



General Teaching Council  
for Northern Ireland

Annual Public Lecture  
General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland

## **Realizing Our Potential**

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# Realizing Our Potential

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I feel very privileged to be here this evening, offering the General Teaching Council's 2010 Public Lecture. It is not a task I take lightly and I must confess it has given me sleepless nights over the past couple of months as I was writing it. Tonight's talk is very probably the 20<sup>th</sup> or 30<sup>th</sup> draft - I kid you not!

What, you might ask, would cause such a re-writing? – something momentous surely? Well, no. Not really. I have been more concerned to do a good job, to make it a good experience for everyone who has taken the time to come this evening – to repay the GTC for their confidence in me having something worthwhile to say. And I think I have.

But the truth is that my topic is a difficult one: Realizing Our Potential.

I am referring to the capacity of our education system to ensure that we give every person, from child to adult, every opportunity and facility to realize their potential – to be the best that they can be and to succeed in their chosen walks of life. It's a tall order, full of challenges – challenges that arise from a variety of sources.

In my talk this evening I intend to address some of these challenges in the school sector – not, I hasten to add, from a position of all-knowing certainty – more from a position of a little bit of knowledge probably being a dangerous thing! Having been in the education business for almost 30 years I have learned a bit about how we do things, and about things we should be able to do better.

During that 30 years, I have visited schools and educational establishments all over the world; in all the usual places like the US, Canada and Australia; in almost every country in Europe: France, Denmark, Greece, Germany, Italy, Austria, Belgium, Portugal and Spain; in the Far East in China and Japan; in the Middle East in Jordan, Dubai, Qatar and Saudi Arabia; and in a variety of other small nation states such as Cuba, Jamaica, Albania and Barbados. Through my students, my research and my various academic responsibilities I can count an even wider circle of engagement in South America, India, South Africa, Pakistan, Taiwan, Korea, Uganda and Nigeria.

Big or small, there is more in common across these nations than many people might think. Common to all of them are concerned parents, concerned legislators, concerned educationalists – all with the desire for every young person to thrive and flourish. Less common among them are things we arguably take for granted: a highly trained teaching profession, high quality teachers, a highly resourced education system – to name but a few. So why do I – and I don't think I am alone in this – why do I think we are not fulfilling our potential?

Well I guess that is the essence of my talk. Perhaps it is worth pausing for a moment to give a health warning. Some of the challenges I intend to address will be old hat for many of you, giving rise to that sinking feeling of "Oh dear, here we go again"! Some will be new to many others – raising not just eyebrows but questions – where does that come from? And some will even be outrageous to some of you. Regrettably I am no respecter of sacred cows and it occurred to me early in this process that I may rattle a few cages tonight. Already I can hear tomorrow's headlines as my talk addresses several ways in which we can improve the chances of Realizing Our Potential. These include well rehearsed themes around leadership and perhaps less well addressed aspects of the experience of schooling.

But before I go on, I need to reinforce the health warning! This is the John Gardner view of the world. Granted, I think it is well informed by research, theory and experience of practice but I must dissociate my sponsors and of course you, my audience, from any ownership of it!

So let me begin with a few questions. What is an education system for? What are its essential purposes? Why do we pay our taxes to provide publicly funded education for all?

Well, universal education has a long history on these islands. In England and Wales it was heralded by the Elementary Education Act of 1870<sup>1</sup>, with the Government proposing to:

*... place an elementary school wherever there is a child to be taught, whether of rich or poor parents; and it will compel every parent and guardian of a child to have it taught, at least, the rudiments of education, and that without reference to any religious creed or persuasion*

Perhaps not surprisingly, however, wrangling between the various interest groups in relation to religious education meant that it was not until 1892 that there was a similar Education Act for Ireland. Even then, though, it was only for 75 days of compulsory education per year for children – and only in cities, not in rural areas. The matters that were deemed to be the objectives of the government, and which had formed part of the focus for school inspectors since 1836<sup>2</sup>, were to:

- promote the general intelligence and good conduct of the poorer classes of this country;
- allay animosities, and to cultivate good feelings between the parties that may have been at variance;
- introduce as much of religious instruction as can be done without exciting jealousy and contention, and hostile feeling, either towards government and [sic] towards one another.

It is now some 174 years later and I wonder what the architects of these noble objectives might think of the impact they have had! Clearly there is still some jealousy, contention and hostility around!

