

I am a teacher at Trafalgar High School, Birchington Road, Cape Town. On Friday the third of September I was in my classroom on the first floor, which is North-facing and is bounded by Constitution Street, and has a view of Table Bay, and the Station and the Grand Parade. On the morning in question I was involved in the arduous task of cleaning up flood waters, 15 cm deep in my large classroom which, for a specific function, is twice the size of an ordinary classroom. The previous day; unbeknown to the students or myself; the plumbers had disconnected the water, and my children had inadvertently left the unruming taps on; in the confusion to evacuate the school because, on the principals instructions, we were to have an emergency meeting to discuss the unrest in town. (The day in question was marked by numerous student gatherings in town, teargas and streets sealed off.) And this resulted in a terrible flood, the next day. At about 11 am the mopping up drawing to a close some std.6 helpers noticed tear gas being fired in town. We had a good view from the windows. At that point it was break and children gathered in the playground beneath my classroom to watch the teargas in town.

At this point I would like to say that at no time had Trafalgar displayed any organised solidarity with the students in the rest of the country and this was a bitter and contentious issue. There had been no protests, no marches, no slogans.

While the children were watching a blue VW car drove past full of policemen. It stopped suddenly and a blue uniformed policeman batoncharged a young boy or about ten. Then the unsuccessful policeman climbed into the car and they turned at the corner of the school and drove past again. The watching children booed. Immediately the car stopped police jumped out and various rounds of teargas were shot. Immediately the children ran indoors. I quickly closed all the windows and children began to rush in my classroom in search of water, eyes streaming, and coughing, and a few children were crying and physically overcome by the teargas, as well as shocked. Of course there was no water in my classroom except hot. We filled basins and tore up rags and led the children (there must have been a few hundred) to basins as they streamed in. At that time I heard a girl had had an epileptic fit in the staffroom. Shocked and shivering children were comforted by others in the safety of my pantry, which has one tiny window only.

Finally after all the chaos things were reasonably calm, in my classroom. Meanwhile some of the senior pupils, incensed by the unforewarned teargas attack, made their first protest: they made some posters stating:

"WE WANT RIGHTS NOT RIOTS" AND

"GIVE US FREEDOM"

These they tied onto the playground fence below. By this time it was about 12.30. A few of the children stood outside quietly talking. At 12.45 two riot vehicles suddenly pulled onto the corner of Birchington Road and Constitution Street and again without warning fired teargas, and camouflage-clad men shot birdshot and a blonde haired bespectacled marksman stood on the step of a vehicle and picked out sleeping children. The principal standing next to me said "Look.. he's got a rifle!" And the children were screaming and running into the school. In the next few minutes some children were telling me that a boy had been shot dead with "Blood pouring out of his eyes and ears and mouth". Again there was chaos and crying children, terrified searching for water in my room. Meanwhile the caretaker had attempted to barricade us in the school. Children were watching from my windows. The police were now in their riot trucks driving round and round the school, with the marksman aiming at people across the road. Police aimed at the children through the windows and the children jumped back and some ran out of my classroom as it seemed they would fire. The principal came up again and pointed out a machinegun in the back of one of the trucks. We still did not know who had been shot. Meanwhile a few children had been rolling the police from the upstairs classrooms and pelting them with rocks. Suddenly a male teacher burst into my room and said "For God's sake don't throw stones." "Everything is under control here!" I replied. As he left a boy shouted: "They are coming into the school Miss" and then "They are coming up here!" "They are beating people!" Some children fled and others had drifted out in the constant stream. But there were about eight children then and we could hear the police running up the stairs a classroom away. The children were young and very frightened, we ran into the pantry, which is on the immediate right of the classroom door, it did not lock, and the class door had been broken that morning, very early, so the caretaker could turn off the water..... I closed the doors and told the children to be dead quiet. Two little girls were almost hysterical with fear. And a small boy said "It's not fair Miss" almost in tears as we heard them swearing and thumping next door. Suddenly my door was banged open and we froze, then silence, and then to our intense relief we heard them run on. We must have been a few centimetres from them. We stayed there for quite a time until the children heard a loudhailer ordering the school to clear. And then the principal opened the pantry door and found the police had gone into the classroom nextdoor. In it were the male teacher warning for boys not to throw stones. Two police stood guard with rifles at the door while another four beat the rest. The teacher was beaten fifteen times with a baton. Another child slipped and was kicked and beaten all over, but particularly about the head. He had a very badly bruised and bleeding face. Eventually the children were released in two's. The police continued to rage around. Later more teargas was fired at parents fetching their children.

Later I heard that the shot boy was Shaheed Jacobs a 15 year old from Bloemhof flats. I have heard from two reliable sources that he was given an Islamic heroes' funeral. He was neither washed nor embalmed. I have heard that he was considered a holy martyr.

The teacher who was assaulted went to various doctors, who were not prepared give him a medical certificate. Finally a Cape Town district surgeon did and advised him to lay a charge of assault.

As it was Ramadan, many of the children who had vomited from the teargas were worried that they had broken their fast by allowing liquid to pass their lips. And the shocked and overcome would not drink water, even though some were choking.

I would like to say was deeply touched by the bravery, strength and love the children showed during this experience, to each other and to the staff. A love that bound us together.