



LES WALTON COLUMNIST

I HAVE mainly worked in schools within 15 miles of the Bigg Market toilets flushing (my definition of Geordie-ism).

Later in my career when I returned to the North East after working down south in Bradford, the unique qualities of the North East were reinforced.

The Bradford radio 'morning phone-ins' were about the key issues of the day - the traffic problems, the local council.

However, whilst driving down the Coast Road, the local DJ was phoning a woman who was clearly talking to someone else. When he asked who was in the room she said it was her chiropodist, who was cutting her toenails. Why would you want to work anywhere else in the world?

It is often through humour or throw-away comments that we can truly engage with and understand others.

One of the best books I have read about school management is Peter Woods' 'The Divided School', which I first read in 1979. He focuses on the humour of the staff and classroom.

Inspired by his book I developed a 'humour index', classifying organisations into types of humour: sarcastic; cynical; jokey; defusing; and creative.

If inspectors analyse the humour within a school they would soon spot whether or not it was improving. We can all remember the teacher who was sarcastic and 'put down' individual students. We also know brilliant school leaders, who use gentle humour to defuse anger, whether with a student or member of staff.

There is something about Geordie humour which is sentimental, gentle and totally subversive - from the genius of Bobby Thompson 'always wear yer shoes a week before you put them on, they'll be more comfortable', to the brilliance of Ross Noble's meanderings.

I would describe the best Geordie comedians as sentimental surrealists. Bobby Hooper would remind us of the time 'we used to bool old car tyres with a stick.

"Ah remember when ah booled me tyre to Whitley Bay. When ah got there ah lost me stick and had to waalk all the way back."

Today fewer headteachers laugh at themselves. The role has become under such critical scrutiny that the 'self-deprecating headteacher' is fast disappearing. It is now dangerous to joke about yourself or it may be taken down and used in evidence.

Old quiz questions such as 'why do heads not look out of the window in the morning ... because they need to do something in the afternoon', are rarely asked.

'Why is a headteacher's brain

worth one thousand pounds ... because it will not have been used', is not a comment to be used during a spot inspection.

Many former students consider the best part of their school life was not the great learning experience, knowledge sharing, and so on but all the fun they had.

There was also a great element of dark humour. One head's 'punishment book' in the 1970s described the punishment meted out to a boy who had been 'urinating at competitive altitudes in the toilets'. This was of course taking place in the outside 'netties'.

I also strongly believe that lessons taught with humour are very powerful - even punctuation! Compare the following.

A woman without her man is nothing.

A woman: Without her, man is nothing.

You can't beat a colon - as in punctuation, not body organ.

When I was Director of Education we often had a number of visitors. I was once asked to show Jack Straw, who was then Shadow Home Secretary, around a local housing estate. After touring for a while we stopped the car and he asked one resident "have you lived here all your life?" The answer given was "not yet, bonnie lad".

When Prince Charles visited another Tyneside estate he asked "how do you feel about being on this estate?" The local resident replied: "probably as bad as you feel now".

One of the most memorable meetings was when Tony Blair visited the region. When being introduced to the female mayor he asked her husband about the chain around his neck and why it had 'consort' engraved on it. Thinking that the question was about where it was manufactured the answer came back - "probably at Consort Iron Works".

I remember observing the lesson of a science teacher who had a reputation for delivering humourless, though effective, lessons. A boy had been arguing that it was perfectly reasonable to watch the match on the telly and do his homework at the same time. The atmosphere became tense as it appeared the boy was challenging the teacher.

"You cannot have your cake and eat it," said the teacher. "So what's the point of a cake?" responded the boy. After a seeming eternity the teacher burst out laughing. The atmosphere changed, the tension defused. No one lost. His humanity had won.

Of course you may describe this article as *Deja Poo*: The feeling a teacher gets at a staff meeting when she's heard this stuff before.

Les Walton CBE is chair of the Northern Education Trust.