

Foreword

MY NAME is Frank Chalk and this is the story of a year in my working life as a teacher at...well, let's call it St. Jude's School, Downtown, UK, to spare any blushes.

St Jude's is a pretty poor school - not the worst, by any means, but at the lower end of what Alastair Campbell used to call 'bog-standard comprehensives' - with a working-class catchment area in a middling-sized city. As such, it's typical of a huge number of schools in Britain, which is quite a horrifying thought.

I used to be full-time (maths, since you ask) but after a few years of that I swapped to supply teaching. In case you are unfamiliar with the modern education system - if, for example, you're an ex-pupil of ours - a supply teacher is someone who fills in for absent full-timers across a range of subjects.

In all, I've got around 10 years in the classroom under my belt.

A bit about me: I'm a normal bloke from an average background in a small northern town. My mum worked part-time as a teacher and my father worked as a project estimator for a local company. I attended my local comprehensive school and went to university, in the days when you didn't leave with £20,000-worth of debts but they did expect you to learn something worthwhile. I'm 40 years old and married. I love outdoor stuff, like skiing, mountain-biking and walking in the countryside.

Obviously, my real name isn't Frank Chalk. Again, I've tried to save a few blushes - my wife is a teacher, too, as are some of my friends, and I wouldn't want them to get all embarrassed if they spot themselves in these pages.

I have also altered the names and other details of the staff who feature in this book and swapped a few of the kids' names around, for obvious reasons.

However, the characters I describe are real and so are the events: every single one of the stories contained within this book is completely and utterly true. It all happened to me and I have deliberately and carefully avoided exaggeration. I've even kept in about 5% of the bad

language (though I have used asterisks; if you can't work them out, ask a teenager). I hate swearing but you can't reflect the atmosphere of a modern comprehensive school without it, I'm afraid.

If you're around 30, parts of this book will make your hair curl.

If you're around 40, they'll make your hair fall out.

If you're 50 or older...well, to be honest, I wouldn't recommend you read this book without paramedics standing by, defibrillator and oxygen tank at the ready.

School isn't like it was in your day. (Or mine.)

All that said, I'm quite sure that there are teachers out there who could tell even more shocking tales. I know that many of them share my despair, though they mostly keep quiet about it. It doesn't do to rock the boat too much.

You might get the impression, from reading this book, that I don't like kids and that I'm flippant about their futures. Actually, I do care, very much, about our youngsters and this book has been born out of my frustration, even despair, at seeing the majority of those who've passed through my classroom let down, day in, day out.

They are let down by their parents, who spend more time watching TV than talking to their children, who serve them reheated junk food instead of fresh meat and vegetables and who fail utterly to encourage them to get the most out of their school days (some actively encourage them to achieve as little as possible, for reasons I can only guess at).

They're let down by their junior schools and, as you'll see, later let down by us at secondary school.

And they're let down by 'the system'.

Blair and Brown promised us 'education, education, education' and failed, disastrously. But I don't entirely blame them, or the hapless succession of ministerial blunderers they have overseen. The rot set in many years ago, and a succession of governments, of both political hues, are responsible. So, too, are the hordes of politically-correct educationalists and right-on teachers whose trendy theories and finger-in-the-air experimentation with what was once the finest education system in the world have conspired to smash the hopes and dreams of millions of young Britons (to the point where many no longer even have hopes or dreams).

I went into the profession, initially, to 'put something back'. I thought I could 'make a difference', too. Perhaps I was naïve.

I've spent years telling my non-teaching friends about what goes on in the mad, mad world of the state education system.

But - fed a constant diet of lies and distortions, by the media, the teaching unions and ministers, about ever-improving exam results, huge investment and shiny new computers in every classroom - they assume I'm joking, or at least exaggerating.

Sadly, I'm not.

MR JONES AND THE WASTED LESSON

MR Jones teaches (or, more correctly, doesn't teach) Mathematics.

