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"Shared Areas in Irish National Schools".

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In this paper, I will discuss the design of national schools in Ireland in relation to the school curriculum and to classroom management and organisation from tne beginning of national education in 1831 to the present day. I will state the case for co-operative teaching and shared area schools as I see it and I will then look briefly at the different bodies and agencies involved in education in Ireland and their role in any educational innovation, particularly in this innovation—shared area schools.

A school building is a tool or a resource in the educational process. It should not dictate a school's philosophy; rather it should facilitate and reflect the philosophy and educational approach of the school and its teachers.

In Ireland, since the introduction of national education in 1831, Government grants have been available for the erection of vested national schools. Vested schools, (either vested in trustees or in the Board—now the Minister), have in virtually all cases been purpose-built with State aid. Non-vested schools, on the other hand, may have originally been built for purposes other than educational and were then adapted for and recognised as national schools. The architectural work in relation to smaller vested schools (i.e. less than 8 classrooms) has been and still is carried out by the Board of Works, and these schools have traditionally been built to a standard design. Managers of

larger schools were allowed to appoint private architects to design these schools and these larger schools vary in design but conform to certain guidelines and limits set down by the Board of Works and the Department of Education. Until the 1960s, there was no formal professional educational section within the Department of Education to comment and advise on the educational aspects of school design, although there has always been close liaison between the administrative section of the Department and the Board of Works school building section, and inspectorial staff gave advice in specific cases as part of their general duties. On occasion, interdepartmental committes were set up to discuss the architectural implications of educational change.

National school design since 1831 falls into three time periods, coinciding with the type of school organisation during those periods. School organisation, in turn, was a function of the school programme or curriculum.

During the first 20 years of national education, school organisation was rather haphazard. The National schoolbooks which were provided and published by the Board were used in all national schools and these were the basis of the school curriculum. The Lancasterian plan of teaching was widely used. In the 1850s P.J. Keenan, then a Head Inspector and afterwards to become Resident Commissioner of National Education, introduced the idea of a more organised system. School organisers were appointed by the Board in October 1856, their role being to help teachers to organise their schools in a more systematic way.[1] The method of organisation recommended by Keenan and afterwards set out by P.W. Joyce in 'Handbook of School Management' was the Bipartite or Tripartite system. Under this system, basically, a proportion of the children in attendance at a school sat at desks and did written work while the others stood around in draft circles, reading, learning spellings,

[1] Speech by P. J. Keenan at the opening of the Belfast Model School published in the *Annual Report of the Commissioners of National Education*, 1856. B. P. P. 1857–58, xx. pp. 389–421.

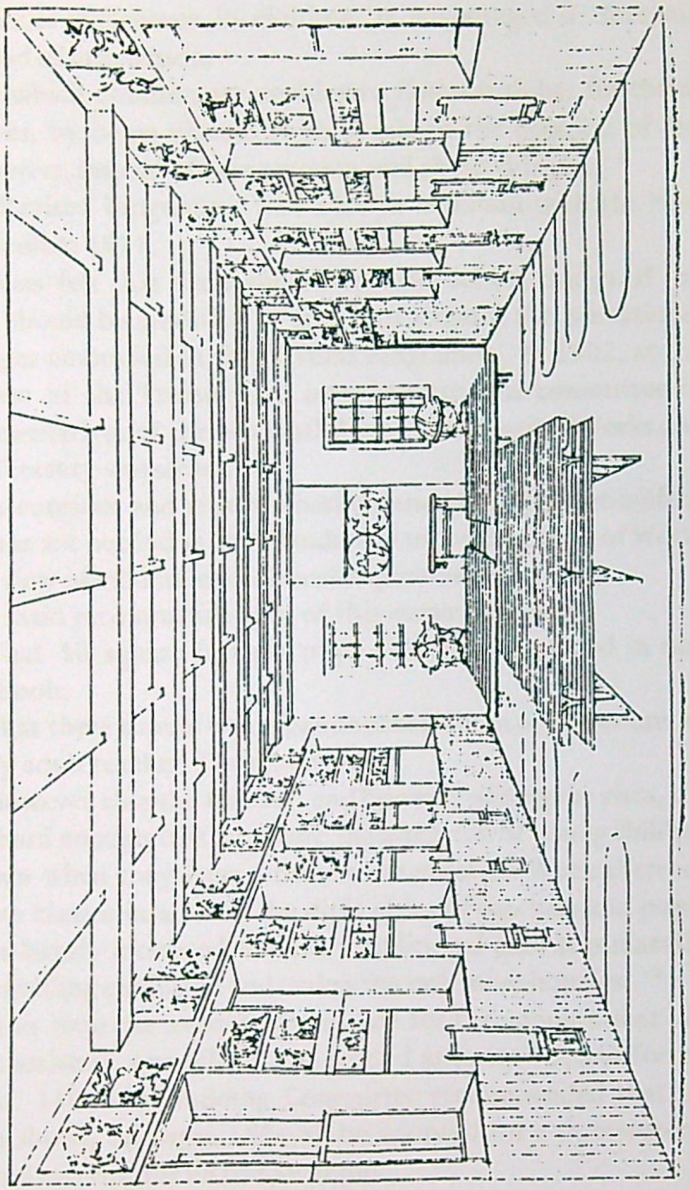
tables, geography or grammar. On page 178 is a picture of a boys' schoolroom in a model school in the 1850's.[1]