Today we have a more thoroughgoing approach to what our education system has to do. I am reasonably sure that everyone here would sign up to roughly the same aspirations for our education system that every child should:

- be prepared for independent living;;
- develop a healthy and positive disposition to life;
- contribute to their community and society;
- be helped to develop to their full potential.

The 2006<sup>3</sup> **Our Children and Young People** vision adds a couple of others, for example experiencing economic and environmental wellbeing, and having their rights respected. Another one is “Enjoying, learning and achieving”.

Many teachers might reflect on these aspirations and say “Yes, that is what we do”. Indeed they might add “... and we do it well”.

Some of them may harbour doubts though: “Yes, that’s what we try to do but ...”

Still others might say:”If we get through to Friday without calling the police or the fire brigade, it’s a good week!”

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<sup>1</sup> Elementary Education Act, 1870 (England and Wales)

[http://www.archive.org/stream/elementaryeducat00greauoft/elementaryeducat00greauoft\\_djvu.txt](http://www.archive.org/stream/elementaryeducat00greauoft/elementaryeducat00greauoft_djvu.txt)

<sup>2</sup> Hyland, A. and Milne, K., (1987) (Eds) Irish Educational Documents, Church of Ireland College of Education, Dublin: Rathmines

<sup>3</sup> Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge, OFMDFM (2006) <http://www.allchildrenni.gov.uk/tenyearstrategychildren1.pdf>

Maybe some eyebrows will be raised at this. But the fact is that we do have schools that are not good; indeed they may even be described as 'bad' – 'bad' because the school is disrupted by the behaviour of pupils perhaps

– or, if I may put it a bit more controversially, perhaps they are 'bad' because the school is disrupting the education of the pupils.

The fact is that schools within the same catchment area, with the same range of pupils and social backgrounds, can perform quite differently in the extent to which they enable their pupils to succeed. The causes of such disparities do not necessarily lie with the children or their parents, the time-honoured excuses for poor school performance.

Another, more likely explanation may be found in the quality of leadership and management in poorly performing schools. Successive Chief Inspectors' reports<sup>4</sup> have highlighted the 'not good enough' condition of a significant proportion of our schools:

- 2002-04 Report: leadership of the principal is 'not good enough' in 16% of inspected post-primary and 'ineffective' in a minority (defined as being between 10-29%) of primary schools.
- 2004-06 Report: with a new focus on leadership and management, inspection highlighted an increasing proportion of 'not good enough' schools; 15% of primary and almost 33% of post-primary with shortcomings in leadership.
- 2006-08 Report: leadership and management 'needed to improve' in 25% of inspected primary and post-primary schools, and was 'inadequate or unsatisfactory' in 10% of post-primary schools (covering potentially 15,000<sup>5</sup> of our children).

We cannot but be filled with sadness whenever we think of all those children who are not given a decent chance – and for the beleaguered teachers and principals who try to cope with the problems of a school in difficulty. There may be things that could be done and that are not done by external agencies - I'm thinking of the adequacy of resources, individual support for pupils and funding, for example. But when all things are equal some schools thrive and some do not. For those that do not, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the buck stops with leadership and management.

Many of us here will be familiar with such schools. I have experience of a number of them. They are characterized by a sense of barely controlled chaos, the teachers harassed and unhappy. The majority of pupils go about in keeping their head down – afraid of fellow pupils who are exceptionally disruptive, maybe even violent. But sometimes they are also afraid of the school itself and the often draconian measures used by some of the teachers to try to assert authority.

Let me illustrate the mayhem that is possible with an example of a visit I remember to one such school. I met the headteacher in the long driveway, picking up litter. Bravo! I thought – leading by example. Except no-one was looking – there was no-one there. Further into the school proper, I was driving among throngs of pupils, looking for a car-parking spot. I couldn't help noticing several police cars and a fire-engine. I parked and got out of my car, and as I turned to lock it I heard the words – loud and clear – 'he's a cop'! As I walked somewhat nervously towards the entrance I took in a scene that was heaving with tension, teachers scurrying here and there, pupils occasionally jeering and cheering but all of them milling around aimlessly, and the smell of burning was still fresh in the air. I thought again of the principal, down the driveway, picking up litter. A serious case of "I'm the headteacher- Get me outta here!"

