



Short-sighted schools cuts will hurt most vulnerable



**BREDA
O'BRIEN**

The consequences
of the cutbacks could
last for generations

AS THE so-called mini-budget approaches, there have been perfunctory noises from some teacher unions about reversing some of the cuts in educational services. However, the reality is that parents and teachers are scared stiff that even more extraordinary measures are ahead.

Thus far, we have seen schoolbook grant cuts, a cap on English language support, cuts to the Junior Certificate Schools Programme, Leaving Cert Applied and Leaving Cert Vocational Programme, and the reduction in the capitation grant for Travellers. Special Education classes are being reabsorbed into the mainstream at the same time as class sizes are set to rise. Teaching vacancies will not be filled in many schools, and subject choices are going to be reduced.

The sad thing about most of the cuts is that they will most affect children who are already vulnerable and at risk. The Junior Certificate Schools Programme and Leaving Cert Applied are essential interventions for children who are the least likely to complete their education. Immigrant children need language support if they and their families are to have any chance of integrating into Irish society.

Children with special needs already have the odds stacked against them. Now it appears that there will also be a review of special needs assistants. It would be wonderful to think that review will be conducted purely on educational grounds, but even to hope that is beginning to look terminally naive.

Education helps to determine a person's life prospects in very fundamental ways. According to Prof John FitzGerald of the Economic and Social Research Institute, it even affects marriage prospects, as men who only have primary education are the least likely to be married. It also has profound intergenerational effects.

The home environment is a prime predictor

of educational success. Parental education, particularly the mother's, is a vital factor in a child's early development. The more education a mother has, the more likely she is to provide an enriched environment, which stacks the odds in favour of doing well later on. Where a child is not in such a stimulating environment, early intervention is vital.

As Nobel Laureate, Prof James Heckmann of the UCD Geary Institute, said, "It is a rare public policy initiative that promotes fairness and social justice, and at the same time promotes productivity in the economy and in society at large. Early interventions for disadvantaged children promote schooling, raise the quality of the workforce, enhance the productivity of schools, and reduce crime, teenage pregnancy and welfare dependency. They raise earnings and promote social attachment."

At a time of recession, it is more important than ever to invest in education. Those with lower levels of education are more likely to be made unemployed and to stay that way. Their children, are likely to perpetuate the cycle.

Children with learning difficulties are another very vulnerable group. Anecdotally, the numbers of children with different types of difficulties are on the rise. We used to think that ability was more or less fixed. Ironically, the IQ test, which has done more to entrench the idea that children have set levels of ability, was originally designed by Alfred Binet to identify children in French schools who were being failed by the education system.

According to Binet, the scale was designed with a single purpose in mind – to help design programmes to benefit children. His assumption was that a lower IQ indicated the need for more teaching, not an inability to learn. The wisdom and compassion of his approach in the early 1900s was sadly abandoned by those who imported his method of testing into other countries, and soon IQ tests were being used to categorise children into such charming categories as idiot, imbecile, moron and normal.

Sadly, even today, those who learn differently to others very rapidly categorise themselves in the same cruel way. Our culture idolises those who learn rapidly, without apparent effort. There is an implicit assumption that only the "smart" are likely to achieve academically. Yet over the past few decades, there is more and more evidence that children who struggle can be helped.

One of the most exciting findings in neuroscience is that the brain, far from being set in stone at a relatively early age, retains astonishing levels of plasticity, that is, the ability to change itself. It is ironic that we now know far more than we ever did about how the brain works, but due to lack of funding or larger classes we may not be able to capitalise on it for children.

Dr Norman Doidge is an American psychiatrist who spoke in Dublin in recent weeks. He became interested in the workings of the brain when some of his patients did not advance psychologically as much as he had hoped. The conventional wisdom was that problems were deeply "hardwired" into an unchanging brain, and therefore beyond hope of change. Yet scientists were discovering that this metaphor, taken from computers, was wrong.

His fascinating book, *The Brain that Changes Itself*, looks at the revolutionary implications of scientists' findings about the organ. He describes people who rewired their brains to deal with previously intractable obsessive compulsive disorder. He tells how an ingenious researcher managed to help people overcome phantom pain in amputated limbs. Previous beliefs about the window of opportunity for stroke victims are being overturned, as evidence mounts that with carefully graded challenges, people could be helped far more than had been realised.

He looks at the work of Michael Merzenich and his colleagues in the area of helping to teach disabled children to improve their cognition and perception. This work led to the design and marketing of FastForWord, computer programmes which are intensive interventions for children with language and reading difficulties.

The programmes develop children's auditory, language and reading skills simultaneously. They make permanent, positive improvements that allow children to learn and read more successfully. Disguised as computer games, they gradually build children's confidence and skills. FastForWord is just one example of an intervention that would have been unthinkable decades ago.

Of course, far from having specially designed computer-based interventions, many Irish schools don't even have decent computers, or broadband access. As the budget approaches, one can only pray that politicians' brains are sufficiently plastic to grasp that short-sighted cuts will have profound social consequences, in some cases for generations.