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COLUMNIST

TOO often our children with the most complex and unstable lives are provided with complicated pathways to education, employment and training.

I have always seen education as the new rock and roll. It is exciting, relevant, subversive and sometimes even revolutionary. But, it can also become bland and repetitive. As an ageing rocker I am increasingly returning to memories of my childhood and early years in education.

Over the coming weeks, months and even years, I wish to share some of my memories and reflections and I would like people to email their memories.

Many people like me who were born at the end of the Second World War are concerned about the national and local memory of education. Too often today our education leaders lack memory.

As a young history teacher I took a group of pupils to the Roman Wall. As I was moving towards the back of the bus I heard a couple of lads whisper: "Don't look out of the window, he might ask a question."

It is our job in education to open windows, not close them.

In 1955 I sat my 11+ exams in my final year of elementary school. I was 10 years old, my 11th birthday being in June that year. The 11+ was a basic arithmetic and English test. Some of my fellow pupils had been 11 since the previous September.

In order to balance the difference in ages, pupils were given extra points for being younger. It has always been my view that these extra points were the key to me passing.

My passing was of great disappointment to my headteacher, "Two Canes", who had created two classes - the "goats" and "sheep". I was in the group who were not considered capable of passing the test. Even then I recognised that the pupils in the "better class" came from more affluent backgrounds - doctors and dentists. Whilst myself and the other "goats" came from more modest surroundings.

Brian Oglethorpe (former headteacher of Oxclose Comprehensive) recounts his time in an 11+ preparatory class in Canning Street School Newcastle in 1947. He remembers pupils "being flogged with considerable frequency and well-practised technique with a leather strap on hands for such slight misdemeanours as blots on exercise books or repeated spelling mistakes."

The 11+ was based on a very simple idea. You could separate society into two types - the academic and the practical by using arithmetic and English tests to identify these two groups.

When I was told I had passed the 11+ the eventual separation from my old friends was put in place.

My primary school was indeed a true neighbourhood comprehensive school, as most primary schools are today. Within three months I would be walking to get the bus to the grammar school whilst the majority of my friends walked to the local secondary modern.

Today there are still cries to bring back grammar schools. Whenever I talk to the promoters of grammar schools they seem to have a blind spot when I raise the necessary requirement for grammar schools - which is the accompanying secondary modern type provision for "the rest".

What is attractive to the "separationists" is the simplicity of the model. Very clear pathways for the academic - medicine, the law, accountancy, teaching for example, as well as very clear pathways for the non-academic - unskilled, semi-skilled or skilled employment - craftsmen, hairdressers, plumbers.

But please don't think I consider the narrowing of paths simply applies to the "practical", the non-academic, the secondary modern child.

Often the paths for the supposedly academic child are also narrowed. For example, the creative child who is told that medicine is the only way forward - to be a musician or an artist is beneath them.

What is difficult for us is how to provide "clear educational or employment pathways" for children in a complex society where we cannot divide people or jobs into two simple compartments.

Unfortunately, too often our children are provided with complicated and ever-changing pathways to education, employment and training. How do we provide clarity about the opportunity for progression without labelling children too early or narrowing their path to the future?

This is the challenge for educationalists and employers.

Les Walton CBE, Chair of the Northern Education Trust.

Can you recall stories about your education, particularly the 11+? If you do, please email Les at les.walton@northerneducation.com