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<sup>4</sup> These are available at [www.etini.gov.uk/](http://www.etini.gov.uk/)

<sup>5</sup> If these schools held 10% of the total post-primary schools' pupils ([www.deni.gov.uk](http://www.deni.gov.uk))

Education is society's way of creating and maintaining itself and mostly, I think it's fair to say, we get it right. However, for many thousands of children EVERY YEAR, we get it wrong. Take for example our perennial 1,000 or so pupils who spend 12 years in schools and leave with absolutely no qualifications at all. And when society gets it very wrong, we find its legacy in our jails, young offenders' centres, underage pregnancy statistics, substance abuse and youth suicides.

But before anyone marches out accusing me of blaming schools for everything bad in our society, let me be clear- I am not. I have no illusions about the many influences and pressures that modern society brings to bear on our children. And I fully appreciate that even when schooling does not help our children to thrive; it is rarely because the teachers and headteachers do not care. When it happens it is more likely because the circumstances are beyond the capabilities of the people concerned. That said, however, I do believe our education system – including schools, headteachers and teachers – could do better.

So where am I going with all this? There are several aspects of our system that I would like to address. I am not going to blind you all with science and research, and as I said at the beginning, there may be little of what I say that will be new to you.

However, some of the things I am going to say will cause some surprise – so much so that I think I will write the headlines before they get written tomorrow.

Let me start with a Leadership theme. I am going to be a bit controversial here and tomorrow you might see the following headline:

### **Loony Professor Says Sack All Headteachers!**

Well of course I am not saying that but I do have a major concern about leadership.

According to successive Chief Inspectors' reports, we continue to have a significant rump of schools with poor leadership and management. It could be as many as 30% of schools and in my view that is disastrous. Poor leadership has a litany of cascading effects. It can hinder improvement, cause disaffection among pupils and teachers, depress pupil performance and undermine pupils' life-chances.

And what is my remedy? First, I must emphasize that poor leadership is a complex phenomenon and I have no simple answer. But there are a number of changes to our system that have potential to bring in significant improvements in the medium to long-term. The first is to introduce fixed contracts for school principals. Around the world, five years is a common term of office before moving to a new school.

Unless there is good reason to retain the existing headteacher, this type of system offers each school the regular opportunity for an injection of new ideas and renewed purpose. If a school leader is not cutting the mustard, and their school is not performing at the level expected, then the system should offer them immediate support. This might include the opportunity to undertake training and shadow more successful headteachers - before the five years is up; and before becoming available for a new posting.

But before the howls of protest begin in earnest, I also believe we should be paying our principals a lot more. The breadth of their responsibilities is huge, and the cost of failure is felt by individual children, their parents and teachers – and ultimately society. And research<sup>6</sup> clearly identifies the overburdened role, poor support and lack of rewards as key factors in making headship unattractive. Something has to give.

Distributed management is one approach to ease the burden. But a separate administration must also be an option; someone else to run the school's administrative affairs while the

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<sup>6</sup> Pont, B., Nusche, D. and Moorman, H. (2008) Improving School Leadership, Volume 1, OECD [www.sourceoecd.org/education/9789264044678](http://www.sourceoecd.org/education/9789264044678)

'head teacher' manages the learning environment, assessment and professional development of staff. This 'school manager' would have joint management responsibility with the 'head teacher'. Such a model is possible without legislative change in Northern Ireland, but clearly new funding arrangements would be needed to support these management structures in schools.

While I am on a radical tack I might as well go the whole hog. One of the most powerful interventions that we have in helping schools to review and improve their activities is the inspection process. But it could be better. The current model does not make sense to me if we want objective and valid evaluations of schools when, in the large majority of cases, everything is prepared and contrived in advance of the inspectors' visit.

I have to say that I consider that the majority of inspections should be un-announced.

It is not that I think inspectors should be sneaking around, trying to catch people out. Quite the opposite. It is about getting as true a reflection of the pupils' normal schooling experience as possible – all the better for commending good practice and suggesting improvements where necessary. It is also a good way of preventing the complacency that often sets in between conventional visits.

The worry, of course, is that the inspectors will not fully appreciate a school's special circumstances – and be in no doubt, my experience is that every school is special and different. These circumstances will relate to such matters as the pupils' backgrounds, motivation, parental support, the resources available to the school (including the expertise and competence of the human resources – the teachers) and the quality of accommodation.

Credit must be given where credit is due but everyone fears criticism and if it is not constructive and carried out sensitively, its impact can be seriously counter-productive. Even way back in 1836, the inspection instructions made no bones about the attitudes the inspectors should have in their role:

*"In his [sic] intercourse with the teachers, he will treat them with the most perfect kindness and respect, apprizing them privately of what he may see as defective, and noting it to be reported to the Board, but by no means addressing them authoritatively, or animadverting upon their conduct in the hearing of the scholars"*

But of course it is not just personal sensitivities that are vulnerable. A whole range of professional and reputational issues are at stake for the teachers and pupils, and the leadership and management of the school. However, a school that is committed to 'walking the talk' has nothing to fear. A constant aspiration for good practice and improvement is always going to be a strong platform for confidence in what a school does.

