

“Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire”

Sarah Smith 6th year Sligo Grammar School

A cry from the heart about the inadequacies of our education system, the curriculum and rote learning by someone who's going through it all. This will have resonance for most people and she makes her points reasonably but in a trenchant way, using a range of apposite quotations. A well written and plausible case for reform. This piece deserves a special merit award. ADJUDICATOR, FERGUS FLOOD

WHETHER AN optimistically confident sentiment or a simple statement of fact, this is no doubt one of the best quotes W B Yeats has (allegedly) penned on what many would deem to be a somewhat controversial subject, however its veracity with regards to the Irish educational system is questionable at best.

In an ideal world (and perhaps some areas of the highly esteemed Scandinavian model of education) his words would ring true in and outside the classroom, and each of us would thirst incessantly for all of the unknown our unquenchable minds could absorb. As it is, when it comes to our schools and colleges, Yeats can take credit for no more than fancifully phrased wishful thinking.

At the risk of sounding overly antipathetic, our country's educational system has been a source of widespread public disdain for far too long and this has been ignored by the government at the costly expense of our country's youth. The idea that teenagers should be force-fed such a mind-numbing volume of facts and largely useless information from the moment they hit secondary school is not only ludicrous and impractical, but also largely pointless, and is what I believe to be the root of our systems unpopularity. It is not only carrying out the exact opposite of what Yeats seemingly intended his words to mean but also doing irreparable damage to the public opinion of education in general. To fill a pail is one thing,

but to drown it to the point of overflowing is no help to either parties and is inarguably doomed to fail. If we are to take this quote to be about actual education (irrespective of the governments warped interpretation) then there can be no question that Yeats was indeed right in his definition of the word - however to agree that true education really is as he says, one must accept that we are grossly mislabelling the work that is being done in most of the classrooms within the country.

One of the biggest mistakes we make when it comes to learning is to subconsciously attach the concept to schools and subsequently force ourselves to conform to the stunted social perceptions of what, how and where we should learn instead of opening our eyes to the world around us, the very place from which everything in our textbooks is taken from. True education has no boundaries as opportunities to learn occur everywhere and are not restricted to formal education.

In school we learn that the only questions that matter are the ones our textbooks can answer, and as a result our curiosity inevitably ebbs until something that we should love and yearn to know more of becomes nothing more than a chore. Why should logarithms and trigonometric functions decide the fate of a girl who wants to be a writer? Why should knowledge of thirty six poems and their authors have a hand in the results of

a boy wishing to study biotechnology? These are questions we have heard countless versions of and the obvious answer is simple: They should not. A recent article in The Irish Times stated that studies done by two reputable universities showed Ireland's "overreliance on rote learning" and stressed the need to ensure "students were rewarded for knowledge that had relevance in later life". I understand that it is important that we are taught about a wide variety of subjects in school in order to allow us explore our interests and indeed for the simple pleasure of learning - that is not my issue. I simply think that at our age as senior cycle students we should be given the opportunity to study subjects which interest us as career paths instead of being forced to continue with ones we have tried and tested for years and still have absolutely no interest in.

It is also a wholly unimpressive testimonial to our educational system that even after twelve years of sitting, writing, reciting and revising, the majority of Irish learners are still not even close to fluent in their native tongue (or any other tongue for that matter). It sounds almost unbelievable that as a country we would continue down this path with such unwavering determination when the results are so boldly staring us in the face - but continue we do, because as is common in small nations such as our own, we are scared of any change that might rock our

old safely moored boats even a fraction. I think it is time we take heed of Grace Hopper's well known adage, admitting that while "a ship in harbour is safe, that is not what ships are built for" and acknowledging that being "safe" is not always the safest option, as it has led to a growing complacency when it comes to the upkeep of our society's education.

That is not to say that all classes are this infuriatingly insufficient as obviously there are some great teachers that do the best with what they are given, however there is unfortunately only so much one can do with such a limited curriculum. In classes like Geography and Biology we learn off pages and pages of facts and in the majority of cases it is not necessary to understand the content as long as we can regurgitate it sufficiently the next morning. That is most certainly not what education is about and I feel the only fair place to put the blame is on the Terminal Examination System itself. The concept of rote learning entire textbooks for at least six subjects in the hope that if we memorise their contents well enough it will enable us to pass an exam that will in turn mean we never have to think of said contents again is lunacy. What is the point of learning if it is just one step on the road to completely disregarding the fruits of our efforts? To put it simply, we learn so we can forget, and the irony of this is unbearably bitter for all of us still in school.

However these classes I seem so against do have the potential to be a lot more engaging and efficient if only the focus were taken off such learning. Indeed small pockets of what Yeats envisioned can be seen around the country in

the form of The BT Young Scientist competition and other such events, but these are so few and far between that it is no great help to the overall grim state of affairs. So many times I have heard teachers complain about how they would love to go into more detail about a certain book or topic that the class is really interested in but instead revert to the dreaded phrase "we have to stick to the coursework". Is it not the entire point of education to nurture and encourage our natural curiosity or are we to be governed by these inanimate objects, to be kept in the confines of our textbook jail cells without an inch of room for independent thought? Yes, if a student has a strong enough passion for a subject then obviously in some cases it withstands the years of constant and dispiriting rote-learning and possibly even thrives. Nevertheless, if we concentrated more on getting students to ask questions and think for themselves, the interest levels in subjects that some may not be so passionate about would undoubtedly rise. To cite La Rochefoucauld, "absence diminishes mediocre passions and increases great ones, as the wind blows out candles and fans fires" which can be interpreted positively or negatively, but either way the absence of inspiring education is unquestionably the greatest extinguisher our youths face and I do not think our country can afford to lose many more candles. I myself love English and so far no amount of second rate government approved curriculum have been able to stamp that out of me but were I someone with just the merest inclination towards the language, then (similar to the words of Elizabeth Bennet) I am

convinced one modern day English lesson would kill it stone dead.

We are being filled to the brim with undrinkable water and then come under fire when our bloated minds can retain no more. School is no longer a test of intelligence or capability (with occasional exceptions) but merely a measure of how much of our lives we are willing to give up for the sake of eight three hour exams. What prize goes for the people with IQ's in the 98th percentile who don't have a great memory? Where is their reward?

I highly suspect there have been countless geniuses who passed through our educational system and never realised or had the chance to achieve even a fraction of their potential just because we refused to accept that standardised testing does not work. In the words of Einstein himself, "Everybody is a genius, but if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it's stupid". Are we to argue with him, too? Yes, education is the lighting of a fire, but I believe the educational system just may be the pail that douses it.

Hopefully one day, the ideas we young people have to resolve some of these shortcomings will reach the ears of somebody with the power and motivation to help, but for now we will continue struggling against this relentless downpour that seems intent on dampening not only our spirits, but also any spark of individuality in our work.

One can only struggle for so long however and I think I speak on behalf of a lot of teenagers in this country when I say,

I am a student, and I am drowning.