He is tall, thin and in his late forties. He wears a faded, mottled-brown sports jacket with those traditional leather patches on the elbows.

He is, no doubt, an expert in his subject but I think it is unlikely that, in the 25 years that he has taught at St Jude's, he has managed to impart one single fact of mathematical significance to the 10,000 or so pupils who have passed through his hands.

His results are terrible, even by our low standards, and have been during all the time he has been here.

Thanks to the teaching unions, however, he will never be sacked; he will simply go on being bad and not teaching maths until he retires.

I could forgive him all the above were it not for the fact that he also wears a beard. I have always gone by the maxim 'never trust a man with a beard' and it has never let me down. He also wears Personality Substitutes, another terrible crime in my eyes. Ties that depict Homer Simpson, socks with Disney characters on them or, Heaven forbid, badges. These are not, and have never been, amusing. Certainly, they have no place in the Staff Room. If you wish to dress to amuse then head for the big top. (I urge any teacher reading this to go immediately to the corner of the Staff Room where all the mugs are kept and carefully check each one. Any that bear

'comical' phrases such as 'Teachers never grow old...they just so-and-so' or 'You don't have to be mad to teach here but etc etc' should be thrown away forthwith.

Remember, you are doing the noble profession of teaching a favour.

Covering for Mr Jones is a nightmare.

This is because the pupils expect to behave in the same way as they do when he is there (ie appallingly). His lessons are utter chaos and the shouting tennis match between him and the children can be heard along the corridor.

His classroom is a terrible mess. Piles of books, graph paper and bits of equipment are strewn everywhere and all the work from his different classes is mixed up. He is always the last teacher to produce his class reports and loses anything that is given to him. A couple of years ago the builders had to come in and do some repairs to the wall at the back of the class; a couple of kids had spent weeks digging away at the plaster and brickwork, like prisoners in Alcatraz. They had made a hole in the wall almost big enough to crawl through and hidden it with a filing cabinet. Mr Jones had not noticed a thing.

Today, I am covering his Year 11 lesson as he has been sent on an Assertiveness Course. As he is such a disaster, he gets to go on all sorts of courses at vast expense to the taxpayer. He has been going on them for 25 years, to no visible effect, and will continue to go on them for another 15 until he retires. I kid you not: he was due to go on an Organisational Skills Course last month but forgot to send off the application form.

It is Set 6 - the same group that I had a couple of weeks ago, when I nearly managed to hypnotise them. Mr Jones used to be given only the bottom sets, in order to limit the damage he could cause, but he complained to his union and they insisted that he be given a full range of abilities in order that he could ruin a wider selection of children's futures.

Once again, the eight regulars have turned up. I have no idea why, but I'm certainly relieved that at least some of the nightmare characters are 'away'.

Six out of the eight pupils have left a green 'Report Card' on my desk, issued to each one after Mr Phillips has received a given number of complaints about them. This must be handed to the

teacher at the start of every lesson; at the end of the lesson, you use the card to comment on each child's behaviour and work. If, after the week is up, a pupil has accumulated too many negative comments he is given an amber report card. Finally, he receives a red one. If that, too, is littered with marks of disapproval the child is supposed to be excluded for three days. Needless to say, this rarely happens (though most of our clients could not care less either way) and the report card system is therefore at best a farce and at worst an encouragement to misbehave: the kids see a report card as a badge of pride.

In fact, it is a prime example of an idea that looks good on paper (and enables the SMT to claim that it has a discipline policy) whilst being completely ineffective in practice. Schools are totally removed from real life, where only tangible, measurable results matter. Businesses go bust without selling their products, patients die if they're left untreated and it's no good drawing up an action plan to clean your dirty car. In the public sector, however, it's all about ticking boxes, producing policies and attending meetings. Whether the countless 'strategies' work or not is an irrelevance.

