

TELLING TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

Chris Lowe and friends

Number 29

The Persistent Parent

One of the many skills of headteachers is knowing how and when to respond to parent concerns and complaints – particularly when they come thick and fast – and from just one source.

Marcus Brampton had one parent – a father of two splendidly normal children and with a wife who would not say boo to a goose. He on the other hand was an inveterate complainer, and devoted letter-writer. It was not that he did not have legitimate points to make about the education of his and other children. It was the way he made them – again, and again and again.

Marcus now has a large file of letters he sent over the years - and treasures one particular one. This letter could reasonably serve as a kind of 'in-tray' training exercise for aspiring or new Heads.

Budding Heads could be asked, '*How would you respond to this?*'

Dear Headmaster,

I acknowledge receipt of your letter to parents of the 5th inst, though I cannot say that I thank you for it.

With reference to its contents, i.e. urging parents of Fifth formers to consider their children's school commitments when considering their part-time employment.

Your cool, legalistic approach to the important issue of child employment is not adequate. You are arguing from a too narrow a base. Marx himself acknowledges that there must be a base on which to build. You are rather like the highway squad who patches up holes when it is the foundation of the highway that needs reinforcing, or the parson who resorts to the Bible when his Sunday school class deserts.

The situation is exacerbated in a developing area like this, where the wealth of the indigenous people – even when equal to the newcomers - is not exploited to the same extent as the latter. This is, of course, obvious, but I think you need to be reminded of it. Because it leads to the important question:

What are you going to do about it, Headmaster?

While living in the oblivion of the northern uplands of your catchment area I have thought long and hard about this, and recently rang the Vice Chancellor of Leeds Metropolitan University to get his view. As we live a hundred miles from Leeds he was quite surprised – especially as he could not work out how I had got past his secretary in order to talk to him. For a while he seemed to find my arguments difficult to understand. He persisted in saying that he had not understood the question. However, when I continued to press him, he did

admit that I might have a point, but could not accept me on a PhD course on the strength of one telephone call.

I have been unable to catch him in since then, but have booked a call to his office next week when he will certainly be in, as the Prime Minister is visiting the university. I look forward to discussing his conversations with the PM after the event.

I am also taking the opportunity to tell you that after a number of postponements I have arranged a lunchtime meeting with your Head of Sixth Form concerning her organisation of the Sixth Form. Below are the references from which I plan to develop my argument, over the next few weeks.

Leighton – Guidance and Counselling: a beginners' guide

Hardy – Revolution: a new approach

Bristow – A Society at Odds

Bulkman – Education without schools

Sperling – Psychology made simple

Quoist – Meet Christ and live

I assume you have read them. I would be interested to know whether you think that these will cover the subject adequately.

Incidentally my daughter came home today and told me your Head of Music had said her recorder was flat. As I have perfect pitch I compared my C with the recorder's C and found it perfectly in tune 8 times out of 10. I presume it is your piano which needs attention.

I have also mentioned to you in the past that during her time at your school my daughter has developed a fixation about 'health and safety in the home'. I wonder if she has misunderstood her Home Economics teacher, as this distorted middle class emphasis on washing and cleanliness is beginning to irritate me greatly.

I also consider a bottom E rating in French is not really encouraging when considered against the 5 major points in Catholic education emphasised by the Archbishop and endorsed by Rome. An E grade is the mark of shoddy secularism and against the strong principle of 'in loco parentis' which is the bedrock of the pedagogic profession.

You will know from our previous exchanges (although I have not yet received replies to my letters of the 10th ult and 1st inst.) that my ideas circulate until they reach an organic truth in true Gestalt psychological fashion. This is happening right now.

My daughter was in a very agitated mood after I had talked to her yesterday. It is no wonder that she did not do her French homework last night, which is what I am writing to tell you.

Yours etc

Marcus confronted his Senior Management Team, who were baying for action.

Now, three things you might understand from the above letter.

The first is - that the writer was in the middle of the Open University sociology course.

The second is - that there was not a cat in hell's chance of my winning any argument.

The third is - that both I and the school would flourish rather better if a confrontation was avoided altogether.

And so, despite protestations from senior colleagues who were more attracted to Tudor jousts than me, I just ignored it and discretely recommended to the Head of Languages that the daughter should be given time at lunchtime to finish the homework and receive his undivided attention while doing it. Cowardly? Well, possibly. Pragmatic? Well, definitely!

Nothing more was heard about this issue. And I finally navigated his children out of the school and on to further education – where incidentally they had greater knowledge of sociology and psychology at that time than any other student had – and probably more than some of the lecturers!

It also confirmed my colleagues' view that I was indeed more the Neville Chamberlain than the Winston Churchill when it came to considerations of war and conflict.
