

THE ELTHAM COLLEGE FOUNDATION PROJECT LAUNCHING DINNER

Glenn College, Latrobe University, October 5th, 1973

Text of Address delivered by the Principal, Mr. D. D. Davey.

We are here, I believe, because we believe in democracy. The initiative of many individuals has been blended together into an amalgam which has produced this meeting - the first fruits of a considerable amount of searching of hearts and minds.

That it should occur at a time like this, when costs of everything are spiralling, when more money than ever before is being ploughed into State systems of education, is all the more important and wonderful to reflect upon. The drives, the objectives which have prompted people to turn their hearts and minds, to turn their hands and money to the establishment of this College spring, I have no doubt, from such concerns as the geographic conditions of this district, the increase in its population, the relative crises of urban transport, especially as it applies to the needs of young people, and intense attachment to the Eltham district itself, which I have sensed since the first time I stepped into it. No doubt, there are a number of other personal concerns also.

Above all, however, it is clear that a concern for a quality of education, a style, a continuum of education, for an education which has a personal dimension about it - that concern, I believe, has been the mainspring of these initiatives and your presence here tonight, even if prompted only by curiosity, is testimony to it.

I believe that most of us in this hall, as we become older, as we busy ourselves with the concerns of every day, earning a living, building or extending a home, moving out in ever widening circles from a concern for ourselves to embrace also a concern for our children's development, we learn soon to realise that 20th Century life can have a feeling of frustration about it unless its quality is controlled. We speak and hear a lot about "quality of life" today, especially as it applies to our environment, our physical lot, our community morals, the standards of deportment of those in public life.

Consideration of these central concerns has led to more and more public interest in education, not just for the young, either, although that is our particular interest tonight. And so the professional educator, the teacher, for so long disregarded by the community, has come more to the centre of the stage. (My wife, I recall, a graduate in Physical Education, was first employed 30 odd years ago, at the princely sum of £120 per annum!).

Times have changed and it is good that this is so.

Education of all things, I believe, requires community interest, parent involvement, the maintaining of an intelligible dialogue between the parties - a real sense of communication.

Effective communication, of course, takes time and trouble, and furthermore it is a two-way process, if it is to be of any use beyond the day. I shall assure those of you who will involve yourselves with Eltham College that I shall look for your involvement, I shall seek your opinion, I shall ask your help and, provided that it is apparent that the leadership which I provide is efficient, modern and understanding, I shall not personally fear or allow that the tail, so to speak, will wag the dog.

I personally look back with some embarrassment, over the years, at the teacher's ignorance of curriculum theory, for instance. What are the best ingredients of a programme for a good school and where do they begin and end? As far back as 1870, the American W. F. Philips, later President of the N.E.A., spoke of schools and teachers affording the sad spectacle of ignorance engaged in the stupendous fraud of self-perpetuation at public expense.

Well, the horizons of knowledge have expanded. This is no longer the case. I want to assure you that Eltham College will seek to involve the community in its working and in its turn, as I shall explain, will provide opportunities for the parent body and the community itself, if it wishes, to grow with it.

There are methods available by which I shall be able to ascertain what parents' priorities are, but I shall not spend time speaking now of these. The reasons justifying this dialogue are many and urgent. Speaking, for example, at the time of the Sputnik, Margaret Mead said this:

"Change has become so rapid that adjustment can't be left to the next generation; adults must - not once, but continually - take in, adjust to, use, and make innovations in a steady stream of discovery and new conditions .... the educational system was designed to teach what was known to little children and to a selected few young men (after which they could be regarded as "educated") and not to the world in which the most important factors in everyone's life are those things that are not yet, but soon will be, known." (-Mead, Margaret, : "Thinking Ahead". Harvard Business Review XXXVI Nov. 1958 p.23).

Whatever the virtues or otherwise of change, the school administrator can no longer assume that the disciplines he inherited are the disciplines that can discipline the present. Nor can he assume that the roles he has traditionally assigned to students, teachers, professional bodies, parents or himself are the roles they will have in the curriculum process of tomorrow.

It is fashionable to make the schools the scapegoat for all of society's shortcomings and failures. Illich and his kind propose to deschool society, substituting "convivial" utilities such as libraries, museums, laboratories and industries as a way of serving educational needs.

Then he would have ad hoc groups of individuals with special interests for verbal exchange at each of these locales.

Yet the average student spends less than 30% of his waking hours in school. What do these critics intend in the way of developing programmes for the non-school agencies and what of the all-pervasive TV, which commands twice the time which the average student spends in school each week?

The critic of traditional education offers a cynical summary of its basis as follows: "True learning and satisfaction come from working hard and enduring pain. It is against the nature of man to want to learn; thus, he must be forced to do so. One has to suffer to be educated."