The weekly School Detention, held by the SMT for an hour after school each Friday, is another case in point. Only Heads of Department can put pupils into detention, which means mere teachers have to justify a request, filling in a form identifying the child's wrong-doing and outlining what other measures have already been tried and have failed. The Head of Department then has to fill in another form showing, in turn, what measures the department as a whole has taken and why they have failed. The pupil's parents then have to be given 24 hours' notice of the detention. At the end of that endless stream of paperwork, the kid then produces a letter from his mother. The letter will say that it is too dangerous for the child to get home on his own and he can't be picked up from school later than normal. Or it will claim that the parent simply didn't receive the letter or message informing them of the detention in the first place. That's if you get a response; quite often, the errant pupil simply never turns up for the detention and the matter is forgotten. Is it any wonder that teachers simply give up?

But I digress.

Jordan, Liam, Sean and Kyle are sitting in the front row not listening to me explain how to calculate the value of x , given that $x + 4 = 10$.

I haven't a clue why we are doing this, as they are not even entered for the GCSE exam. Even if they were entered, it is obvious that they will never be able to calculate 'x' in a million years (or need to). Now they are drawing pictures of men armed with guns, daggers and chainsaws. Perhaps they will find careers with Walt Disney's famous animation studios. Or perhaps they won't.

I've confiscated a soft porn magazine from one of them and a bottle of Coca Cola topped up with a healthy supply of rum from another.

'What's the point in us doing this?' asks Jordan, porn boy, busily not doing it anyway.

'No point whatsoever,' I reassure him, cheerfully. I carry on with the next example.

Behind them sit Dawn, Keeley, Jade and Tracey, who are also not showing the slightest interest in my sums. Dawn and Keeley are writing a note to a boy in another class. Occasionally, they even ask me how to spell something. I help them out, struggling bravely to keep a straight face. Jade and Tracey are discreetly playing noughts and crosses.

I must say, teaching algebra is so much easier when nobody is paying the slightest attention.

I'm quite enjoying it, so I move on to more complicated examples such as $2x + 5 = 11$. I even get Jade to wipe the board for me when it is full.

I glance at my watch: only ten minutes left of another successful lesson.

I notice that Dawn is using the pen she was awarded at Presentation Evening for having the best attendance in the year. We like to reward achievement. Her exercise book is virtually empty, however, as she would never dream of doing any work. Instead, she is using the pen to write on her desk.

My despair reaches no greater depths than Presentation Evening, where prizes are liberally distributed for good attendance (ie not absolutely appalling attendance) and other classics such as 'Most improved pupil.' I mean, it's not exactly difficult for some of these kids to improve; just keeping quiet for five minutes would do.

Maths cover isn't actually too bad if you're covering for anyone other than Mr Jones. The textbooks still have lots of questions for the

kids, ostensibly, to get on with and there are always plenty of opportunities for colouring. Graphs and shapes should always be coloured in and graph paper provides hours of pattern-making fun for the average 15-year-old.

In fact, thinking about it, it can be quite relaxing.

LABELS, GLUE AND BLOOD PRESSURE

AFTER some years spent teaching full-time, I have switched to supply work.

Although I still teach pretty much full-time, I do, in theory, have the freedom to do other things as well. Psychologically, I'm no longer tied to St Jude's by an umbilical cord, and this fact is important because it has prevented me from going bonkers.

Supply work also gives you a bit more variety. The way it works is this: the phone rings, it's school asking if you can come in because a given teacher is off for a week or so (stress, nervous trouble, broken nose etc). They offer you money, and you say yes. Later, you wonder why you didn't say no, because there is a downside: as a supply teacher, you tend to get the worst classes. This is because their teachers tend to be away more often and also because Mrs Borrowdale once heard me call her a witch. Mrs Borrowdale is in charge of organising Cover. Sometimes, I am booked well in advance to cover an arranged absence - to fill in for Mr Blunt while he goes on his Anger Management Course, for example. Other times, I am woken by a phone call from The Witch at 7.15am, saying cheerfully, 'Come on in, we've got lots of teachers away'.

