

Beware the rise of helicopter teachers



Colin Foster
Teacher at King
Henry VIII
School,
Coventry

Dr Paul Redmond, head of the careers service at Liverpool University, has been commenting in the press on the problem of “helicopter parents”: those who hover over every aspect of their child’s life. Teachers are familiar with parents wishing to be in near-constant mobile phone communication with their child during the school day. But, most recently, it seems that over-involved parents – not content with controlling their offspring’s university education (after all, they’re paying for it) – are muscling in on the workplace. It’s not unheard of, apparently, for parents to negotiate promotions and pay rises on their children’s behalf or complain vociferously about their working conditions.

I believe a similar over-protectiveness is creeping into the teaching profession. “Helicopter teachers” are on the increase. Teachers today are increasingly held to account for measurable lesson-by-lesson progress by pupils. And a fear of even momentary failure is leading to

suffocating control-freakery. Teachers feel they cannot take the chance of allowing pupils the space necessary to explore ideas, form their own conclusions, and ask and answer their own questions. They’d like to indulge that luxury, but the risks are too great – it might interfere with the relentless march of “progress”.

Instead, teachers offer short, structured tasks with instant feedback. The helicopter teacher hovers nearby, nudging the poor pupil along the “correct path”, ready to rescue them from disaster before they have begun to sense any danger. Prompts and hints are liberally given, and sanctions are immediately imposed for any hesitation that might be deemed time “off task”.

This approach might seem helpful at the time, but it is destructive long term. It fosters an unhealthy dependency on the teacher and makes it impossible for learners to develop autonomy. Being hands-on as a teacher is not always a good thing; there is a time for standing back and

letting learners get themselves into – and out of – a mess. Avoiding such valuable experiences means young people will leave school with an unrealistic idea of what it is to work at anything for themselves.

How much of the frustration pupils experience is due to the constant interference of their teachers, the relentless effort to prevent them from making mistakes? A less interventionist approach might not win us friends with school managers and parents – who might accuse us of abdicating our responsibilities – but learners would benefit from the opportunity to learn for themselves without constant interruptions.

Where pupils are desperate for constant guidance, advice, direction and support, the damage has already been done and any attempt to change the classroom dynamic is likely to be a threatening or frightening experience. But if we don’t act, our school-leavers will be increasingly unable to stand on their own two feet.