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Tribute to Seán Griffin (Founding Editor of REACH Journal)

ÉAMON Ó MURCHÚ is former principal of Scoil Chiaráin, Glasnevin, Dublin where Seán Griffin taught for many years. **MICHAEL SHEVLIN** knew Seán during his time in Scoil Chiaráin and also as a teacher educator at Trinity College, Dublin.

Seán was “one of the good guys”.

This phrase or variations on it was the recurring phrase from everyone who has heard of Seán’s untimely passing. A true gentleman; a fine scholar; a good listener; a reflective teacher; a good colleague, friend and family man.

He was all of these and more.

We first met Seán when he was a teacher in Scoil Chiaráin, an innovative school that remains at the forefront of providing quality education for its pupils. Seán particularly valued his teaching experience in Scoil Chiaráin which he described as follows:

Scoil Chiaráin is more than a place. It is a concept, a dream that is ongoing...it is a grand passion to create or articulate or produce a set of circumstances that would enable happiness for people – particularly those who would otherwise be overlooked as unimportant. I have drawn much ongoing strength and courage from my formative years as a teacher/learner at Scoil Chiaráin.

Seán was an inspirational teacher who had the gift of making his pupils feel that they, and what they said were important. Seán welcomed, in particular, engagement with marginalised children and he delighted in encouraging their creativity and energy. He realised the importance of facilitating expression for those pupils who were less articulate than others and he provided opportunities for them to express themselves through art and encounters with people and experiences that were meaningful to them. Seán expressed these ideas about teaching and learning as follows:





Every teacher can find ways to connect with the playful creativity of their young pupils. Children are naturally playful and fun-loving with extraordinary imaginative resources. Teachers at times, especially when under pressure from an often-overloaded curriculum, may think they should dispense with the frivolities of play and get on with the serious “work” of teaching. To do so is to ignore and neglect the many ways the good teacher can teach through connecting with the magical imagination of the child. One obvious way to do this is through story, engagement with the children’s own daily experiences and familiar environment – both real and imaginative.....

The objectives in a teacher’s lesson plan must be specific and relate to children’s activities – something said, completed, written, composed, drawn or experienced. The lesson plan should be written in such a way that it is clear that activity is planned for the child, so that he/she discovers the magic and power of their own valued expression, rather than a regurgitation of the teacher’s anticipated outcomes. In this way the child grows and finds his/her own expression and understanding of the teacher’s excitement for him/her discovering what is important and real (Griffin, 1999).



Seán’s quiet manner belied his passion for learning and this was evident in his membership of the Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education (IATSE) and editorship of *REACH Journal of Special Needs Education in Ireland*. IATSE awarded Seán an honorary lifetime membership in 1994 and on this occasion Seán commented that IATSE:



...had provided support, encouragement and reassurance for my teaching and my personal and professional development. IATSE enabled me through personal contact, professional dialogue and real responsibility to grow, discover and develop in a mutually enriching experience that I treasure and that has been one of the hallmarks that has marked and touched my work in special education.

In 1987, Seán was ahead of his time in establishing the *REACH Journal of Special Needs Education in Ireland* and campaigning for evidence based practice which is the common catch cry at the moment for informing policy and practice in special education.

Seán’s commitment to his work, and in particular to the education of children experiencing difficulties, continued in his roles as principal at St. Paul’s Special School, teacher educator in St. Nicholas Montessori College, lecturer to Masters students in Trinity College Dublin and ardent supporter of the Educational Studies





Association of Ireland. Seán was also co-author of a major book on special education in Ireland *Responding to Special Educational Needs: An Irish Perspective* that is now being used in teacher education programmes.

Seán and a number of other like minded people were determined to challenge the notion of two worlds –the special encompassing separation and protection and the real world where everyone lived, worked, had families, had fun. He did not accept that children with special educational needs should be any different to their peers and they, he believed, were entitled to participate and achieve alongside their peers. Seán’s qualities are captured in Brendan Kennelly’s beautiful poem ‘The Good’:

*The good are vulnerable
As any bird in flight
They do not think of safety
Are blind to possible extinction
And when most vulnerable
Are most themselves.*

Seán’s gentle manner belied a great passion for what was right, fair and just – a passion informed by his deep love for Mary, Emma, Mike and his family.



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