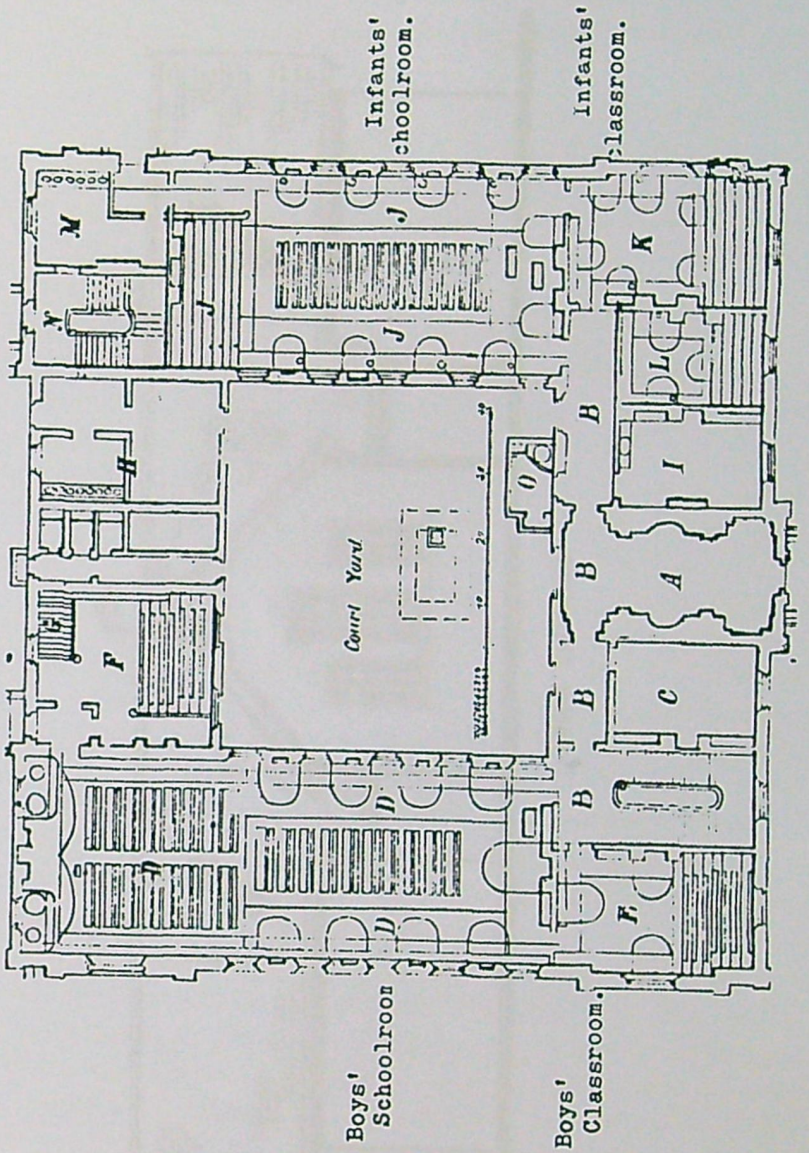
Around this period, an assistant teacher would be paid by the Board after 'an average daily attendance of at least 75 pupils for three months previous to the date of the application', had been secured. Consequently, one teacher coped with up to 75 children (sometimes with the assistance of a monitor or monitore). The standard classroom was designed to allow approximately 7 square feet per pupil. The plan on page 179 of the ground floor of Belfast Model School, opened by P.J. Keenan in 1856, is typical of a model school built during this period. The building was a two-storeyed one built around a courtyard and catered for boys and infants on the ground floor and for girls and adults on the first floor. There were three large schoolrooms (one for boys, one for girls, one for infants) and a number of smaller classrooms. Each schoolroom measured 40 feet by 30 feet and would accommodate up to 150 pupils—50 seated in desks and up to 100 working at the draft circles. At least three teachers and some monitors worked in each room.

This type of school organisation was particularly suited to the Results programme which was in operation from 1870 to 1900. This was a rigid, exact, subject centred curriculum, setting out precisely the programme which was to be taught and would be examined in every school.There was no scope for freedom or creative work.

Towards the end of the 19th century, Irish education was affected by the more child-centred philosophies of education prevalent in Europe at the time. In the early 1890s, kindergarten education was introduced in schools which had an infant department. In 1900, a Revised Programme of Instruction for National Schools was introduced by the National Board and this programme became operative in all national schools within a very short period. This programme recognised the concept of

[1] *Ibid.*




Infants' Schoolroom.
Infants' Classroom.
Court Yard
Boys' Schoolroom
Boys' Classroom.
A
B
C
D
E
F
G
H
I
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O

individual difference in children. It encouraged a Heuristic method of instruction,

> 'by which children are enabled to *find out* things for themselves, by being placed, so to speak, in the position of discoverers, instead of being merely told about things....' [1]

The Revised Programme had a lot in common with the New Curriculum 1971.

It was felt that the standard national school design of the time should be modified to take into account the educational changes embodied in the Revised Programme. In 1902, at the request of the Treasury, an interdepartmental committee of representatives of the National Board, the Board of Works and the Treasury was set up,

> 'to consider and report whether, and if so, what, modifications are needed in the Standard Plans of the Board of Works in view of modern educational requirements'.

