

Mr Ian Gallacher, Dip. Ed.
Former Headmaster,
Honicknowle County
Secondary School,
now working as a
freelance writer

"There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into an abyss of in-justice where they experience the bleakness of corroding despair."

Martin Luther King

I count myself a third generation Irishman, and pessimistic to boot.

My pessimism is not about the attitudes of the young people I come into contact with, or about their morals, or their behaviour in school. Indeed, I find them to be not very much different to the youngsters of twenty years ago. In the main, they manage, school day by school day, to sustain the difficult switch from what may be a 'sophisticated' adolescent life style back to the schoolgirl or schoolboy image, and I admire them for it.

The root of my pessimism is my fear of our post industrial technology, and my vision of the world it may create. If we are in truth going to see a world where paid employment is for a substantial number a minimal experience, where many may lead lives without significant employment, then I am despondent.

Douglas Hamblin of University College, Swansea, foresees an increasingly divisive society in which prejudice and mutual antagonism develops between three groups:

- "a) Those who have a job which is essential for the creation of wealth.
- "b) Those who have a job which is at least partly 'created'. Such jobs may carry connotations of inferiority and artificiality.
- "c) Those who do not have a job and are not likely to ever have one. This group will not be restricted to the disadvantaged and less able."

Crude forms of identity by belonging to certain groups rather than identity by selfawareness may operate. Divisiveness will be accentuated by demographic changes in which a larger geriatric population has to be supported as we approach the 'nineties'.

University lecturers are not omniscient, but even a superficial examination of our society must underline his comments. One thinks of the Bristol riot, the physical attitudes adopted by many pickets in the recent miners' strike, the behaviour of many young football supporters - indeed, the eager tolerance of certain forms of tantrum on Centre Court at Wimbledon! The list is depressingly long.

Careers Officers working with young people are now beginning to express their concerns about 'compound unemployment'. This is a pattern of young unemployed sinking into the family background of unemployment - with ready resignation.

If the education service is to play its part in attempting to grapple with these problems, then it must have three things. These are - sufficient finance, commitment and imaginative backing from central government/s, and staff of the right calibre. I see hope in meeting the latter condition. The difficult job market and the drop in child population have allowed a start to be made in improving teacher quality, and not before time. There have been too many of us in the profession, heads and assistant teachers alike, who have lacked the vital ingredients - imagination and the ability to communicate with young people.

It is far easier to highlight problems than to find answers. Indeed, it is quite unrealistic to expect schools to shoulder the whole burden of preparing young people for the rapidly changing world. Nevertheless the stark fact remains that in the month of October 1984, 40% of young school leavers were either unemployed, or on Youth Training Schemes. Many face considerable spells without work. Have we done our best to ensure through the attitudes we have fostered, through the curriculum we have devised and are now re-examining, that we have prepared our youngsters as best we can for these uncertainties? I am not sure that we have. There are glimmerings of hope, though. The personal, social and moral education courses now taught in most of our secondary schools are attempting to assist teenagers in developing their personal resources. Pupil profiling offers a young person the opportunity to take away from school a 'portfolio' of successes. These are successes in fields that are not examination based - and such a scheme at last gives recognition to the fact that examination results may not tell us much more about a person than their ability to pass exams.

I suspect, though, that such a scheme at national level is going to require a considerable investment in teacher time if it is to work properly. It will be well worth it, though, if it raises the levels of aspiration of our pupils and improves their self concepts.

We need to spend money on a structured and systematic effort to improve the interface between

education, voluntary agencies, community workers and staff engaged on the Youth Training Scheme. This fledgling scheme is proving popular with trainees. There would appear to be overlap though in some areas of the scheme between work done in school, and then served up afresh in the life skills section of the course. Whether at the end of the day it will have proved possible to teach broad based transferable job skills remains as yet unproven; and this is one of the great hopes of this expensive venture.

My other great hope is that the stimuli and new experiences offered by this scheme will cut into the dreadful awful boredom of the young unemployed. Many of them come back to see me at school, nearly always in the afternoons - they 'sleep on' in the mornings. They are depressed, bewildered by the reality of the outside world, and wistful about bygone days. These teenagers never visit libraries or community centres - notices of activities for the 'unwaged' pass them by. Many of them are fringe members only of youth clubs. Unless we devise a way to reach them, then I am fearful that Hamblin's prophecies will come to pass.

I am equally fearful for John. John is twelve and devoted to his BMX bike. He wrote about it for me.

"Me Hopey are BMX in like BMX Rayig and Freyling to and Joping in Fraeyling and like we are. to I do weaning on a said to and I do run to Horse-piting I got six korgrrs. and my Frind Tomon got Ten korgrrs and we triud to Katin skollyll to and we mete to nigt we are going in the boot in the coittan and wemoing to we are going Foff tha brig. to Ensation to. on Satday in am got to the BMX corate to Ramues Jon and I met to sleep at Sunday"

Who, I wonder, will find a place for John in our brave new world?