

School Improvement – or the ‘Equivalent’

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It is critical to state from the outset that this report does not seek to undermine the value of vocational qualifications: on the contrary, it intends to assert that such learning is too advanced to be suitable for pupils below the age of 16.

Trading in futures

Ever-rising GCSE grades are required to support government claims that school standards are improving. The impetus therefore, for year-on-year rises in GCSE performance is very strong, with Public Service Agreements (PSAs) set regularly to determine the specifics of how much improvement must be made. The latest PSA target stipulates that in all schools at least 30 per cent of pupils must achieve a minimum five A*-C GCSEs or equivalent including maths and English by 2011, and that the overall proportion of pupils achieve 5 A*-C GCSEs or equivalent including maths and English increase to 53 per cent.¹

The main problem which New Labour education policy has so far not succeeded in getting to grips with is the achievement gap between better and worse-off pupils. As such, there is a strong relationship between lower national test and exam performance, and entitlement to free school meals (the central poverty indicator used in education, based on parents' income.) This relationship means that pupils from more deprived backgrounds are disproportionately hampering government targets. Accordingly, lower-income pupils are disproportionately exposed to the New Labour government's measures to bolster exam results.

The focus of this report is on one such result-bolstering measure: the vocational course offered at GCSE level, Key Stage 4. This measure which has sprung up on account of the relationship between government GCSE targets and an equivalence system in which vocational qualifications potentially accrue GCSE grades in the league tables. In principle this system of equivalence is a positive for pupils in that it broadens their opportunities by offering them more options; in principle it is also a positive for vocational qualifications in that it puts them on a par with academic ones. In practice, however, neither of these positives is being achieved. Instead the equivalence system in GCSE league tables is being utilised as a way to reach *academic* targets sinking vocational education and skills further and further into second-class status in the process.

How are GCSE results being improved?

GCSE results are taken as such a crucial measure of standards in schooling because, at least in theory, they reflect the quality of the education system at both primary and secondary level. Higher investment in schools under New Labour, a much greater prioritisation of education politically and fiscally and an increase in the number and pay of teachers should all be manifest in the results as school conditions improve. However, distortions within the examination regime

¹ Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), Schools Facing Challenging Circumstances, August 2008

mean that it has become difficult to calculate how much quantifiable improvement reflects genuine improvement and how much reflects artificial gains in the results.

At GCSE level, distortions have taken a multitude of forms, from coursework cheating through plagiarism to coursework cheating in which teachers have essentially collaborated with pupils, (for example the *Times Education Supplement's* Warwick Mansell describes as using 'writing frames').² The above board measures which have boosted results but not learning have ranged from a focus on exam performance throughout the course leading to counter-intuitively low pass marks: for example, as again Mansell noted in his 2007 book *Education by Numbers*, a 2005 AQA Business Studies GCSE paper in 2005 required only 47 per cent to gain an A*.³ In line with this there is the often-cited argument that both the GCSE curriculum and the exams themselves have become less challenging. Robert Coe, of the Curriculum, Evaluation and Management Centre (CEM) at Durham University, has found that using the Year 11 Information System (YELLIS) pupils of the same YELLIS standard (taking an average of 26 subjects) could generally expect to achieve approximately half a grade higher at GCSE in 2005 than they could in 1996.⁴ This means that a higher proportion of pupils could achieve A*-C without an increase in pupil standard. This particular concern has contributed to a widespread move in the independent sector to alternative courses, such as the IGCSE, an international version of the GCSE which is considered to be more demanding in both curriculum and exam.

