

Wasted Lives

(How our Education System betrays its most vulnerable).

The Education debate in 2009 which centred on the abolition of the transfer test and grammar schools has now moved on, albeit temporarily, to the area of Special Needs.

Parents, teachers, unions and special needs groups are rightly concerned about the proposals in, "The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion."

But all of this debate masks an even bigger problem the dire state of our Education System.

An International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) carried out in 1996, showed that around 1 in 4 (or 250,000) people of working age in Northern Ireland had levels of Literacy and Numeracy at the lowest level (Band 1). This group would have difficulty reading and understanding signs and instructions or checking whether they had received the correct change when shopping. Many will be unemployed, on benefits, and may suffer from relatively poor physical health and mental well being. They are also least likely to be home owners.

The IALS results showed that the incidence of the problem in Northern Ireland was higher than in all but one of the 14 countries participating in the survey.

Things haven't changed a lot since 1996. The Department of Education has reported that around 4,000 young people are leaving school each year without the appropriate basic literacy and numeracy skills and research has indicated that the number of working age adults in Northern Ireland who have no qualifications is the highest in the UK.

It needs to be stressed that we are not just talking about abstract things like reading, writing and counting. We are talking about peoples' lives. We are talking about wasted and lost human potential.

Every major social concern has a much higher incidence of reading problems attached to it from juvenile delinquency, to alcohol and drug problems, unemployment, teenage pregnancies, criminality and imprisonment, anything that we say is a major concern and there is a much higher than expected incidence by far of individuals who have had or struggled with reading.

One young person interviewed for a television documentary described not being able to read as 'just like being homeless, it takes you to a whole other world.'

Tellingly, in some states in the USA the authorities use the reading test scores of 9 year olds to predict how many prison places they will need in twenty years time.

In April, 2008, a Review of the Competitiveness of Northern Ireland undertaken by Sir David Varney, pointed out that while the number of people who have only basic skills in Northern Ireland is on a par with the rest of the UK, the stock of working age adults who have no qualifications is the highest in the UK by some margin, at 24% with a large proportion of the inactive population having only basic skills.

We have always prided ourselves on doing well at the top end and even this assumption is questionable. Department of Education figures indicate that in 2006-7 some 42% of school leavers left without English and Maths graded at A* -C.

The real measure of success of any education system is how well it serves its weakest members.

Judged on this measure the Education System in Northern Ireland has failed its most vulnerable and disadvantaged children and adults.