

The morning after a terrible night... how did we cope?

LES WALTON on the critical role schools can play in restoring stability after a crisis

"WHAT should young people do with their lives today? Many things, obviously. But the most daring thing is to create stable communities in which the terrible disease of loneliness can be cured."

Kurt Vonnegut

IN the 1990s there were a number of urban riots across the UK. One of the most serious was in the Meadow Well Estate on Tyneside.

My own school, Northam Community High School, was on the edge of the estate. For a number of years the school did not have a boundary fence. It was considered that a fence would separate us from the community.

However, we maintained an 'aggressive daffodil planting policy'. Daffodils and other flowers were planted around the front of the school.

We also had a 'ha-ha', an invisible ditch which ran down the side of the playing field. This was designed to protect the school fields, without defacing the landscape, and allow the school to be seen as part of the community.

On the Monday afternoon of September 9, 1991, the head of Meadow Well Primary rang me. She had a concern about what was happening on the estate. We agreed to have a little walk around. Mini-barricades were being constructed at strategic spots.

At 2am on the morning of September 10, I received a phone call from the police who suggested I come to the school. As I arrived, police cars were everywhere; the youth centre, a fish and chip shop, and an electricity sub-station were on fire and there was extensive vandalism to numerous buildings and vehicles.

The riots themselves were triggered by the deaths of two local youths who were killed when the stolen car, in which they were fleeing from police, crashed. Police and fire crews which attended the scene had been pelted with bricks. It was estimated that at its height 400 people were involved and 37 people were arrested, including one who was jailed for four and a half years.

At a hastily-convened meeting with the senior staff, we discussed how we should deal with the situation. Should we address the situation



► Flames engulf the Meadow Well estate in North Shields in 1991

head on or very much focus on 'business as usual'?

We agreed a way forward. The deputy head took a 'normal' school assembly and then the children would go straight to their lessons, demonstrating the importance of learning for our children.

At the end of the assembly she briefly referred to the fact that we were all aware of what had happened during the previous night but we were in school now and had to concentrate on lessons.

We then announced that the children were to attend their tutorial groups mid-morning. This would be an opportunity to discuss the previous evening's events and begin to address the impact of the situation on our children.

During the next two or three days, visitors to the school commented on the school being "a haven" and an "oasis" compared to the chaos outside.

The following September, in 1992, I was asked to speak at a conference in Brighton about the role of education within urban areas. The main reason I agreed to speak was that there were to be speakers from Los Angeles, California who would be talking about how they responded to the LA riots. I had prepared a handwritten overhead projector presentation. I described the work we had done in engaging with the community before and after the Meadow Well riots.

I was followed by an American psychologist who wowed me and the whole conference with his new-fangled 'PowerPoint' presentation.

After our respective presentations there was a question-and-answer session on the stage. When I was asked what caused the riots in Meadow Well and the east end of Newcastle I explained that the reasons were complex and different for the differ-

ent areas within the North East.

In Los Angeles, the acquittals of the police officers accused of the beating up of Rodney King were generally considered to have triggered the 1992 riots. My new American friend, when asked to describe the LA police attack on Rodney King, said that they had a 'temporary low empathy response'.

Unfortunately, the laughter from the audience at this Americanism drowned out his next pearl of wisdom. However, I understood what he was saying.

This is the big challenge for community schools. How do schools maintain their focus on maintaining the school values and learning needs of all their children whilst avoiding 'low empathy responses' with those who we do not understand or who have very different values and beliefs?

Without doubt, the relationship between schools and their communities is complex as well as the role of schools with regard to regeneration. However, for many communities schools are the only stable and constant organisation within the area.

We need to remind ourselves of the critical role schools can play as community leaders. It is a long time since 'Rab' Butler's Education Act of 1944 sought to encourage the "spiritual, mental and physical" well-being of the community.

Too many education acts have since ignored the vital role that education can play in community regeneration and cohesion. When a community is in turmoil no child should be left behind and no child should be lonely.

Surrounded by incredibly supportive staff, pupils and parents, I was fortunate. I never felt alone.

■ Les Walton CBE is chairman of Northern Education Trust.