Jamie MacBeth, a mischief maker, suggests that his class raise funds to provide toilets for African school pupils.

This BSL-signed video presentation of a story by Theresa Breslin is part of the financial education resource, On the Money.

Transcript: Down the Pan

The toilet sat there in the school entrance hall.

A great big lavatory pan. Beside the glass cabinet with the silver cups and shiny award shields. Right in front of the Head Teacher’s door.

I saw it as soon as I came into school and I *knew* that it would be my class that would get the blame.

But it wasn’t our fault. I mean it was our idea, sort of. But it shouldn’t have been us that got ticked off because someone had plonked it down just where the Head would trip over it on the day the school inspectors were due to arrive. We weren’t responsible. Definitely not. Our teacher is the one who should have carried the can. Mr Walker is his name, and he’s a nutter.

Before I had time to dodge round the corner the Head’s door opened and she came rushing out. She was carrying a huge pile of papers and was trying to write something on the top sheet and talk on her mobile at the same time. She didn’t see the toilet.

And to be fair, if you were a Head Teacher it’s not the sort of thing you’d expect to find outside your door first thing on a Monday morning.

There was the most terrific clatter, and the Head went flying amongst a blizzard of white paper.

I managed to catch her mobile phone. I was quite pleased about this as my eye to hand co-ordination skills aren’t usually very good.

But did she thank me?

She did not.

‘Jamie Macbeth!’ She screeched up at me from where she lay sprawled across the toilet pan. ‘Why is it always you, or one of your classmates, that are hanging around when something goes wrong in this school?’

In my six years of primary school I’ve discovered that it’s better not to answer questions like that, so I said nothing.

The Head stretched out and snatched her mobile phone from my hand. Not a word of appreciation to me for saving it from being smashed on the floor.

‘Would you have any clue at all as to why there is a toilet outside my office door?’ she demanded.

‘Well yes,’ I had to reply to this. ‘I think I might.’

Last Friday afternoon our teacher, Mr Walker, had held a Brain-Busting session to help us think up a good idea for the class Charitable Cause Campaign.

Every year in our school, while the Primary Sevens do an Enterprise Project, the Primary Sixes have to choose a Charitable Cause and find a way of raising money for it. Both classes were having bother deciding what their project would be.

Heather, who sits next to me, suggested a Sponsored Silence.

‘Don’t tempt me.’ Mr Walker gave us one of his manic grins. ‘I’d pay money myself, tons of it, to get you lot to be quiet for a few hours, but we must try to avoid doing the same old things that bore people.’

‘Sponsored Spell?’ said Ben.

‘Boring.’ Mr Walker yawned loudly. ‘Boring. Boring. Boring.’

‘Sponsored Sitting Still?’ said Salikah.

‘*More* boring,’ said Mr Walker, making snoring sounds.

‘Sponsored Sleepover?’ said Martin.

‘*Most* boring.’ Mr Walker held his hand up. ‘I forbid anyone to use the word “sponsored” again.

Why don’t you think of the Charitable Cause first?

Decide what you want to collect money for. That might help you work out how you actually do it.’ He looked at his watch. ‘There are three and a half minutes left before the final bell. Do you really want to be here over the weekend? No? Well, think of a good cause. Now!’

It was then that something I’d read on the Internet came into my head. We’d been doing research about water. There’s masses of water in Scotland, mainly because it rains quite a lot and that fills up the lochs and rivers and reservoirs. But some countries have hardly any. And the stuff they do have is hard to find.

The people have to dig wells and walk for hours each day carrying it home in jugs and pots. I’d been trawling and clicking and had come across a school in Africa that had found a water source nearby but didn’t have enough money to build themselves a toilet.

My hand shot up. ‘A toilet,’ I said.

Mr Walker shook his head. ‘No, Jamie, unless your need is very urgent, you may not go to the toilet.’

‘Not *me*,’ I said. ‘*I* don’t need the toilet. But there’s a school in Africa that does.’

And I explained about the school that had no toilet.

‘Yechh!’ said Heather, holding her nose. ‘Can you imagine that?’

‘I’d rather not,’ said Salikah.

‘Maybe we could collect enough money to build them one?’ I said.

‘Let’s have a show of hands of those who vote for Jamie’s suggestion,’ said Mr Walker.

With 30 seconds to go before the last bell everyone stuck their hands up.

‘Excellent!’ Mr Walker thrust his own hand in the air. ‘That’s it decided. No back backers, you can’t change your minds. The school in Africa will have a toilet. Next week we’ll discuss the best way to raise funds.’ He paused, and a mad light came into his eyes. ‘There’s this friend of mine who is a builder. I think I’ll pay him a visit tomorrow. I might be able to obtain an eye-catching prop to help Primary Six plan their Charitable Cause Campaign in a nonboring way.’ He beamed at me. ‘Well done, Jamie! A gold star for you, my lad.’