The main recommendations of this committee were:

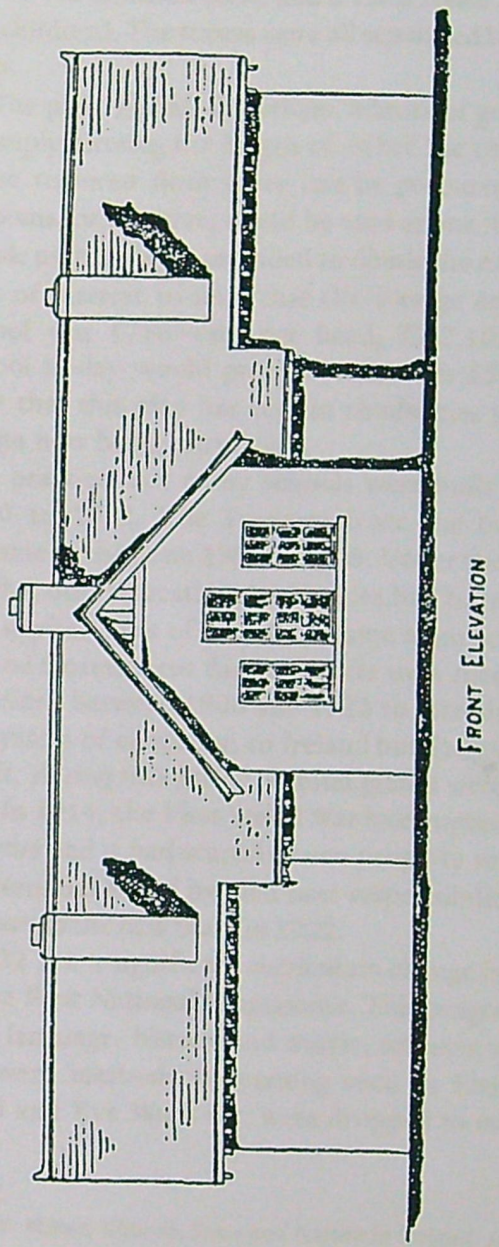
1. That 10 square feet per pupil should be provided in new schools.
2. That there should be a separate schoolroom or classroom for every adult teacher. The report stated:

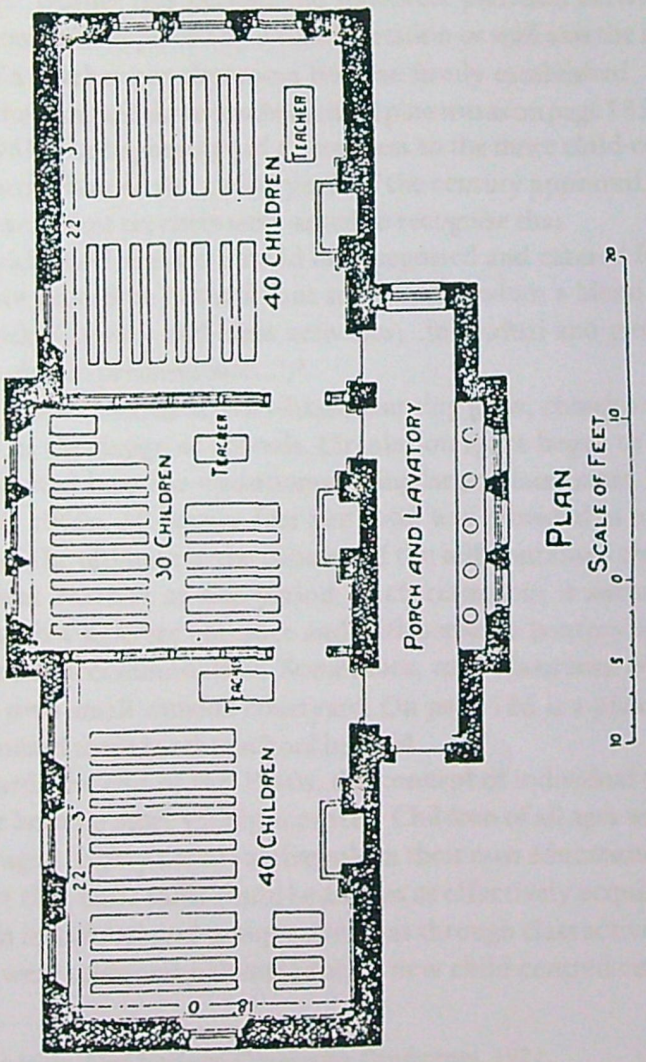
> 'However able the teacher, and however willing the class, it is a hard enough task to secure the attention of young children even when they have a room to themselves. When there are two classes in a room the difficulties of teachers and pupils are largely increased and every additional class augments the prevailing confusion and makes the task more hopeless.' [2]

At this time the average attendance for the appointment of a first assistant was 60; for the second assistant 95; and for the third, 140. The Building Committee recommended that the plan shown on pages 181–82 be adopted for a three-teacher school catering for 95 to 139 pupils.

The plan allowed for 110 pupils in actual attendance at 10

[1] *Revised Programme of Instruction in National Schools, 1902. Notes Hints and Observations for the Information of Managers and Teachers.*
[2] *Report of the Building Committee, 1902.*





square feet per pupil in three rooms—two of which were 22 feet by 18 (40 children each) and a third room 20 ft. by 15 ft. (for 30 children). The rooms were all separated by a moveable partition.

> 'The plan, like all the others, admits of great elasticity, as by simply altering the length of either the centre or side rooms, the required floor space can be procured. Any two of the rooms, or all three, could be used as one if required, as moveable partitions are provided to divide the rooms.' [1]

It is of interest to note that the average cost of this type of school was £786—rate per head, £7.2.10. A three teacher school to-day would probably cost over £50,000. We will see later that this plan has certain similarities to the shared area design now being introduced.

In practice, not many schools were built during the period 1900 to 1922. The Treasury froze the building grant programme in the years 1900 to 1908. Under the Education Act of 1902, Local Education Authorities had been set up in England and capital costs of schools became a burden on the rates not central Government funds. Efforts were made on at least three occasions between 1900 and 1922 to introduce a local authority system of education to Ireland but these efforts failed. As a result, during this period, capital grants were severely restricted.[2] In 1914, the First World War interrupted the building programme and it had scarcely been properly re-established when the National Board handed over responsibility for national education to the new State in 1922.

