

TELLING TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

Chris Lowe and friends

Number 5

The Artful Dodges

The question that annoyed me most as a Headteacher was, 'What do headteachers actually do?'

I'll tell you why..... It's not fair. Does anyone ask what a doctor actually does, or a lawyer, or a member of parliament, or a teacher? Well, actually, I expect they do. But that does not annoy me. Asking what a Head does is really annoying, because Heads themselves don't know.....actually!

When he was five years old one of my sons was asked on a campsite in Italy, what his father did. He thought for a while and then told the mother in the adjacent caravan, 'well, he plays Santa Claus at Christmas in a red dressing gown.' True.... but not truly representative of my life's work. However, if that did not make me consider my vocation then I really had to when one of my 13 year old students at my school was asked by an Ofsted inspector what he thought the Head's job was (I have no idea why he asked this, but, then, I have no idea what many questions about my role by inspectors, advisers, politicians, not to mention my own colleagues, were getting at!). Anyway, my lovely student answered, 'All I know is, he stands on the stage in the morning, says prayers and reads out the notices.'

It is always a 'learning experience' to be told what others think you do. It is rarely comfortable...

So the question remains, 'What do Headteachers actually do?' After 40 years in schools I confess I was still searching for an answer when I retired.

It is easy enough to find out what they are supposed to do, what the nation expects of them. It is set out in the annual 'School teachers' pay and conditions document and guidance on school teachers' pay and conditions' issued by the government. Headteachers have a duty to provide overall strategic leadership and, with others, 'lead, develop and support the strategic direction, vision, values and priorities of the school.' The document goes on to explain these onerous duties in some detail.

When the first of these annual documents came out in the 1980s my local authority produced its own portentous 'Framework: Headteachers Managerial Tasks and Competences' – five pages of managerial tasks and competences (Problem Analysis, Adaptability, Organisation and Motivation, and so on. All very worthy, but I gather from today's headteachers and academy principals that, as ever, the theory of 'a day in the life of a headteacher' is somewhat different from the hurly burly of the ordinary school day. The headteacher's legal responsibilities are generally carried out in an array of meetings, confrontations, writings, telephonings, instant decision-making, and seat-of-the-pants management. That is how things get done and how duties are actually discharged.

School management (I don't know about any other kind) is the technique of coping ad hoc with any circumstance that turns up, expected or unexpected. Ancient Roman leaders were very good exponents of ad hockery because they had plenty of experience of dealing with

things on the spot, taking with them only the sketchiest of orders from Rome as they set off to all corners of the vast Roman empire.

Management by 'ad hockery' is also a way of life for Heads. It can be 'measured ad hockery', 'inspired ad hockery'... and at times 'charismatic ad hockery'; all of them can have one's colleagues gasping in awe and astonishment, or head-shaking disbelief. That is how it is!

And over the years school management has largely been carried out with the minimum of training. One became a Head because one had been a good teacher, even a Head of Department, or had served a sort of apprenticeship as a Deputy Head. Not until close to the end of the 20th century was a National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) instituted – and it was not, and is not, a compulsory certificate for headship. An independent National College for Teaching and Leadership was also inaugurated but was soon replaced by a Department for Education and Teaching Regulation Agency.

Undoubtedly there is now more opportunity for appropriate training in management. Whether this produces better school leaders/managers is not for me to judge.

But to start my self-investigation of 'what Heads actually do' here are two more little anecdotes about Donny Dodge, 'the Number One artful dodge' and his sister Bonny Dodge, 'deputy artful dodge', who both stand as representatives of the fame....notoriety...of certain types of pupils in most secondary schools....those who have intrinsic talents but no need for the extrinsic motivation of a school They bring into action that branch of headship qualities that is unsung, frustrating, occasionally rewarding, and sometimes hilarious....the quick and devastating response!

The following two incidents are pretty typical illustrations of the time spent on disciplinary issues in schools, and in solving age-old, familiar petty school 'crimes'. As pupils have received better education so their ingenuity levels have increased, and with it their brazenness.