Six years I’ve been in primary school and I’ve never once been given a gold star. I felt brilliant all weekend.

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I wasn’t feeling so brilliant now as the Head stared at me from her seat on the great white throne.

‘I’m waiting, Jamie,’ she said. ‘Please explain to me why there is a toilet—,’ she broke off, stared past me at the front door, and scrambled to her feet. ‘I can see the school inspectors outside,’ she hissed.

‘I’ll stall them. You find the janitor and have that thing removed. At once!’

Which is how I, helped by the jannie, came to be lugging a huge lavvy pan down the corridor to my classroom.

The Primary Sevens were lined up outside their classroom door waiting for their teacher, and I had to walk past them. At that moment I’d have given back my gold star to avoid the barrage of rude remarks.

‘Yo! It’s boggin’ Macbeth!’

‘How’s it going? Or have you been already?’

‘You’re supposed to be toilet trained before you come to school.’

And loads of other rotten remarks.

Most of my class were already inside and sitting down. Mr Walker looked up from his desk as the jannie and I staggered into the class.

‘Please don’t bring that toilet in here,’ he said, getting to his feet. ‘It’s an important prop in the Charitable Cause Campaign that Primary Six is planning. I want it positioned in the entrance hall for maximum effect.’

‘You’ve already *had* maximum effect,’ the jannie told my teacher. ‘Believe me.’

Then he described how the Head had come hurrying out of her room and tripped and fallen across it, and had been sitting on the toilet as the school inspectors drove up outside the front door.

‘Oops,’ said Mr Walker. ‘That’s not quite the thing we want to happen on school inspection day, is it?’

‘No,’ said the jannie, ‘And there’s another thing you might want to think about. Health and Safety.’

‘This toilet,’ said Mr Walker loftily, ‘is brand new. Untouched by human hand.’

‘Or bottom,’ someone snickered.

Mr Walker glared at the class. Then he smiled at the jannie. ‘I obtained this piece of sanitary ware from my friend who is a builder. I can guarantee that this toilet is unused.’

‘It had better stay that way,’ the jannie muttered as he stomped off.

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By the end of morning break the news had spread.

When our class went into the playground the comments were endless. I think I heard every ancient joke about toilets that morning.

The Primary Sevens were the worst. ‘We’d rather have no idea for our Enterprise Project than a really crap one like yours!’ they yelled at us and then fell about shrieking with laughter.

And it wasn’t just jokes – there were riddles and rhymes too.

‘Do you know where Mr Walker’s class are going on their school trip?’

‘Romania?’

‘No. *Pooh* Mania.’

‘Who wrote the book *I’ve got to go now?*’

‘Lydia Laverty!’

Even the Infants joined in. Two little kids in Primary One ran up to me in the playground.

‘Why did Tigger stick his head down the toilet?’ one of them called out.

And before I could reply the other shouted back.

‘He was looking for Winnie the Pooh!’

Then they giggled hysterically the way Primary Ones do, and ran away.

At lunchtime I thought it safer to eat my packed lunch in the classroom.

Most of my classmates joined me. It was too much to take, being outside and having to listen to the teasing. Then Mr Walker drifted in with his own sandwich box.

‘The Head is lunching with the school inspectors in the staffroom,’ he said. ‘I thought it best to keep a low profile.’

Salikah, who had gone home for lunch, came bursting in. ‘Have you heard the latest?’ she said.

‘The whole school is calling us the WCs.’

‘It’s a pun,’ explained Mr Walker. ‘Originally a toilet was known as a Water Closet, hence WC. And the initial letters from the two words, “Walker’s Class” also gives the abbreviation WC.’

Everybody looked at me

They never said anything, but I knew what they were thinking. It was all my fault.

Mr Walker must have noticed because he spoke up. ‘Don’t blame Jamie. Everyone voted for his idea, myself included. So we stick together. One for all, and all for one.’

‘Well, if we’re keeping the toilet in the classroom a Number One is better than a Number Two,’ said Martin.

‘Very funny,’ I said bitterly.

‘Actually,’ Mr Walker laughed, ‘that *is* quite funny.’

At that moment someone knocked at the classroom door. Heather, who was nearest, opened it up. There was a Primary Three kid standing there. ‘Is it true that you’ve got a toilet in there?’

‘What’s it to you?’ said Heather.

‘Can I see it?’

‘It’ll cost you 10p,’ said Heather.

Heather was joking, but this little guy pulled 10p from his pocket and handed it to her. Heather glanced at Mr Walker. He nodded and said. ‘That can be the first contribution to the Charitable Cause.’

Heather took the money and stood aside.

The Primary Three kid walked over and had a good look

Then he went away. A few seconds later we saw him out in the playground waving his arms and pointing to our classroom. The next thing he was back with some of his mates.

‘They want to see it too,’ he said.

