It has been suggested that the changes to the GCSE exam system for students completing secondary education will make things more challenging for students and reduce teaching to the test thereby increasing standards in education. However, will writing a more difficult test by one exam board increase standards in education? Proposed changes also include further consultation on how schools will be held to account for teaching standards with parity existing for students across social and economic differences.

We are certain that many educators passionate about their subject will welcome measures to reduce the pressure on schools to teach to the test. However, unless the actual causes for doing exactly that are addressed then it may be argued that teaching standards will remain as they are. The reason for teaching to the test, in our experience, is often not that teachers are unable to teach their subject well, alternatively it is because schools are under pressure to ensure short term ‘success’ and for students to achieve standards that are not always representative of their ‘actual’ level of understanding in that subject.

That said, therefore, perhaps it is worth considering a rethink of the school inspection system to ensure that standards in teaching and learning meet the high standards that are widely sought after and not a rebranding and restructuring of the exams themselves; for it is not the exams which educate the child. Perhaps, controversially, school inspections might not focus on added value or exam results of any kind but instead evaluate the quality of provision in the school, focusing more on standards of teaching in lessons.

While it is appreciated that the grading of lessons is subjective, it is sufficiently measurable and comparable to many other auditing procedures already in the public sector. Maintaining standards might be simpler as a consequence since the characteristics of high quality teaching with the aim of developing understanding over recall are very well established and promote students interest in learning. If school inspections, as they are, lost their high stakes status and become a more regular lower key assessment process, it may be argued that this will provide a more thorough evidence-base for making judgements on the quality of schools and teaching and almost certainly encourage a range of pedagogical approaches and risk taking on the part of staff, while allowing them to take more ownership over what they do. This is, after all, what we train them for and why the training is so intense.

It may be refreshing for government policy makers to undertake ‘joined up thinking’ when developing and promoting new initiatives and to recognise that encouraging innovation, problem solving and creativity at the chalk face will ultimately and positively influence the economy.

Only then might students be encouraged to understand subjects and not simply remember rules to follow in order to pass their exams using little more than well rehearsed algorithmic procedures. Creating such a high quality education which is reflected in the workforce is possible if policy makers have confidence in the independence of lesson observations. Put simply, good quality teaching will produce good quality results and better students in the longer term if used as the measure of ensuring and upholding standards.

With regards to ensuring parity for the academically weakest students, it is often due to the low standards of prior attainment, or inflated prior attainment due to teaching to the test, that they find themselves taught to the test at all. Unfortunately, and as a result of this, such students are likely to find it much more difficult to advance in education, employment or training since they might always struggle to grasp that which will be expected of them.
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