Another way in which results have been bolstered is by targeting resources at 'borderline' pupils. At GCSE level this involves concentrating resources and teaching time on C/D borderline pupils who are likely to get the all important C (thereby hitting the A*-C bracket) with targeted support. Considerable resources have gone into 'booster' classes and revision courses with this aim.⁵ The main concerns with this strategy have been two-fold. Firstly, evidence suggests that a focus on borderline pupils can lead to other pupils being neglected.⁶ Secondly, these boosts are seen to be

² Mansell, W., *Education by Numbers: The Tyranny of Testing*, 2007, Politico's, p67

³ Mansell, W., *Education by Numbers: The Tyranny of Testing*, 2007, Politico's, p137

⁴ Coe, R., *Changes in standards at GCSE and A-level: Evidence from ALIS and YELLIS*, Report for the ONS, April 2007: Updated to include 2006

⁵ For example: City of Leicester Children and Young People's Services: Learning Services: their school improvement advisers' guidance illustrates some of the common strategies being used to boost performance in its document 'Strategies for Raising Attainment at 16 – examples from Leicester schools': 'Parents of C/D borderline pupils are invited in early during Year 10 to encourage high expectations and provide study support where necessary.' (Richard White: *Strategies for Raising Attainment*, October 2006). Many other local authorities provide similar guidance.

⁶ Research on the side effects of 'borderlining': Gillborn, D., and Youdell, D., *Rationing Education*, Oxford University Press, 2002; Boyle, B. And Bragg, J. 'What a waste of money!' University of Manchester, 2006

of questionable educational value. As New Labour education adviser Michael Barber has argued: '[Booster classes]...don't amount to a long-term improvement strategy.'⁷

In fairness to the New Labour government, sufficient criticism about weaknesses within the system, for example the proliferation of coursework cheating, has led to action being taken. Not always however; over the decade a history of contention from the government on what constitutes a weakness within the system has developed. In other cases, as we will see with the vocational qualification arrangements at GCSE level, the remedies for weaknesses have themselves been highly problematic.

In short, a range of factors mean that the rise in the number of 'good' grades at GCSE does not in fact reflect a straightforward improvement in the nation's schools. The crucial element about a disconnect between examination performance and learning levels (in essence, how well-educated pupils are) is the effect on pupils' education. In this respect, whether the grade boundary is lowered is in itself not important, if the only effect is for the headline figures to appear better than they would have done on a previous measure. This may be deceptive and it may be misleading as to the progress which policy is leading to, yet it is not directly detrimental to pupils per se. The important side effect is where the distortions diminish learning levels.

The aim of bolstering the numbers of pupils who attain 5 A*-C (or 'good') GCSEs is, in principle, to bolster learning across society thereby overcoming the wide socio-economic divide amongst pupils characterised by the strong relationship between lower achievement and lower-income background. This aim of narrowing the achievement gap between the affluent and the less affluent is unquestionably laudable and the *raison d'être* of an education system which aims to create a more equitable society. The problem is that the scenario being generated is a narrowing of the performance gap with the simultaneous *widening* of the learning and opportunity – and thereby life chances – gap.

Were the education system to have failed to extend the opportunities of the most deprived, then the New Labour government would be failing their agenda. What is happening today, however, is much more dangerous as deprived pupils' lack of opportunities are being compounded through the very strategies which in principle are intended to extend them.

⁷ Pyke, N., 'Schools focus on D-grades to boost rankings,' *Times Education Supplement*, 22nd November 1996 in Reed, J., and Hallgarten, J., 'Time to Say Goodbye? The Future of Performance Tables,' IPPR, 2003

The relationship between low-income background and lower exam performance

The persisting socio-economic achievement gap in school performance means that those pupils not achieving the five A*-C GCSE benchmark in England are disproportionately from low-income backgrounds.

Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 Sats test performance are used by secondary schools as central indicators of potential. The relationship in both the 2006/07 Key Stage 2 and 3 tests between those pupils entitled to free school meals (i.e. from lower-income homes) and whether they attained the expected level in the Sats tests is stark. For example, whilst 83 per cent of pupils not eligible for free school meals reached the expected level 4, this was the case for only 62 per cent of eligible pupils.⁸ The pattern is similar at Key Stage 3. For example, 26 percentage points fewer pupils eligible for free school meals achieved at least level 5 in Key Stage 3 English compared to those pupils not eligible for free school meals.⁹ Maths and science show similar patterns at both Key Stages.¹⁰

Correspondingly, GCSE results for 2007 show that only 35.5 per cent of pupils eligible for free school meals achieved five A*-Cs compared to 62.9 per cent of pupils not eligible for them. Including maths and English, the gap is even wider with only 21.1 per cent achieving the 5 A*-C inclusive of maths and English benchmark amongst those eligible for free school meals compared to 49.1 per cent of those that were not eligible.