On days like those, my first challenge is to find out what lessons I'm covering (since I have been at the school for years now, most of the kids think I am a normal teacher who just can't make up his mind which subject to do).

Sometimes my timetable actually changes during the day: someone may have to leave unexpectedly, or an emergency might arise. I just accept whatever I'm given.

Knowing which lessons I am to cover is only half the story; then I have to track down the work that has been left for the kids to get on with. This often requires the skills of Sherlock Holmes. It can be Sellotaped to the teacher's desk, from where it will often have been removed by a naughty pupil. It might be left in my pigeonhole. It might be left in some random other person's pigeonhole. Or it might not be left at all.

I love the element of surprise.

Today, I am covering for another teacher who seems to be permanently off with stress (the school cannot replace her as she is still officially employed).

It's a red letter day, too: the new set of science textbooks has finally arrived.

This may not seem much to you but I feel like bringing in champagne to celebrate or asking the Head for a half day's holiday. In the past, we have shared one dirty, dog-eared textbook between two or even three children and it's a book which doesn't even cover the right topics for our syllabus.

These new ones are written by the people who set the exam, so they must cover the relevant stuff.

The Head of Department arrives carrying the books and hands them out to the kids, handling them with great reverence.

'These books are brand new,' he intones solemnly, placing one neatly on my desk. 'They must be treated with great respect and care so that others may use them in the future.'

It's a Year 7 class, so they are listening intently. For many of them, these will be the first books they have ever seen that are not covered in graffiti. (For readers who left school a while ago, the year numbering system has changed. We are a secondary school, so when kids reluctantly come to us at the age of 11 they go into Year 7. Confusingly, it is actually their eighth year of schooling - reception year, when they started at age four, was their first. At the end of Year 11 they take their GCSEs. Sixth Form is Years 12 and 13. But we don't have one of those).

As he drones on, I examine one of the books. It has that pleasant smell of newly-printed paper and, like all modern textbooks, is a masterpiece of political correctness. It is chock-full of bright pictures of children from ethnic minority backgrounds doing science

experiments and photographs of every kind of phenomena. Even the teachers are in wheelchairs. Any wrongdoing is illustrated by a white boy; here is one, foolishly sticking his fork into an electrical socket and being electrocuted. Here's another, drinking from a test tube.

What I cannot find, to my mounting horror as I flip through the book, are any questions.

Oh, bloody hell!

Why are all modern textbooks in every subject full of photographs but devoid of questions?

I also notice that, actually, it doesn't quite seem to cover the syllabus to which we have recently changed after the head of department assured us that it was 'the easiest one yet'.

He hands me a pile of rectangular labels and half a dozen glue sticks.

'Get them to fill these in and stick them in the books. It'll only take two minutes. I'll pop back later to pick up the glue.' Off he goes.

I am in good spirits because this task ought to be a breeze.

I glance at the labels. They look absolutely ancient; someone's dug them up from the back of a stock cupboard. The typeface and print are from another era. They must be decades old.

Each label has four headings.

'Do not touch these yet!' I say, giving them out and quickly drawing one on the board so I can fill it in for the kids to see.

SCHOOL: St. Jude's

NAME: Julius Caesar

TEACHER: Miss Barrow

FORM: 7A

'Put them down!' Dale has been unable to resist writing his name next to 'SCHOOL' and has to be given another one.

'Now, listen carefully while I explain what we are going to...put them down!' Brett has dropped his on the floor and it has got dirty. Another label is given out.

'Right, listen! Do not touch these labels *until I say so!* OK? All I want to see on your desk is the text book, label and your pen.'

Pause, while we look at our desks and make any necessary adjustments.

'Don't touch that glue!'

I rescue a glue stick from an over-eager hand and place it safely out of reach on my desk. There's something about glue sticks; everybody wants one. The kids love sticking things in their books. In fact, they love most activities that don't involve learning something or answering questions.

Now, let's make sure we do this nice and steadily: 'Right. First of all, at the top is the school name, which we all know?'

Nods all round.

