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**Dr Mark  
Dooley**



**MORAL MATTERS**

## Teachers are key to a life less ordinary

**M**OST evenings, my two older sons take off to their room to imitate their teachers. 'Have you got that worksheet for me yet, Ms McGann?' 'Not yet, Ms Cooke. I'll have it in a minute. I'm just dealing with a few bold children.'

This hilarious dialogue, which could continue for more than an hour, speaks volumes about our boys' perception of their school.

For me, however, it is a reminder of those childhood years spent acting out a similar role. Each day after school, I would take out my little blackboard and get to work teaching an imaginary class. Looking back, I can now see this was a testament to those men and women who not only inspired me but who moulded me into the person I am.

Cyril Mahon was no ordinary primary teacher. We left his class with a sound grasp of astronomy, politics and biology. We knew every word of the National Anthem and of all those great hymns that, in those days, resounded through every church.

Mr Mahon gave me an understanding of this world, and of our place in it, that far exceeded the limits of the national curriculum. In so doing, he earned the respect of all his students. He was a man of vision, one who believed that education was the key to a life less ordinary.

That noble vision was shared by PJ Brady, one of my secondary teachers who read serious philosophy in his spare time. When I was 15, he introduced me to the writings of his intellectual hero, the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur. Imagine his delight when, as a young lecturer at UCD, I rang Mr Brady to invite him to meet Ricoeur whose visit I had arranged.

At a time when we are all too prone to complain about teachers, it is worthwhile remembering how influential they are in the lives of our children. Even now, I can't help wondering what path I might have taken in the absence of inspirational people like Cyril Mahon and PJ Brady. Watching my children doing their impersonations, I realise few things in life have greater impact than a good teacher.

As it happens, our boys' school is currently celebrating its centenary. Think about that: since before the foundation of the State, that school has served generations of Irish children. This means our boys are heirs to a proud and enduring educational legacy.

One of the reasons the school has flourished for so long is because the teachers steadfastly uphold their bond of trust with parents. Each morning, we place our children in

their care, trusting the teachers to mind our children as they would their own. The fact that my boys love their teachers is proof that we don't trust in vain.

As the primary school year draws to a close, it is slowly dawning on them that their days with Ms McGann and Ms Cooke are numbered. Both women have done more for my little men than I can possibly record here. My boys know this, which is why their eyes swell at the prospect of saying goodbye.

We cannot reward teachers enough for that level of care and attention. What we so often forget is that they are not obliged to go the extra mile for our children. They are not obliged to do more than their contract demands.

Yet, I don't know a single teacher who simply 'works the contract'. Every day, I watch in awe as Mrs Dooley balances her home life with her duties as a school teacher. I marvel as she puts the interests of her students before her own, while never neglecting her family back at home.

**A**LL the teachers in my life are united in their passionate commitment and dedication to their students. That is something we parents should never take for granted. For what is at stake is nothing less than our children's welfare and happiness, and is there a parent who would not risk everything for that?

Very soon, our boys will bid farewell to Ms McGann and Ms Cooke. It won't be easy. Memories of the Christmas concert, school tours and the big milestones will inevitably come rushing back.

So, too, will memories of those countless acts of affection that are hidden from the world but which teachers never tire of showing to all our sons and daughters.

And if those memories cause my children to weep, I won't try to stop them. As someone who can recall the names of all his teachers, who can still hear Mr Mahon waxing eloquent on the health benefits of garlic, I know what it is to suddenly realise a light has stopped shining in your life. I know what it is like to leave behind an inspirational person, one with whom you felt safe and secure.

As the holidays take hold, our evenings will no longer be dominated by Ms Cooke and Ms McGann scolding troublesome students.

Still, in everything our children do, and in what they have become, the inspiration of those people is plainly evident.

That is why, having earned a precious place in my boys' hearts, their fine teachers will remain there forever.

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