They all had 10ps clutched in their hands. Ben collected the money and led them over to the toilet. They stood round in a circle staring at it for a minute.

‘Can I touch it?’ one of them asked.

Ben shrugged. ‘I don’t see why not.’

‘But that’s an extra 5p,’ Heather said quickly.

Right away they all paid an extra 5p. Mr Walker raised an eyebrow. ‘I think we might be on to something here,’ he said.

We held a quick conference to decide a few things, like how to collect the money.

Salikah suggested buying a clear toilet lid and asking the jannie to cut a slot in it and make the toilet itself into a bank.

Everybody thought it was a great idea.

‘It would be a good gimmick for the younger

children,’ she said.

Mr Walker grabbed his jacket. ‘I’ve got time to nip out to the retail park before lunch break ends.’

By that afternoon our toilet’s see-through lid with slot was firmly attached. Then we made steps leading up to it and covered them in red cloth. Heather and Ben printed off pictures of the African school from the Internet and stuck them onto display boards to show where the money was going.

We held a full Class Council to sort out our business plan. We agreed that the little ones would pay money to look at a toilet but the older ones might not. So we needed something else to encourage the older children to donate to our cause.

I remembered Mr Walker laughing earlier at Martin’s joke.

‘Maybe we could collect all the jokes and funny remarks and puns,’ I said, ‘and do something with those.’

We made up joke sheets to sell. Mr Walker insisted on checking them and deleting the very rude ones.

He said he was accepting non-flushing jokes only.

We produced fast facts about toilets, with interesting items like all the different names people use for it – the gents, the ladies, the smallest room in the house, the privy, the cludgie, the can, the outhouse, and the rest.

We did lots of research on waste disposal. Did you know you can actually go on a visit to the sewers in Paris?

All this helped us with our environment project. Since I read up on this I’m going to be a lot more careful. Those cotton buds that are so useful for cleaning in between the computer keyboard keys and getting glue on models, well, they’re a pollution nightmare.

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But the best bit was how we got Primary Seven to contribute to our Charitable Cause.

They still hadn’t come up with an original idea for their Enterprise Project. The pressure was on them, for the inspectors were due to visit their class during the week. On Tuesday morning we had an approach from their teacher Ms Baxter.

The Primary Sevens had decided that they wanted to make savings banks in the shape of a lavatory pan with a slot in the seat to put the money in and the opening at the bottom. Making and selling these would be their Enterprise Project.

Mr Walker said they’d have to pay us a fee. After all it had all been our idea. ‘Especially Jamie’s,’ he smiled at me.

Ms Baxter went away and members of the Primary Seven Enterprise Committee came to talk to us.

They offered us ten pounds.

We had a whole class meeting to discuss their offer.

‘Suppose they sell fifty million of them banks?’ said Martin.

‘*Those* banks,’ Mr Walker corrected him. ‘What is your point?’

‘We need a cut,’ said Martin.

‘I think you’ll find that’s a licensing agreement with a profit percentage,’ said Mr Walker.

‘No, a cut,’ said Ben. ‘And if they don’t pay up then we go along and sort them out.’

‘Business doesn’t have to be like that,’ said Mr Walker hurriedly. ‘Negotiation is the way forward.’

‘There should be Fair Trade,’ agreed Heather.

‘Yes,’ said Mr Walker. ‘They’ve got to make a profit too. Work it out for yourselves. From their profit comes ours. If we don’t let them make money, then they won’t make enough to pay us.’

So we charged them, but not too much. For every bank they made they had to give us 20p towards our Toilet Fund. We insisted on inspection rights to make sure they were using recycleable materials, and had good working conditions.

‘We have a responsibility to see that they don’t exploit their workers,’ said Mr Walker.

‘The person who’s being exploited is me,’ moaned their teacher, Ms Baxter. ‘I haven’t had a tea break since this project began.’

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The School Inspector’s Report came in.

The Head read it out at whole school assembly.

‘“Innovative and interesting things are happening in this school,”’ she read.

She actually smiled at our class. We’re still known in the school as the WCs.

But we don’t care.

Last week we got some photographs and a podcast emailed to us from Africa. It showed all the school children queuing to use their new toilet. They’d made a big sign that read ‘Thank you Primary Six’. They were waving their hands and shouting and smiling at us.

Mrs Walker printed one of the photographs and we made them into badges and stickers. It’s the new ‘must-have’ thing to wear.

The Head bought one from us for five pounds.

As a reward Mr Walker treated the whole class to an ice cream and it was such a lovely day that he took us to the local park to eat it. In that part of Africa on a warm day the temperature can go to over 40 degrees. A lot of the children have to walk several miles to reach the school. By the time they arrive they are so hot they can’t do their work.

They need a shower cubicle.

Mr Walker says he’s going to speak to his builder friend at the weekend.

I only hope the Head Teacher looks where she’s going when she walks out of her office on Monday

morning.