

Education and learning have different definitions in the dictionary, but to me are intertwined. We start learning from birth and continue throughout our lives until death. Education or training starts young: as children we are trained to eat properly, to talk correctly, to go to the toilet and dress ourselves, etc. But formal education for most in this country starts at the age of 5 when our children start school. Some will have become used to numbers of other children through playgroups, mother and toddler clubs and nursery schools, but for many when they enter infants' school it will be the first time they meet with a lot of other children. They have to adapt to others' needs and wants and learn to do what the teacher tells them. It's the most traumatic time for all, whatever background they come from, having to accept discipline and correction from little known adults. From my experience, the majority enjoy their infant schooling, learning to read and write, and playing with things they never had the chance to use and do in their homes, a great new experience. At seven when junior school is reached, it's becoming more serious, the greater part of school time is spent in learning and not at playing, but is accepted. By the time they are eleven and at senior school, most children have long ago accepted the fact that they have to attend school and do the best they can if they are to pass exams, which might or might not help them to get a job.

The majority of our children do want to work and most want a job that will interest them and use their minds, but with the state of the country now, some know they might never have a job. But I still believe that very few give up before they even leave school. I think they hope. So now not only do the teachers of our young have to impart knowledge and skill, and prepare them as far as possible for exams, but also try and prepare them for likelihood of rejection and no work. They have a difficult and demanding profession, the teachers of our young, and because they have the future of our country in their hands for many years, they should be chosen with great care. Only the best and dedicated should be teachers and to get the best, we should make certain they have good conditions and salaries. I don't agree with the current teachers' strike, but the situation should never have been allowed to get as it has. Our country's future, our children are in the hands of the teachers, we must do the best for them and in so doing, it will surely reflect on the youngsters.

The change in education has been great over the years, with the raising of the leaving age, changes in exam systems, and types of schools. One of the major changes I deplore is making the schools larger, I don't believe larger is necessarily better, in most cases I think not. The facilities might be more and better but the effect on the individual I feel isn't. Children can get lost and fade into the background in a large school; that doesn't happen in a school which is of a size where the teachers know all of the pupils. I feel that smaller units get better results and have a happier atmosphere because of the greater sense of belonging.

A lot of parents go through financial hardship over several years sending their young to private school where the actual school might be large, but classes aren't. Because smaller numbers are taught together, individuals have a greater chance, and the academic achievement is usually better. In this way, although these schools are the privilege of the rich, some poorer children get a better chance of a good education than others. I'm not saying all state schools are bad, only that there appears to me to be a greater advantage in the private sector because of a larger pupil-teacher relationship.

I hope against hope that we aren't approaching a time when it will be only the rich who get a decent education, because with all the cutbacks, places in colleges and universities seem to be progressively less available. Even in the state system, more and more has to be paid for by the parents, and as some just haven't got the money, is it going to be a case of only the rich and talented and intelligent that will get on? If so, it will be very bad for this country's future. I know of two cases of talented children from working class families.

One, a boy accepted as a chorister for a famous Cathedral choir, whose parents couldn't get a grant to help pay the fees. The grandmother moved in to look after the family, while the mother worked full time to pay for the boy's education. The other case, an 11 year old girl passed for a ballet school, and again no grant. But this time there was no grandmother, so the girl couldn't accept the place and develop her talent. It would have been a great financial strain for the parents with a grant, but without, impossible.

We all know there isn't a bottomless pit of cash available, but the education of our young is of the utmost importance now and always. To develop the talent and intellect of our children is a must, the future depends on them.