And that takes me to my next headline:

### **Are They Having a Laugh? They Should Be! Says Loopy Boffin**

Again, I think they've missed my point!

What I would argue is that schools are not happy enough. Not enough effort is being put into making the whole school experience enjoyable, motivating and interesting. I do not mean schools should be circus acts or comedy clubs. I mean that there needs to be a deliberate, continuous effort on the part of all concerned to make schools happy places – places children and young people want to go to.

Yes, I know there are many schools in which, according to inspection reports, there are good relationships between staff and pupils. But that is not quite the same as the feel-good factor that derives from observing genuinely happy and fully engaged children.

Primary schools tend to have the edge on this – they do not have teenagers with all their propensities for sulking and rebelliousness. But I have been in post-primary schools where the atmosphere is really positive – pupils engaging with learning, pupils wanting to learn.

Unfortunately most of these schools were not in Northern Ireland. Invariably, ‘good’ schools here are often considered to be good because behaviour is good, not necessarily because the pupils are happy to be there. Even when a school is manifestly succeeding, many pupils may still see the whole enterprise as a chore.

Indeed there is research that suggests our children may be at the low end of pupil ‘happiness’ ratings in the OECD. If we consider Northern Ireland to be somewhere between England and the Republic (I hope I am being politically correct here!) then the proportion of our children who ‘like school a lot’ may lie between 19% (England – 16<sup>th</sup>/21 OECD countries) and 22% (RoI – 10<sup>th</sup>/21)<sup>7</sup>.

If these figures are valid, the question is begged: *Should we be satisfied with only one-in-five of our pupils being happy in school?*

The top ratings were found in Norway: 39%, Austria: 36% and Netherlands 34%. And where was Finland, the top performing country in a number of educational outcome measures? Bottom, with 8%! But clearly we must not try to emulate the well-known success of Finland’s education system by reducing the proportion of our happy pupils to single figures!

I mentioned that most of the really ‘happy’ schools I have been in were not in Northern Ireland. That doesn’t mean that our schools are desperately unhappy places; it is a matter of degree. In my own work with colleagues at Queen’s, however, pupils have recently expressed their dissatisfaction with school life in no uncertain terms. For example, here is a selection of pupil representations of their school experience:

[several slides]

So my argument is this – if pupils are happy in their work, their work will be more fulfilling and the chances of realizing their potential will be much increased. So let us deliberately and continuously work to make schools happier places. One way to achieve this leads to my next theme: Respecting the Person.

Or as tomorrow’s headline might have it:

### **Let the Kids Run Schools, Says Numpty Don!**

Oh dear! How do they get things so mixed up?

No, I am not arguing for a pupil take-over of schools, but I am arguing for a much greater role for them in their schooling and education. It is only right; indeed it is enshrined in the European Convention on the Rights of the Child, that something that is so influential on children’s lives should be subject to their meaningful participation and consultation. The following statement from the 2004-06 Chief Inspector’s Report shows I am not alone in this:

*It is our view that the leaders and managers could learn much about the quality of their provision by listening more often and more carefully to what young people have to say<sup>8</sup>*

Too often and in too many schools, ‘pastoral care’ has its original rustic meaning, that is, the shepherding of sheep – with all the allusions of keeping the pupils in order, uniform in

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<sup>7</sup> UNICEF (2007) Child poverty in perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries. UNICEF: Innocenti Research Centre, Florence [http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/rc7\\_eng.pdf](http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/rc7_eng.pdf) (use with caution - data from 2000-01 and with problematic sampling for England)

<sup>8</sup> Chief Inspector’s Report 2004-06 p3, [www.etini.gov.uk/](http://www.etini.gov.uk/)

appearance, compliant and deferential in manner. School-pupil relationships echo the traditional rhetoric:

- *“Speak when you are spoken to!”*
- *“We know best”*
- *“Everything we do is for your own good”*
- *“You are too young to understand!”*

To progress to fully Realizing Our Potential, we need a radical shift from such old notions.