'Next there is your name. *YOUR* name, OK? I've put in 'Julius Caesar' to show you where. Underneath that we have your teacher's name - Miss Barrow.'

'OK?'

More nods. Now for the tricky bit; the class is made up of kids from four different Registration groups.

'Finally, it says 'Form', which is your *REGISTRATION* form, not 7T, which is your *science group*. OK? I have put 7A, which is an *EXAMPLE!* You will write in your own.'

They seem to have got it.

'Now, first of all, you will fill the forms out and then I will come round and check them all, then we will stick them in. Do not stick them in before I have said that you can. OK?'

Nods. We can't *wait* to use those glue sticks.

I watch them like a hawk: 'No, Stella, don't use a pencil, use your pen...Oh, OK, here's one.'

Thirty seconds into the exercise, the first label is destroyed as Stella (it's amazing how many kids are named after alcoholic drinks) attempts to rub out her pencil marks and clumsily causes the label to fold in half. It is no longer good enough for her, so she scrunches it up instantly and throws it in the general direction of the bin. Under my glare she then gets up and puts it into the bin. Fortunately we have a generous number of spares, so we carry on.

Less than one minute later, Kat (seriously, that's what her parents called her) scrunches up her label, too.

'Stop!' I shout.

Everyone looks at me.

'What is wrong with that label?'

I immediately see that she is using Stella's pencil and has repeated her mistake. It's interesting that the lower the kid's own

standards are the less likely they are to accept anything other than the most perfect handouts. Any slight fault, such as an insufficiently sharp pencil or a slightly creased piece of paper, will not be tolerated. Even if they have forgotten their own pen, they won't accept a pencil or a Biro with a chewed end. The amount of waste is truly astronomical. Any A4 paper that is not perfect will be scrunched up and rejected.

'Right. From now on, we have another rule. Nobody scrunches up labels and nobody uses a pencil. Oh, and nobody tries to rub anything out. Yes, Dale, I know that is three rules, thank you for telling me. We do not have an endless supply of these labels.'

For God's sake, these kids are twelve years old.

I rub out my example answers on the board to a chorus of moans and groans.

'What's wrong? I'm going to write the answers in with you, OK?'

Nods of understanding all around. I glance at my watch. Bloody hell, we're twenty minutes into the lesson already.

'OK, all together now. School: St. Jude's, right?'

I write in 'St. Jude's'.

'No problems?'

Oh God, please don't let there be.

But there is somebody who has spelt the school name wrongly and is on the point of scrunching up the label.

'No! I scream. 'It doesn't matter if you make a mistake.'

Downcast looks.

'Oh, all right. But this is the very last time.'

Another label ends up in the bin. This is doing my head in.

A hand rises slowly from the back of the class accompanied by a shameful look and a chorus of accusing 'ahs' from all around.

'What?'

Stella has written the name of her previous school by mistake and has started to cry.

'OK, OK, here's another label.' If there's one thing I can't cope with it's crying kids.

I notice that the pile of spare labels doesn't look quite as big as it once did.

Keep the momentum up: 'Right we've all got the school name, good. Let's move on. Next is your name, *YOUR NAME!*'

Now it is my turn to mess up. Forgetting their natural inclination to copy, exactly, whatever I do, I write my name on the board next to 'NAME' and - aaargh! - by the time I turn round, half a dozen of them have copied 'Mr Chalk' into the space next to 'Name' on their labels.

'Stop!'

I cover my face with my hands. I need a drink.

Calm down, Chalk. I tell myself. Think tropical islands, warm beaches and palm trees.

That's better.

Let's try again. Slowly, slowly.

'OK. Put your hand up if you've written 'Mr Chalk' next to 'Name.'

Six hands go up.

'Alright, no problem.'

Six more labels given out. I sit on my desk at the front, voice still calm.

Let's try a different idea.

'I'm not going to write anything on the board any more in case it causes confusion. In fact, let's roll the board round.' I give the board a mighty heave and it rolls round.

