



COMPLEX: The relationship between teacher and pupil is a unique and complex one

Teaching is not just a job – it's a vocation

'RESULTS Week' was a portentous one for our 'O' and 'A'-level students. In my day, the good or bad news arrived in the post. I remember aged 11 and again at 16 and 17, sitting at the turn of the stairs sick with apprehension, waiting for the metallic rattle of the letterbox that would decide my future, in an era when there were many fewer options than today.

Now the welcome or dreaded news arrives electronically and is shared publicly in schools, often with local media present – thrilling for the successful, but mortifying for the disappointed.

This year, a combination of Covid, school closures and loss of direct teaching has thrown pupils and students upon their own resources, granting them a degree of autonomy, trust and self-motivation that may, or may not have been realised.

Government, in a quandary, suspended examinations, handed over assessment procedures to teachers and now doubt is expressed over unusually high success rates. Is the inference that teachers were erring on the side of generosity? Being an ex-teacher myself, naturally I'm on the side of the angels.

The relationship between tutor and pupil is a unique and complex one – a daily mentoring and monitoring of competences, assessments and compensations.

To have a pupil under one's eye regularly, either absorbing a subject or failing to grasp its elements, makes the teacher a skilled judge.

A pupil is a complicated creature. Teachers know whether or not he/she is absorbing information, processing it and mastering a skill; whether there's engagement, aptitude or apathy; whether there's confidence or confusion; whether or not there's parental support or indifference at home.

Teaching isn't just a job. It's a

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vocation. Those who blithely 'give teaching a go' as a professional experiment or stop-gap measure, soon realise their mistake. Teaching means wholehearted moral commitment to motivate each and every child in one's care, no matter what their talents, or lack of them, with the aim of turning out a fully autonomous adult equipped with the skills for a decent quality of life and aspiration to be the best they can be.

The onerous responsibilities of teaching are mostly unrecognised by people outside the profession. Education isn't simply a conveyor belt, nor is the child or adolescent a vessel to be filled like a milk bottle with facts, formulae and proficiencies, then tested and capped by exams. Children are not mere units for education. Rather, each is an individual plant that wants nurturing according to its needs

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and talents, so it can thrive and flower and take a useful and fulfilling place in society.

The task of the teacher is to develop strengths, strengthen weaknesses, imbue the young with curiosity, enthusiasm and the virtue of perseverance, opening their minds to the fascination of learning and achieving. If they're lucky, they may encounter a teacher (maybe more than one) who'll fire the imagination and make learning, not only a challenge, but a pleasure.

Contrary to popular opinion, school doesn't end at 3:30pm. Teachers are sick of the tiresome cliché, 'short hours and long holidays'. No credit is given them for endless preparation, scrupulous marking and informal counselling that can solve a pupil problem – not to mention the inflated expectations of some parents and the eternal angst of adolescents, uncertain of themselves and their future.

As the famous educator Maria Montessori put it: "What's the use of transmitting knowledge if the individual's total development lags behind?" Exhaustion and burnout are endemic in the profession. The 'good teacher' is generally only recognised in retrospect when it's too late to express gratitude to 'the one who made a difference'.

Decades down the line, I'd like to thank the teacher who, at a critical stage, failed me in English and gave me the most valuable wake-up call of my life.

In the long-running Covid catastrophe, while politicians vacillated, teachers wore themselves out to accommodate the ongoing needs of their students and prevent them becoming casualties of circumstance.

The proof of their labours will be how this year's fledglings fare in third-level education or training, where self-motivation, commitment and maturity are key.

ON THIS DAY

AUGUST 17 1921

Falls Ambush Inquest

AT THE Old Recorder's Court yesterday, the City Coroner presided over the inquest on the victims of the July disturbances. Evidence was heard in the case of the late Constable Thomas Conlon, RIC, Springfield Road barracks, who was shot dead during the ambush of a Crossley tender containing an RIC Curfew Patrol in Raglan Street on the night of 9th July.

Sergeant C P Clarke stated he left Springfield Road barracks in a Crossley tender along with Sergeant Hanley and five constables. About 11.50p.m. they entered Raglan Street from Panton Street.

Witness noticed the street was very dark, there being only one street lamp lighted. The car was about twenty yards past the illuminated lamp when witness heard a shot behind them. '... The whole street in front was lighted up by the flashes from rifles and revolvers'.

Constables Rogan and Golden and myself immediately opened fire on the attackers while the remainder of the party jumped out and lay behind the car.

Just then Constable Hogan said: "Sergeant, they have got me". About the same time I observed Constable Conlon, who was in a kneeling position at the side of the car, drop his rifle and fall forward. Special Constable Charles Dunne, the driver, was hit in the side.

Sergeant Clarke continued: "Our position at this juncture was desperate ... I then heard a voice calling out "Number One Section, burn the car!" We immediately opened rapid fire to prevent one party from coming in on us and the other from getting near the car as, had the car been set alight, Constable Hogan would have been burned alive.

"Subsequently we were able to get a telephone message through to the police office and in a few minutes assistance arrived.

"Then we found Constable T Conlon dead and Constable Hogan and Special Constable Dunne wounded."

Specials Charged with Sectarian Murder

SIX B Class Specials who had been in military custody since June in connection with the shooting of Joseph Hayden, a farmer, of Gortfad, Glebe, County Tyrone and had been handed to the civil authorities, will be formally charged at a special court in Derry.

(This inquest report concerned the so-called 'Raglan Street Ambush' of an RIC patrol by the Belfast IRA in response to IRA intelligence that the RIC 'murder-gang' had planned to assassinate IRA members in reprisal for the murder of a policeman in Union Street. Sergeant Christy Clarke was later shot dead by the IRA. Meanwhile, the IRA continued to enforce the Dáil Éireann boycott of Belfast firms enacted the previous year in retaliation for the shipyard expulsions.)

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