

## 17 CORRELATION STREET

"You have a go, mate!"

Gavin looked up as I walked into my classroom, and we exchanged hellos. He had just finished teaching a lesson there, and was now leafing through a book that I'd left on the table called *Teaching Algebra*. Its author was Malcolm Rogers, a prolific writer in the maths education field. "Are you a fan then?" I asked. To be honest, I was surprised to see him looking at such a book. Gavin's lessons had a reputation for being 'traditional' - his students sat rapt in awe of his knowledge, but never really formed a close bond with him. 'The Iceman' was his nickname. So why was Gavin reading my improving book?

"A fan, Jonny? Of Malcolm Rogers?" He sat down, tossing the book to one side. He appeared upset about something. "I should think so. Look, you started out in an inner city comprehensive, did you not?"

I nodded.

"Do you remember sometimes in that first year waking up at three in the morning with a mouth like sandpaper, wondering what to teach that unruly bottom set in a few hours time?"

I nodded again.

"Now, your friend Mr Rogers - has he ever been through that, I wonder?"

Gavin paused, letting a little of his anger go in a sigh. "You see - I know the man. When I started my teaching career in a Birmingham comp, Malcolm Rogers was the area's Chief Inspector for Mathematics. And he'd never taught in a school, or even in a college. University only."

I said nothing, as Gavin stared at me, clearly reliving a painful memory.

"He had some hard things to say about some departments in some schools. And as he walked out the gates, those teachers would roll their eyes and say, "I know! Why don't you have a go, mate!" "

I wondered what Malcolm Rogers had said about Gavin's teaching.

"Oh, he knew his stuff, he was a committed educationalist, he cared about the young people he was responsible for. But in the job itself, Jonny," he added, "He wouldn't have lasted ten minutes."

Gavin stopped speaking, his anger causing him to shake a little. I felt a real concern for my colleague. This was not 'The Iceman', rather 'The Towering Inferno'.

"But isn't there room for all sorts in maths education?" I asked. "Don't we teachers need the theorists and don't the theorists need us?"

"I've got time for those who teach kids," said Gavin, calmer now. "And I've got time for those who aspire to teach kids. And I've also got time for those who have left the classroom but who secretly wish they could go back." He blew his nose. "But I don't have time for people who would rather write a cookery book than do any cooking themselves."

"But Gavin," I urged, feeling angry myself now. "Arsene Wenger is a great manager, but he was a fairly ordinary footballer. Can't you imagine someone who is not cut out to be a teacher, but who is perfectly cut out to be a theoriser about teaching?"

Gavin stood and made for the corridor. "At least Arsene Wenger had a go, Jonny," he said, calmly now. "Enjoy your book."

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