1922 saw a significant curriculum change in the introduction of the First National Programme. This programme emphasised Irish language, history and music; subjects which encouraged discovery methods of learning such as Elementary Science, Hand and Eye Work etc. were dropped to make room for the

[1] *Ibid.*

[2] D. W. Miller, *Church, State and Nation in Ireland, 1898–1921*. (Dublin, 1973).

National subjects.[1] On the building side, relatively few schools were built during the first ten years of the new state, only about 20 schools per annum being provided. In the 1930s and 1940s, approximately 35 new schools per annum were built on average.[2] During this period, the moveable partition between classrooms was replaced by a fixed partition or wall and the notion of a teacher per classroom became firmly established. By 1935, the standard three teacher school plan was as on page 185.

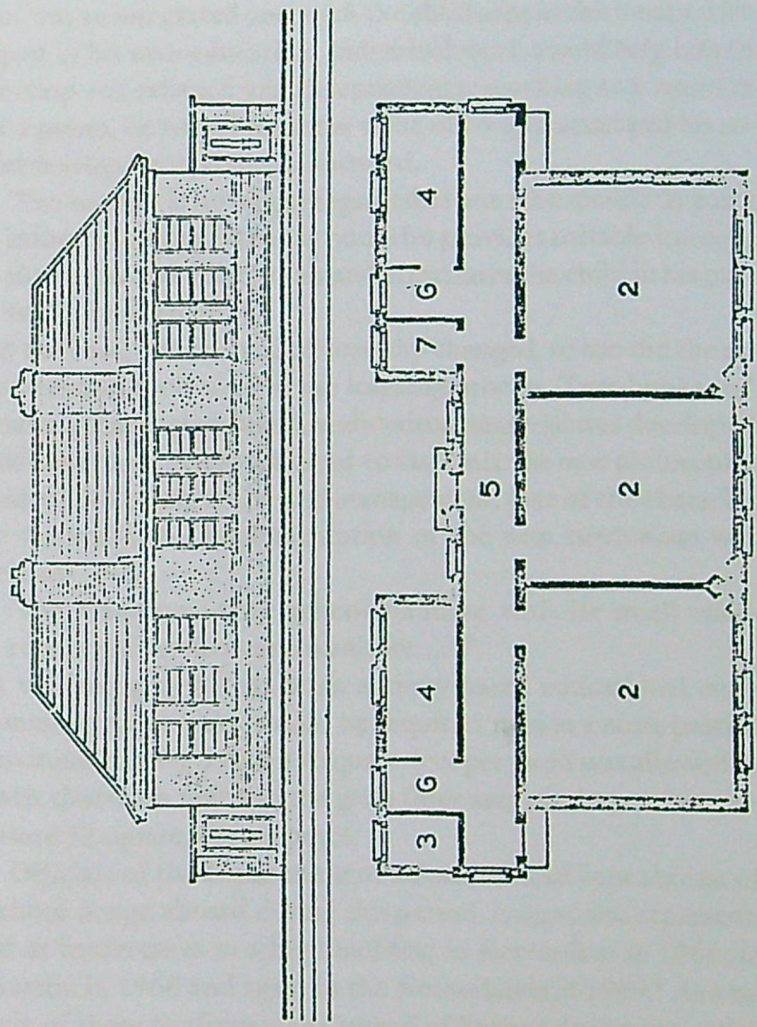
In 1951, the beginnings of a reversion to the more child-centred curriculum of the earlier years of the century appeared. In that year, infant teachers were asked to recognise that

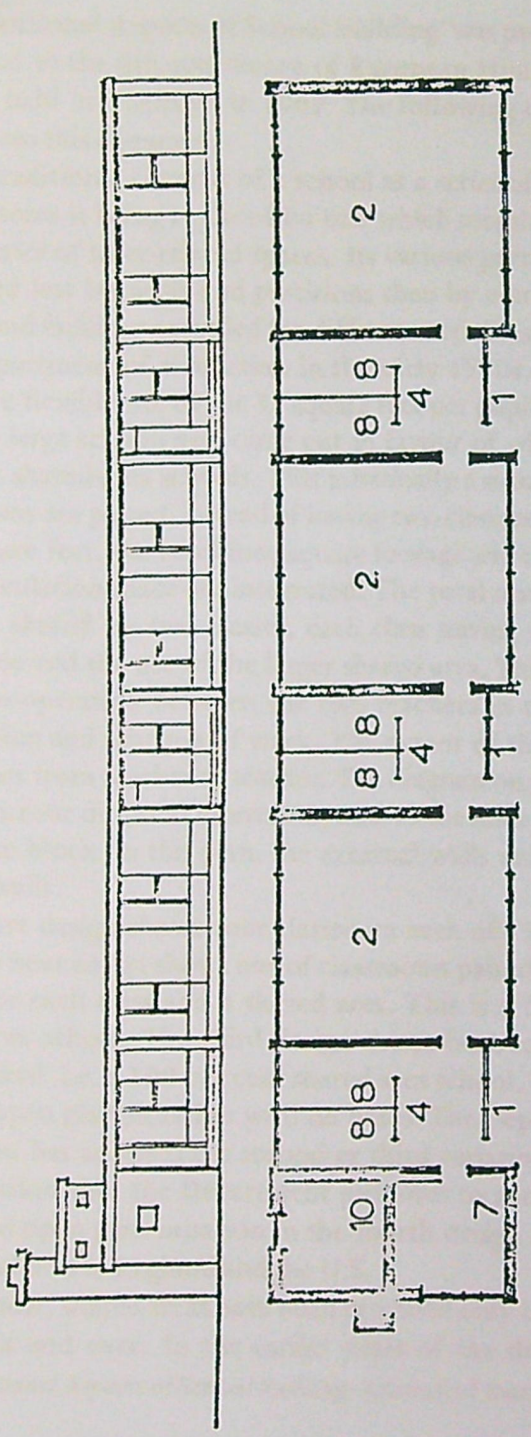
> 'individual differences should be recognised and catered for; ...there should be in the infant school curriculum a blend of individual, group and class activities;...individual and group work should predominate...'.[3]

