

Children should not feel insecure about natural speech

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■ Learning dialect is as important as learning to read and write Standard English.

Some while ago, we saw in the newspapers that the headteacher of a school in Middlesbrough had taken the extraordinary step of writing to parents urging them to “correct” their children’s English.

Did she really think that would make any difference? Children quite rightly and naturally speak like their peers, not like their parents, and most certainly not like their teachers.

It’s amazing the extent to which people who know nothing about language are willing to believe they are actually authorities – this teacher was clearly someone who did not know very much. She arrogantly informed parents that you “is never plural”. I’m sorry, but if I bump into Russell Martin and Wes Hoolahan at Thorpe Station and tell them “It’s nice to meet you” that IS plural. But what she was referring to was the fact that the Middlesbrough dialect, very intelligently, has followed Wes’s Irish English example in distinguishing between singular and plural you and yours.

The headteacher said she was not asking children to change their dialect. But she was. Astonishingly, she instructed parents – even though she must have known most of them say it themselves –

that it’s wrong to say “nowt”. What on earth makes her think that? Nowt is a word which has come down to us over more than a thousand years of English language history – it’s the same as nought and naught. Millions of people in the north of England say it – and will continue to say it however many letters they get from headmistresses. Nowt is part of their local dialect.

Her justification was that she didn’t want her pupils to enter the world of work without knowing about Standard English. Well, of course not. But why would they? She is, we hope, teaching them to read and write the Standard English dialect in her school. It’s actually very interesting in the

classroom to contrast local dialect grammar with Standard English.

What isn’t interesting for children is to be told that the way they speak is “incorrect”. Making children feel insecure about their natural speech is no way to produce articulate adults.

Instead of wasting her time writing interfering letters to parents, this headteacher should inform herself about language structure so she can talk about it in an analytical, non-judgemental way.

Happily, our well-informed Norfolk teachers already do this, as we have learnt in our excellent sessions with FOND in local Norfolk schools. Maybe we should open a branch of FOND in Middlesbrough.