Despite the over-simplification, these sentiments have a familiar ring to older teachers. Some would maintain that this position operates today. Few, however, would argue that the educational system should not be responsive and able to offer both the openness and the diversity that are necessary for catering to individual needs. Every learner should have a wide range of alternatives of high quality, that will enable him to achieve his full potential.

Change and advance in education there must be and doubtless the public utilities cited above will play an increasing part. The system itself, however, can only develop to the degree that it carries public confidence. This is at once a dilemma and a paradox. The question is raised: education for what life style in what kind of society? The quality of life within any school is closely tied to the state of health of the broader contexts of society, within which it functions "As more and more people have shifted from a person-centred to an object-centred world view, amassing possessions has become the major value in the society, and the making and maintaining of mutual commitments to persons has receded in importance and become more difficult to accomplish. We must find ways for people to rely more on each other and less on material objects for the essential meaning in their lives." ("Learning Environments". A first year progress report. Harvard Graduate School of Education 1971.) Consider how you, yourselves, fit into this picture.

It may be wildly optimistic, but the cultivation of this reliance on persons and their involvement would be my hope for Eltham College. From all this, I hope you can feel something of the enthusiasm I want to generate in this atmosphere which I could describe as one of positive usefulness, of supporting love in the best sense, within the school. Perhaps I can say with a friendly warning, before turning to what is actually to happen next year at Eltham College, that I should want your responsibilities as parents only to begin when you enrol your child and pay the fees. The further unfolding of your involvement will be, I believe, not a cause for alarm or vexation, but for fulfilment and satisfaction.

How, I shall have to leave to time and your contribution, as well as my own, to tell.

Let me now turn to Eltham College 1974.

As the Chairman has explained, we will have the Preparatory School immediately available and we expect the Early Learning Centre to be ready for occupation in May, 1974.

The first point to note is that Eltham College will emphasise the importance of the individual. Each child is different and his different needs must be catered for and his different capacities developed by different means. Designing a programme of this sort, of course, requires skilled and dedicated staff. I have ample evidence already that there are many qualified and experienced men and women anxious to join our team.

The Early Learning Centre will be more than a Kindergarten. Experience for the younger children is still essentially a process of social interaction. It is this interaction which the great psychologist Piaget describes as liberating the child from its ego-centric stage.

Many of us are probably used to the concept of the Kindergarten as a place for "just play". But "just play" can produce much learning. Small children are essentially "people on the go" and intellectual processes are going on in them that form the very foundation of the reasoning power which each child will be capable of later.

Experience, they say, is the best teacher - certainly it is at the foundations for the very young. These raw recruits to life make best sense out of what they have had - the chance to see, to do, to explore, in company, even if they can't read at that stage.

It is for these reasons that I say that the Early Learning Centre will be more than a Kindergarten. It will not only encourage the private dream world of the child - perhaps his greatest insurance against the advancing shocks of life, but it will develop cognitive experiences in an open-ended, non-pressured way, planned by the staff to compass the needs of the individual. So too experience with music and the exploration of physical capacities will add systematically to the social programme.

In this process, we will try to make obvious and examinable clues which will be valuable for assessing the educational needs of the child for later growth.

I have dwelt at some length on the Early Learning Centre, because it sets so much of the stage. Let me pass to the moral teaching of Eltham College. While some people believe that we live in the beginning of a post Christian society, I have no doubt that Christian ethics form a sound basis for the operation of a modern school. Religious and moral teaching at Eltham College will emphasise strong moral tone using sound Christian perspectives without denominational affiliations. Much of the religious education will be integrated into the total educational programme.

How this programme works out is a matter in which I hope you will find great interest.

At the Preparatory and Junior levels, many problems of development are intensified by the Grade structure, characteristic of most school systems. It will be the policy of the Junior School to provide the advantages of a non-graded process while retaining the essential cohesion of the group. It does not require an expert to understand that to divide a child's progress up into steps which are placed a year apart is little short of absurd. The reason that we have clung to this process for so long is largely economic and partly connected with the problem of the scientific understanding of learning processes. We are still far from fully understanding learning processes. Again, and especially, the skills, sensitivity and permanence of the staff in an Independent School enable the best of both worlds to be planned for. I believe that there are, within our group, considerable potentials of this kind, without going out into the fringes of permissiveness or restrictive traditionalism.

An important facet of the development of the young person today is the insurance of his physical well-being. Research reveals the alarming fact that, despite a wonderful climate and plenty of space, Australian youth is nowhere near as well developed physically as many of its overseas contemporaries. Eltham College will emphasise a physical education in a systematic way, providing the widest range of opportunity for physical development, achieved through a planned programme during the school week.

I think you will be surprised to know that some of the latest research into physical education has shown that, even at the Higher School Certificate level, students who have had the opportunity of one hour a day of organised physical activity, have actually performed better in their examinations than the students without this opportunity.

