

Chair, Minister, distinguished guests, delegates and friends,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to the Ulster Teachers' Union 97th Annual Conference. I would like to extend a special welcome to all our guests from other Teachers' Unions here today and, in particular, to those from the INTO, who we have continued to work closely with through our Joint UTU/INTO Board.

It has been an honour and privilege to have been the President of the Ulster Teachers' Union over the past twelve months. The motto of the UTU is 'For Teachers, For Pupils' and this year has permitted me to gain a closer insight into just how our Union works day in, day out to not only support individual members but to listen to and project the voice of teachers, Principals and pupils, from Nursery, Primary, Secondary and Special Schools, and negotiate on our behalf.

I feel proud to represent a Union that values the opinions and ideas of its members and truly cares about the issues affecting us here in Northern Ireland, throughout the different stages in our teaching careers. As one of the founding members of the Future In Teaching group (known as the FIT group), formed by our Union in 2006, I have personally experienced the encouragement and guidance our Union provides for teachers who are starting out in their careers. Throughout my year as President, several Teaching Unions from across the world have remarked upon this investment by our Union in 'The Future of Teaching'. Already this investment is paying off and this is evident through the engaged participation and contributions that our FIT members make, not only here at our annual conference each year, but also at our FIT conferences and within Branch, Area Association and Central Executive Committee meetings.

My year as President has been a fantastic opportunity and it has been a busy one. My goal throughout this year was to be an informed and pro-active representative for you, the members of the UTU. I am a Primary 5 teacher with an average class size of 30. I am not a financial analyst, I am not a politician. As you have no doubt very quickly worked out for yourselves, I am clearly not a public speaker. But I **do** know about the pupils in my class. I also know what hard-working, dedicated, professional teachers we have here in Northern Ireland - because I work alongside them every day. I understand the reality of what teachers face on a daily basis and the issues affecting us most. I therefore hope that I have been able to speak out knowledgeably on your behalf throughout this past year.

In a popular TED presentation (and one that I would recommend you to watch), an American teacher, Rita Pierson, explained her view that - 'Every child deserves a champion - an adult who will never give up on them, who understands the power of connection, and insists that they become the best that they can possibly be.' To extend this further, I believe that teachers and principals too deserve a champion and I have seen first hand how our Union works to fulfill that role for us.

On a personal note, one of the key highlights of my year as President was the opportunity to attend some Global Education events such as the EI World Congress in Ottawa and the adoption of the Education For All Framework for Action event in Paris. For me, these opportunities to meet with teachers and Union officials from across the globe highlighted a common and vital principle - that **quality** education, publicly funded, should be available to **every student in every country**'. These events also highlighted the important role that we play as educators and emphasized the value and impact that Education has in every country and at every level. Education is a basic human right.

Last September, a '2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' was adopted by countries from across the globe. Made up of 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets, it aims to **end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all**. Education is at the heart of this global agenda. Recognizing the important role of education, this 2030 Agenda highlights education as a stand-alone goal (SDG 4), namely to- "**Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all**". This renewed education agenda is holistic and aspirational, and is inspired by a vision of education that transforms the lives of individuals, communities and societies, leaving no one behind.

Education is a much valued tool. It is key to providing pupils with opportunities to reach for a better future and to have the confidence in their own abilities to strive for more. Education is about empowerment.

Very few are likely to argue about the value and importance of a quality education system, but what we do seem to be less clear about is how this is achieved in reality.

The EFA Framework for Action, adopted in Paris this year, includes a practical approach for the realization of education goals and very clearly sets out the responsibilities of everyone involved in Education, working together to ensure that these goals are achieved within our individual countries. Importantly, it recognizes that quality Education requires sufficient funding. It is only through respecting the importance of Education, and adequately funding it, that its value to all stakeholders can be increased, making it a worthwhile investment for the future. Indeed this is not a new concept. Benjamin Franklin, one of the Founding Fathers of the United States: wrote in 1758: 'An investment in knowledge always pays the best interest'.

But how does this understanding of the value and importance of Education translate into what is happening with our Education system here in Northern Ireland?