Donny Dodge was not enamoured of school. In fact, he preferred to be anywhere else – and often was - but he was a wily entrepreneur, and sometimes business took precedence over school. He is the only student Marcus Brampton, Head of Market Upabit Academy had ever come across who has advertised his truancy in a newspaper!

Donny was son of the owner of the Market Upabit garage, grandiosely called Executive Motors Garage. He had been off school for nearly a week, claiming via several notes signed (allegedly) by his father, Donny senior, that he had a heavy, very debilitating, throat infection. On the Thursday morning before school opened, Mr Brampton was idly flipping through the local newspaper, looking for a replacement for his old Volvo Estate, when he came across a small advert for a week-long, never-to-be-repeated 'Grand Sale' of 'exceptional re-tread tyres'.

That was unremarkable, but at the bottom his eye caught - in bold lettering – 'RING AT ANYTIME, DAY OR NIGHT, AND ASK FOR OUR EXECUTIVE DONNY'.

'Donny!' he shouted to himself. 'Donny Dodge! Year 10. Of course! It would be!. Well, well, the little blighter. Day and night, eh?' I'll 'executive' him, all right.'

He checked that Donny was indeed absent from school and then rang Executive Motors.

A youngish voice attempting to be posh but with a marked local twang answered. 'Executive Motors. Sales Department. Sales Executive Donny speaking. What can I do for you?'

'Donny!' yelled Marcus down the phone. 'Mr Brampton here. Get back to.....' He got no further. There was a loud fit of coughing at the other end and a croaky voice whispering, 'I have been really poorly, Mr Brampton,, a chest infection.....'

'I thought you had told the school it was a throat infection,' said Marcus, breaking into Donny's flow.

'Er... yes ... it was. But it's gone down to my chest now.' A further bout of wheezing followed.

'Well,' replied Marcus after a pause. 'That sounds very bad indeed. I'd better send the Attendance Officer along to assess the situation.'

Donny's reply came swiftly in a less throaty yell. 'No need for that, sir.....' The fit of coughing began again. 'Funny things these chest colds, sir. They come and go quickly you know. I'm feeling a lot better already.... Matter of fact, I was just thinking of ringing the school. I'm sure I can make it back tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow, Donny? How about.... now?' said Marcus slowly and deliberately.

A short pause.

'Yes, sir. I think you have caught me at a good moment. I will struggle back'.

'Do that, Donny.... I know life can be a struggle, but it is usually worth the fight. Get here in the next hour and you will find life going on much the same as you vaguely remember it. We will be very understanding.... and fair.'

He did and they were.

But Marcus hadn't finished with the Dodges. Donny's sister Bonny was not much better than her brother at attending. She had a portfolio of excuse notes, some more plausible than others, but all duly signed by mother or father, and occasionally, Mr Brampton surmised, by brother Donny, too.

Among the gems were:

'Bonny cannot make school today because of a coleslaw which she cannot get rid of.'

and -

'Bonny suffered a blow to her head when she cycled home after games and stopped at the pub for a shandy. It was dark and she rode into the wrong drive. She banged her head on a tree we have not got.'

Bonny, it seems, was the second most accident-prone pupil in the school, second only to her brother Donny.

Finally, after one too many absence excuse notes and thoroughly exasperated at having yet another absence reported to him, Marcus Brampton rang the Dodge home.

A female voice answered rather brightly.

'Hello.'

'Good morning,' said Marcus, conjuring up as much politeness as he could muster. 'Mr Brampton Market Upabit Academy here. I'm enquiring after Bonny. She seems to have had a lot of time off school.'

The voice at the other end changed to a deeper, gruffer tone, a touch more adult but not quite getting there. 'Oh yes. I'm afraid she has been very ill, you know. Very poorly indeed. We told the school some days ago, Mr Brampton. I told Mrs Thingy that Bonny was in bed with the doctor and, I'm afraid, it doesn't seem to be doing her any good.... (pause)....Throat still very, very bad.'

'Oh really,' growled Mr B. Then raising his voice a little. 'Who am I talking to?'

A quick response.

'Mee mum.'
