

Maybe our little rebels really do have a cause



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ONE of the major themes throughout my life in education is the recognition that children are growing up, the transitional stage of physical and psychological development, during their secondary school years.

It is a period of multiple transitions, though too often, those responsible for education consider it a simple transition to examination qualifications.

Before my childhood, the word teenager was not part of everyday language. However, the word teenage had been around since the late 19th century. Only after the Second World War did the adjective teenage become the noun, teenager.

As a child in the 1940s and 50s, my world simply consisted of two species - adults and children. I was used to the description of being a baby boomer or a war baby, raised on rationing and the welfare state. There were three phrases that were often used and applied to us, 'children should be seen and not heard', 'spare the rod and spoil the child', 'there was nothing wrong with him that two years' national service wouldn't cure'.

By the late 1950s, I would be reclassified as a teenager.

In 1951, JD Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* supposedly delivered an accurate depiction of teenagers in our society. Many considered that Salinger had an unerring understanding of the feelings of teenage angst, vulnerability and anger and considered his book intimately articulated what it was to be young and sensitive. As young teenagers in the 1950s, we were almost divided into those who identified with Salinger or not.

My transition from child to teenager did not have the great highs and lows that seemed to be the way of the Salinger teenager.

My own Geordie British experience was different from the young Americans in the cinema or on TV, who would drive open top cars and, most radical of all, go on dates.

My secondary school was small, all wearing uniform, divided into three streams and enforced by a strict discipline, which included the cane. The chance of us developing our own culture was very limited. My



> Bill Haley and the Comets in Newcastle in 1957

big personal rebellion was loosening my tie on the way back from school. My Raleigh bike did not compare to the American automobile. When the American teenagers held hands at the Drive in Cinema, I was flicking peanuts in the Flea Pit Picture House.

To me the impact of the American cinema and television programmes was small compared to the impact of Rock and Roll. When Rock and Roll came over the Atlantic, it changed how we behaved.

On 17th February 1957, Bill Haley and the Comets played at Newcastle Odeon. Haley used the word teenager, to signify a more rebellious kind of young person. Elvis's 'All Shook Up', Jerry Lee Lewis's 'Whole Lotta Shakin' Going On' began replacing Bing Crosby and Gracie Fields in the charts.

It was odd for me and my friends to be part of a group of people who were described as rebellious, sex mad, wearing peculiar clothes and listening to loud and crude music. For a start, I was no rebel. I thought sex was something that carried coal.

And yet, we did attempt to have our own language, our own technology and our own political views. True own unique language was a parody of Americanisms - when things were good they were cool, having a blast meant a great time. We also had our own technology, using transistor radios rather than the wireless and buying extended play records rather than the old 78-inch singles.

To James Dean and Elvis my rebellion must have appeared quite square. I wore denims and made my first guitar at woodwork classes. The skiffle band I played in transformed into a rock band. We even played a rock song in our local church. The *Evening Chronicle* reported that this

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was a first in the 97-year history of the Church.

Between adults, parents and teachers, and ourselves a generation gap was forming. This was the space in which my parents and teachers were trying to control the young and protect us. The space in which we started to push back and create our own world, on our terms. We filled this gap with our own culture - our youth culture.

As Baby Boomers, we were described as the first generation that went against everything our parents had believed in terms of music, values, governmental and political views. It is true that we did feel we were developing a new culture, meeting up in youth clubs, playing our own music and wearing our own style of clothing and supporting the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, which was formed in 1957.

In schools today, we have teenagers with their own personal agenda and unique challenge. I am not sure whether it is harder or not for today's young person to go through the transition to adulthood. When I was at school the stress teachers made on learning a language, studying Shakespeare or solving algebraic equations suggested to me that the problem of growing up, managing physical and emotional change, earning a living and establishing relationships with the opposite sex were of secondary importance. This emphasis is still with us today.

In a class of 15-year-olds, the combined experience of love and sadness, discovery and loss, friendship and divorce, birth and death, good fortune and poverty is beyond comprehension. A good teacher sees their class as one of their greatest assets, a group from which to learn.

We should celebrate our teenagers - they are daft and yet wise, radical and yet careful in their behaviour. They can be cynical and at the same time optimistic. They may parrot things they have learned in class whilst at the same time challenge any imposed view. The bottom line is that they are in intense learning mode... perhaps we fail to recognise this.