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ICT and Education:
INCREMENTAL PROGRESS OR FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE?

Discussion group: **SCHOOL**

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I worked with the group that went to the table marked "School" and I don't know about other members of the group, who I cannot name, I didn't write their names down, and we could signify the members of the group and you may choose to remain anonymous as I ramble though – but briefly, Seymour, because I'm watching the clock. I purposely delayed coming up to last, because I listened to the input from other groups. Did other members of the group hear the conversations that we had had coming up across Technology, Society, Learning, Change – the topics that we have heard all came through in School? We started – and having seen visual effects I feel I needed to carry something up with me –so I brought this, and our first response – understanding that this is written in English, so it's different – but there is a visceral response to this word, that when we see this word we either think of a place or – it may be good and it may be bad, but school is a universal experience.

It has a responsibility for shaping society, and we came into a conversation around the role of school and the ability of school to shape society – or does society shape school? We were reminded as we came close to the lunchbreak that our direct charge from Seymour was to come back with questions. And in the last piece that we saw, the culminating question with which to chew on – and if we were to do that, we would come back to: What is the purpose of school? As we talked about fundamental change in school, it was suggested by one group member that school since the organisation of the formal schools – that we are all from nations that practice a basic

model of schooling – that the greatest fundamental change that has come – and this might have been specific to Ireland, although it probably is in general – was the elimination of corporal punishment – that in terms of fundamental change of the way things run, that has been about the biggest.

And that – you walk into schools and at lunchtime – John, you shared a story with me of walking into a school in Jordan where you had heard of wonderful integrations of technology – what nation was it? Was it Jordan? And you went across to the nearest school, got in a taxi, “Take me to the nearest school”, coming from the Ministers – and the talk that was being talked about, technology as being transforming the way we do things. And you went into a school where that was proven untrue immediately, because the fundamental role of school is in shaping the citizens to be. And it caused us to think about some very deep issues of what is school, how is fundamental change achieved in a system – because we went into conversations around the curriculum, around learning, around the social implications. School is a system which has all of those pieces built into it and where do you begin? Which comes first, where do you start?

You cannot be moved away from the teacher because the teacher is the engine of school, that the teacher is the person who takes curriculum, takes materials – be it the textbooks, computers, video, etc. – and puts it to work to move things ahead. Can the current model of school survive, depending on pressures?

And when we think about the fact that school – are there powers that will act as aggressively against change in school as this group might act for? Because the question, do we really want to create, do we – I put the editorial we – do the powers that be truly want a full nation of intellectually empowered, able and capable of speaking up and speaking out, of making decisions that may question the status quo or the authorities already in power? Do they, do we as nations, want that? And the final piece, as we talk about fundamental change and incremental change, does fundamental change require crisis? Does it have to hit the fan in order to awaken or empower an organisation to move ahead?

Other members of the group – I’m confident that I’ve left pieces out – what else should be said, or what shouldn’t have been said – you have complete editorial ability. Are there questions or comments? Yes?

QUESTION FROM AUDIENCE

From a teacher perspective – and you are obviously going through special experiences in the last couple of years in your teaching and learning environment – do you think we need to go through a crisis in order to really create fundamental change from what you see right now happening?

JIM MOULTON

Yes, I think we do, I think - - -

QUESTION FROM AUDIENCE

Did the members of your group agree with you?

JIM MOULTON

The people from the state of Maine?

QUESTION FROM AUDIENCE

No, from the School group.

JIM MOULTON

From the School group, members of the group, what do you think do we require - - -

RESPONSE FROM AUDIENCE

I think it's probably pretty clear to all of us that of all the things that change in the world, school is about the slowest. In my view very little has changed in schooling in Ireland, apart from the fact that we don't get hit with sticks anymore, over the last 100 years. So I'm not sure that crisis is a good thing, but I certainly think that school will not change of its own volition and that political will will not create massive change, so something else has to.

