

Your Education System*

*A Response to the Invitation by the Minister
to Submit my Views*

Dara Molloy

* I am sticking with the title “Your Education System”, rather than calling it my education system, because in its present form the system is very alien to my own beliefs, as you will see below.

Who I Am

My name is Dara Molloy.

I was a youth club leader for six years (1970-'76) and then a secondary school teacher for six years (1977-'83). I saw how both models — youth club and school — work. My preference is for the former as a structure to assist the learning, growth and development of young people.

From 1983 onwards I have campaigned publicly against the present education system, mainly focussing on the secondary system. I have tried to do so in a constructive way, submitting various papers to the government sponsored education debates during the drawing up of the Education Bill.

*In 1989, I organised a conference on 'Alternatives in Education'. It took place in a tent on the site of St Finian's famous Celtic monastic school in Clonard, Co. Meath. The present **Minister Noel Dempsey** was a young local TD at the time and addressed the conference.*

I now have four young children who are learning and developing without school. I and my family are members of the Home Education Network (H.E.N.). We live on Inis Mór, on the Aran Islands.

CONTENTS

<i>Three Components of a Vision for Education</i>	4
• <i>A Vision for Future Society</i>	
• <i>A Philosophy of the Child or Learner</i>	
• <i>A Pedagogical Approach</i>	
<i>Analysis of Present-day Vision for Education</i>	5
• <i>Present-day Vision for Future Society</i>	
• <i>Present-day Philosophy of Child or Learner</i>	
• <i>Present-day Pedagogical Approach</i>	
<i>My Alternative Vision for Education</i>	8
• <i>My Vision for Future Society</i>	
• <i>My Philosophy of Child or Learner</i>	
• <i>My Pedagogical Approach</i>	
<i>Why I Keep My Children Out of School</i>	11
<i>What I Propose</i>	13
• <i>A Central and Controlling Role for Parents</i>	
• <i>A Supportive Role for the State</i>	
<i>Initial Steps The State Could Take</i>	15
<i>Two Principles on Which to Build</i>	17
<i>Financial Implications</i>	19
<i>Ireland and Other EU States</i>	20
<i>Conclusion</i>	21

THREE COMPONENTS OF A VISION FOR EDUCATION

In order to create a new vision for education in Ireland, I propose that we break the process down into three constituent parts:

- **What we want in the future**
- **How we understand the present**
- **How we imagine we can go from what we have to what we want**

These three components are part of any envisioning process. Applying this analytic tool to education, we might have the following questions:

- **What is the society, new or otherwise, that we want in the future?**
 - **How do we understand the child as the potential subject of this society?**
 - **How can we prepare the child to create or recreate this society?**
- I propose to use this approach to first look at our education system as it is at present, and then to offer my own alternative views, using these three components summarised under the following headings:
 - **Vision for society**
 - **Philosophy of the Child**
 - **Pedagogical approach.**

ANALYSIS OF PRESENT-DAY VISION FOR EDUCATION

Our Present-day Vision for Society

With such an emphasis today on the economy, jobs and income, it seems to me that our vision for our society has become narrowed to materialism. More and more, we seem to be content with the notion that schools and third level colleges are places that prepare people for employment, rather than for life.

When we say our education system is one of the best in the world, this is what we seem to mean — that our schools do a good job in preparing young people to be producers and consumers. We want to be one of the richest countries in the world, with full employment and therefore everybody sharing in those riches. We want our children to grow up to be employable in the highest paid jobs possible for them.

This is a very narrow and a very materialist vision of education, but it is almost totally dominant at present.

Our Present-day Philosophy of the Child or Learner

Looking at the way learning is structured in present-day schools, it is clear to me that we view the child in the same way that we view raw material being processed through a factory system on a conveyor belt.

- The curriculum and the learning process is designed independently of any individual child.
- The child is fed this curriculum, and put through this process, with minimal deference to the child's individual orientation, aptitudes, way of learning or ability to learn.
- The child is assessed, not according to his or her individual achievements in themselves, but in relation to his or her peers within a narrow range of mostly academic subjects.

- This assessment sorts all children into one straight line, with the highest scorers at the top, and the lowest at the bottom.
- The assessment system is similar to quality grading in factories.
- After school or college, the young person is treated as a product ready for the open market with his or her quality labels — Leaving Certificate Points, Third Level certificates, diplomas and degrees — attached.

This is a materialist and market driven view of the young person, a view which is inbuilt in the structure of our education system.