The past few years have not been ones to celebrate in terms of investing in Education. Budget cuts, savings, financial pressures, whatever you prefer to refer to them by, they have been the reality of schools not only over the past year, but over the past 5 years and beyond.

5 years ago, the shortfall between the anticipated spending requirements and the Education Budget for 2011-15 originally added up to over £800 million across the 4 year Budget period. A 'Savings Delivery Plan' was therefore developed to address this gap in funding. A rather clever choice of words here I feel. A 'Savings delivery plan' doesn't seem threatening in any way, it seems rather sensible and yet it effectively masks the cold reality of the cuts needed to ensure these savings were made. We welcomed the announcements from the Education Minister in November 2011 that he was reallocating an additional £40 million in total into the Aggregated Schools Budget spread over 3 years. We also welcomed his further announcement in January 2012 that additional funding of £120 million, spread over the same time period, was to be allocated directly to schools. As a result of these 2 measures, there **was** a reduction in the level of savings to be delivered from that originally planned. Now as I explained before, I am not a financial analyst, but huge annual slashes in funding of between £100 million and £300 million cannot be covered with mere sticky plasters of £10 million, £15 million, or even £75 million one off additional installments.

Regardless of what you call them and regardless of the positive press relating to additional funding here or additional funding there, significant cuts have been made and schools, teachers and pupils have witnessed the very real negative impacts they are having on our Education system.

Closure of schools, teacher redundancies, larger class sizes, increased pupil:teacher ratios and reduced resources within schools. With these reduced budgets, many classroom assistants who were employed by the school to support both teachers and pupils have seen their hours drastically reduced or cut completely. We value our support staff and as any teacher knows, a good classroom assistant truly is worth their weight in gold.

Schools have also experienced the farther-reaching effects these cuts are having on the wider education environment. There simply is less support available. Schools are continuing to struggle through the increasing challenges of referring pupils for much needed additional assessment, diagnosis and support. In addition, the services of CASS and RTU have been greatly reduced and we have yet to see how the proposed interim structure for the EA School Development Service will ensure that the Education Authority's statutory responsibility to support schools is adequately met.

It was this time last year when our members voted in favour of industrial action short of strike, action which has been ongoing from 30th March 2015. The Education budget for 2015-16 faced a resource funding gap of £97.6m and the time had come to draw a halt to this detrimental depletion of funds and the inevitable watering down of resources. Our Teachers were saying loud and clear, "Enough is enough. Schools simply cannot cope any more. They are at breaking point, fuelled by the goodwill of its workforce rather than financial investment or support." As we have said many times before, Minister; Education cuts don't heal.

One year later, has the release of adequate funding for the provision of quality education in Northern Ireland been prioritized? Are these 'Savings plans'

introduced 5 years ago finally complete? Can we now face the future with greater hope as to the investment in Education? Sadly the future does not seem to be any brighter.

In January of this year, the Director of Finance for the Department of Education explained to the Education Committee at Stormont that – “The Budget 2016-17 resource allocation means a net cash reduction of £72 million.” Despite yet another welcome announcement in February of an additional £20 million allocated to Education, we are only beginning to come to terms with just how this sustained reduced funding to Education will continue to impact on schools and the pupils and teachers within them.

And yet, despite these increasing pressures, we appear to have a system that continues to demand more. ‘Raise standards’ appears to be the battle-cry of our ETI. In a time of ‘Austerity’ our DE and EA appear to feel the need to ‘justify’ any spending, however reduced, on Education. And how can they do this? Data. And lots of it. Schools must prove that learning is taking place. Otherwise, surely Education must be a waste of money.

We seem to have created an education system that is so intensely focused on standards, test scores and ‘value for money’ that it neglects to value both pupils and teachers as individuals.

There has been an increasing focus on educational achievement based solely on results in key tests or tasks – End of Key Stage results, GCSE results, A-Level results, Transfer Test results, PIE and PIM results, NRIT or CAT results. However, as all teachers will understand, the learning of an individual child isn’t something that can be easily measured. Such tests merely measure the knowledge and skills that can most easily be measured and, by doing so, they tend to neglect the much wider spectrum of the results of learning such as critical thinking, self-motivation and problem solving.

