádh mór oraibh uilig.

ENDS

