Telling children a dangerous lie about life

Maria Tumarkin

LAST year school report cards were cryptograms from hell. For each learning area, one tiny diagram contained coded letters, squares, shaded areas, black and white dots and a menacing progress line known as a class average.

This year it's simpler. Your child's results are mapped onto the state-wide expected average for each learning area along a five-point scale: from A to E. C is where you need to be. A is well above the expected standard, E is well below. Parents can exhale. It's plain English all the way.

Yet the welcome simplicity hides behind it the same essentially dishonest attitude towards children's education. We still don't know how and what our children are doing.

Last year your child was beginning, consolidating or established. This year the child is above, at or below the expected state-wide standard. The insane graphs are gone, but clarity remains out of plain sight, obscured by a swarm of euphemisms. As parents we are still stuck poring over coded messages, trying to squeeze meaning out of all the wooden, insipid, tortuous terms and concepts that have become one of the defining traits of the outcomes-based education.

My heart goes out to teachers locked into the system of bureaucratic double-speak - cornered into obsessive quantifying, assessing students without actually assessing them, placating parents rather than openly communicating with them.

The issue of the plain English report cards is heating up. Boycotts, controversies, threats to cut funding are all on the table. The opinions are split. I am not entirely sure what makes the issue so divisive. To me, it's just a little bit like choosing between a triple root canal and a surgical removal of hemorrhoids. Seems kind of strange to have a clear preference.

So I don't. Schools and education departments can rate, standardise and average out children's achievements all they want, but statistics should be an afterthought, not the message. It's for them to play with, not for us to make sense of. Mapping your child's GPS position on the road to achieving specific outcomes and standards - what a slippery, homogeneous, offensively vague way of evaluating your child's schooling. And the language itself, the much-lauded plain English, is nothing short of scary in its earnest overtones of corporate performance review.

No matter how many bureaucrats it takes to change a light bulb, the truth is that no assessment is ever fully objective or fully fair. Personally, I prefer human bias to the notion of mechanistic detachment. I would much rather
trust a teacher, no matter how potentially grumpy, disillusioned or inflexible in his or her judgement, than a set of self-referential, self-serving bureaucratic standards.

The move away from grades comes from a seemingly honourable desire to make education non-competitive and non-punitive and to give every child all the nurturing and support required to succeed. Within the new system, failure is abolished and children in the same class are not pitted against each other. Sounds eerily humanistic. But this kind of approach, where an assessment is not really assessment but a road map, and children are all walking to learning outcomes at a varying speed and with a varying resolve, is a sweet but dangerous kind of lie.

Some school districts in the US have replaced the word "fail" with "success deferred". Are you laughing? But haven't we been swallowing enough dumb euphemisms in Australia too?

Could it be that the system of grades is being replaced with notions that may prove far more dangerous in the long term? Because they devalue teachers, parents and children alike.

Stuck with bureaucratically devised statewide standards as the measure of all things, the teachers are handicapped in their ability to inspire, to guide and to help. Presented with the latest brain-twister from the Education Department, the parents are handicapped in their ability to engage and to support. The students, whose self-esteem is being so painstakingly protected, have no idea how they are doing. What will happen to them when they come to the final years of their schooling and to university, to say nothing about the world of work, where they will be measured by much more critical and stark standards?

I am not speaking in favour of the return of As, Bs and Cs as grades, but against a euphemistic "I can't believe it's not butter" culture of replacing a clear evaluation of children's abilities and needs with something pleasant-tasting but potentially harmful if swallowed.

It is bloodcurdling to see a bureaucratic apparatus set loose on children's education. It may take a whole village to raise a child, but it doesn't take all public servants in the country to educate him or her. On the contrary, children's education is best left to the fragile and infinitely nurturing one-on-one relationships between a teacher and a student, a child and a parent, a learner and the infinite world of learning.

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