Vote of Thanks

by

I. WILKINSON

(*Inspector of Education, O.F.S.*)

ON behalf of all the participants, I wish to congratulate Professor Linder and his staff on their foresight and their initiative in the organising of this course. The widespread interest and the very large attendance of teachers from all parts of the Republic are proof of the dissatisfaction with present day teaching of mathematics and the desire for enlightenment on new materials and a new approach. We thank you most sincerely for the inauguration and organisation of this course as well as for the informal and friendly way in which it has been conducted.

Material matters contribute largely to the success of such a course and we should like to express our appreciation of the excellent accommodation provided for some of us in the hostel and to the catering department for their outstanding effort. The tea session was also one of the highlights—I think the tea helped to oil the wheels of the course and on occasion to wash down some of the more unpalatable truths. I assure Professor Linder, the matron and all concerned that we have thoroughly enjoyed their hospitality.

Our thanks are due also to Mr. Eybers for his very comprehensive display of books. Perhaps as much as anything else, they have brought home to us the magnitude and scope of the changes that are being effected, the realisation of the leeway which we have to make up and the pressing need for immediate action.

It gladdens the heart and augurs well for the future teaching of mathematics to see so many teachers attending this course in their own time and at considerable expense. The education authorities value highly their attendance. Now that your interest has been aroused, we trust that it will be maintained and that it will lead to a new era in the teaching of school mathematics.

I would like to mention the enjoyment which the keen sense of humour of our three lecturers has given us. I would even go so far as to say that I am not responsible for what follows and in the words of Mr. Harold Fletcher, I wouldn't like to be quoted on this and I am not prepared to take the blame. I wish to say a few words about the course. This must be done elegantly, so I have put it in the form of verse, with apologies to the department of English in this college and also to some of our better known poets. This I have entitled "The Ode to the Visiting Lecturers". I had difficulty in getting the words to rhyme, as I found that most of the words I was choosing were really from the sub-set of swear words that I know.

Professor Linder from all quarters frequently heard say,
The teaching of maths was getting worse every day.
He enlisted the help of three experts sane
And one day in July they flew in by plane.

Very soon, the teachers they met,
"By Gad!" they cried, "the empty set".
They did their darn'dest and are not to blame
If their names don't go down in the hall of fame.

The course was divided into groups and sets,
Films were shown and experiences shared;
Harold Fletcher enjoyed his bit of fun,
Why bother if the sums aren't done?

Len Sealey played with his blocks and trains
To get the stuff inside our brains.
John Flavell outlined his particular way,
Exams, he maintained, no longer hold sway.

Now what have we learned in just over a week?
They sure have given us the knowledge we seek.
Vital statistics are no longer a force,
A subjective approach is a far better course.

The pint is still the measure of the good old beer,
The teacher of maths must not be deprived of his cheer.
We all agree it was well worth while,
Although we had to travel for many a mile.

I would like to point out again that they have only got themselves to blame for that effusion.

To continue in a more serious vein, the arrival of our three guests was most timely. What we have gleaned from their own experience will be used to advantage.

May I discuss the situation in the Republic briefly? A sound educational system has been built up in the country, of which we can all be proud.

As far as the teaching of mathematics and science is concerned, this system can be criticized on the grounds that it is too conservative. Much outdated material is still taught and in the traditional fashion. There is overmuch emphasis on drill, and the public examination largely dominates the overall scene. Manipulation and rote learning are stressed at the expense of understanding. The result has been that many pupils have become discouraged. They have never experienced the thrill of discovery or the inherent beauty of these subjects. This system has equipped them to deal with specific problems and situations, but has not enabled them to acquire those values so fundamental to present day mathematics, science and industry.

We are aware of the shortcomings of our system, and have taken note of what has been happening overseas. Certain authorities are already considering a change. The Joint Matriculation Board is revising the syllabi in maths and science. The Bureau of Educational and Social Research is investigating the teaching of high school mathematics on a nation-wide scale. Some of our teachers have been privileged to study programmes in the countries of their origin. Yet there are many points on which we are not clear and will have to reach agreement. I would like to mention just a few. At what stage should mathematics be introduced into our schools? What new material should be incorporated into our elementary mathematics? How must we change our methods of presentation, testing and examining to make full use of a new approach? Just how much should manipulation be stressed? In a senior mathematics course, what traditional material should be retained and what should be included?—Theory of functions, matrix algebra, calculus, probability, statistics, three dimensional geometry, topology, games theory or something else?

A stage has been reached where the holding of a course such as this had become imperative and we are particularly grateful that Mr. Fletcher, Mr. Sealey and Mr. Flavell were available to conduct this course. This was a fortunate choice. Together they are extremely well qualified to discuss the teaching of mathematics at all levels in the primary and in the secondary schools. In their lectures and seminars they have thrown light on many of our problems and supplied the answers to numerous questions. In the short time available, it was an impossible task to develop any subject fully, but they were able to indicate general procedure and to introduce us to many of the highlights of the new approach and to some of the new materials.

On behalf of all the participants, I wish to thank them for their inspiring lectures, the instructive and informative seminars, for their willingness to share a wealth of experience and above all for pointing out so clearly the need for discovery and insight in any learning situation. Their enthusiasm for the new approach and the new materials has been infectious. Many of us are eager to pursue the study further and we hope that the time is imminent when we shall be able to bring our teaching of mathematics in line with modern practice. It has been a stimulating and exciting experience for which we thank you most heartily.

In bidding you farewell, we do hope that you have enjoyed your stay, that you have felt the throb of a young, virile, progressive nation, that you experienced the goodwill that exists amongst our people and that this visit may lead to better understanding. We wish you God speed and a pleasant journey.