As the move towards activity-based learning grew, changes appeared in the design of schools. Circulation space began to be incorporated into the classrooms giving larger classrooms. By the mid 1960s, 15 square feet per pupil was provided in new schools. The ultimate in the concept of the self-contained classroom was reached at this period. Each classroom is autonomous with a separate entrance and with separate lavatory and cloakroom accommodation. Sometimes, each classroom even has its own small outside courtyard. On page 186 is a plan of the standard three teacher school in 1964.

Towards the end of the 1960s, the concept of individual difference became more widely accepted. Children of all ages were encouraged to play a more active role in their own education. It was felt that basic skills could be at least as effectively acquired through individual and group activity as through class activity. Moves were under way to introduce a new child-centred curri-

[1] *Report of the First National Programme Conference*, 1922.
[2] *A Historical Note on School Building*. Oibre 2. (Journal of the Office of Public Works), January 1965.
[3] *An Naíscoil*, p. 3 (Department of Education, 1951).





culum. This new curriculum, which had been piloted in some schools in the late 1960s, was published in 1971. The curriculum was an integrated one, with the child seen as the most active agent in his own education. Individual work would help him to develop self-reliance and independence; working as a member of a group, he would learn the value of co-operation and his social development would be fostered.

> 'The teacher is no longer regarded as one who merely imparts information but rather as one who provides suitable learning situations and who guides and stimulates the child in his pursuit of knowledge.'[1]

As the basic educational philosophy changed, so too did the resources and tools used in the learning process. Text-books and learning material changed; audio-visual material was developed and classroom design adjusted to facilitate the new philosophy and school organisation and management. One of the obstacles to the successful implementation of the new curriculum was seen as:

> 'The traditional-type school building with its small classrooms and cumbersome furniture....'.[2]

It was recognised that in an activity-based educational environment, more space would be required than in a more passive environment. By 1974, 19 square feet per pupil was allowed in each classroom unit and the gross floor area of a large school allowed 32 square feet per pupil.

Officials of the Department of Education had kept abreast of school design abroad during this period. Ireland was represented at conferences in school building in Rotterdam in 1964; in Austria in 1968 and again in the Netherlands in 1969.[3] As a result of these conferences a Council of Europe document entitl-

[1] *Primary School Curriculum, Teachers' Handbook, Part 1.* (Department of Education, 1971).

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] *National Schools—Planning Data and Procedure in Managers' Cases.* Office of Public Works, 1974.

[4] *Co-operative Teaching in Irish Primary Schools*—a booklet comprising papers read at a one-day seminar held by the Department of Education in the Gresham Hotel, Dublin, on 9/1/76.

ed 'Educational Aspects of School Building' was published and presented to the 6th conference of European Ministers of Education held in Versailles in 1969. The following quotation is taken from this document:

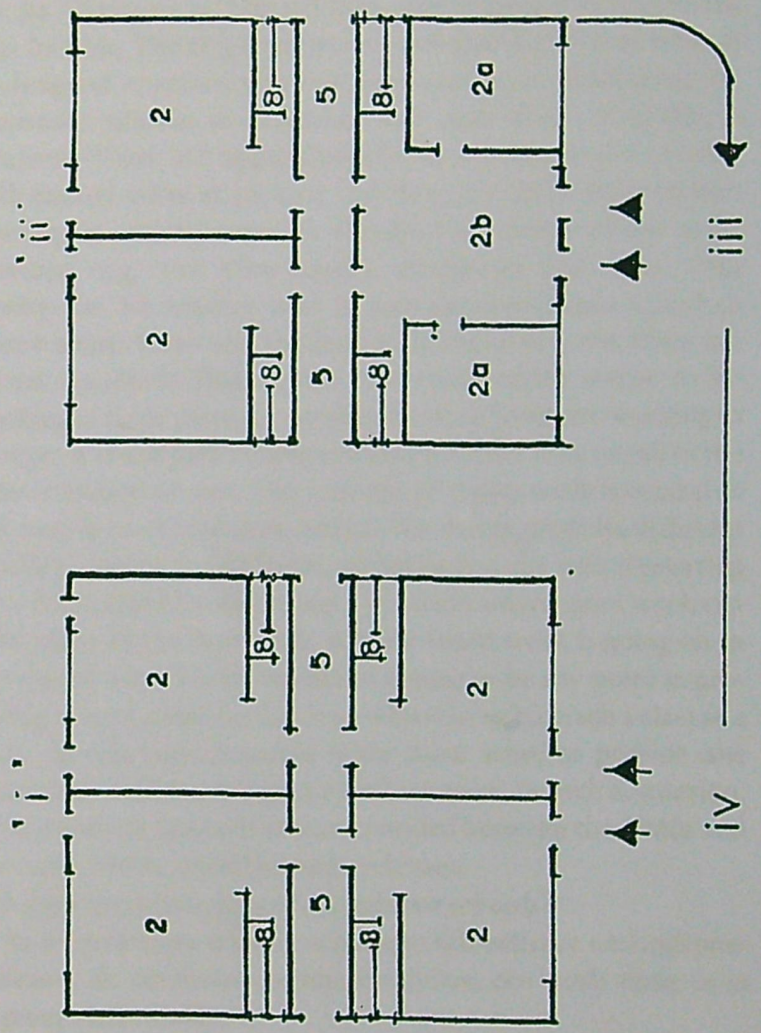
> 'The traditional concept of a school as a series of equal sized classrooms is being replaced by one which sees the floor area as a series of inter-related spaces. Its various parts are distinguished less by walls and partitions than by equipment, fittings and facilities provided for different activities.'[1]

