

# Introduction

This is a collection of articles from the pages of the *Times Educational Supplement*. I hope I have been faithful to my initial brief – I've included stuff that I think is fun, mostly suggested by my irrepressible students at Paston College in Norfolk, but there are also moments of danger where I feel as though I am risking my career with every word. I had not reckoned with the psychic liberation that results from writing pieces like this: I am free to revisit every moment of my life as a mathematics teacher, celebrating the ups and redeeming the downs. Of course, that could mean upsetting one or two people along the way.

So is what I write here the truth? I can safely say that half of what is here is fictionalized documentary, while the other half is fact-inspired fiction. Let me invite Mr Lemony Snicket to explain the situation:

*All stories are based on two things: real-life things, and other stories, but these "other stories", of course, are also based on the same two things - real-life things or other stories, and these "other stories" are also based on the same two things, and so on, and so on, and this complicated arrangement is further complicated by the tendency for real-life things to become stories as time passes, and the difference between real-life things and stories becomes complicated, so real-life things tend to get lost inside stories that are based on real-life things and on other stories, or perhaps its the other way round, with stories based upon real-life things and other stories getting lost inside real-life things, which might explain why, in real life, we seem so very lost that even answering a simple question becomes so exhausting that we want to lie down with our eyes closed and listen closely to the string quartets of Dmitri Shostakovich and certain 12in singles by New Order.*

So yes, I tell 'lies' here, and maybe those lies reveal the truth better than the true bits do. The only writing worth reading is written by a writer who is enjoying himself as he writes, and I have loved simplifying situations to exaggerate a truth, or re-working a quotation to make it more comic, or saying in print those things that in real life I am too timid to say. Each issue of *Mathematics Teaching* used to carry the following disclaimer next to my column, and the words below apply to everything here too:

*This is a mixture of what happens,  
what I would like to happen,  
and what I am glad does not happen  
in my classroom (or thereabouts).*

There will be some who read these pages who will wonder if they can see themselves portrayed in a character here. (After all, the world of mathematics education in the UK is not that large.) They may be annoyed, outraged even, over the way in which they consider I have painted them. I would only say to you that there is a bit of everyone in each character that I draw, and that no one character is wholly based on a single real-life person. Names have been changed, locations have been disguised, and misdemeanours have been re-assigned. If you still feel aggrieved after reading this, I suggest you get a column of your own somewhere, and take your revenge upon me. I hope that my back will prove to be a broad one.

Above all, I hope that these pieces are on the side of the ordinary classroom maths teacher, a description that I am proud to apply to myself. Every day we hear stories of the entry-level practitioner being hit by piles of dense paperwork, being harassed by unsympathetic management, and being beaten over the head with league tables and inspectors' reports (and all this before they even open the classroom door.) To me, those who commit to the classroom are the real heroes amongst those who earn their living in education, and I hope that these words provide for them a few moments of relief from the daily round. Certainly writing these pieces has provided that for me.

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