COMMENT FROM AUDIENCE

I'd just like to make a comment again in relation to change, again it's a little story. I'm not sure if it was here I was listening to it the other day. When thinking of the lobster being boiled – and very often they talk about, if you put the lobster straightaway into boiling water he's going to jump out but if you put him in cold water and heat it very, very slowly, he doesn't actually notice that he's being boiled. Now, maybe we should think about maybe that's what's happening in our schools, maybe we don't need a crisis like the boiled water, maybe we are talking about that change is actually happening on the ground all the time.

I taught for many years in a primary school here and I can honestly say that the last day I taught in a classroom was very fundamentally different from the first day I was in there. And there was constant change and I had to keep on changing because the teachers are dealing with the future every day because children are different, and society, and what is happening in the world outside is coming into the school. I think the institution, the structures and the way the system is organised haven't changed a lot – I would certainly agree with that, that needs to change, but within itself there has been a lot of change and even the things that are very often as teachers – the teachers themselves are restricted by the system.

There is very often a feeling within schools – there used to be, long ago, “There shouldn't be noise in classrooms”. This was just as much a restriction on the teacher as it was on the children. There were teachers who hated that thinking and they were

very happy when that thinking has moved away. So maybe – all I’m saying is, maybe we don’t need crisis, but we do need rethinking and I think it needs to come from above as well as below.

JIM MOULTON

That’s why waiting till last, in classroom practice, absolutely, there are individual teachers who in spite of – what we got to discussing is, there are organisational structures in place whose goal is to maintain quiet in the classroom. We have rules, we have organisational structures and the placement of – I don’t know what the numbers are in the schools you either send your own children to or the countries you represent, but as long as we put 25 students in a classroom with one adult without access to computers, then it becomes a management issue, not – and the role of schools – we still in the United States are working completely in a fundamental school design that was built to produce industrial workers, that is the purpose and we are still working there.

QUESTION FROM AUDIENCE

When we are talking about school sometimes I think it helps to talk on two levels, one is the individual local school you know or I know, and that’s an individual school or maybe it’s related to a school and community. There is schooling as a national enterprise or schools and national enterprise. And when you think at that level, issues of scale come into point because we are all probably very familiar with highly successful innovative technology initiatives. The existence proof – yes, it has happened in 1 or 2 or 10 schools, but going to scale raises a whole set of other questions and issues which are much more complicated about breadth and depth and direction of change, that are particularly difficult given the ambitious nature of the technology innovations we are trying to put in place.

JIM MOULTON

School with a capital S perhaps, yes.

COMMENT FROM AUDIENCE

I don't think the question "Do we need crisis?" is the right question, really. My own sense is certainly in the United States we have crisis so it's not a question, do we need it or – I think we do: our schools are failing many more children than they are succeeding with. So we have a crisis. I think the question is, who needs to know that there is crisis in order for change to occur, and does it have to be consensus in society. Certainly if you go by the reforms in the 19th century, the answer to that question would be, you don't need to have consensus – and God forbid if you wait for consensus in society, it's never going to happen. I think there is evidence from other sectors in society also, you don't need – it's not a mass movement ever, generally not, but it requires individuals who understand they are in the midst of crisis to take action and to do it in a way that they don't self-destruct in the process.

JIM MOULTON

People in positions of authority, we have West Virginia, Maine here who have done that, but one of the things that would come up against the sense that there is a crisis – American parents when queried how their schools are doing universally say across the nation, "My school is a good school". So it is the acceptance – if a tree falls in the forest and nobody is there to hear it, did it really fall?

COMMENT FROM AUDIENCE

I make one comment about this crisis, and in general I am very optimistic – but from the engineer point of view, you mentioned several times education system, and look what kind of system it is: it is homeostatic system. What means, if you want to change it, it immediately goes to the previous state. And if you don't look on this as the

proper system we will discuss for years and never change the story because we, you, the Government, didn't realise what kind of system it is. And until we will discuss instead of thinking how we will change that homeostatic system we will do nothing in general.