ASTI Conference: Young homeless people

*2 April 2013: Address by Fr Peter McVerry to Secondary School teachers in Ireland*

My only experience of teaching was in the 1960’s, when I taught for two years in Belvedere College, a Jesuit secondary fee-paying school, located right in the middle of Dublin’s Inner city, the most deprived area in Ireland at that time. Those were the days, perhaps one or two of you can remember that far back, when pupils said “Yes, sir” and “thank you, sir” and you didn’t need to do a course in crowd control. Much to the relief of those I was teaching, I then gave it up as a bad job. When people ask me how I cope with working with young homeless people, I always reply: “If I ever stopped, they might send me back teaching.”

I would like to talk this afternoon about my experience of working with young homeless people and to reflect on the educational system, from that perspective.

Most of the young homeless people I work with dropped out of school early. Not all of them, by any means. Some homeless people have gone on to Third Level Colleges, studying IT, addiction, social care, community and youth work and so on. Others became electricians, plumbers, carpenters, bricklayers. One had his own construction company during the Celtic Tiger years, luckily not big enough to end up in NAMA!

But many dropped out of school early, or never really attended at all. This is hardly surprising. They were the young people who became homeless because of addicted parents, violent parents, severe neglect, dysfunctional families. Some of them ended up in an equally dysfunctional care system which continues to be highlighted in report after report. One young lad, aged 12, had to go into town each morning before going to school in order to buy the heroin his mother needed for the day, and then he had to help her inject it, as she couldn’t find a vein. Another lad, aged 14, every time he went home, his mother slammed the door in his face and said: “Go away, you’re not wanted here.”

How could they stay focused in school? Their bodies were in a classroom, but their minds were somewhere else: perhaps they had been up half the night while their parents, back from the pub, had an almighty row, shouting and screaming at each other; perhaps they were wondering would their parents be drunk tonight again, or would there be any dinner ready when they came home, or would their father beat up their mother again tonight, or any one of a variety of dysfuntionalities that may have characterised their family. Attending school was not the most important issue in their stressed-out lives; indeed it was just another unwanted stress.

Some of these young people we work with take drugs. Why do they take drugs? They take drugs for a different reason to the reason why some young people in your schools take drugs – even if you don’t like to admit that some of them do! These young people take drugs to forget; to forget their childhood experiences and to suppress the feelings associated with those experiences. One young girl expressed it very poetically shortly before she died of a drug overdose: “Wouldn’t it be wonderful,” she said, “if you could run so fast that your memories couldn’t catch up.” If they are taking drugs to run away from their memories, then what happens when they come off drugs? All those memories and feelings come flooding back to the surface – and they come back with a vengeance! To cope with those memories, they need all the counselling, therapy and support that we can give them. It is not just a question of saying: “why don’t they give up drugs?” If only it were that simple!

We work with young people who started smoking cannabis at the age of 9; by the age of 13 or 14, they were using harder drugs. How could they stay in school? How could any school cope with them?

**The path to prison**

One of the consequences of dropping out of school, or being kicked out of school, is low self esteem. They feel they are failures, different from ‘normal’ kids who go to school each day. It is only one short step from feeling that you are a failure to believing that no-one wants you, no-one cares about you, no-one is interested in you.

The final step on this downward spiral is a sense of alienation. They come to live in a different world to the majority of kids around them, a world apart. The aspirations, hopes and values of their world have little in common with the larger world around them. Their interaction with that larger world then becomes one of conflict – conflict on both sides.

And so my job is not just to provide accommodation, drug treatment, therapy and counselling for homeless people, but above all to restore to them a sense of their own value. And if we are not doing that, the rest becomes irrelevant.

**Building self-esteem**

And perhaps that is what my work and your work has in common, even though the young people you and I work with are sometimes – not always - very different. Even main-stream young people today sometimes struggle to find their identity and their place in this society. Many have doubts about what the future holds for them. Will there be a place for them in this society? Living in communities that are fragmented, sometimes even non-existent, they wonder where can they experience a sense of belonging? In the economic model we have chosen, they wonder will there be a job for them? Young people often project back into themselves their apprehensions and may come to feel that they are the failures and perhaps to question their own value. The recent suicides of very young children from cyber-bullying highlights for all of us how isolated young people, even very middle-class young people, can feel in times of difficulty. Young people, even apparently successful young people, often doubt themselves, a doubt which can sometimes lead to tragic consequences for themselves or others. Unless young people leave the educational system feeling good about themselves, then, no matter how successful the grades they have achieved, the educational system and our society have failed them.

When young homeless people return to us, having been away for perhaps several years, what is it that they say thanks for? Not so much: “Thank you for getting me somewhere to live,” or “Thank you for helping me to get off drugs,” but more usually something like, “Thank you for being there for me when I needed you.” What they remember, and what they value most, was the relationship: a relationship in which they felt cared for, valued and in which they did not feel judged. Often the first question they ask when they return – and I am certain that this is your experience too – is: “Is so-and-so still working with you?” They may have forgotten the momentous, but usually irrelevant, events that teachers are inclined to remember, but they remember the teacher who they felt cared about them, the teacher whom they felt valued them. They sometimes talk to us about their teachers, not that they had too many of them! But they do not talk about the great teacher, they talk about the kind teacher, the teacher who cared.