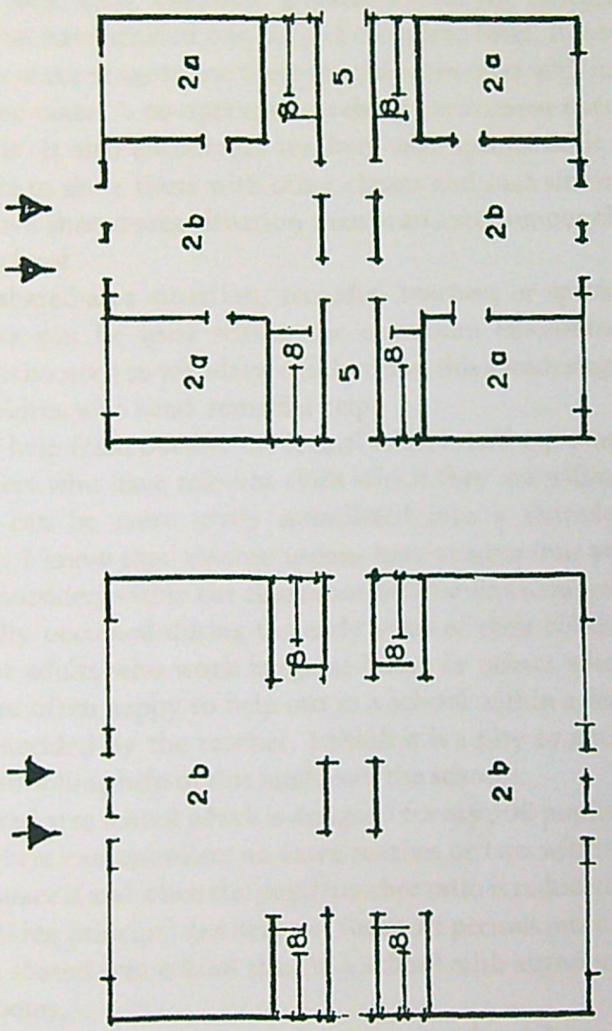
The Department of Education in the early 1970s encouraged the more flexible use of the 32 square feet per pupil gross floor space in large schools and came out in favour of what we now know as shared-area schools. This is basically a situation where classrooms are paired; instead of having two classrooms each of 750 square feet, the combined square footage and often the related circulation space are integrated. The total resultant floor space is shared by two classes, each class having a relatively small base and the use of the larger shared area. This design assumes co-operation between the two teachers in their lesson preparation and schemes of work. The extent of the co-operation varies from teacher to teacher. The diagram on pages 189–90 shows four different internal layouts of the same basic four-classroom block. In this plan, the external walls only are load-bearing walls.

The first design shows four classroom each of 750 squarere feet. The next design shows one of classrooms paired, providing a base for each class and a shared area. This is a 50 per cent shared-area school. The third design shows both sets of classroom-paired, i.e. a 100 per cent shared area school. Finally, we have an open plan situation with no bases. The Department of Education has adopted the second or third variation. There is no indication that the Department proposes to adopt the less structured open plan situation in the fourth design as adopted in some schools in England and the U.S.

Up to now, shared areas have been provided only in 16 teacher schools and over. In the earlier years of the decade, new

[1] *Educational Aspects of School Building*—Council of Europe, 1969.





schools of this size were built with 25 per cent shared areas. The Department now has a policy of 50 per cent shared areas and has no objection to 100 per cent shared areas if management asks for this. The Department requires that shared area schools be designed in such a way that they can revert to autonomous classroom schools at relatively low cost. Thus, flexibility is retained. There are approximately 65 schools in the country with shared areas at present and there are up to 400 teachers working in shared areas. In theory, two classes of the same standard, e.g. two First classes, co-operate and share. This is why the 16 teacher unit is seen as particularly suited to shared areas. However, in practice, in many schools, there are mixed standards sharing and the arrangement seems to be working in these cases. In my view if the children are working in groups, it is not particularly relevant whether they are all in the same standard or not. The concept of group work is central to the notion of shared area design. The design provides different working spaces for different activities and the wall separating base from shared area ensures a situation where quiet work can take place in the base while activity-based work is going on in the shared area. There would not appear to be any point in providing shared areas for teachers who choose to teach a class as a unit. In this case, it would make more sense to provide one space only and to arrange the desks in rows. In such a situation, a classroom design such as that provided between the 1920s and the early 1960s, would be more relevant.

What are the advantages of shared-area schools?

1. In a curriculum which encourages self-reliance and independence, an environment where children can work alone or in groups is desirable.
2. In a child-centred curriculum, some children may need more help from a teacher than others. An environment which provides different areas for a teacher to work with one group of children while the others are working alone or in groups is preferable to an autonomous classroom situation.
3. The best way to teach co-operation is by example. To talk of

children co-operating when they never see adults co-operating, is a contradiction.