Our Present-day Pedagogical Approach

I am not talking here about the individual approaches of teachers, good or bad, but about the pedagogical structure within which all teachers are forced to operate.

A teacher in a primary or secondary school, in normal circumstances, is forced to teach:

- a specified curriculum
- to a group of between 20 and 30
- children of the one age
- in a classroom.

This institutional and authoritarian structure fits **the ‘mug and jug’ pedagogical approach** but does not fit any of the more enlightened approaches to learning. In the ‘mug and jug’ approach, the ‘mug’ is the learner awaiting being filled up with knowledge by the ‘jug’ who is the teacher.

This is a very inadequate model of how children learn. Because the curriculum and even timetable (by this I mean the number of hours each subject is to be taught per week) is controlled from on high by the Department, **not only**

students, but even teachers, are locked into a certain way of doing things with little room for more enlightened approaches and no room at all for an approach such as Montessori, which encourages the child to follow his or her own curriculum.

These three components need to encompass a much broader range of Vision, Philosophy and Pedagogical Approach.

I would like the State to celebrate real diversity within the education system, and to allow and support many different models and approaches to learning.

MY ALTERNATIVE VISION FOR EDUCATION

My Vision for our Future Society

I want a society for my children where:

- they will find happiness and fulfillment.
- their potential as human and spiritual beings can to be realised at every level
- the world is at peace
- there is participatory democracy
- justice and human rights prevail
- the natural environment is clean and unpolluted
- natural resources are preserved or renewed, so that future generations will have the same or better than we have
- all life forms, and the earth itself, is treated as sacred
- humans have a non-exploitative relationship with the earth and its life-forms
- diversity is valued at every level — in nature and in human culture
- my children will value their own Irish identity and celebrate in their lives the rich Irish traditions and heritage.
- my children, and every child on earth, will have all of their human rights catered for
- they will have enough material things to live life with dignity.

My Philosophy of the Child

I think of my child as a unique creation of the universe with an individual potential and destiny in life which none of us can know in advance or anticipate.

I want to give that child therefore the utmost respect. I want to place that child in an environment where:

- his or her uniqueness and potential will be protected
- he or she will grow and develop healthily in all the areas of his or her possibilities.

I do not want to direct the child in any predefined way other than towards the broad goals of human endeavor — goodness, truth, beauty, love. I do however want to encourage the child to develop the skills and tools for learning.

I want the child's direction in life to develop from within the child, and I want to facilitate and resource that to the best of my ability.

I believe that if my children grow and develop in this way they will not only have the means to provide for themselves and their families, but they will also have the capability of growing healthily to their full potential, contributing fully to life, and achieving happiness.

My Pedagogical Approach

A child cannot learn or develop without an inner desire, either conscious or unconscious, to do so.

A child normally learns to walk and to talk without any formal teaching process. There is an inner dynamism motivating the child in this direction.

In my view, the role of parents, teachers and society in general is to facilitate

this in-built developmental process, which is within every child, so that the child can find all that it needs, in terms of experience, resources, and instructors, to satisfy this inner motivation for learning and development.

For this to happen, **each child must be respected as a unique individual and his or her own interests, abilities, style of learning, and rate of learning catered for.**

This is an approach to education supported by many of the finest of educational theorists, including Maria Montessori, A.S. Neill, Ivan Illich, John Holt, Paulo Freire and others. It is not supported in any way by the present State system.

WHY I KEEP MY CHILDREN OUT OF SCHOOL

My wife and I have agreed that we will not send our children to school. Instead, we facilitate their learning and development outside the formal school system, as is our right according to the Irish Constitution.

I keep my children out of school because the present system of education is alien to my views at every level. Far from being a system unique to Ireland, it is a system that is being promoted all over the developed and developing world. Its vision for society, philosophy of the child and pedagogical approach is the same everywhere. Because of this, I must resist its global dominance, not just for the sake of my own children, but for the sake of children everywhere.

Whether my children fitted well into school or not, I believe they would be damaged by being institutionalised into the system. This institutionalisation includes the imposition of:

- **an authoritarian structure**
- **compulsory subjects**
- **pre-selected teachers**
- **fixed content of schooling**
- **fixed curricula**
- **fixed timetables**
- **uniforms**
- **rules and regulations**
- **little or no freedom of choice**

They could also be damaged by:

- **bad teachers**
- **bullying**
- **failure to achieve goals set by others**

While I keep my children at home, I believe they benefit enormously from the involvement of wider society, and in particular the local community, in their learning and development. This happens at present in a non-institutional way because we parents in the local community are active in organising activities for children outside of school – all types of sport, classes, and events.

