

How the inspectors were egged on at my school assembly

LES WALTON on music and messages for students

In the 1980s the "pastoral care" of pupils was prominent in the establishment of the new comprehensive schools. One possible reason for this was a fear that these new large organisations may not have so much concern for "the individual child."

In 1981 we decided to create Gateshead Pastoral Care Association, bringing together educationalists, social workers, psychologists and other key professions who have an interest in pastoral care and the welfare of students. Steve Munby, who eventually became chief executive of the National College, was a young committee member.

Whilst the main focus of the association was on all aspects of personal and social education, one of my interests was the contribution school assemblies made to student development.

A particular memorable school assembly was when a rather self-important headteacher complained to the head of music about always playing the calming Mendelssohn on his Dansette record player on his entry to the assembly.

This didn't fit in with his idea of "leading the troops into battle" and his love of talking about how he had "bombed Germany during the war."

After three weeks of the 633 Squadron and the Dambusters theme the hall was packed, ready to hear the latest musical choice when he entered to the strains of "Jesus Christ Superstar...who do you think you really are?" He finally cracked.

I spent a lot of time preparing assemblies for the children. One of my favourites was the 'Tie Assembly'. The Head of Music would wear a tie tucked into a pullover. I would then insult him, pull out his tie and cut a bit off with a pair of scissors. I would then tuck it back in and apologise. Eventually the tie was so short it could not be put back in without showing a gap. My apologies would not mend the division. Meanwhile P.P. Arnold's "The First Cut is the Deepest" played on the Dansette.

The assembly was about bullying, "cutting remarks" which eventually cannot be forgiven. With older pupils the assembly focused on bereavement and the "final cut," which may or may not be the end. In 1988 that assembly was accompanied by the Mike and the Mechanics song "The Living Years."

Another favourite assembly was the "Egg Assembly." I would ask a pupil to try to crush a fresh egg by pressing each end with their hands. It is in fact impossible to break the egg. The theme was 'inner strength'. In the background the school choir sang Labi Siffre's "Something Inside



► A step up from tie-snipping...Collabro's Jamie Lambert visits his old school, Dame Allan's in Newcastle, for an inspirational assembly last month

So Strong." Unfortunately, when I was being inspected, due to sweaty hands, the egg slipped and splattered the inspectors sitting in the front row.

A Pastoral Head was a new invention at the time and so I often would visit other people who had a similar role and get ideas for assemblies. One of my favourite people was Bill who worked at the neighbouring comprehensive.

I asked to watch one of his assemblies. We met in his office as the children were assembling. As the children started to enter the hall Bill lit a fag. When his deputy announced they were seated waiting for him he placed his half-smoked Woodbine in the ashtray, walked to the front, gave a brief announcement, said a prayer, and then got back in time to finish his cigarette. The health part of what we now term personal, social and health education (PSHE) was in its infancy.

I was then approached by Michael Marland, a nationally renowned headteacher from London who, together with a number of leading educationalists, wanted to establish a similar association across the UK. So in 1982 we established the National Association of Pastoral Care in Education (NAPCE).

Like the Gateshead Pastoral Care Association, NAPCE took off like a rocket. We soon established regular conferences in the North East, usually held at Beamish Hall. The whole focus of the weekend was how the needs of individual children should be at the forefront of our educational thinking.

Within a couple of years we decided to hold our first national conference in Bede College, Durham.

Whilst the conference was a tre-

mendous success, even before the conference opened there were problems. A group of female teachers from London had complained to me about how they were welcomed at Durham railway station.

When they arrived they were greeted by Trevor and Steve, two Pastoral Heads from East Durham who said 'Welcome Hinnies'. They then told him off for calling them 'Hinnies'. He then said 'I apologise Pet' which also upset them. 'We are not your Pets' they complained. When Trevor offered to carry their bags, because they might be a bit heavy, relationships broke down entirely. I persuaded the group to stay and continue with the conference.

Unfortunately, I had forgotten the brief I had given to the conference president who also came from London and had asked for advice on how he should open the conference. A few years before in 1977 Jimmy Carter the American President visited Newcastle. Carter had said 'Howay the lads'.

Thinking this was a good idea, I advised him to welcome the conference by saying 'Howay Lads and Lasses', making sure to include men and women in the reference.

As soon as he uttered the fatal words the London group walked out, never to return.

It is hard to imagine now that the "pastoral care movement" at that time was incredibly powerful. This indeed was a forerunner of Every Child Matters.

I am delighted to say, after 33 years, NAPCE is still going strong and retaining our focus on the "whole child."

Les Walton CBE is chairman of the Northern Education Trust.