This thirst for data and numerical scores is reflected in the recent difficulties encountered by schools who had signed up to the Shared Education project, only to be told that their funding would not be supplied unless schools went against their Union Industrial Action and provided End of Key Stage results. I know that I will simply have to agree to disagree with the Minister and the Department in their view that the only way to measure the success of such shared education initiatives is to measure the Literacy and Numeracy levels of completely different year groups. I, for one, simply cannot understand the reasoning behind this decision - business case or no business case.

So I ask the question, in Education, why is this plethora of data needed? What are we trying to measure and why are we measuring it? Is it really adding value or, in many cases, is it taking up valuable teaching time? Can schools accurately capture the essence of the quality of learning taking place within their schools in narrowly focused assessment tasks?

The predicament in all this is whether we are measuring and assessing what we value, or whether we are ending up in a situation where society is valuing what is being measured. We all know the data analysis and paperwork that takes place within schools and is required by the ETI during a school inspection. Target setting, under-achieving, low-achieving, high-achieving, mean scores, tracking and 'value-added'. Pupils represented as numbers on a page, colour-coded by their apparent success or failure within a school from year to year. Multiple graphs that somehow manage to find different ways to show exactly the same thing. Now don't get me wrong, I love a bit of data. Give me a Spreadsheet and I will produce as many pretty colour-coded charts as you wish. I will even change the font to Comic Sans, because you all know how we Primary School teachers love a bit of Comic Sans. My difficulty with Data is that I feel it **must** be useful. We need to be data **informed**, not data **driven**. There is simply no point in generating data that cannot usefully inform a teacher's practice.

We, as teachers, also know that data does not always accurately reflect the learning of our pupils. We all know that there can be any number of reasons why a test score may not reflect a child's true ability. We've all had those pupils in class who become so irrationally panicked over an exam that they cry over their test paper. In contrast, we've all taught those pupils who, despite your repeated pleas for all pupils to check their test papers before handing them in, still manage to have left out 2 entire pages of their test. I will admit that, despite my own enthusiasm and commitment at school, I managed to make some spectacular blunders in my time. In lower sixth, after struggling with the flu, I actually fell asleep during a Maths test and was too embarrassed to tell the teacher that this was the reason for my lowest ever score of 47%. At University, I resorted to desperate measures of writing on an End of Year exam paper, "I'm really really sorry, I thought this was on the other paper! Please don't fail me!" And, to express my heartache over this confusion fully, I even added an unhappy smiley face. The difficulty with tests is when they become high-stake. When they are taken in isolation, and without an understanding of the human sitting on the other side of that test paper, it becomes far too easy to misinterpret the data in front of you, valuing a pupil's ability to sit a test, rather than their ability to learn and apply knowledge.

A few weeks ago, thousands of Year 7 pupils across our province received a letter summing up their entire Primary education in one number. Then began the wait to see what exactly that number meant for their future. High stakes testing indeed. Thousands of pupils, at the age of 11, made to feel like their value depends on the outcome of a test... and for what purpose? Why is our Education system so data driven?

I will admit that during the course of this year, I have occasionally felt a sense of disillusionment during some of the negotiation meetings with our employing authorities, as I encountered Educational Values that seem to be so starkly opposite to the ones that I, as a teacher, hold dear. The direction of travel for the future of teachers, and those whom they teach, appears to me to have become guided by a view that is built on the low-cost, short-term returns of business capital, rather than the long-term, high quality returns of professional capital.

Are the policies and decisions that are currently being driven forward by our Department of Education and Education Authority being so because of strong evidence from research as to the long-term benefits to teachers and pupils or, as I fear, merely short-sighted, money saving activities which take no account of any detrimental impact on schools which may occur as a result? Even the announcement before Christmas of the 'Refreshing the Teaching Workforce' scheme, highlighted the priorities of our Department of Education. What could be an excellent opportunity to create job opportunities for beginning teachers and allow more experienced teachers to choose to exit the profession with dignity if they wish, became tainted by the initial lack of information and narrow terms and conditions attached – highlighting the main motivation in the creation of this scheme as merely yet another money saving exercise, based on a Business Plan without any real consideration of the welfare of teachers and schools in the long-term.

