

75% party games, 25% disco music and 100% hassle

LES WALTON is still mightily proud of his school Christmas Party Policy from 1975

EVERY so often in the history of education there are 'tipping points'. These are times when fundamental changes occur in schools.

For many people these may be the creation of local education authorities or the rise of comprehensive schools. For me the demise of Christmas party traditional games and dances and the rise of disco was a major 'tipping point'.

Christmas for many pupils in a secondary school in the 1950s was very stressful. We would learn *The Gay Gordons*, the *Dashing White Sergeant*, *Strip the Willow* and the *Waltz*. For me it was absolute hell.

The worst part was holding a girl in close proximity. Up till then I had pretended girls didn't exist. Also most of the girls weren't too keen to have their feet stamped on by this totally uncoordinated hooper.

Then the instructions! "Hold a girl's right hand with your left and place your right hand on her shoulder blade. Then stand in front of her and a little to the right. Step on your right foot, pivot on the ball of your foot so that now you are facing the wall bars in the gym." These commands had the complexity of modern day computer programming classes.

My own school decided to make matters worse by inflicting the dreaded 'Moonlight Saunter' on us. This consisted of turning the lights down and then shining a spotlight on certain couples. Avoiding the spotlight became a real art.

The dance reminded me very much of a scene from a British prisoner of war film, when the prisoners, crossing the compound, trying to escape, were caught in the guards' searchlight. At least they were put out of their misery by being shot. The pain for me continued right until the day I left school.

In 1975 I was designated a senior teacher in a comprehensive school. The original idea for senior teachers is that they would be 'lead professionals', a role model for teachers, not managers, within the school.

Like most senior teachers in the 1970s we didn't really know how to help other teachers to teach. In fact it was not seen as a function of a school. There was an assumption that qualified teachers status was enough.

So, like many other 'senior teachers', I became an administrator. I was in charge of 'probationary teachers',



► A school Christmas party in 1970. Anyone for pass the parcel?

students amongst other things. One of the 'other things' I took responsibility for was the school Christmas parties and because I am essentially a bureaucrat I decided to introduce a 'Christmas Party Policy'.

In the 1970s schools would still continue to have Christmas parties which consisted of games such as pass the parcel and statues, and traditional dances. Don't let anyone tell you we didn't adapt with the times - we had evolved to 'pass the parcel' and 'statues' set to pop music.

During December the PE staff, as when I was a pupil, would have the honour of teaching the children to dance. Instead of football and netball there would be dancing lessons. Thus the children were being carefully trained to be 'party ready' by Christmas.

Let me tell you about my Christmas Party Policy. The 11-year-olds were used to party games in primary so they were happy to continue the tradition. The older pupils wanted 'disco music'. Following lengthy and tough negotiations with the pupils an agreement was reached. The 11-year-olds would have 100% party games, the 12-year-olds 75% party games with 25% 'disco'; for the 13-year-olds it was 50/50 and for the pupils aged 14, it was 75% disco and 25% games. The 15-year-olds would then have a free choice.

I thought this was a brilliant solution. This was a proper school policy with rules and regulations.

At each party we presented a prize for the winner of the Christmas Charity Raffle. The prize was usually the record that was 'Top of the Pops'. In 1975 the winner's record was to be *Bohemian Rhapsody*. At the time it

was the most expensive single ever made, the first live performance having just taken place in November.

The headteacher was to present the prize. He quite liked the record because it 'didn't sound like the usual rubbish you hear on the wireless'. However I was asked to change the prize. Queen at the time were surrounded by controversy and were 'not good role models for young people'.

Having just completed the highly complex and revolutionary 'Christmas Party Policy', I entered into serious negotiations with the headteacher.

Part of the discussion was the meaning of the lyrics. I argued that the record would encourage children's love of opera. *Bohemian Rhapsody* parodied many different elements of opera by using bombastic choruses and bits of distorted Italian operatic phraseology. Also there were lyrical references to figures such as Scaramouche, Galileo, Figaro and Bismillah.

Eventually common sense (and pseudo-intellectual reasoning) won. *Bohemian Rhapsody* was presented as the Christmas raffle prize.

School parties are an example of how schools are adapting to changes in society.

However let no one underestimate the difficulties in managing the continuous demand for change in schools. It is interesting to consider which was the biggest 'tipping point' at the time - the 1975 Bullock Report which recommended improvements in reading, writing and spoken English or the demise of the *Moonlight Saunter*.

■ Les Walton is chairman of the Northern Education Trust.