

# VOICE OF THE ICONO CLASS ROOM

I am very glad to be a teacher for a number of reasons, but alongside the more obvious ones that we are all familiar with (the chance to work with young people as they deepen their understanding of the world around them; the opportunity to help them to prepare to launch themselves into that world; the experience of their 'wow' moments in learning, and, of course, the six weeks off that conclude the school year) there exists another benefit: I can read and understand my own child's school report.

I say this, because over the years I have witnessed a movement towards increasingly euphemistic report writing and I am not sure why. Perhaps its origins lie in a worthy desire to prevent teachers from writing cruel or unkind comments that have no consequence other than to destroy the confidence of the unfortunate subject of the report. However it seems to me that often, the removal of hurtful content also means dispensing with clarity, to the extent that parents and their children might not be able to understand the nature of problems the student is facing. If my daughter is described as finding her work 'very challenging' or is 'on occasion struggling to motivate herself' I think I will have a fair idea of the conversations I need to have with her and her teachers. But would the same be true of a non-teaching parent? Are teachers tiptoeing along a fine line between 'covering their own backs' in the event that a problem rears its ugly head later on (at which point we can refer to the report as evidence that the parents were informed) and the intense pressure to 'focus on the positive' at report-writing time?

Conversations on this subject with friends (both teachers and parents) have yielded interesting examples of reports that have left families at best unsure, and at worst, mystified as to the teacher's perception of their child's progress, problems and abilities. As well as expressing frustration at euphemistic language usage, parents felt that their children were the subject of descriptions

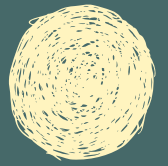
focusing on targets, rather than what they were able or not able to do, or in place of qualitative comments and observations. Many were unhappy about reports indicating not so much that a teacher really knew their child, but rather that he or she was fully aware of the 'copy and paste' function on the laptop.

One parent received a wordy yet diplomatic description of her son's problem in 'translating his many pertinent and varied ideas to paper'. There are many possibilities that might present themselves in the parental mind when reading such a comment – the mother was not expecting, however, that what was really being alluded to was the student's terrible handwriting (about which she already knew!) So why didn't the teacher make an explicit statement about handwriting on the report?

Ultimately it seems to me that many school leadership teams work on the basis that we must not risk upsetting a minority of parents by writing in a precise fashion about a problem that exists with the child, and I suspect that the mantra of 'focusing on the positive' is designed in many cases simply to prevent the scarier parents from marching, bristling and unannounced, to the school. While we may all have had encounters with difficult parents who have taken issue with a few home truths, my experience (maybe I am just lucky) tells me that most simply want a clear picture about their child's strengths and weaknesses, and would in fact wish to be informed in the event that their son or daughter never listened in class, behaved poorly or was unable to cope with the course he or she was undertaking.

If a report is not clear – and I mean on first reading – about the reasons both to celebrate and be concerned with regards to the student's progress, then surely it could benefit from employing a more focused approach in order to meet expectations. Or, to put it into words we can all understand, it's not fit for purpose.

If school reports are so 'focused on the positive' that genuine problems are euphemised out of existence, then why send them home at all, asks an educator who's increasingly failing to see the point...



## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Do you have a point that needs making about any aspect at all of our education system, informed by experience on the inside? Email [editor@teachsecondary.com](mailto:editor@teachsecondary.com) and let us know what you want to say (no need to focus on the positive here). If you can persuade us, then you're a potential future Voice of the Iconoclassroom!