It is widely quoted that Teachers are the most influential 'factor' in the education of pupils... In fact, our Education Minister has highlighted this in interviews himself.

Despite this, a number of recent trends point to a continued process of de-professionalization of teachers. These trends include the casualization of teachers through contract teaching, the reduced autonomy and increased accountability of teachers, high stake inspection procedures and gaps between the remuneration of teachers and of professionals in other sectors. This year, the NITC has seen an attack on Teacher's Contractual rights to Automatic incremental progression and they have been involved in pay discussions that, quite frankly, are an **insult** to teachers. In addition, negotiations on Maternity, Paternity and Adoption Rights, currently the worst in the Public sector, have been dismissed as 'not being a priority at this time'. Teachers need to feel valued as professionals and in a recent EI article, research has highlighted the positive correlation between the societal value placed on teaching (measured in terms of pay, working conditions and involvement in professional decision making) and student achievement and well-being.

I can't say why the teachers in this room chose to enter into the teaching profession, but I can say why I did. My parents, here today, were both teachers, and Principals, and members of the UTU and they loved the job they did. I too then experienced that satisfaction of a job that allowed you to share your skills and help others. Despite this, I have to admit that my parents tried hard to convince me that perhaps a job in a different profession might be a better option. As teachers themselves, they were also only too aware of the demands that a career in teaching has, not only on your professional life, but also on your personal life. Teachers invest emotionally in what they do. Despite our Department's apparent obsession with finance, I teach, not because of any financial analysis of my hourly rate of pay, but because I love to work with children and I recognize the rewards of teaching through the daily, simple achievements of the pupils I teach. The pupils in my class matter to me and I do my best to teach, support, encourage and help develop them individually. I care

about the well-being of the students in my care and yet I have become increasingly aware that teachers cannot develop the well-being of their students unless they also pay attention to their own health and well-being.

If I return to the statement that teachers are the most influential factor in the education of a pupil, here I can see one way in which we have taken the wrong direction slightly. Teachers are not merely factors that can be added in or taken out of an education equation. We are educational professionals, but more than that, we are human and it is the connections that we make with the students in our care that makes us the teachers we are. Despite this, emphasis in recent years has been viewing teachers merely as factors and, worse than this, coming up with ever more ways to try to make this factor work in the most, supposedly, efficient and cost-effective way possible - regardless of any detrimental effect upon the education of our students or on the Health and Well-being of teachers themselves. Teacher morale appears to be at an all time low with many teachers struggling to meet the daily demands of an increasingly challenging work environment. The implementation of a Teacher Health And Well-being strategy (also known as THAW), despite being on the agenda for meetings with management side, has also, like so many other issues brought to the attention of our employing authorities this year, sadly seen extremely limited progress over my 12 months as President - the reason? THAW is also 'simply not a priority at this time'. Interpret that as you choose, but it has not given me reassurance that as a teacher I am valued and will be supported in what I do.

In a meeting with representatives from the Department of Education and the Inspectorate earlier this year, myself and some other UTU colleagues had an opportunity to outline some of the key issues affecting teachers in Northern Ireland and, in particular, those driving our need to continue our Industrial Action. We were honest but reasonable. We explained rationally the increasing pressures facing schools and our fears for the future. At the end of our presentation, we were simply told that although they were sure it was all very 'heart-felt', we as teachers needed to be more 'strategic' in our thinking. The message was clear - our opinions, experiences and concerns as teachers and principals are of absolutely no interest unless they can influence yet another business plan to suggest yet another way that savings can be made.

Professional teacher that I am, I have since evaluated this meeting. We, as representatives of the UTU, wanted to share the difficulties facing teachers currently, but our audience didn't quite listen. I have reflected on this situation and come up with a possible solution... Minister, I think it would be most beneficial if the members of the Department and the Employing Authorities who sit on the Joint Working Party, as part of their roles, undertook at least 2 hours of voluntary service within schools each week... after they complete their Child Protection training and security checks of course! Perhaps they could help with structured play in Key Stage one or spend some time supporting pupils on the computer in Key Stage 2. We are always grateful for regular support and I truly believe that decision making during Joint Working Party meetings would become much more meaningful if the people making decisions about Education can

relate to how it will truly impact upon schools. As your current advertising slogan tells us Minister – “Get involved – because Education works!”