This relationship between prior test performance and GCSE results means that within the 5 A*-C GCSE improvement drive disproportionate emphasis is being placed on pupils entitled to free school meals.

⁸ DCSF Statistics Gateway 2007: Table 41: Achievements at Key Stage 2 English level 4 and above by ethnicity, eligibility for free school meals and gender, Year: 2007, England

⁹ DCSF Statistics Gateway 2007: Table 58: Achievements at Key Stage 3 English at Level 5 and above, by ethnicity, eligibility for free school meals and gender, Year: 2007, England

¹⁰ DCSF Statistics Gateway 2007: Table 49: Local Authority tables showing achievements at GCSE and Equivalent, by ethnicity, English as a first Language, free school meals and special educational needs, Year: 2007, England

The equivalence equation: bolstering GCSE performance through vocational qualifications

Much controversy was caused when a number of investigations¹¹ revealed that GCSE performance was being distorted in an additional way: schools were using the equivalence equation between GCSEs and vocational qualifications to boost their GCSE performance. In the purported bid to create ‘parity of esteem’ between vocational and academic subjects, GCSE’s and vocational qualifications, including the General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) before it was completely withdrawn in 2007, are grouped together in the league tables.

The *Times Education Supplement’s* Warwick Mansell, together with former head teacher Roger Titcombe and statistician Roger Davies, compared the GNVQs with GCSEs on two measures: the teaching time a GNVQ took up and their relative difficulty. The decision to make an intermediate GNVQ, the most commonly taken level at GCSE, worth four GCSEs, suggests Mansell argues that they take four times as long to teach. Mansell et al.’s survey of the top 100 most improved schools in 2005, however, found that a GNVQ should instead have been worth 1.2 GCSEs, based on teaching time. Mansell also found there to be a discrepancy in the relative difficulties of GCSEs and GNVQs. In 2006 the GNVQ pass rates (C grade or above) in the two GNVQs the researchers found most popular, ICT and science, were 80 per cent and 86 per cent. This compared to the 62 per cent A*-C rate for all GCSEs. Mansell et al.’s research found that the most popular GNVQ was in Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The details of their research revealed why.

The intermediate GNVQ ICT course came in six modules (or units). Only two of these units were assessed by exam and the other four were assessed by coursework. In 2006, for both coursework and exams, only 45 per cent was needed to gain a pass (in the GNVQs offered by the largest provider examining board, AQA). Furthermore, Mansell highlights, pupils were allowed to take as many re-sits as they liked, and not all modules had to be passed to pass the overall GNVQ. Therefore, thanks to the equivalence system, many schools were using the GNVQ in ICT to bolster their A*-C GCSE performance in the league tables. Indeed Mansell found that out of the top ten ‘most improved’ schools in England six of them ‘...admitted that their gains would have been significantly lower had GNVQs been excluded...’¹² For example, by getting all its pupils to take ICT GNVQ, the eighth most improved school in the country, Croxteth Community Comprehensive in Liverpool, managed to more than double its percentage of pupils with good grades, from 20 per cent in 2002 to 47 per cent in 2003.¹³

¹¹ Smithers: Do school exams need reforming? Alan Smithers, Centre for Education and Employment Research, University of Buckingham, September 2005; Mansell, W., *Education by Numbers: The Tyranny of Testing*, Politicos, London, 2007

¹² Mansell, W., *Education by Numbers: The Tyranny of Testing*, Politicos, London, 2007, p118

¹³ Mansell, W., *Education by Numbers: The Tyranny of Testing*, Politicos, London, 2007, p118

Further as yet unpublished research carried out by former head teacher Roger Titcombe has found that this utilisation of the vocational qualification/GCSE equivalence has been especially acute amongst Academies.

Academies are designed to serve disproportionately deprived areas and on the whole their record is seen to be impressive. The National Audit Office (NAO) reported in 2007, for example, that ‘GCSE performance is improving faster in Academies than in any other types of school, including those in similar circumstances.’ The NAO therefore concluded that Academies ‘...are on track to deliver good value for money’.

