

TELLING TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

Chris Lowe and friends

Number 28

Grief and Belief

Heads spend a lot of their waking hours dealing with staff issues, problems of attitude, capability, conduct and the need for support, followed by hours immersed in matters of finance, administration, premises management, parental concerns, governors' questions. It comes as blessed relief to actually deal with a pupil's progress or lack of it.

One day I came across a Head in a Conference bar, looking rather wistful. After a couple of gins he opened up. He confessed that he was musing over a recent encounter with a Year 10 student, a well known reprobate, and frequent visitor to his study for sundry offences.

What happened yesterday, he said, was that young Kevin appeared at my door clutching a tattered exercise book. Nothing unusual there. He was his normal boorish self, and thrust the book at me, while explaining why he was there.

It appears he had been told by his teacher - exasperated by the boy's poor English work - to 'go and see the head' - *again*. The boy dutifully told me that he had been ordered to show his exercise book to the Head - 'so that is what I am doing, see.'

The Head took it gingerly between two fingers, spread it out on his desk, smoothed the pages with the corner of his academic gown and perused it. He flipped through the pages noting all the crossing-out, the blots, and the torn-out pages. He was about to admonish the boy when he noticed at the bottom of a page:

*mischief, mischief, mischief,
grief, grief, grief,
belief, belief, belief,
relief, relief, relief.*

'I was gobsmacked,' said my new conference colleague. 'I was immediately taken by the succinctness and the sheer intensity embodied in four simple words and a quartet of lines. So, he read them to himself again and felt they must come out of a specific deeply felt experience. He finally lifted his head from the page and eyed the lad.

'You must have felt something very deeply to write this, Kevin.... I realise, of course, that it may contain very personal feelings. But do you want to tell me about it?' he said kindly.

There was a pause while Kevin took this in.

'Yer what?'

'Well,' said the Head, pointing to the well-thumbed page, 'This is a very powerful and moving little poem. I am really touched by it. I'll put it in the school magazine, with your permission. I am really pleased with you. Well done.'

The Head looked down and read out the words slowly, and in a mournful tone that he considered befitted the sentiments,

*'mischief, mischief, mischief,
grief, grief, grief,
belief, belief, belief,
relief, relief, relief.'*

Silence. The Head thrilled at this moment of blissful recognition of young genius.

Kevin looked quizzically at the Head, 'They're my spelling corrections, sir.'

Oh joy! The capacity for students to surprise knows no bounds!
