SOMEONE HAS CHANGED THE ‘CHILDREN Eat Free’ sign at my local, The Mermaid’s Foot, to ‘Children Eat en Free.’

Those two little extra letters have got me thinking about graffiti, and it strikes me as strange that so many people who would normally only reluctantly pick up a pen are so happy to create graffiti – on other people’s property. Maybe teachers are working in the wrong place. Perhaps if classes moved out of classrooms and into, say, public toilets, reluctant writers would become willing ones. Instead of failing, they’d be flushed with success.

Why is it that, when confronted with a pristine white page, our mind becomes as blank as the paper, but our creativity blossoms when we have an aerosol spray can to hand? Maybe it’s to do with the grip. Many children love hurling rocks and the throwing grip is very similar to the one used when holding a can of spray paint, as has been demonstrated by my own extensive anthropological research.

Perhaps if pen manufacturers could devise a device that sprayed ink, literacy standards would improve.

When early humans first started recording their world, they didn’t pop out to the newsagent for an artist’s diary and a pencil, they scratched on cave walls. People have, through the ages, found countless inventive ways to do it. Etching with sticks in the sand; writing ‘Clean me’ in dust on parked cars; spitting masticated food onto the table in interesting patterns – as children in most families do. In The Moon’s a Balloon, David Niven relates sitting with Errol Flynn outside a Las Vegas hotel trying to work out which rooms they’d have to call with some bogus story to get various hotel guests to switch on their lights so they’d spell out a four-letter word – ‘milk,’ if my memory serves – on the hotel’s façade.

I could go on giving examples until the cows come home and since I don’t have anything to do until six o’clock milking, I will.

Every teacher has probably had to deal with some budding tattooist who’ll write on their skin but not in their books. ‘Can you all hand in your hands for marking, please?’

In an episode of The Simpsons, Bart insults Australia and in the interest of détente is sentenced to a kicking from the Prime Minister. Just as Bart is about to receive a Prime Ministerial boot, he drops his pants to reveal a message: ‘Eat my shorts.’ Lisa marvels that he could write so neatly on his butt.

If they’re not sending such messages to politicians, many young men are doing something with cars: racing, doing blockies, laying down rubber. Pure hooliganism, some might say but, no, if you consider it with an unbiased eye this is quite evidently art. Is a blackened circle burnt into tarmac really all that different from, say, the sand mandalas created by Buddhist monks? It’s just as heartfelt, but maybe executed with a bit less delicacy than the monks’ patient offerings.

Would the reluctant student be reluctant if their classroom was a car? In Design and Technology, ‘I’m sorry, Barry, you’re not going out driving until you re-do the seam on your fluffy dice.’

‘Right away, Mrs Bremner.’

In Maths, ‘If a police car is travelling at 100 kilometres an hour on one road at a 45 degree angle to your road, how fast do you need to go to beat it to the next intersection two kilometres away and then make it to the disused barn where you’ve stashed the tinnies?’

Isn’t it time to update some of our educational ideas and move into the 21st Century?

Of course it is.

So, away with books and then the next time some anti-educationalist accuses your school of going to the toilet, you can agree.

‘Yes, we are. For results!’

The writing’s on the wall.

This month’s Last Word was written by David Rish, writer and occasional columnist for Teacher.