You may have heard the phrase ‘Flip the system’, an interesting idea developed by the Dutch educationalists Jelmer Evers and Rene Kneyber that, ‘Instead of being accountable to the system, the system has to be accountable to the interaction in classrooms and schools.’ I return to the Education 2030 Framework for action, which highlights the responsibility of our Governments, politicians and Departments of Education to actively promote, support and finance ‘inclusive and equitable quality education.” The role then of our DE and Employing authorities should be to **support** teachers and schools, rather than seek to control and narrowly measure them.

As a teacher, I want my voice to be heard. I want to be valued as a professional. Teachers are the ones who are working with the next generation on a daily basis. We can see which policies are working and which ones are not. We can see the direction that our education system is being taken in and, as last year’s conference highlighted, we are asking those in positions of power and responsibility to STOP, LOOK and LISTEN. We, as teachers and principals, understand the duty of care we have towards the pupils we teach and, in return, we are asking, “Where is the Duty of Care to us?”

A quality, valuable education system will only be possible through a highly trained, professional, skilled, up-to-date, motivated and valued teaching workforce. All teachers, regardless of experience, benefit from opportunities to be rejuvenated, encouraged and challenged with new ideas and methods. A world-class education system is one which values the expertise and professionalism of their teachers, by ensuring that there is not only high-quality initial teacher training programmes, but also innovative and extensive continued professional development opportunities for all teachers, based on relevant and current research.

Recognising the importance of professional development, and concerned about the dwindling opportunities for teachers to develop themselves as professionals throughout their teaching careers, the Northern Ireland Teaching Council (NITC) have also asked for consideration to be given as to how the continued Professional Development of Teachers within Northern Ireland could be developed, as part of our pay claim award submitted to the Department this year.

Sadly, as with the majority of issues brought to Management side this year, we have yet to see any progress in this area. This issue also apparently did not fit with a viable business case and was shelved with seemingly very little consideration and discussion as to how this could be developed. Yes, continued professional development does require funding, as any worthwhile venture would, but surely our DE and EA recognize that the best way to support and value the pupils in our Education system is by supporting and valuing the teachers who in turn support and value their pupils on a daily basis.

As I draw to a close, I return again to the TED presentation given by Rita Pierson and to a personal story she told during this talk.

Video clip:

I gave a quiz, 20 questions. A student missed 18. I put a "+2" on his paper and a big smiley face.

He said, "Ms. Pierson, is this an F?"

I said, "Yes."

He said, "Then why'd you put a smiley face?"

I said, "Because you're on a roll. You got two right. You didn't miss them all."

I said, "And when we review this, won't you do better?"

He said, "Yes, ma'am, I can do better."

You see, "-18" sucks all the life out of you. "+2" said, "I ain't all bad."

Chair, Minister – my fear is that our Education system is becoming that -18 rather than the +2. Education is so important – without it where would we be today? I know the kind of future that I want for our children and it definitely involves smiley faces. We have so much to celebrate about our Education system and yet I worry that the life is slowly being sucked out of it.

In summary, I return to the question - What are we – as teachers, as parents, as politicians, as Departments of Education and Education Authorities – currently valuing in our Education system here in Northern Ireland? Yes, we do realistically need to consider the financial difficulties that Education is continuing to face and we realize that there is a need for careful consideration of how best to utilize the money invested into our Education Budget each year but, in an attempt to cope with these 'financial pressures', have we lost understanding of the true value and worth of our Education system? Are we properly investing in the future generations of Northern Ireland? Are we valuing and measuring what is truly important? Can we honestly say that current decisions and policies affecting Education are being made in the best interests of our schools, teachers, classroom assistants and pupils or are they being driven by monetary priorities? Are we recognizing and celebrating the hard-working and dedicated educators in our society and in turn, are we inspiring our pupils to value their learning, their potential and ultimately themselves?

Chair, Minister, delegates, guests – let us not underestimate the value of education, but together let's celebrate it, protect it and invest in it.

Let's prioritise, putting people, not pounds first.

Thank you.