As such, when announcing the establishment of an extra 70 Academies in June of this year, Education Secretary Ed Balls argued that Academies could ‘...break the link between poverty and attainment’.¹⁴ However Roger Titcombe’s investigation of Academies’ GCSE results by subject shows that the way in which this ‘rapid’ improvement is being achieved is less positive.

Over the last academic year Titcombe looked into the 2007 GCSE results of existing Academies. The first thing he noted was that of the 40 academies entering pupils for GCSE exams in 2007, 26 failed to achieve the government’s floor target of 30 per cent of pupils achieving five A*-Cs passes including English and maths. However, the figures for five good GCSEs without English and maths he found to be much better. For example, Marlowe Academy in Kent achieved a respectable 39 per cent 5 A*-C figure overall, but only 7 per cent achieved this figure when English and maths were included. For Barnsley Academy (in Barnsley) the comparative figures were 62 per cent and 20 per cent, and for Greig Academy in Haringey, 64 per cent and 21 per cent.¹⁵

In order to investigate this disparity Titcombe wanted to see the breakdown of the results by subject. This was thwarted by the fact that subject results are no longer required to be included in annual school prospectuses, neither are they available from the Department for Children, Schools and Families’ school performance tables. For state schools subject results can be obtained using the Freedom of Information Act, but not for Academies, which as independent schools are exempt from the Act. Seeking to obtain the results himself, Titcombe found that Academies were extremely reluctant to reveal the breakdown of their GCSE entries by subject; when he then requested the information from the Departments for Children, Schools and Families, they said that they did not hold this information.¹⁶

¹⁴ “‘No excuses’ on school results,” *BBC News Online*, 10th June 2008

¹⁵ Titcombe, R., Unpublished article, June 2008

¹⁶ Titcombe, R., Unpublished article, June 2008

Eventually, Titcombe hit on the idea of using the Ofsted's 'RAISEonline' system, an Internet performance database for local authorities and schools.

This revealed that at Marlowe Academy, just 6.8 per cent of its pupils obtained an A*-C in Double Award science, and none at all in history or geography, with a very small number (not precisely given by Ofsted apparently for 'pupil privacy' reasons) in European languages. At Barnsley Academy no GCSE courses were provided in these subjects, and at Greig Academy no pupils obtained an A*-C in Double Award science, history or geography with only another very small but indeterminate number in European languages. What Titcombe was not able to find out was what 'vocational' subjects were replacing the mainstream academic GCSE subjects as the Ofsted 'RAISEonline' system only provides data on GCSEs.

Titcombe's motivation for looking into the way in which Academies are moving away from academic GCSEs was a concern about the diminishing of the academic curriculum.¹⁷ What is especially significant about the use of the vocational qualifications in Academies in particular is the relationship between their intake and income. Academies' disproportionately low-income intake make concern about their migration to vocational qualifications at GCSE more specifically that the academic curriculum of the already most deprived is being shrunk.

New vocational qualifications: narrowing rather than broadening learning

'BTEC Firsts are Level 2 qualifications which are the equivalent of traditional GCSEs grades A*-C. In 2007, there was a 50% increase in BTEC uptake across schools in the UK.'

Edexcel¹⁸

In 2007 the GNVQ was withdrawn and therefore it ceased to be an option for boosting GCSE league table performance. The league-table loop-hole is not however closed – and in fact the situation looks like it will be getting worse as vocational courses become much more than a way to boost league table performance and become a wholesale 'babysitting' service for pupils with weaker prior test performance. A range of 'successor' qualifications as the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) refers to them, have replaced the GNVQ and there exist many other so-called vocational or more accurately, 'vocationally related' qualifications.

'GNVQ Intermediate ICT using online resources has boosted several schools significantly...At the end of the course 99 students gained the equivalent of 4 GCSEs at grade C or above. The potential for similar levels of achievement now exists with Edexcel Digital Applications and OCR National in ICT qualifications.'

