

A little more PE, a little more woodwork – and maybe a little more world peace

LES WALTON looks back to 1972, when the school leaving age was raised to 16 and teachers wondered what to do with the students who stayed on

IN 1964, preparations began around raising the school leaving age (ROSLA) to 16 (not to be confused with the recent law relating to Raising the Participation Age).

The preparations for ROSLA were delayed in 1968, and the decision was reached in 1971 that the new upper age limit would be enforced from September 1, 1972 onwards.

Today when many people talk about the need for continuing education they focus on the aspect of 'lifelong learning' and the need for a better and more competitive work force.

Without doubt in the 1970s there was an increasing focus on work-related education, so as well as raising the school leaving age in 1972, the year also saw the introduction of the Education (Work Experience) Act.

I had been running work experience programmes since 1966. It was so simple then. Most companies were locally run and controlled, including the local council offices, so it was easy for me to arrange to meet the head of the organisations and agree placements for my students – no bureaucracy and no health and safety or criminal record checks. Every pupil in the final year of the secondary modern would have one full week of work experience.

Considering the lack of paper work and health checks the only really memorable incident was when Tommy Smith allowed daylight to enter a battery chicken farm building and caused a riot with the chickens.

I had the 'good luck' to be head of 5th Year (Year 11), the year when around 60% of the pupils were required to stay an extra year. The two new 'ROSLA' posts were taken by the head of woodwork and metalwork and the head of home economics. There was a clear message in these appointments.

Of course, as usual, the O-level pupils continued their studies in the normal way. This was to become, and remains, a prevailing theme of secondary education: pupils with the most stable and supportive background had the most constant and secure education pathways, whereas those with the most unsettled back-



► Woodwork and metalwork lessons helped to fill up the timetable when the school leaving age was raised in the early 1970s

grounds were subject to the most change and disruption.

So to address the requirements of ROSLA, the answer was simply to increase the amount of time given over to 'practical subjects'.

Thus the 'ROSLA Kids' as they were known, received a timetable which was filled up with extra PE and woodwork and metalwork, for the boys and cooking and textiles for the girls.

As head of 5th Year I arranged an 'extended studies' programme for the ROSLA children. This consisted of a year-long programme involving work experience, the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme and a personal and social education programme.

Looking back this was a period of educational innovation and creativity.

At the end of the year the head of ROSLA retired. During the year we had become friends. Bill eventually shared with me his quite shocking experiences of being a prisoner of war in the Second World War.

To Bill there was a moral purpose behind the raising of the school leaving age. It was not raised to simply ensure the children could get better qualifications and subsequently go on to higher education or jobs.

Bill's clear view was that the core purpose of education was to develop a society in which people would

behave in a 'civilised way' to each other; that they would understand and empathise with other people from different backgrounds and different cultures.

To put it simply, the more educated people are, there will be less likelihood of war and the atrocities sometimes associated with war.

Bill's views very much contrast with the modern thinking that if we increase the amount and level of education we can better compete with countries such as Japan and Germany.

This may be true but I would still like to think that education has other purposes. Some of us can still remember the teaching of 'Peace Studies' in schools. Whilst I am not suggesting the return of such a programme, I do believe that education has a major part to play in improving international understanding and relations. I know Bill would have agreed.

When Bill eventually retired it was hard to persuade him to even attend a little staff celebration on his last day, but eventually, he reluctantly attended and accepted his gift. He then asked the staff to wave goodbye to him from the staff room. As he drove his Ford Prefect out of the school he gave a salute from the window. I miss him.

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