**“Problem Children”**

Probably, like myself, you spend a disproportionate amount of time dealing with a small number of young people, those we tend to label as “problem children.” One of the lessons I have learnt from homeless people, particularly those whose behaviour is most problematic, is that there is always a story behind that behaviour. When I feel like throttling them, or walking away, I ask myself: “Where are they coming from?” It may take a long time to discover, but the discovery is always revealing and sometimes harrowing. The 20-year old drug user who eventually revealed that, at 11 years of age, he was sent out each night by his parents into prostitution and had to bring back a certain amount of money or face a beating.

Of course he’s going to be angry, distrustful of adults, and he’s going to bring that anger and distrust with him into school, if he bothers to go at all. The 25-year old with sixty previous convictions, who eventually revealed that, from the age of 6, he was regularly taken out of school to go shoplifting with his foster parents, who needed him to distract the security guards, while they filled their shopping bags. The 17-year old violent youngster who eventually revealed that the only way of surviving at home was to punch his father before his father could get a punch in. The young child who used to hide from his mother, for hours on end, in the dogs kennel in the back garden to avoid a beating.

 We tend to define “problem children” as children whose behaviour causes problems for us, as teachers or citizens. Our objective then becomes to change their behaviour, so that they are no longer a problem to us. Our criteria for success becomes the measure in which their behaviour changes. And the consequence may be that if their behaviour doesn’t change, in measureable ways as defined by us, then we may exclude them from our service and our care, we may judge that we have failed and give up on them and abandon our relationship with them.

Those we label “problem children” are better defined as “children with problems.”
As a rule of thumb, I believe that the more difficult young people’s behaviour, the more damaged they have been in earlier years. And therefore the more that they need our help and our support. But often the more damaged young people are the ones who get the least help, because no-one wants to, or, with the resources available, no-one is able to manage their behaviour.

**The Educational System**

And so I would like to reflect on the educational system, from that perspective of working with damaged children, who have dropped out of school. Of course, the educational system cannot solve the dysfuntionalities within families or the inequalities within society. But at least we can ask, and should expect, the educational system not to reinforce those inequalities.

I know that you are facing significant changes in the structures within which you work and I know some of the difficulties which that poses for you, especially in the context of reduced resources and staffing cutbacks. But it seems to me that a far deeper reform of the educational system at second-level is necessary.

I would argue that the educational system is the most unjust structure in our society today. I say that because of the fundamental role that the educational system plays today in determining a young person’s future life choices. As we are all aware, it is primarily their success within the educational system that allocates to a young person their future place in Irish society, the opportunities, lifestyle and quality of life that will be available to them. Most young people only get one shot at it. Because of this, a just educational system must offer equality of access to the educational system and equality of opportunity within the educational system. Before criticising the system, I wish to acknowledge the huge commitment and work of the vast majority of teachers, who give their all, and sometimes more, to the young people they teach. As I said at the beginning, even my very limited experience of teaching has taught me how difficult and challenging the work is and left me with a great admiration for those of you who spend your whole life in the classroom, something I could never have done.

It is clear from interviews with children who drop out of school early, that the predominant reason for dropping out was their experience of the educational system itself.

In my view, the educational system has absorbed some of the worst values that are prominent in our society today, the values of consumerism, competitiveness, and an excessive individualism.

First, in our society today everything today has become a commodity, to be purchased by those who can afford it – housing, which should be a basic social need, became an investment, to be traded for profit; so, too, healthcare, childcare, care of the elderly, all basic needs, have become commodities to be purchased. And so too has education. Indeed, it is the most prized commodity of all.

This education commodity is called “points”. Five or six years of a child’s life is completely devoted to securing this commodity to its maximum possible value and it is then cashed in for a place in a Third Level Institution, subsequently enabling a young person to move on to the bottom rung of the employment ladder with the expectation of climbing that ladder and securing a good income and high status. The quality of education has become identified with results, as evidenced by the desire of many for a league table of schools and the highlighting in the media each year of those schools who have succeeded in sending the highest proportion of their pupils to Third Level education. While the adults in their lives are under pressure from the demands of society to seek security and happiness in higher incomes and material goods, their children are being pressured to acquire the points that equally give the illusion of future security and happiness.

Some disengage from the educational system, or even drop out, because they feel that they cannot achieve their desired goals because of the highly competitive nature of the system or who feel that they cannot compete on a level playing field with those who can afford fee-paying schools and grind courses. Why spend five or six years in post primary school when you know pretty early on that you are not going to succeed – success defined in terms of points? In fact, the longer you stay within the educational system, the worse you may feel about yourself. At the bottom, the educational system makes you feel a failure. You are not going to make it to Third Level, so why try and fail. You cannot compete against those whose parents are pushing them, paying for grind schools, giving them out-of-school educational opportunities which you can never have. For them, second level education becomes irrelevant and boring.