City of Leicester Children and Young People's Services: Learning Services¹⁹

¹⁷ Titcombe, R. *How Academies Threaten the Comprehensive Curriculum*, Forum: Volume 50, Number 1, 2008

¹⁸ Edexcel website (www.edexcel.org.uk), BTEC Parent's Guide: 'Guide your child in the right direction'

In terms of take-up, the number of vocational qualifications taken by school pupils is on the rise, almost doubling between the (academic) year 2005/2006 and 2006/2007.²⁰

‘Losing GNVQ was a big disappointment, as our students loved it. Other qualifications failed to meet our expectations so we were forced into looking for alternatives...OCR Nationals are exactly what we were looking for.’²¹

OCR Travel and Tourism level 2, teacher testimonial, Mark Willimont

What vocational qualifications are on offer which are equivalent to GCSEs?

The table below presents a selection of the most popular courses known as vocational or vocationally related, and their value in the league tables as calculated by their levels in the National Qualifications Framework.

‘If you’re interested in gaining a qualification, choosing from the huge range available can seem daunting.’

Directgov²²

Level 1: *equivalent to GCSE grades D-G*

- Edexcel BTEC Introductory Certificates (worth 2 GCSEs) assessed through ongoing exam-free assessment
- Edexcel BTEC Introductory Diploma (worth 4 GCSEs) assessed through ongoing exam-free assessment
- OCR Level 1 National First Award/Certificate Level 1 (worth 1,3 or 4 GCSEs) centre-assessed
- Applied (or ‘vocational’) GCSEs, grades D-G (worth 2 GCSEs) assessed predominantly through ongoing assessment, with a maximum of a third of work assessed through examination

¹⁹ City of Leicester Children and Young People’s Services: Learning Services, Richard White: Strategies for Raising Attainment, October 2006

²⁰ DCSF Statistical First Release 05/06 and 06/07, Table 6

²¹ OCR brochure: ‘Leisure and Tourism, Level 1; Travel and Tourism Levels 2 and 3’

²² Directgov (www.direct.gov.uk): Education and Learning: ‘Qualifications: what the different levels mean’

Level 2: *equivalent to GCSE grades A*-C*

- Edexcel BTEC First Certificates level 2 (worth 2 GCSEs)
- Edexcel BTEC First Diploma level 2 (worth 4 GCSEs)
- OCR Level 2 National Award/Certificate (also First Award/First Certificate for ICT) (worth 2 or 4 GCSEs)
- Applied (or ‘vocational’) GCSEs, grades A*-C (worth 2 GCSEs)

Subjects available in vocational qualifications include variations on the following areas:

- Animal Care (Countryside and the environment)
- Art and design
- Business and enterprise
- Engineering
- Health and social care
- Hospitality and catering
- ICT
- Leisure and tourism
- Manufacturing
- Media
- Performing Arts
- Public services
- Retail
- Science
- Sport

Who is taking the vocational qualifications at 14?

Other than the compulsory core subjects, there is room for options which include a range of ‘academic’ GCSEs and a selection of qualifications which are known as ‘vocational’.

When it comes to choosing GCSE-level options, the significant element is who the vocational qualifications are aimed at. Although the government, examining boards and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) have gone to great lengths to dispel the notion that vocational courses at GCSE level are ‘easier’, the courses are explicitly aimed at pupils who are deemed weaker academically, as gauged for example through pupils’ Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 results. The strong correlation between performance at both Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 and eligibility for free school meals highlighted earlier strongly indicates therefore that pupils from lower-income backgrounds are more likely to end up taking vocational courses at GCSE level. The question is, why is this problematic?