'There. All gone now.'

My troubles seem to disappear.

'Now, has everyone written their name next to 'Name'?'

Nods and a few hands raised.

'What? Yes, *both* names.'

Several groans.

'OK, OK, your surname is fine. Just put your initial...WHAT THE...*What are you doing?*'

Dale has just ripped up his label.

'Look,' I say, in an icy voice, 'it doesn't matter if you've put your initial first, your surname first, your first name first or even somebody else's name first. Whatever you have written is fine.'

I am approaching the end of my tether and the pile of remaining labels is getting very low now.

We manage to get past 'Teacher' with only two putting their form teacher by mistake, Chesney copying the word 'Teacher' and Dale writing in the name of his favourite teacher. (That wasn't my name, I can assure you.)

Now the final hurdle: 'OK. Only one more to do now.'

Glance at watch again.

Christ, there's only ten minutes of the lesson left!

'Now, remember: 'Form' is your *REGISTRATION FORM*, the one you register in.'

Eyes down, pens moving. We're nearly done, and thank God because there is only one spare label left.

A commotion has broken out at the back. I walk over and pick up Chesney's label to see that he has written 'G22' next to Form.

'That is not your form group, Chesney, is it?'

'That's the room I register in, Sir.'

A chorus of nods and then the accusations fly, 'You said the room number we register in.'

A quick look around...no, surely not? Yes, yes, they have. They've all got it wrong.

This is the straw that breaks Mr Chalk's back.

'Look!' I bellow. 'All you had to do was fill in four simple things and it's taken all bloody lesson and you've still got it wrong. How can it possibly be that difficult?'

I snatch the textbook off my desk and, to my horror, manage to pull the front cover off. I stand there, holding the severed parts of the book, one in each hand. I am frozen in shock and all is suddenly silent.

The Head of Department chooses this moment to return.

OVER-BEARING, OVER-AUTHORITATIVE AND TOO RIGID IN MY APPROACH

THE great day arrives. We have spent weeks preparing our attempt to pull the wool over the eyes of the Ofsted Inspection Team.

All sorts of policies and action-plans are in place, whether or not they work or even have any meaning. I have passed on my suggestion of a Behaviour Improvement Policy whose targets should be: Clear, Realistic, Achievable and Permanent. If it's adopted I'm hoping the Head will shorten it to an acronym.

A couple of miniature bay trees have appeared outside the school entrance. The whole school has been half-cleaned. The caretaker has been woken up and all the bits of wood fixing the Temporary Classrooms have been given a new coat of paint.

In short, we have done everything except address any of our real problems.

I predict we will fail miserably, unless the Inspectors are completely stupid.

If we do badly, we may well become a 'Failing school' (and if we're not failing our pupils, then who the hell is?) and have to be inspected more frequently or even closed and reopened under a different name. All the teachers would then have to reapply for their jobs (don't worry on their account, they'll be fine: I can't really see anyone else wanting them).

Reopening under a new name would be great. I wonder if they let the teachers decide what it should be. I can certainly think of a few ideas. We would get a new Head, who would be given all sorts of emergency powers to chuck out all the bad kids and send them to other schools in the area. That would certainly make us popular locally. You'll often hear on the news how a heroic new super-Head has managed to turn a failing school around. What is rarely mentioned is that he or she will usually have negotiated *carte blanche* to exclude any troublesome pupils; otherwise there's not a damn thing they or anyone else will be able to do.

Obviously, we need school inspections. Firstly, we need to know how schools are doing. Secondly, we need to provide employment for thousands of ex-teachers, who would much rather check up on how other teachers are doing than risk doing any teaching themselves.

But let's be serious about them: make them unannounced, so that these busybodies can see what really happens, how the kids really behave and how (in) competent everyone really is. Under the current system, a school gets lots of notice of an inspection which gives the staff time to put on a great show. Or to commit fraud, as you might term it. What a nonsensical idea this is.