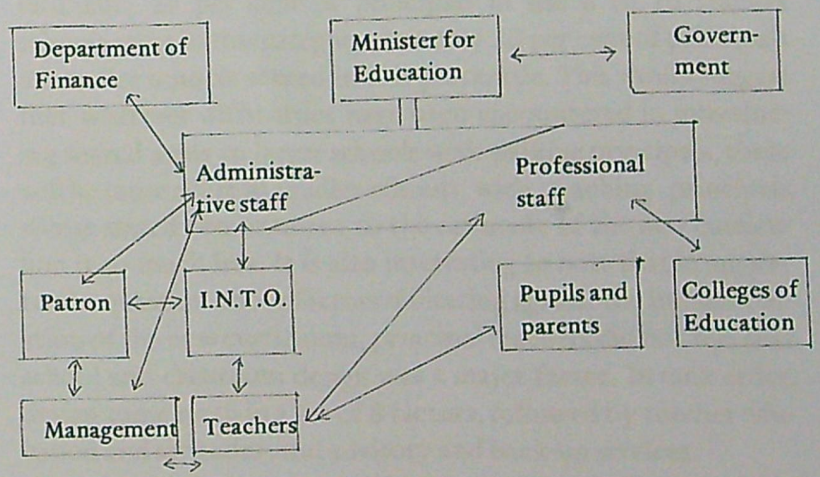
4. In the new B.Ed. situation, graduates from the colleges of education have studied one subject to degree level. It would seem to make sense to use these specialist teachers with more than one class. A co-operative teaching enviroment encourages this. It also encourages teachers with special skills and interests to share these with other classes and such sharing is easier in a shared-area situation than in an autonomous classroom school.
5. In a shared-area situation, remedial teachers or specialist teachers can be used within the classroom environment. There is no need to withdraw children and this avoids singling out children who need remedial help.
6. Other help from outside the formal school staff, e.g. parents or others who have relevant skills which they are willing to share, can be more easily assimilated into a shared-area school. I know that teacher unions have reservations about using outsiders within the classroom, but parents who are not gainfully occupied during the early years of their children's lives or adults who work irregular hours or others who are free are often happy to help out in a school within a framework decided by the teacher. I think it is a pity to exclude free and willing help of this kind from the schools.
7. A shared-area school which is designed for say 300 pupils and 8 teachers can assimilate an extra teacher or two within the same space if and when the pupil/teacher ratio is reduced.
8. A walking principal can help out for short periods more easily in a shared area school than in a school with autonomous classrooms.
9. Transition to post-primary schools is easier for children who have become accustomed during their primary school days to relating to more than one teacher.

I do not propose to discuss the disadvantages of shared area schools. I feel that a discussion of disadvantages is often a discussion of the disadvantages of group teaching as opposed to

teaching the class as a unit, or a discussion of problems relating to the design of specific schools, e.g. inadequate lighting or ventilation, unsuitable furniture etc. If one accepts the desirability of group work and individual work, and the desirability of developing virtues such as self-reliance, independence and cooperation then the advantages of shared area schools are considerable.

This is not to say that shared areas are without their problems. No innovation is problem-free. The different bodies and agencies involved in education in Ireland must be considered in any educational change:

Here we have a diagram of the relationships between the different groups involved:



We will now consider the problems relating to each group.

PATRON AND MANAGEMENT

Our system of patronage, management and administration is unique. It is different to the system in other countries where the link between central government and the individual school is either direct or through a local education authority of some kind, e.g. L.E.A.s in England; Education and Library Board in N.I. In the Irish Republic, the comparable link is the Patron who in over 98 per cent of schools is the Bishop (either Catholic or Church of Ireland). In England, a L.E.A. would take a policy decision on innovation; in Ireland the comparable body is the Patron, but in practice most Bishops would not interfere with the local Board of Management in relation to secular matters of this kind. (The exception might be the Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin which has a well-organised bureaucratic structure of its own to advise and support its managers where required.) The consequence of this is that very often major decisions in relation to matters like design of school are taken by Boards of Management or Chairman of Boards who may have very little knowledge or indeed interest in school design. The Department of Education and the Board of Works are available to advise but the ultimate decision in relation to school design, is taken by the Board on behalf of Diocesan Trustees who are the legal owners of the school. This devolved system of responsibility poses its own problems in educational innovation.

Without the co-operation and agreement of Patrons, no educational change can take place. Responsibility then devolves upon the Boards of Management whose co-operation is also necessary. The Board in turn must have the co-operation of the teachers in the school. It is therefore desirable that all these bodies be involved and work together in the design of a new school from the start.

TEACHERS AND I.N.T.O.

In regard to teachers, a disquieting fact emerges from the Department's survey of the new curriculum carried out in May 1976 and published in January 1977—'The New Primary School Curriculum—its implementation and effects'. In question 6, each principal teacher was asked to state his degree of agreement with the following statement:

'A class of children is best taught as a unit (e.g. using the same texts and doing the same level of work.'

47 per cent said that a class is best taught as a unit; 44 per cent said it is not; 9 per cent had no strong views. If such a high proportion of principal teachers have reservations about group teaching and individual work, this suggests that there may be more problems ahead in the introduction of shared area. However, principals of larger schools tended to be more in agreement with the underlying concepts of the new curriculum than principals of smaller schools. For example, 39 per cent of the principals of schools with 16 or more teachers, scored above the 75th percentile on agreement with the new curriculum rationale; 29 per cent of principals in the 8 to 16 teacher schools were in this category; but only 20 per cent of principals of smaller schools scored in this percentile. This would suggest that whatever difficulties have been encountered in introducing shared areas to larger schools with walking principals, these will be more acute in smaller schools with teaching principals whose stated commitment to the rationale of the new curriculum is so much less. It is also interesting to note that in answer to the question about factors militating against the implementation of the new curriculum, principal teachers did not feel that school and classroom design was a major factor. In rank order, design came sixth in a list of 8 factors, followed by teacher education and attitudes; and advisory and back-up services.