The idea that it is easier to get a higher grade through the vocational courses available for 14-16 year-olds is as heavily contested as the idea that the courses themselves are less challenging. However, official information on the qualifications (‘official’ denoting course material from the exam boards and information disseminated by government agencies) invariably stresses precisely the suitability of the vocational courses for pupils who are not performing well in mainstream ‘academic’ subjects – however carefully cloaked in euphemisms about ‘different learning styles’. For example, the examining board OCR which has a number of vocational qualifications on offer, describes their OCR level 2 Nationals (the equivalent of the old intermediate GNVQ) as an ‘...exam-free alternative to GCSEs, taking a more engaging, practical approach to learning and assessment... these vocationally related qualifications are increasingly popular with schools and colleges, and suit a range of learning styles’.²³

Edexcel, another examining board offering vocational qualifications for 14-16 year-olds, describes one of the ‘broad objectives’ of their vocational GCSEs as being to: ‘...provide a range of teaching, learning and assessment styles to motivate students to achieve the best they can’.²⁴

In turn, the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA) describes the appropriateness of vocational alternatives to the GCSE in a similar way: ‘Some young people who have lost interest in learning

²³ OCR brochure: Leisure and Tourism, Level 1; Travel and Tourism Levels 2 and 3, ‘OCR Nationals - a fresh approach’

²⁴ Edexcel website, GCSE in Applied Business (Double Award), Specifications

the traditional subjects in school may find that a focus on the world of work is much more interesting and motivating to them.²⁵

Significantly though, it is all too apparent that it is the system which has *lost interest in the pupils* largely because they run the risk of not delivering the right (A*-C) performance through academic GCSEs.

‘Success without exams: Many students struggle in exam situations, and they can miss out on opportunities when exam grades don’t represent their true understanding or ability... Instead, assessment and learning support throughout the course give students a much better indication of their progress, and a greater chance of success’.

OCR with reference to the ‘Nationals’²⁶

This emphasis on the potential for greater achievement in the vocational courses than through academic GCSEs is evident throughout the course materials.

‘BTECs are not exam-based qualifications. Exams work well for some students but others find them rather daunting and struggle to see how they fit into the real world of work.’

Edexcel²⁷

The vocational courses on offer either have exams which can be taken at varying points to suit the school, reduced exams, or none at all. This factor is used as a key reason for pupils achieving better grades in the vocational courses than they would in the academic alternatives. This is however a dubious equation; were there a wide-spread issue with pupils’ ability to perform in exams then this would need to be addressed within the school system as a whole: the exact opposite of what is happening with testing having become a greater feature in the education system than ever before. Secondly, just because a pupil may struggle to perform to their ‘true’ abilities in exams does not mean that they should therefore learn different subject matter.

In the same vein, the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust says in its guidance to teachers:

‘You will want to encourage your students to choose this course because it holds a better prospect of success than some other courses on offer.’²⁸

²⁵ Quality Improvement Agency (QIA), ‘Questions about vocational qualifications,’ from Vocational Learning Support Programme

²⁶ OCR brochure: ‘Leisure and Tourism, Level 1; Travel and Tourism Levels 2 and 3, ‘OCR Nationals - a fresh approach’

²⁷ Edexcel, BTEC Parents’ Guide: ‘Guide your child in the right direction’

²⁸ Specialist Schools and Academies Trust website (www.specialistschools.org.uk), Vocational Skills: General outline, ‘Are GCSEs in vocational subjects easy?’, p34

Edexcel, in line with this, describes Applied (vocational) GCSEs as such:

‘GCSEs in vocational subjects are for students across the ability range. Those students, who are more successful with coursework and with continuous assessment rather than terminal exams, are likely to benefit the most. Also, students who have an idea about their future careers may find these GCSEs in a related area a useful starting point.’²⁹

Edexcel which offers an extensive range of vocational qualifications, including BTECs, Applied GCSEs and IT-related ‘DiDAs’, sells these by saying:

‘By giving students the chance to study subjects such as engineering, performing arts, travel and tourism and ICT, they [vocational qualifications] encourage achievement in practically-oriented subjects for students who may not feel at ease with academic study.’³⁰

Schools are also clear on the benefits of pupils who are not doing well in school opting for vocational qualifications at 14. A pertinent example is Stoke Newington School in Hackney. Stoke Newington School has provided pupils who are going into their first year of GCSEs in September 2008 with an ‘Options Guidance Pack’. The aim of the guidance pack is for pupils, parents and tutors to decide which options at GCSE would be best for the pupil. The main basis for making this decision is how well a pupil has performed in their Key Stage 2 Sats tests. For those pupils who have achieved low marks in the tests the message is this:

[In ‘Understanding how well you are doing’] ‘A SAT score of less than 14 means that your chances of getting 5 A to C grades as a minimum at GCSE are greatly reduced following a standard GCSE curriculum and you should strongly consider following a BTEC or Diploma course as well as the GCSE courses.’ (Hackney is one of the first local authorities which will be able to offer the Diploma from September 2008).³¹

In other words, the reality of allegedly greater choice for pupils may actually translate as pupils being pushed into vocational qualifications.

