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Nice letter, a pity it was copied from America

It was well-meant, but a head's cut-and-paste missive to pupils is not going to encourage original thinking or creativity

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Whose heart-cockles were not thoroughly warmed this week by the sweet letter that a head teacher wrote to her pupils and that then went, as they say, "viral"? Enclosed with the Key Stage 2 test results, Rachel Tomlinson's missive praised the year 6 children for working hard but reminded them that they were individuals with unique qualities and quirks, beings who would also dance, paint, play musical instruments and help care for younger siblings.

"The people who create these tests and score them do not know each of you the way your teachers do... and certainly not the way your families do," she wrote. In other words a child should be measured against more than some dry husk of a marking grid. Which is true, of course. I felt rather teary when I first saw it on Twitter and even tweeted the link. Then I read it more closely and thought: "Oh. Oh dear."

It is not that I believe, as the *Daily Mail* does, that the letter is "cloyingly defeatist", an apology for mediocrity and the sort of feeble woolliness that has "condemned countless working-class children to lives of unfulfilled potential". I do not think, as some do, that this teacher was, in effect, strumming a guitar while saying: "Hey kids, forget boring old exams because you're all special, yeah?" (though some parts, such as "your laughter can brighten the dreariest day" were definite toe-curlers).

No, the heart-sinker is that this letter turns out to have been plagiarised, and not very well at that. It is more or less a cut-and-paste job from an American blog, from which

Many children come to higher education as skilled plagiarists

Mrs Tomlinson and a fellow teacher did not bother to remove the Americanisms. So the children at Barrowford Primary School, in Nelson, Lancashire, learnt that some of them had "travelled to a really neat place". Neat? I was brought up about five miles from that school and "neat", I'm fairly sure, was an adjective applied to handwriting or a newly cut privet hedge. It certainly

did not mean admirable or "cool". It also told the children that "there are many ways of being smart". Again, I know language moves on and I do not wish to appear like a crusty old colonel shaking my fists at change, but this was an official piece of school correspondence, not the script of *Friends*. "Smart" is what you look when you wear your best clothes.

It is obvious that Mrs Tomlinson meant well and is a dedicated teacher but the letter, when read in detail, manages the feat of being both touching and somewhat depressing. All pupils are told from an early age that "copying" is for losers, yet here is a head teacher sitting down to write a "personal" letter to her pupils — but pulling out a (rather cheesy) internet template. On Instagram, one of my 10-year-old's favourite inventions, children become adept at rehashing borrowed sentiment and humour, posting hoary bumper-sticker clichés with zeal: "Don't let school get in the way of your education!" or "I used to be indecisive but now I'm not so sure!"

Already many primary school children, given a homework project, simply go on the internet and hit the "print" key. I know a child who handed in an entire project on China without once picking up a pen. In recent times plagiarism has become a recognised problem in education,

with some university students being prepared to buy ready-made essays off the internet (about £300 for a first-class dissertation, apparently).

Plagiarism-detection software is used by many exam-markers to spot liberal use of the cut-and-paste command. A fascinating film on the TES Connect website, made in 2011, asserts that many young people have been coming to higher education as "accomplished plagiarists", not

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realising that sources must be referenced. In the film one student admits: "Most of my GCSE coursework was plagiarised because we didn't have to reference and were never taught about that." In fairness the situation is said to be improving rapidly with many schools now extremely hot on the subject. If some of you are now mouthing the words "pot" and "kettle" I do recognise that journalists can be most assiduous magpies when it comes to "collating" information. And retweeting, I know, is frequently just basking in the glow of someone else's witticism.

Does it matter? Thousands of people have been utterly charmed by

this letter whose central point, after all, is surely correct: standardised testing tells us something but it does not tell us everything, and education is about much more than exams. It is only one school, after all, and the teacher has admitted that she took the letter from the internet.

Well, symbolically, I think it does matter. Original thinking and creativity are said to be crucial to what David Cameron likes to call the "global race". Last month he hailed Britain as a "nation of geniuses", rich in qualities of innovation and imagination. "Almost every invention worth inventing, we've had a hand in it," he said. "I'm proud that we've always been... at the top of the tree when it comes to innovation and creativity."

In Barrowford, Mrs Tomlinson has been taken aback by the stir her letter has caused. "We were surprised at the reaction as this is how we always speak to our children," she said. "We have a 'rounded and grounded' policy where we teach them that personal values are important too."

Which is laudable, genuinely. It is just a pity she conveyed her message using an internet copy and the sort of sentimental twaddle you might find on a tea-towel.

Janice Turner is away