Professor Karmel commented in the South Australian enquiry in education recently: "We endorse the acceptance of Physical Education as an essential part of the curriculum with a status in no way different from that of other subjects."

I will look to the day, within the next few years, when Eltham College will have a Physical Education Department which will allow you, as parents, to come into the situation and take advantage of the resources, to be tested and helped in whatever way you wish. Twentieth Century society, as you realise, is inclined to be guilty of digging its own grave with its teeth. Unless we make some attack on this matter of physical fitness, which I believe will be so easy to do with the kind of plan we can plan for and achieve at Eltham College, then we will be much less than the best that we can be.

We will be fortunate to have, from the beginning of next year, a large thirty-foot above-ground swimming pool. This will serve all age groups, under qualified supervision, until the Physical Education complex can be built in a year or two.

Many Australian parents are unaware of the restrictive nature of the education to which most young Australians are submitted, as a result of the decision which they make or is made for them to direct their children to a High School or a Technical School after Grade 6. Such a decision often limits the options later available to the student. At Eltham College, a wide range of academic and also technical options will be available to every secondary student so that vital decisions concerning academic destinations can be deferred until the pupil has had time to appreciate his own strengths, weaknesses and preferences. A counselling programme will be provided to assist him along the way.

For Eltham College this will mean that practical subjects such as Instrumental Drawing, Woodwork and Sheetmetal work, to begin with, will be available as well as the standard academic programme of Mathematics, Physical and Social Science, Fine Arts and Foreign Languages. Similarly, options in areas of Home and Cuisine Management will be developed. All of these subjects will be available equally to boys and girls. I shall be anxious to consult parents about developments within the curriculum and also in the extra-curricular programme, as the school develops.

We hear a great deal about open classrooms and integrated programmes. Whatever you describe as the knowledge explosion, it has now reached such proportions that, if one attempts to design an educational programme based purely and simply on facts, one immediately faces an impossibility. The purpose of the integrated programme which Eltham College will seek to develop in the Middle School, is to provide opportunities for the student to become self-supporting, developing at his own best pace, by ways which are truly individual with the teacher no longer in possession of a captive audience, but standing aside as a facilitator, an enabler, a person who is available as a supporter, no longer the source of all knowledge - a role which it is now impossible to fill.

I believe this is the type of programme which will revive the lagging interest in school which you have seen in so many students who, like Shakespeare's school-boy, drag their shining face, so unwillingly to school. In the Primary Grades, the bloom is still there. Somehow it seems to fade and the glaze comes over the students' eye at secondary level. By an integrated programme of sensitive design, I believe we can go a long way towards overcoming this problem at Eltham College.

A modern education must take into account the "global village" aspect of our world and introduce the culture and language of overseas people progressively and effectively into the curriculum. This will be best prepared for by an introductory general language course in Forms I and II. The study of an individual foreign language, such as Indonesian or German, Japanese or French, will begin in Form III. Some opportunity will be offered to parents in the first year or two of the College to indicate a preference for the languages which might be included in the school curriculum.

Life into the 21st century will offer an increasing amount of leisure. Our human nature dictates that this need be fulfilled by the pursuit of a variety of activities offering the widest aesthetic and physical satisfactions. Such broadly cultural pursuits are no longer to be regarded as "frills" in a school programme and Eltham College will set out to develop the widest possible opportunities for satisfying experiences. Community development within the school and the school's involvement in the community can be seriously cultivated. I should like to see adult theatre and film-making, poetry and creative writing, choral and instrumental music, and the practice of graphic and manual arts all flourishing in the College in the evenings, following the pursuit of these activities at more junior levels during the school day. What, short of the lack of enthusiasm and co-operation of those concerned, need prevent this? Can you see the possibilities of a theatre and a licensed restaurant, on the campus, which would provide facilities for the students in the daytime, and could be appropriately developed in the evening? I put it to you that there are people in this community who want to see and would work towards this development and I believe that many of you would join in such a co-operative enterprise.

It is obvious that the selectivity and variety of the options to be available is proportionate to the numerical strength of the school. If the school begins with 250 pupils, all the prospects to which I have referred can become immediately operative in 1974.

Let me conclude as I began, by emphasising the importance of concern for the individual student. Under a discipline neither restrictive nor permissive, he will enjoy the support and encouragement and control, within Eltham College, which twentieth century life more than ever requires of its young people if they are to cope with the problems of tomorrow.

I am looking forward to meeting you all personally and to enlisting your support for the best development of the College and the growth of the Eltham District.

I should like to thank finally, three men whose assistance has been, in the past month, quite beyond belief, namely, the Chairman, Mr. Les Clarke, The Secretary of the Council, Mr. Cordell Short and the Academic Policy Convener, Mr. David Wilkinson. They have worked tirelessly to bring us to this point and to help me. There are many others, particularly the womenfolk in the office who have manned the telephones and have helped you to understand something of what this evening is beginning to mean.