While I was covering French today, one of the inspectors came into my lesson. He was a mild, slightly nervous-looking man in his mid-fifties, with thin, grey hair and a nice, dark suit. I'm not sure if

he was supposed to be there, given that I'm on supply, but I didn't have a problem with it. They might as well see the full horror of what goes on here.

I thought it all went quite well, actually; the kids didn't play up to him as much as I'd expected. They seemed to like him a lot, especially when he put on a tape of soothing music for them to listen to. I quite enjoyed this too.

Afterwards he gave me a debrief (see, I know all the terms already).

He started by telling me that I was over-bearing, over-authoritative and too rigid in my approach to seating and behaviour.

I thanked him; it's nice to get a bit of praise now and again.

He noted that I had spent five minutes lining the kids up outside (though he called them 'students'), five minutes sitting them down and a further five minutes getting them to write down the title and the date and then underline them.

I thanked him again, and was about to enquire as to whether I might apply for some sort of pay rise when he continued by saying that he was very disappointed in the lesson content, which apparently did not stretch the pupils sufficiently.

They had been drawing pictures of various objects and writing the word next to them. This was in English, admittedly, but if they had worked a bit quicker and got on to the next bit they would have started looking the word up in their dictionaries and writing it down in French. If that isn't stretching them, then I don't know what is. They really struggle with the dictionaries and constantly announce that the word is not listed, as they cannot spell and have no perseverance.

He was also concerned about my knowledge of the language. I had to admit that my degree was in another subject, but I said I had been to France quite a few times on holiday and loved the food, especially the pasta and the pizzas cooked in those proper wood-burning ovens. He seemed a bit puzzled, but eventually praised me for my efforts in what must be a difficult subject for me. He finished by urging me to raise my expectations of the children. He then went to leave, remembered his cassette recorder and discovered that one of the kids had nicked it.

After lunch, he went into Mme Dupont's lesson and was much

happier, apparently. He told her that she had an excellent grasp of the language and that her accent was first rate. He never seemed to notice that she only spoke about six words of English.

Meanwhile, I meet up with Mr Green in the prep room. I am loafing about, finishing off a cup of coffee that the lab techs have made for me in return for labelling a few test tubes.

All over the school there is still a frantic hum of activity, with teachers rushing around looking for equipment for their next lesson or just generally panicking, hoping they won't be singled out by the Ofsted lot. For the thousandth time, I thank my lucky stars that I have given up regular teaching. I'm able to relax, safe in the knowledge that none of it matters in the slightest.

Mr Green exhales loudly and informs me that the inspector has told him that his lesson had 'great contextual relevancy'. He had to admit, however, that he didn't know whether this was good or bad. He was disappointed to hear of shortcomings in his 'Related Learning Objectives' and I wished him a speedy recovery. Mind you, he was delighted to be praised for involving all the children in his lesson. He had wondered if the inspector had thought he might just teach half the group.

I tell him my latest plan: I've been surfing the internet and have found a place where I can purchase a gown and mortar board. I have had the sudden desire to be a Victorian Teacher and, as far as I know, nothing in the school rules precludes me from dressing in this way. Discipline problems will be a thing of the past when my supply of canes arrives.

He is suitably impressed and nods sagely. I can see he's on the verge of asking me to send off for two sets.

None of this is to say that I don't want to embrace modern trendy teaching methods. Just because telling kids how to do something and then getting them to do it was good enough for the likes of Galileo, Newton and Einstein, that doesn't mean it will do for Bradley, Coyne and Dwayne. In fact, I outline to Mr Green and the Techs a new scheme all of my own. In order to Facilitate Memory Retention Skills, Give Experience of Public Speaking and Build Self Esteem, first thing each day each child will come out to the front and be quizzed on his or her multiplication tables. The one who gets the most sums wrong will be allowed to stand in the corner on a small

It's Your Time You're Wasting

box wearing white conical hat with the capital letter 'D' written on it.

We all agree that this ought to impress the Ofsted people and the Techs make more coffee.