

The last word

# With all due respect



WHETHER YOU'RE WRITING REPORTS OR CONDUCTING PARENT-TEACHER INTERVIEWS, IT PAYS TO EMPLOY A FEW KIND EUPHEMISMS, SAYS MICK WILKINSON.

Okay, it's one of the worst kept secrets in the world of education: teachers use euphemisms in lieu of the cold, hard truth when reporting on student progress. It tends to save your reputation from irreparable damage when you're writing reports, and in some cases might even save your nose during a parent-teacher interview.

There are some bread-and-butter euphemisms that every teacher should master sooner rather than later. 'John has well-developed social skills,' for example, might be a wiser way to phrase one's judgement of John than your private and, let's hope untranslated, view that even the Amazon Basin has difficulty keeping up with the oxygen demand of this motormouth of a kid. Likewise, 'Angela is quiet in class and could benefit from interacting more in class discussions' is well understood among the educational fraternity to mean, 'I don't recall an Angela in class this year.'

Sometimes managing the name is the easy bit. It's the other apparently essential

details that can escape us at the worst possible moments. I once spent a full 10 minutes in a parent-teacher interview in Hong Kong, elaborating to Jackie's parents on her academic achievements and outlining various areas in which their daughter might improve. At the end of the interview, Jackie himself came bounding up and gave his parents a warm embrace.

Ah, yes, Jackie. Of course.

The tremendous opportunity to couch potentially confronting information in code allows teachers to make statements like, 'Akmed would do well to apply himself more to his homework,' when what is intended is closer to, 'If Akmed were any more casual in his effort, I fear he would forget to breathe.'

Even parents of students with the most hardcore behaviour problems can end a parent-teacher interview without an assault charge if you use a simple phrase like, 'Eugene has made significant improvements in moderating his behaviour this

term,' when reporting the observation that actually Eugene has almost been successful in refraining from stabbing other students in class with compass points.

Once you've learned the full range of bread-and-butter euphemisms, you're basically set, although there is one situation in which highly-trained teachers really break into a cold sweat: when they're confronted by other parents who are also teachers.

Aside from wiping your sweating palms, what can you do? The solution is as simple as it might be disturbing to the uninitiated: the only safe strategy when faced with the parent who is a teacher at parent-teacher is to lie. Blatantly, fluently and frequently. If you admit that the student is playing up in your class, your behaviour management strategies will be questioned. If homework completion appears to be an issue, then perhaps the work set is not engaging. If, God forbid, there should be a 'personality problem' between you and the student, the knowing look from the parent will reveal that you obviously have a problem building rapport with students!

Unless your judgement with the child of another teacher can be upheld by a jury of your peers, just let it slide. Lie and smile, and hope that if the sucker who teaches the child next year spills the beans on the little terror that they don't end their career.

Heck, if they have a nice desk, though, and you play your cards right, you might get upgraded! **T**

*This month's Last Word was written by Mick Wilkinson, the Student Activities Coordinator, Student Services, at Northside Christian College, Brisbane, after making significant improvements in moderating his vocabulary in parent-teacher interviews. John, Angela, Jackie, Akmed and Eugene are fictitious and any resemblance to actual students is entirely coincidental, so if you're a teacher and have a son or daughter with any of those names, please don't write in.*

*Photo by Jyn Meyer courtesy of stock.xchng*