Secondly, society increasingly values people by their achievements, by their success. This too has infiltrated the educational system.

Many students feel that the exam results do not just evaluate their intellectual or academic ability but they measure their value as persons. Too many pupils leave school disappointed that they did not achieve what they had – perhaps unrealistically - hoped for, they leave school feeling that they have failed, whereas they may have done themselves proud in achieving what they did. I cringe every year when those who have achieved nine A1s in their Leaving Cert are given celebrity status, interviewed on television and photographed for the front pages of the national media. Of course it is right to applaud their achievement, but what does this communicate to those who have worked just as hard, tried just as much, but achieved, objectively, less. It somehow diminishes their achievement, of which they, too, can and should be equally proud.

The educational system has absorbed the values of our consumer society: to acquire the points which will determine the future lives of students becomes the driving force within the educational system. This drive for points reinforces the message that the meaning of life is about getting, getting, getting, achieving, achieving, achieving. It reinforces the message that competitiveness is the process by which we succeed in life. It reinforces the message that our value as persons depends on our achievements.

Hence, those students who have not succeeded within the educational system – success defined by the educational system itself - are a very important group of young people who often see things in a very different way to the rest of us who have been “successful”, and their vision is important if we are to change the educational system for the better. Perhaps the children who disengage or drop out of school are the modern prophets in the educational system. The prophets in the Old Testament drew attention to certain issues that people didn't want to know about. They challenged the huge gap between the wealthy and the poor, they challenged the kings for not dispensing justice, and for being partial towards their own friends and their own wealthy supporters. They criticised the status quo, and got their heads chopped off. Maybe those who have disengaged or dropped out of the educational rat race are asking basic questions about the purpose of the educational system, about the academic bias within the educational system, about the morality of imposing such pressures on children just to satisfy the needs of third level institutions and employers. They are asking questions – and answering them with their feet – about the quality of our educational system. We don’t chop their heads off today, we just suspend them or write them off as unteachable.

There is a wonderful film by Ken Loach, called Kes, which some of you may have seen. It should be compulsory viewing for everyone considering a career in education. It is about a teacher who befriends a difficult child in the school, whom all the other teachers want to get rid of, and discovers that the child’s passion is a kestrel hawk which he owns and trains. The film is the story of how that relationship with the teacher, focused on the kestrel hawk, changes the young lad’s whole life. And that is what education is about.

Those who have been successful within the educational system (by successful I mean those who have been successful in using the educational system to secure a prized position within Irish economic and social life) are those most likely to equate quality with results. They got so many points, ergo they have succeeded. Those who have dropped out are questioning the quality of the educational system and this identification of quality with results.

Maybe part of the problem is that in order to ask hard questions about the educational system, you must, ironically, have succeeded within the educational system. Those who reflect on the educational system, those who write about it and talk about it, are, by and large, those for whom the educational system has been successful. And success within the system may make it difficult to hear the questions which those who have dropped out are asking. The experiences of those who have succeeded within the system, and those who have failed within the same system, are so different that they may not be able to understand one another. It is perhaps even more difficult to hear those challenging questions when you are part of the system, working very hard within the system, and therefore have, understandably a vested interest in the system.

Politicians often describe our educational system as the best in Europe. Large multinational companies find here a ready supply of well trained young adults and this attracts them to Ireland. If this is our criterion for judging our educational system, then we do in fact have the best educational system Europe.

Yet

* Each year 4,000 children leave school with no qualification whatsoever
* Each year 1,000 primary school children do not even make the transition from primary school to second-level
* Many others leave school disappointed with their achievements, despite all their efforts and hard work

How can we reconcile these two perspectives? The difference arises at the level of values. If we are concerned primarily with those at the top who will be the leaders of industry in the future, then, yes, we have a very good educational system; but if we are concerned about the more vulnerable and more disadvantaged young people in our society, then the educational system fails very badly.

I am obviously not an educationalist but I am very attracted to the FETAC system of accreditation. In particular, it gives students an on-going experience of achievement, as they progress from one level to another and build up their FETAC credits at a pace which suits their abilities. I think there is something to be learnt also from the Leaving Certificate Applied, in which some learning is done in small groups and the assessment of this learning is a group assessment. Here, instead of having to compete with others to get the grades you want, working together, sharing skills and dividing tasks is the key to a successful assessment.

The educational cutbacks which we have seen over recent years will adversely impact on those young people who are already most vulnerable and at risk. Many of those cutbacks target marginalised groups of children and young adults. Cutbacks in educational support for poorer children will close off, for many of them, the already limited opportunities which the educational system offers them.

Unless our young people learn to value themselves and others for who they are and not for what they achieve, unless they learn to measure achievement by reference to their own abilities and not by reference to the abilities of others, unless they learn to seek happiness in relationships and not in acquiring material possessions and status, then we are creating a society that undermines the self-respect of our children, that divides them in a competitive struggle for a narrowly defined understanding of success and which may lead us to a wealthier but an ever more restless society. I believe that that in fact is the direction in which we are travelling – and the mainstream educational system is a major factor in steering our society in that direction.

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