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School Reports that are Centred on Pupil Voice

I was privileged to be asked to speak at the #LearningFirst conference at Bath Spa University on the subject of our pupil voice centred school reports.

We have issued our annual reports in this form for two years now with overwhelmingly positive feedback from parents and carers. Teachers say that the work is no more time consuming than the previous system and a good deal more interesting. Children by and large like the new reports more though with some quite valid reservations. The Governors are very proud of the reports and see them as good evidence of 'how forward thinking we are'.

Our school had been using commercial electronic report writing software for a number of years. It suggested comments you might apply to a child and automatically applied their name and correct gender pronouns to make it 'refer' to the child. You could group the children – typically by ability – and apply comments to them in this way. The reports read as if written by a robot and the clever personalisation algorithm was fooling no one. To me, as a parent of a child at the school, the report told me absolutely nothing, wasn't interesting to read and didn't give me the impression that the class teacher knew or cared particularly about my child.

I had felt a deep unease about these reports for many years but a visit to Wroxham School, led by Dame Alison Peacock, gave us an opportunity to take some action.

The project to bring in the new style reports was run by two members of SLT, myself and colleague Charlotte Stewart. We brought back examples of the reports used at Wroxham and shared them with the senior leadership team. We were asked to create a Larkrise version and come up with a protocol. In all honestly we had expected to be refused or for the project to be treated with more suspicion so we were very pleased to see the project moving so smoothly. Sometimes one brave decision is all that is needed!

After two years we feel the new reports are well bedded in and, in fact, 'the new normal'. A return to the old system would not be welcomed by anyone I think.

The majority of our pupils are able to type well enough to fill out their sections of the template, teachers simply create a new folder in their class area on the IT network and put a 'read only' copy of the report template in there. Children open it, save it down to their own names and fill out there sections. Some children who are less confident at typing work with a partner as an amanuensis to type up their words.

For the children in Year One and Two teachers have worked in a variety of ways. Some have printed off the template and blown it up to A3 on the photocopier before letting children hand write their comments. They have then typed this up – although I say every time I have a chance that I'm very happy for them to handwrite their own comments as well in this circumstance. One teacher chose to take time to sit with each child in turn to chat and fill in the report together. Foundation unit are not currently using this format due to differences in statutory reporting requirements.

As I have said, these new formats have been extremely well received by the school community as a whole. I have no doubt personally that they are a huge improvement on what went before but equally sure that they could be a whole lot better than they are at present. My main issue is the language that the majority of children are using in the first box 'Me and My Learning'. In the first year of the reports many children, in Year 6 the majority, filled this with comments like "I started this year as a 3c, by the end I want to be at least a 3a". My heart died a little inside me! This year, the language of levels has gone and has mostly not been replaced by a proxy so I'm happy to see no instances of 'at the start of this year I was working towards, by the end I want to be working a greater depth". However many children, to me it seems to be a majority have used that field to talk about subjects they do and don't like, "I really like literacy because I get to write my own ideas, I don't like PE because I'm not so good at it and I don't like having to change my clothes". At Larkrise we put a lot of emphasis on talking about learning and using the language of metacognition – it seems, from what the children choose to write in the 'Me and My Learning' box, that this isn't getting through just yet.

To impact on this I will be asking teachers to redouble efforts to model this language in classroom talk throughout the year and to make aspects of learning behaviour a focus for circle time in class in the weeks leading up to the report writing season! I want to see children talking about risk taking, about resilience, about consolidation, pride in progress, about what they're finding difficult and how they think we can help them. Perhaps I should create a bank of examples of the sort of thing I think I'm talking about so children and teachers aren't left guessing what I'm hoping for!

One aspect of the project, which is plainly disappointing is the limited use to which staff have put the reports. To me they are a fascinating trove of information about the pupil and I believe that, if I still had my own class of pupils, I would be able to use them as a great starting point for talk with children about their learning and experience of schooling. Only two teachers tell me they have used the reports in this way. One reason is undoubtedly that they are written summatively and go out in the last few weeks of the school year. One great way to impact on this would be to write and distribute them earlier in the school year while the class teacher could still make good use of them. Another way of using them would be to put them at the centre of the handover to the new class teacher as part of our transition system. One participant at our conference in Bath suggested that the children could revisit the reports throughout the school year – redrafting as the year and their learning attitudes moved on – an excellent suggestion that I will discuss with my colleagues at SLT.

I was delighted by the interest my presentation at Bath Spa generated. I spoke with a number of colleagues immediately following the presentation and worked with some more through twitter and email in the week following. Certainly this is an idea which resonates with practitioners who want to put the children at the heart of a learning conversation. I was particularly pleased to hear from a local authority advisor who had shared the resources I had distributed at Learning First at Bath Spa with schools in his area.

Please don't hesitate to get in touch to talk about this approach and how we are getting on at Larkrise.