If there was no school, I believe these same parents would organise everything for the children, and do so extremely well. This is the model I propose.

WHAT I PROPOSE

I propose a model of learning and development for children of primary and secondary age, where the parents are in control.

In particular, I propose the following:

A Central and Controlling Role for Parents

- The hiring and firing of teachers will be done by groups of parents within the local community. This will control the quality of teachers, require them to respond to the needs of the local community, and allow the market to decide what teachers get work and what teachers don't.
- The local community of parents, with the help of teachers, will also decide the content. What is made available to children will inevitably include skills based programmes, knowledge based programmes, and programmes that offer broad holistic experiences (e.g. travel, dramatic and musical productions, projects, events).
- Parents will be free to choose programmes suited to their individual children's needs and will be under no obligation to send their children to any programme.

A Supportive Role for the State

The State will provide:

- **material facilities and resources** for learning and development, to include what is presently available in most schools and communities — spaces and furnishings suitable for gathering small or large numbers in one place; specially equipped rooms such as computer rooms, laboratories, gymnasias, kitchens, libraries, and workshops. **What we call school buildings at present will become 'resource centres for human**

learning and development’.

- **training** for people to become teachers, facilitators, administrators and caretakers.
- **a system of financial support**, for the human resources and for the material resources. The State will directly pay salaries or will grant-aid parents for the hiring of human resources. It will finance the material resources through State ownership or through grants to parents.
- **opportunities for young people to assess their own achievements** by assisting in the establishment of fixed levels of achievement in an unlimited range of areas of learning or development, where these are measurable.
- **objective examinations or tests** to assess these levels of achievement.
- **for the monitoring of entry requirements** for all institutes of learning (third level colleges in particular) and the requirements for all job applications, to ensure that there is no discrimination against the applicant and that the requirements are reasonable for the course or job being applied for. The State will be the protector of the young applicant in these areas.
- **non-discriminatory financial support for all reasonable forms of learning, styles of teaching, and curricula, without favour.** Where the State has a particular stance, it will make its views and interests known, and thereby attempt to influence public opinion in a democratic way, without recourse to legal measures, except where human rights are concerned.

INITIAL STEPS THE STATE COULD TAKE

The State could begin to:

- **release its control over the curriculum**, which at present leaves little or no room for schools or teachers to manoeuvre, and which controls the content of classroom activity down to the minutest detail.
- **concentrate on providing curricular options**, allowing schools and teachers to choose a pre-packaged curriculum that suited them, or to create their own.
- **support diversification**, financially supporting initiatives that come from schools and parents themselves, and loosening the tight grip of control that it maintains. The State already does this in supporting the Transition Year. **All of school could be organised in the same way as the Transition Year.**
- **support equally all reasonable attempts by parents to provide learning and development opportunities for their children**, instead of just supporting mainstream and government controlled schools. This should include private schools, alternative schools and home learning. It could also include 'grind' schools, individual 'grinds', classes and tutorials, and extra curricular learning and development activities. **The State could do this by offering grants and tax relief to parents.** This should cover not just tuition but also books and other material resources. By doing so, the State would begin to put control back into the hands of parents, where it belongs. It would also level the playing field between parents who are wealthy and parents who are not.
- **broaden its role in providing assessment.** Its role is at present limited to that of the Junior and Leaving Certificate. These examinations channel all students into a narrow funnel. The State could take the view that it valued all reasonable achievements of young people, and could give expression to this by making efforts to provide objective standards and levels to which young people could

aspire in a diverse and unlimited range of areas — academic, linguistic, artistic, manual skills, sport, etc.. The State could also provide, where necessary, the opportunities for assessment in these areas, leaving it to the young person to decide when he or she was ready to take this assessment. This would get rid of the Junior and Leaving Certificate examinations, encouraging young people instead to develop their own broad portfolio of achievements, at their own pace and in their own time.