Notably, Ofsted describes Stoke Newington School as: ‘An outstanding school with a culture of high expectations.’³²

That schools tend to aim vocational qualifications at pupils who are not doing well is supported by research from the vocational pressure group Edge. The group recently published an audit of the vocational ‘landscape’ in the UK, based on vocational course take-up in the year 2006-2007. Commenting on vocational courses for 14-16 year-olds, the report’s lead researcher, David

²⁹ Edexcel website: Qualifications: GCSE (vocational subjects) , FAQs

³⁰ Edexcel website, GNVQ Successors, ‘Better Start’, 2007

³¹ Stoke Newington School, Options Guidance Pack 2008-09 (<http://www.sns.hackney.sch.uk/>)

³² Stoke Newington School Ofsted report, October 2007 (www.ofsted.gov.uk)

Hemsworth, said that schools generally aimed vocational qualifications towards the ‘least able and most disaffected pupils’.³³

‘If a young person’s strengths, preferences and interests are in practical, active pursuits, he/she may achieve better on a vocational course than in a general GCSE.’

Specialist Schools and Academies Trust³⁴

Although vocational skills are sold as more hands-on,³⁵ in reality the vocational courses are strikingly *non*-hands on. Instead the emphasis is on learning *about the working world*. In this respect, learning is actually often much less applied than is the case with GCSEs. It quickly transpires that vocational learning related to industry (for example, Construction and Tourism) is learning about an industry, rather than gaining the skills necessary for entering it. Firstly this raises the question of whether it is very useful to be learning how to be, for example, an air steward at 14 (in OCR’s level 2 National Certificate Travel and Tourism, in the unit ‘Working as Airline Cabin Crew’ pupils learn about the key responsibilities which cabin crew have). Certainly questionable however is taking up a 14-16 curriculum *learning about the skills* required to be an air steward.

‘Why should a young person think about taking a new vocational qualification? Because they are keen to learn *about work*.’

OCR³⁶

Learning elementary construction skills is arguably more valuable than learning something under the umbrella of ‘tourism skills’; learning *about* the skills required in construction, when under 16 year-olds are not even allowed to do any work on a building site, is highly questionable.

‘They [OCR Nationals] do not certificate competence on the job but are work-related qualifications which will support progression to an NVQ once a candidate is in the workplace.’

OCR³⁷

Returning to OCR’s level 2 National Certificate in Travel and Tourism, which is potentially the equivalent of doing 4 A*-C GCSEs, in the course brochure details are given about an example unit:

³³ ‘Schools adopt vocational courses,’ *BBC News Online*, 22nd July 2008

³⁴ Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, General outline, p43

³⁵ Directgov, Education and Learning: Applied GCSEs

³⁶ OCR website: OCR Nationals ICT Level 2 information

³⁷ OCR website: OCR Nationals ICT Level 2 information

‘Unit highlights: OCR Nationals in Travel and Tourism and Level 2: Unit 6 – Investigating Package Holidays (Tour Operations) Examining the role of the tour operator and how package holidays are developed. Students develop their practical skills in presenting a simple welcome party for a resort.’³⁸

Aside from the oddity of the idea that a particular section of (often deemed ‘demotivated’) 14 year-olds have more or less determined their careers at such a young age – ‘OCR has developed a suite of stimulating, vocation-based qualifications for those who want to pursue a career in leisure, travel and tourism industries’³⁹ – it would seem that a preferable area of study at school for a future member of cabin crew, for example, would be a language or geography, rather than taking a course on what they will eventually learn to do themselves if they do indeed decide to work in the airline industry.

