



“LET’S GET TO IT.”

Gurraneasig national school’s award-winning ways

Gurraneasig national school is idyllically-situated on the coast near Kilbrittain in Courtmacsherry Bay. Surrounded by trees, horse paddocks, farmland and linked to the rest of creation by tiny winding roads, it seems at first viewing like a picture- book place from another era. This impression was even stronger fifteen years ago when the school, built on a classic, national two-classroom template, had no pre-fabs or any of the other modern additions which its recent growth has necessitated. It’s a five minute walk to Howe’s Strand which is visible from the playground and that beach itself is somewhat laid away and only partly of the modern era. There the kids do P.E, study nature and learn surfing.

There is a garden; there are new trees in the little grounds of the school: the place oozes charm, inspires nostalgia for the kind of scholastic idyll which most people never even smell. This is the first fact of importance about Gurraneasig. It radiates charm and inspires affection and life-long loyalty.

Last summer this tiny rural school won the inaugural Fred O’Connor award for the work of its parents’ association in a competition which was open to every school in the country. The award was for a particular initiative, the parents association in the school has never been more active but the level of commitment and intelligent involvement by parents has been extremely high for decades

At one point in the early 1990s, the number of pupils fell below thirty and at that point the parents had to fight tooth and nail to keep the school open. Dealing with this ultimate danger bonded and strengthened the tiny local community, those families of which several generations had gone to the school, That sense of being an endangered community definitely galvanised parents into action and, paradoxically, may have been one of the main catalysts for the school’s spectacular growth in numbers over the last fifteen

years.

This has, of course, been caused partially by an influx of newcomers from Ireland and abroad, many seeking a different, less stressful lifestyle and a kind of school that would be compatible with it. So, simple demographics is another cornerstone of the school's burgeoning success. The school has nearly tripled its numbers and now has a fertile mix of traditional residents and new people from all over the world.

I talked to the O'Kennedy family who live five miles away in Garrettstown but who, like many others, have chosen Gurraneasig because of its existing ethos and have worked hard to contribute their skills to the development of the school.

Torin is eight years old - "Our school looks very old from the outside but on the inside it looks not so old, There's a ping-pong table and i-pads. I'd say that the school on the inside is kind of middle. I love that it isn't a brand new shiny place. It's kind of comfy. The basketball hoops are old and the stage."

Arlen, his older brother refers all the time to the whole school community as "we". He never distinguishes between teachers, parents and children and clearly identifies with the whole school community rather than his tribe of contemporaries:

"We have a student council and that helps us to explain our ideas to the parents and the teachers and we work things out together. We all talk so if our ideas work out that's great. If not we understand why"

Marilien Romme, the boys' mum, is an innovation consultant, conversant with educational systems in several countries and particularly with the Dutch system.

"Gurraneasig is a special school. I see kids and mothers in London and in Amsterdam and they are often so stressed. When I tell people what we are doing in this tiny country school people can't believe the range of activities. They cannot imagine the same range being available even in fancy fee-paying schools. There are several parents here whose work involves the initia-

tion of projects and once ideas come up there is a tremendous willingness on all sides to get behind the ideas and make them work.

The teachers are wonderful. They are great at asking the kids what excites them and then enlisting them in the organisation of projects”

Like many of those who have come here from other countries, Marilien is amazed at the freedom and the creativity that is available to everybody involved with the school. Challenged that it all sounds rather Utopian and the product of a lucky gathering of highly-educated and motivated parents, Marilien points out that the ethos of the school has grown over generations and that successive principals have fostered highly progressive policies without making any fuss about them

It is local lore that all the principals in living memory have been great leaders of their school. Phil Deasy, who retired six years ago, initiated foreign school trips, interpretative dance, much greater parental involvement and above all a relaxed atmosphere where control was exercised firmly but almost invisibly.

Her successor, Edward McCarthy, has built on Phil’s great work and with the most recent cohort of parents gone where few schools have gone before with a programme of workshops, run on a biennial basis in which parents bring their skills into the school and lead projects which impart those skills to the kids.

This is obviously a practice as old as good schooling but the range of activities, the intensity of the workshops and the extraordinary bonding of the school community derived from them is certainly unusual.

The programme of workshops, which has been running for several years, is the strand of work which won the award. The list of activities would warm anybody’s heart: currach making; scientific experiments; a silent film accompanied by Pat Crowley, regular accompanist of Mary Black; collage; motor-cycle maintenance; yoga; carpentry... the list goes on.

Arlen “I’ve done science every year and it’s great. You can extract a substance from red cabbage and it forms a jelly when you put it into water”.

Thorin: "The only reason I didn't finish my bird house in carpentry is that Dad ran out of wood"

The sceptic might expect a lot of soft-focussed arts activity mixed up with a bit of West Cork craftiness and artisan jams to be the staple fare here. Indeed, this is in part the case but what is surprising for the prejudiced is that a lot of the workshops are extremely practical and pragmatic; this kind of activity balances the cultural work most effectively.

Queries about the reasons for the school's success elicit many predictable answers. There is a great tradition of openness in the school; its situation is a massive boon; it inspires loyalty; the new blood in the community complements the traditions of the area very effectively to produce a vibrant heterogeneous parent body; the principal is visionary, the teachers navigate between traditional methods and new ways with skill and commitment; there are several people in the parents' association whose work involves innovation, researching and realising new ideas; the scale of the school makes communication and parental involvement much easier; there is a common commitment among teachers and parents to ensuring that children have real, playful childhoods unburdened as far as possible by the stresses of neurotic competition. All of these are wonderful features of any school. Indeed, there are bound to be innumerable schools around the country; healthy, sensible, child-centred places where some or all of these factors are at play. The question remains then why such a tiny, traditionally beleaguered school should flourish so remarkably. It seems that money is not the key. The school has a full social mix. It is neither rich nor poor financially and ultimately it seems that its main resource is creativity itself.

Tim O' Kennedy, who was chair of the parents' association for some years has this to say.

"From what I've observed it seems to me that many parents think of parents' associations almost like a trade union for parents. They are inclined to get together as a reaction to an issue or a problem. The idea that there's a three ring circus here of kids, teachers and parents in which the association should play a full creative, progressive role is not really the way thinking tends to

go. People who think that we don't need to change the world, we don't need government money, we don't need everything to change to do really good things don't seem to be in the majority. I think that there is a deficit of confidence and a resultant shortage of people thinking really creatively... Teachers are teachers; they have a job to do and the last thing they need is parents crawling all over them every day. But there is room for everybody. That's the message from this school's experience"

This comment places the work of this parent's association exactly in line with the overall agenda now being advanced generally by Ideopolis. This parents' association is not waiting for problems to arise so that they can react to them. This vibrant group are asking Bobby Kennedy's most important question "Why not?" over and over and in so doing are adding extraordinary riches to their children's experience.

While the specifics of the Gurraneasig experience are in theory possible to replicate more or less anywhere, it seems that a pre-requisite for the kind of slow creative explosion at work there is a critical mass of people playful enough, cheerful enough, personally-empowered enough and judicious enough to shape a programme that is fit for purpose in their own particular community. The spirit of radical creativity, applied to all the areas of expertise available seems to be a potent strategy for personal good health and effective community functioning in Gurraneasig.

The lessons for other parents' associations are obvious. There are lessons here too, though, for any group which wants to innovate simply and effectively.