There are of course complaints from some teachers teaching in shared areas. No comprehensive study has yet been completed about shared areas in Ireland, but the results of a survey by the I.N.T.O. should be available shortly. However, it would appear that the complaints tend to be about details of the design of individual schools, e.g. insufficient viewing panels between the base and the shared area, base size too small; or unsatisfactory furniture (a very common complaint since the standard

furniture was not designed with shared areas in mind). Lack of consultation between management and teachers is another complaint. Problems of incompatibility between teachers are also mentioned. There is a feeling that 25 per cent and 50 per cent schools are undesirable as this situation can create tension among the staff and lead to divisiveness. Class size is also mentioned as a factor creating problems for shared areas but again I feel that this is a problem related to group teaching as opposed to teaching the class as a unit and is not strictly related to school design. Since the scheme is still in its infancy and in a trial situation, the Department should face up to the fact that there may well be mistakes in design which may need to be corrected.

In their initial building, shared-area schools are subject to precisely the same cost limitations as autonomous classroom schools. However, if a design is found to create difficulties in practice, there should be funds available to remedy the faults in the design. It would be desirable if the Department of Education in their negotiations with the Department of Finance could get a general agreement that funds should be available to remedy errors in innovative situations. In this connection, I might again mention the Revised Programme of 1900. In that case, many of the problems which arose could have been solved by spending relatively small amounts of money. But the Resident Commissioner of National Education, Dr. Starkie had agreed to a Treasury demand that the innovation would be introduced at no increase to the Treasury. It is unrealistic to think that innovation can cost nothing.

PUPILS AND PARENTS

If we accept that shared-area schools facilitate the implementation of group teaching, then it is difficult to justify anything less than 100 per cent shared-area schools where a school's policy clearly accepts the rationale of the new curriculum. Some consideration should be given to the pupils in a school. 25 per cent or 50 per cent shared area implies either that 25 per cent or 50 per cent of the children in a school use shared area all their

life, or more commonly that they spend some of their primary school life in the shared area and the rest in the autonomous classroom. This requires a child to adjust to a very different type of classroom management and school organisation and to a different psychological approach to learning. Since a shared area/ group teaching method encourages independence, use of research methods of learning etc., is it any wonder that problems arise when children are asked to return to a more dependent, teacher-centred type of education?

A school that is introducing shared areas should make some efforts to familiarise parents with the new approach. This might best be done by Parent/Teacher meetings and group discussion and seminars involving both parents and teachers. In addition, it would be helpful if the Dept. of Education could develop a brochure or hand-out which would state clearly the rationale and concepts underlying shared-areas. This type of thing was done with some success in 1969 when the booklet 'All our Children' was distributed to every household in the country.

COLLEGES OF EDUCATION

The aim of teacher education to-day is much broader than teacher training was a century ago. Teachers are no longer being trained in a certain method of teaching; they are professional people who can choose their own approach. Teachers should be able to cope with change as it occurs in their professional life. In talking about shared area schools, we are not talking about a future possible situation; we are talking about an innovation which has now existed in some Irish national schools for 9 years, and which is spreading annually. Student-teachers should at least be familiarised with the situation. At present some of them do their teaching practice in shared area schools and often their first introduction to shared areas takes place on the spot. More help should be given to these students in the colleges before they go out on teaching practice and indeed to all students. Shared area schools are typically provided in new or expanding schools in areas of population growth. These are

also the areas in which new jobs will be available so it is reasonable to assume that a significant proportion of the posts being offered to students leaving college will be in shared-area situations.

It is worth mentioning that so far shared area schools have all been Catholic schools. This is because no new 16 teacher Protestant schools have been built since 1971. However, it would be a pity to restrict awareness of this innovation either to Catholic schools or Catholic colleges of education since it appears likely that smaller schools in the future will want to adopt the new design.

ADMINISTRATIVE AND PROFESSIONAL STAFF WITHIN THE DEPARTMENT

Simply because shared areas are being encouraged by the Department of Education, one must not assume that there is unanimous agreement within the Department on the matter. Again I refer to the Revised Programme of 1900. The Revised Programme was the brainchild of Starkie but some of his administrative staff and inspectors (indoor and outdoor staff as they were then called), were far from enthusiastic about the change. This led to problems between teachers and inspectors which have some parallel to-day. One cannot underestimate the importance of converting the administrative staff, since then as now they had the final say in matters of policy and finance, subject of course to Government approval.

Apart from finance, the key word in an innovation of this kind is consultation—consultation between patrons, management, teachers, and teachers unions, parents and administrative and professional staff within the Department. Involvement from the start is crucial where at all possible, as this very often results in positive attitudes. On the other hand, defensiveness and antagonism can result from lack of consultation and by the time the need to consult is acted on, it may be too late. Much of the controversy between teachers and the National Board in 1900 was the result of lack of consultation by the Board with the I.N.T.O. and teachers. Since the teachers are ultimately the

group who can make or break an innovation, their co-operation is crucial and the importance of consultation with them cannot be overestimated.

The vocabulary associated with the discussion on shared areas is a sensitive issue. I have used the term 'autonomous' classroom throughout this paper rather than 'traditional' or 'conventional' classroom or any such word which might be seen to imply a value judgement on the matter. And finally, like all innovations this one will ultimately have to be judged on experience.