

I count myself very lucky that my Secondary education was completed at a time when there seemed to be plenty of money and resources available to schools. These were the heady days of the '60s when many new schools were built and the whole attitude towards education was being changed, Government reports were being compiled, which were to change the face of Primary teaching and this of course was to extend throughout the whole education system. New ideas and philosophies are all very well, but there must always be the resources to back them up, the agreement of those who have to put new ideas into practice and money spent on assessment and evaluation of these new practices. At this time there was the finance available for these innovations. The picture was not ideal by any means, but a movement had been made away from the rigid forms of teaching, which in some cases had changed very little since the 19th century.

Change is slow and in education this is doubly true. It takes a long time, naturally, for new thinking to be implemented, but in the '60s alterations seemed to be going apace. My school, in common with others in the area, in the space of five years was given first new science labs, two language labs and a business studies dept. together with first class equipment and increased numbers of staff. The methods of teaching were being changed also. Formal teaching gave way to group work and streaming was far less rigid. There was an emphasis on child-centred learning and an increased awareness of the creative arts. Many flourishing Drama depts in schools have their origins in the early '70s.

I came into teaching in 1975, having been trained in a College that was full of enthusiasm generated by the reports of Plowden and Newsom. Primary Education was flourishing, so many exciting things were happening. Group work, learning through play, thematic learning, creative dance and drama, and so much more. These were vibrant days full of hope in the future of education. Training teachers and established teachers were caught up in a common aim to provide a stimulating environment within the school where real learning and self-expression could take place and the old rote learning could be swept away. Open plan schools were built where work areas for crafts and classes became hives of activity, not rows of writing pupils.

All this filled me with great excitement and as I embarked on my teaching career I came to see very quickly how marvellous it was to be in a profession that was evolving to meet the needs of the pupils it served. At the start, my school had the resources it needed and there seemed to be enough money to provide more than the basics for learning. Where a child-centred approach was adopted the need for more equipment and resources was obvious. Teachers were not content with a clean board and a box of chalk! Massive amounts had to be invested in the system if the ideals of the new thinking were to be met. Classrooms seemed to change overnight - tables, not desks, class libraries, wall displays, art areas, displays of work - this changed the face of education and provided the kind of environment which would make children curious and encourage them to explore the world around them.

What happened to those heady days of hope and enthusiasm? Over the last ten years I have become disenchanted with the system of education. I have seen education become more and more of a political issue and this does great harm to a system which should be left basically in the hands of the professionals. Minister after Minister for Education has made no real attempt to find out what schools are like. The present incumbent has made an effort, but an hour in one school is no fair test of the situation. It should be mandatory for every Minister to spend a week in a school, perhaps one in an inner city school and another in a rural primary school. Perhaps then some sensible steps would be taken concerning Education.

Theories of Education and ideas for new areas within the curriculum have not stopped being propounded. In the profession we are constantly being bombarded by reports into this and that - curriculum innovation, pupil assessment, pupil profiles, personal, social and moral education, vocational skills learning, etc. etc. Most of these are good ideas in theory, but where are the resources?

It is all very well to expect teachers to innovate and improve, but unless resources are given then there is a limit to what can be done. If teachers are expected to understand current thinking about their subjects they must be allowed time to retrain or time to attend courses. Successive cuts in Educational spending have meant that the very areas which are vital have been cut to the bone. In-service training has been savagely cut, in some cases we are expected to pay for our own professional development.

Serious cutbacks within the service can only mean a lowering of staff morale, as they become increasingly frustrated by not being able to provide the kind of environment that they wish for their classes. For not only has financial restraint meant fewer resources, but also the maintaining of high numbers of pupils for many classes. With so many teachers unemployed it seems wrong that classes are kept numerically high when there is such an opportunity to lower the pupil/teacher ratio. The same applies to the falling rolls

situation. Here is a real opportunity to improve the quality of teaching by maintaining staff levels, despite the falling number of children in the country. Areas such as remedial education and nursery education could be improved, instead of which these are the very places where cuts seem to fall most heavily.

However slowly, financial restraints filter through to the classroom and teachers begin to feel the effects of such cuts. Fewer books and equipment, little money for outside visits, less clerical help and cleaning hours, all this causes a lowering of morale in the schools.

Added to the problems caused by financial stringencies are the pressures from society. Teachers and schools seem more than ever to be obliged to take over responsibilities normally taken by the home. Some would argue that sex education and moral education should be the responsibility of the parents, nevertheless it is now part of the school curriculum.

Social problems are more openly seen in schools. Broken homes, single parent families, unemployment, drug addiction and so on do put pressures on both staff and pupils in and out of school. Increasingly I speak to parents who, in the course of an interview, will wish to talk about their problems. It seems that as teachers we have to be social workers and marriage guidance counsellors as well as teaching channels. This type of added pressure on teachers does take its toll, especially in areas which have increased social problems such as high unemployment and bad housing.

With an increased bureaucratic state, the amount of red tape and paperwork in schools is phenomenal. The ordinary classroom teacher is involved to some extent, but much of this increased workload is laid at the feet of the senior staff within the school, which means that their pupil/contact time is reduced. In the case of Heads this is, I believe, detrimental to the school.

The majority of teachers are dedicated and professional people who are interested solely in doing their work well for the benefit of the pupils they teach. Most of us try hard to keep abreast of current educational practice and use our spare time to develop our teaching skills. However, over the years the status of teachers has been eroded and the teaching profession has been devalued. So many feel that a sound and well-funded education system is the only hope for the future, and to see that system constantly under attack does little for those concerned with children. Our present system is not without its faults and often teachers are themselves disinclined to accept change, but making education a political football does not help to give the system any coherence or stability.

If the system is to survive without serious mutilation because of the restraints put upon it, those in power must be made to realise that in the hands of this system lies the future of the country.