- **monitor and correct the discriminatory and unfair use of the Leaving Certificate Points system** in giving access to third level courses and to employment. For example, a young person who wants to become a medical doctor is accepted to third level medicine solely on the points they have attained in the Leaving Certificate. This is not an objective test of the young person's suitability for medicine, but a test which puts him or her in a pecking order of academic achievement. It is not a true measure of the young person's suitability for medicine, takes no account of non-academic requirements, and excludes many potentially suitable candidates who do not reach the required arbitrary level of points. In the case of applications for employment, the Government or its agency needs to be vigilant against such discrimination as: "Apprentice hairdresser required. Only those with Leaving Certificate will be considered." **I suggest that the Government set up an agency to monitor and correct these abuses.**

TWO PRINCIPLES ON WHICH TO BUILD

The Irish Constitution and the Easter Proclamation of 1916 give us two fundamental principles on which we can build an exciting future in relation to children and their learning and development. These two principles are:

- **that parents are the primary educators of their children¹**
- **that the State will cherish all the children of the nation equally²**

In the present education system in Ireland, **neither of these principles are visible in action.** Parents, who deliver their children over to the State system, have little or no role within that system. Parents who try to have a greater role in their children's education by keeping them out of the State system, get little or no support from the State, and in fact get penalised because their taxes go to support the State system.

The majority of parents are not, in reality, the primary educators of their children, and the State does not cherish all of the children equally because it supports only some of them.

Yet, parents who send their children to private schools, politicians among them, clearly believe that their children will do better this way. In the case of home-schooling, study after study in a number of countries has established that the average home-schooled child does better, in all the measurable academic goals, and in other non-academic goals, than the average normal school goer³.

It is also clear that, where parents have the money and motivation for providing additional opportunities for their children outside of school, such as

¹ Irish Constitution, article 42:1-2.

² Easter Proclamation.

³ See, for example, "The Academic Achievement and Affective Development of Home-schooled Children" by Brian D. Ray and John Wartes in *Home Schooling: Political, Historical and Pedagogical Perspectives*. Ablex Publishing, Norwood, NJ, 1992.

grinds, private classes, and extra-curricular activities, these children will do better in these areas.

The State could cherish all of the children equally in a practical way by giving equal financial support to all reasonable forms of learning opportunity, whether inside or outside a school structure, and in this way level the playing field for all.

Financial Implications

My proposals may seem to imply an inordinate amount of money being spent by the State, but I disagree.

At present there is huge wastage in the system because:

- many children who go to school are bored or unhappy, and therefore are not making the progress they could make
- teachers and pupils lose large amounts of potentially useful time by having to deal with disruptive children in the classroom who have no choice but to be there
- the majority of children could spend much more time on their own in self-directed learning. Nowadays, the opportunities for this are even greater than before, with computer and internet aided learning
- there are teachers in almost every school who were never good at their job, or who are now tired, burned out or disillusioned and no longer teach well. Yet the State continues to pay them and the children continue to suffer them.

Also, under my proposals, parents will have a greatly increased role in their childrens' education, at no cost to the State.

A more flexible and diverse approach to learning and development will distribute the available resources more efficiently and will, in my view, give a much higher return.

IRELAND AND OTHER EU STATES

There are a number of States within the EU that **forbid by law the home education of children** (e.g. France and Germany), and others that will only allow it where one or both of the parents are qualified teachers (e.g. the United Kingdom). In my view, this is a denial of a human right — the right of parents to be the primary educators.

Ireland has the opportunity to champion this right for the sake of all children in the world. It can do so by building a system of education that provides the opportunity for parents to be fully involved and in control of their children's learning and development.

Ireland, through its Constitution, has the opportunity to:

- **champion the right of parents to be the primary educators of their children, within the EU and throughout the whole world**
- **confront the dominant model of education being promoted throughout the world**
- **present an alternative model of education that is flexible, celebrates diversity, and is parent controlled**

CONCLUSION

I have proposed a radical change to the way our society facilitates the learning and development of children. There are two fundamentals to this proposal:

that the State:

- **recognises, in a practical and supportive way, that parents are the primary educators of their children, as is enshrined in the Irish Constitution**
- **cherishes all of the children equally by giving financial support equally to all reasonable forms of learning and development, both inside and outside of schools, chosen by parents for their children.**

If my proposals are enacted, parents within the local community will become central in controlling the content and structure of their children's learning and development. The State will have a supportive rather than a controlling role in this.

In my view, this system will provide the best results for parents, for the State, and even for those with a materialist perspective.

Dara Molloy, Mainistir, Inis Mór, Arainn, Co. na Gaillimhe.
Tel. 099-61245. Fax: 099-61968. E-mail: daramolloy@iol.ie
Web site: www.iolfree.ie/~daramolloy

February 2004.