We need to listen to and respect pupils, we need to learn from them and improve our practice. We need to see every child as an individual person, with opinions and contributions that matter. We must not make assumptions about their capacity to learn and achieve based on their age, their background, where they live, their siblings, their parents or their social skills. Schools and teachers must always remember that society expects them to facilitate the fulfilment of pupils’ potential. Schools must be at the service of pupils, not vice versa.

And this takes me to my next theme, with tomorrow’s likely headline:

### **Potty Professor Tells Schools: Teaching Doesn’t Matter!**

Now how do I get out of this one?

You see, what I want to argue is that we spend too much time and effort worrying and talking about teaching. If you are in the company of teachers for any length of time, and they are talking about education, it will be about teaching: how 3B were behaving all week, how this topic needs to be taught, how best to prepare reports for parents. They might talk about the curriculum, about tests and assessments, about field trips, about new books, about using computers, about selection, about the ESA ... etc

So what is missing?

Unfortunately, the word I suggest you will not hear, or not hear a lot, is: ‘LEARNING’.

Yet ‘learning’, compared to ‘teaching’, is by far the more important activity. Teaching does not always lead to learning

And if teaching does not lead to learning, it is clearly not achieving its purpose. Teaching doesn’t matter anywhere near as much as learning.

Why do I say that? For the following reasons. If we constantly frame our activities in terms of the tools we use, we may not give sufficient attention to the objective of our activities. If teachers reflect primarily on their teaching, they may not reflect sufficiently on the learners’ learning.

The problem of mis-directed focus strays into other aspects of teaching that also have the potential for serious detriment to learners’ progress. One of these is target-setting.

The rationale for target-setting is that the targets are designed to support learning by prompting improvement and raising standards. But if teachers and schools concentrate too much on achieving the targets, that is, on the tools of improvement, they run the risk of losing sight of the purpose, and that is helping pupils to learn and realize their potential. And there is plenty of evidence that it happens.

Under the rigours of the **No Child Left Behind** (NCLB) policy in the US, schools have been shown to band their pupils into three groups: those who definitely will make the target grade, those who might make the target grade and those who will definitely not make the target grade. The individual needs of pupils are lost in a process that sees resources directed towards those who might make the targets and thereby improve the school’s performance.

Much less effort is aimed at those who can definitely get there or those who definitely cannot. These pupils do not 'add value'.

Similar emphasis on the tools over the outcomes is manifesting itself in England's **Contextual Value Added (CVA)** system. In theory CVA is a good indicator of how well a school is performing in terms of pupil outcomes. It takes in a variety of influencing factors such as pupils' prior attainment, special needs, first language and ethnicity, children 'in care', free school meal entitlements and levels of deprivation. In practice it may suffer from the same targeting problems as NCLB.

Or to put it another way, CVA may (if it has not already) succumb to Goodhart's Law<sup>9</sup>. Once a measure is used to regulate a process, it becomes the target itself.

In CVA terms, schools quickly adopt a strategic approach, seeking to optimize their CVA scores and avoid the attention of the authorities for '*not showing sufficient improvement*'. Individual learning needs become a secondary concern, especially for those outside the primary target groups. There is growing evidence that Northern Ireland schools are also playing these tactical games with target setting and, according to the **Every School a Good School** policy, we will soon have our own CVA process.

And now for the final section of my talk, here is the headline:

### **Internationally Renowned Professor Knocks Selection Critics for Six!**

There's something I particularly like about this headline – I think it is the 'internationally renowned' bit!

Anyway, I could not be in front of you tonight without getting into the Selection debate. Just what is all the fuss about? For many people it's really very simple, is it not? Over time I have heard various viewpoints expressed and I have collected here six quotes designed to demolish the anti-selection brigade:

First there is the '**Doesn't hurt a bit**' argument:

*"... the emotional trauma that these children go through is hyped-up and anecdotal. I had four children that did the 11-plus and none of them suffered emotional trauma"* – a politician

Then there is the "**Whoopee, it's a bargain**" view:

*"It's brilliant living in Northern Ireland. Jonathan is getting an academic education that would cost me £12,000 a year in London. Here the tax-payer pays it for me. Why would you ever want to change it?"* – a university lecturer

And the "**character building**" view:

*"Yes, there were times when Susan became very anxious; indeed we had to take her to the doctor a couple of times. But in the end it was good for her – she will face the world as a stronger person"* – a relieved parent

Don't forget the "**close escape**":

*"Without selection, Zach would have to go to school with children who are completely different to him: unruly, not very smart and with poor hygiene. The school near us even has children of paramilitaries in it"* – a happy parent

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<sup>9</sup> Charles Goodhart was chief advisor to the Bank of England in 1998 when he formulated the 'law': *Any observed statistical regularity will tend to collapse once pressure is placed upon it for control purposes.*

And “**who dares challenge the scriptures**”?

