

From constant curriculum reform, to a curriculum that stands the test of time

Over the summer break I'm sure plenty of us (pupils, parents and teachers alike) were, nonetheless, thinking about school; not least those who were in school or in touch with school around the three results days (we had pupils collecting IB Diploma results in July, and GCSE and A Level results in August).

One element of results season that always fascinates me is the lack of attention paid nationally to IB pupils' results, compared to A Level and GCSE pupils' results. Understandably so, perhaps, when you consider that there are fewer pupils taking IB programmes across the country. But another reason might be that the IB programmes' focus, pedagogy, assessment style and grade boundaries have remained consistent for 50 years. In stark contrast, A Levels and GCSEs have both undergone considerable and repeated change as a result of government involvement, and the cohort collecting GCSE results this summer has navigated what has been hailed as the most significant change in the examination system since O Levels were replaced 30 years ago.

Collecting their GCSE results on 23 August, our Year 11 pupils joined others across the country in discovering how they had fared in these "more demanding, more fulfilling and more stretching" courses, according to Michael Gove when he introduced the reforms during his time as Education Minister in 2013. Most pupils who collected GCSE results in the summer of 2017 would have taken the first three reformed GCSEs – in English Language and Literature, and Mathematics – but this year's cohort was the first to take the reformed GCSEs in a further 20 subjects.

So what has really changed?

Grading

The reformed GCSEs have a new grade system and are marked from 9-1 instead of A*-G. The two systems cannot be compared like for like. Last summer there was a distinct lack of clarity, for instance, around whether a grade 4 was a pass, equal to a grade C under the old system. Ofqual has advised that the new grade 7 starts at the same standard as the former A grade, meaning that the three grades 7, 8 and 9 equate to just two grades, A and A*, in 'old money'. The top 9 grade, therefore, isn't the same as the former A* – rather it identifies the very top of the former A* grade, while the 8 encompasses the lower end of an A* grade as well as the top end of the old A grade. We should not expect pupils or schools to achieve as many grade 9s as we may have expected A* grades in the past. In fact, as few as 200 pupils nationally were expected to receive straight grade 9s this year.

Aside from the difficulty of translating the new numerical system into the old system (which is not necessarily something that needs to be addressed), pupils should have had no concerns about the new grading system itself. Ofqual advised that pupils would not suffer this year from being the first to encounter the new GCSEs, because continuity in the proportion of grades awarded would be

maintained. In essence, Ofqual is unabashed about the jiggery pokery that goes on each year to determine grade boundaries and this year was no different.

It is this jiggery pokery however that has, over the years, tarnished the reputation of the qualifications, and which has members of the older generation crying out that “exams are getting easier”. So while some of Gove’s reforms were certainly well intended – to bring back the respect that is due for pupils’ qualifications, considering how hard they work – it all becomes a moot point when grade boundaries remain something to be tampered with. Government involvement means that grades can never really drop, regardless of actual pupil attainment in any given year.

Drawing a parallel with IB programmes, which see minimal, if any, fluctuation in grade boundaries year on year – because there is no external political motivation for grades to be raised – it is clear that school assessment can and should be determined by educationalists, not by the revolving door of government.

Content

The new GCSEs also require pupils to cover more, and more difficult, content. Reformed subjects have definitely been beefed up – with teachers having a difficult task to cover all of the content they need to before the exams and many forgoing the usual exam practice, simply to fit all of the content in. This is no bad thing, when you consider what a unique opportunity school is. It’s a once in a lifetime experience to learn so much about such a wide variety of topics. Even the best lifelong learners will struggle to fit so much breadth in to their learning in later life. What’s more, when universities are saying that some former A* pupils, arriving at undergraduate level, are unexceptional, it may well be time that the bar was raised so that all children do have the opportunity to be really stretched and enriched during their time at school.

Many people argue today that, with the Internet providing us with all the information we need at the touch of a button, knowledge as a commodity should no longer be a priority for schools. But this is wrong. I understand that retention of facts may not be as highly sought after as it once was, but we mustn’t devalue knowledge. To develop children’s understanding of how different facts relate to each other, to nurture their wisdom to interpret situations accurately, and to grow in them an awareness of what people can create and how it can impact the world around them – children first need to experience learning that offers sequential and in-depth study of a topic, and how different topics are interlinked. Acquiring knowledge must remain a focus for schools.

Style of assessment

In light of Gove’s renewed emphasis on knowledge acquisition, the new style of GCSE assessment works well. Pupils are sitting more exams, as a result of a greatly reduced emphasis on assessed coursework or practical work. The problem with summative assessment of course remains; those pupils who, for any number of reasons, don’t perform on the day of the exam as well as they hoped,

will have grades that reflect that one day's performance, rather than their knowledge and understanding.

But the opposite is true too; there will be children who are adept at taking exams but who don't have as firm a grasp of the facts or as great an understanding of the topic as others. Our national obsession with exam results might prompt us to hold the second outcome up as preferable. But do we really value a clutch of impressive grades when we know that this comes alongside questionable knowledge and understanding, more than we value a child's grasp of a subject and potential to excel, regardless of a poorer on-the-day exam performance?

Another positive element of the new system is that, by examining pupils at the end of their two year course, the quite empty and ridiculous element of 'playing the system' – in which pupils might re-attempt coursework or modular assessments multiple times, even just to gain an additional percentage or two – is eliminated. Pupils are freer then to focus on a much longer-term view, learning about the subject as a whole.

Which brings me to the often-recurring question: what is the purpose of education, and how can we better fulfil it for pupils' benefit?

At the Festival of Education in June, Neil Carmichael, Ex-chair, Education Select Committee and Chair of Commission for Sustainable Learning for Work, Life and Community, said:

“We need to look at the system holistically – for the content, approach, and assessment of learning. We also need to look at what success means, both for individuals, and for 'UK PLC'.”

I couldn't agree more, and I suggest that as part of this holistic system review we need to not only remember that education is to nurture, inspire, motivate and equip pupils as much as it is to drive the economy (a point that is often lost when government becomes fixated on STEM subjects alone, for example), but that the Department for Education should be run by educationalists, as a quango, and not by partisan politicians.

All that educators really want is a curriculum that stands the test of time, and at least a decade for reformed systems to settle in before they are changed again! But politics puts education under too much pressure and creates an imperative for curriculum reform. We are fortunate that our pupils, who wish to, are able to opt for the IB Diploma, which has stood the test of time for 50 years now. It would be better if all children were able to rely on curricula and assessment systems that were sustainable and consistent long-term.