

Education: Have we forgotten more than we learned?

In the first of his fortnightly columns, LES WALTON says the view that education is to be suffered rather than enjoyed has proved difficult to shake off over the years

LET me say from the start that I am in love with the sight, the shape and the sounds of education.

I have the same attitude to education that Bill Shankly had to football when he said: "People believe football is a matter of life and death. I am very disappointed with that attitude. I can assure you it is much more important than that."

Even I think education is more important than football. Throughout the whole of my life education has been fought over by political parties, advocacy groups, pressure groups, lobby groups, campaign groups, interest groups, parent organisations, teacher organisations, employer organisations... I could go on. It continually changes, whilst staying the same.

It tries new ideas, repeats old ones and introduces old ideas as though they have been just invented.

An operating theatre in a hospital is, I know, very different in terms of technology and culture compared to the 19th Century.

Most people's view of school classrooms is that they appear exactly the same as when I was attending my local Infant and Junior School in 1949. That is where the problem lies. We all understand and have clear views on education because we remember clearly our own education.

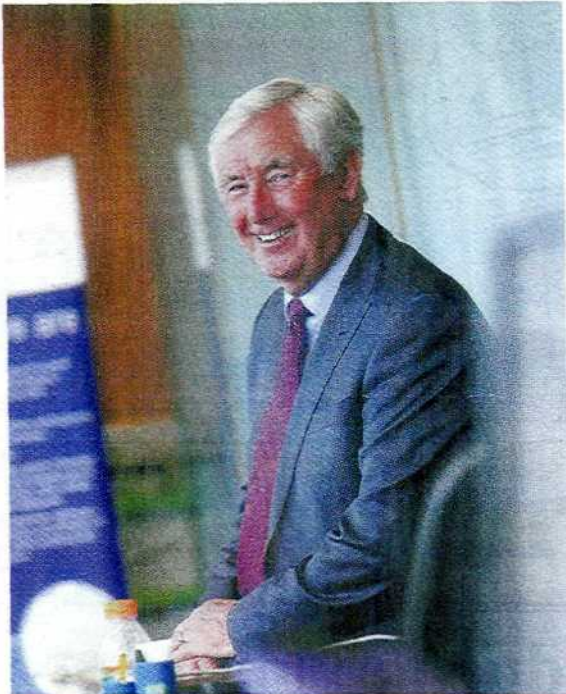
The reason why I accepted the invitation to write this column is because I do believe we have forgotten more than we have learned in our continual quest to improve the education of the children we love.

I also believe we need to celebrate the improvements we have made and be critical of the lack of progress.

I will attempt, in my small way, to reflect on current education thinking by referring to my experience of education over the second half of the 20th Century.

A couple of weeks ago I visited my 'old primary school'. My memories of the 'old school' in the 1950s were of being strapped with a leather belt in the infants' school and with a cane in the primary.

This school is now described by Ofsted as an 'Outstanding School'. Without doubt it is outstanding. I met a committed and highly experienced Chair of Governors and a truly remarkable headteacher supported



► Les Walton: "We need to celebrate the improvements we have made and be critical of the lack of progress"

by dedicated staff and wonderful pupils.

Everywhere I looked there was quality. In the teaching, the learning, the displays inside the classrooms and the activities in the playground.

There was also discipline! Not the discipline imposed by the strap or the cane but a discipline driven by outstanding teaching, building on the children's innate desire to learn.

Interestingly, when I later drove around the area in which I was brought up, very little seemed to have changed. There is a new fast food shop and factories where there once were 'pit cooling ponds'.

However the level of deprivation and employment in the area has not significantly changed.

On June 2, 1953, Queen Elizabeth II was crowned at a coronation ceremony in Westminster Abbey, London. The previous Sunday we celebrated the coronation in our local chapel by staging a mock coronation. We made paper mache models of the orb, sceptre, rod of mercy and the crown. It was a wonderful event.

In contrast, Tuesday, June 2, was a miserable, overcast day. My primary school celebrated the coronation by giving us the day off and then insist-

ing we returned to school for a Coronation Party.

Right from the start I thought this was unfair. The injustice was compounded when on arrival we were all sat down in the gym/dining hall and given a rock cake and a Coronation mug filled with warm milk!

The thought that we may 'enjoy' the day never entered the teachers' or pupils' minds. Of course this was in keeping with the view that education is to be suffered and not enjoyed; a view that is still held by some people today.

Every alternate Monday, I will attempt to reflect on the current education scene. I'll cover curriculums, discipline, academies - even school meals. I have always in my professional life tried to remain 'apolitical' - but the problem with education is that every time we say anything it is positioned within a political perspective.

You may decide I am a wishy-washy liberal come socialist/conservative!

Nevertheless, I hope I can bring some insight to what is a key topic for all of us.

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