*“The good book teaches us that those who make profit from their investments should be rewarded. Those who are evil and lazy should be cast aside. I’m not saying that anyone who fails the 11-plus is necessarily evil or lazy, but they clearly do not have the same potential as those who pass” – a contented pastor*

And finally there are the “**great expectations**”:

*“Look, as a P1 teacher you know the score. You can tell straightaway, from the very first day they come into the school. Sometimes you know their family: their mother, brothers and sisters - and father, if they have one. But even when you don’t, the poor vocabulary and social skills tell you there’s nothing much you can do. Selection simply postpones the inevitable.” – a P1 teacher*

If I was to add a seventh it would be my personal favourite: the Life of Brian version:

*“It’s not the Selection; it’s just a naughty test!”*

When the 11-plus was first introduced in 1947, approximately 1-in-5 pupils were enrolled in grammar school. The figures today<sup>10</sup> are worth examining (Table 1):

Table 1: Enrolments and Free School Meal Entitlements 2000/01 and 2009/10

<b>Number of Pupils Enrolled</b>					
School Type	2000/01	%Total	2009/10	%Total	Change in Total (%)
<b>All Ability</b>	<b>92,979</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>85,315</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>-7,664 (8)</b>
<b>Selective</b>	<b>62,574</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>62,444</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>-130 (0)</b>
<b>Total Secondary</b>	155,553		147,759		-7,794 (5)
<b>All Schools</b>	348,065		322,713		-25,352 (7)

<b>Entitlement to Free School Meals (%)</b>				
School Type	2000/01	Ratio	2009/10	Ratio
<b>All Ability</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>3.9:1</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>4.3:1</b>
<b>Selective</b>	<b>8</b>		<b>6</b>	
<b>All Schools</b>	22		18	

By 2000/01, selective schools were enrolling 40% of all secondary level pupils. Now, nine years later, it is 42%. An important factor to be considered is the fall of pupil numbers overall: some 25,000 since 2000/01, with approximately 8,000 of the reduction already having been experienced in 2009 in enrolments to post-primary schools. The number enrolled in selective schools has barely changed while all ability schools have seen a fall of 8%, that is, most of the 8,000.

<sup>10</sup> Figures from DENI Statistics, [www.deni.gov.uk](http://www.deni.gov.uk)

Today, 42% of all secondary-level pupils are in selective schools. In anyone's language it is not so much selectivity as a simple division of society into two almost equal halves. And if the decline in overall numbers continues, the prospect of 50:50 is not far off.

In effect, we are presiding over a system that is dividing society straight down the middle.

In some people's minds it is a natural and desirable situation: the doctors, teachers, lawyers this way – the manual types that way; those that have, this way - those who have not, that way; my kind of people this way – the others that way.

To those who are not blinded by vested self-interests and shameful social prejudices, the situation is disgraceful and ultimately counter-productive.

How can we expect to break out of the doldrums of public sector dependency, archaic politics and conforming mediocrity if one half of our society is telling the other that their children are not quite good enough and must be spared an academic education. How can all children realize their potential if we tell half of them at 11 years of age that they have already failed?

Aside from the minority living within non-selective areas, children in great swathes of disadvantaged urban and rural areas may simply be written off.

Why? Perhaps because their parents have no aspirations for them.

- or worse, much worse – perhaps because their primary schools and teachers have no aspirations for them.

As we get older, selection becomes a fact of life, and mostly for sensible reasons; for example, admissions to university courses or in applications for jobs.

But selection at 11 years of age in Northern Ireland is blatantly a tool for deliberate social division.

It has no educational rationale and should have no place in a forward-looking society that wishes to ensure all children realize their full potential.

On that final note, I will now finish up by summarizing the Gardner plan for Realizing Our Potential.

First and foremost we must energize school leadership by:

1. Introducing fixed term contracts for headteachers!
2. Increasing headteacher salaries!
3. Making un-announced inspections the norm!

Next we should ensure our children want to learn. We should:

4. Make all schools happy places!
5. Involve pupils in all aspects of schooling!
6. Make 'learning' an everyday topic of discussion!

Finally, we should ensure society's investment in education is used to ensure all children can realize their potential. We should:

7. Stop selection at 11!

## Thank You