The point is not that the content itself of the vocational courses on offer is necessarily very easy. Whilst the assessment methods and ways in which the learning is heavily geared towards them⁴⁰ certainly do make it easier to do well in these courses, the most important point is that the learning itself is too often pointless in the sense that it is abstract knowledge relating often quite tenuously to career areas. As the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA) says: ‘...these qualifications focus on learning about the working world, rather than learning about a specific job’.⁴¹ Ultimately the problem is that these qualifications are neither vocational nor academic; rather they are both pseudo-vocational and pseudo-academic.

To repeat the point made earlier, this report does not seek to undermine the value of vocational qualifications: on the contrary, it argues that such learning is too advanced to be suitable for pupils below the age of 16. A reality which has been made clear by the fact that alleged ‘vocational’ qualifications for under 16s are very often only remotely connected to vocational skills. As with all areas of work, underpinning success in vocational occupations is a sound understanding of the core academic subjects.

³⁸ OCR brochure: ‘Leisure and Tourism, Level 1; Travel and Tourism Levels 2 and 3’

³⁹ OCR brochure: ‘Leisure and Tourism, Level 1; Travel and Tourism Levels 2 and 3’

⁴⁰ OCR Nationals are described as ‘more focused’ meaning that pupils can ‘give attention to the essential evidence’: OCR ICT Levels 2 and 3 National Certificates.

⁴¹ QIA from Vocational Learning Support Programme

Conclusion

Perhaps these qualifications masquerading as vocational would be better called ‘occupational’, as they appear to be much more about occupying pupils who are not deemed capable of producing the ‘right’ grade in academic GCSEs.

There are many reasons why the inclusion of so-called vocational courses is worrying. The two most important relate to pupils’ futures, especially those from low-income backgrounds, and the future of vocational skills. On the first point, there is a grave danger that academic study is being reserved for the high performers, which will widen socio-economic divides in light of the relationship between income and exam performance. If this were to escalate there is a very real possibility of a reversion to a system akin to the grammar/secondary modern divide – though arguably in less meritocratic a form. That a purportedly equalising Labour government should be the architect of such a divide would be a tragic irony.

It is clear that there is an awareness amongst most people involved in education of the problems with vocational courses. Schools are not obliged to release subject-level GCSE performance data, and the evidence is that many are reluctant to give out such data⁴² – whilst at the same time very keen to champion their headline ‘GCSE’ figures.

Most importantly, the pupil who takes (or, as appears to often be the case, is pushed into) a vocational course is at risk of forfeiting a great deal. Firstly, although there may be ‘parity of esteem’ in the league tables when it comes to vocational learning there is not parity of esteem when it comes to the outside world. Ironically, QCA chief Ken Boston made this point very clearly in defending the vocational qualification:

‘It is the school, not the pupil, that accrues the points. A young person with a GNVQ cannot properly claim to have four GCSEs, nor vice-versa. The incentive is for the school to broaden its curriculum: despite some reported abuse, it is not intended to be an incentive for an individual to take health and social care rather than maths.’⁴³

Other than the questionable element of whether schools are introducing vocational qualifications to broaden their curriculum, this statement inadvertently highlights one of the injustices of the

⁴² Titcombe, R., Unpublished article, June 2008

⁴³ Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, ‘GCSE and Equivalent Results for Young People in England,’ statement from Ken Boston, 20th October 2005

system: the *pupils themselves* cannot use this false ‘parity’ with GCSEs, and ultimately, unlike the school and the government, all they are left with is a learning experience and qualification of questionable value.

The notion that vocational courses are broadening the curriculum is a powerful one. In fact, the effect which they are having at a pupil level is the opposite. The Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, which suggests that teachers encourage their pupils to do vocational (Applied) GCSE courses because they have a better chance at gaining a good grade, acknowledges the dangers:

‘There are risks involved in taking GCSEs in vocational subjects, particularly as they take up a large proportion of a student’s KS4 programme. Each starts to prepare the student for work in a broad vocational area, where he/she could be continuing with general education for longer.’⁴⁴

For vocational qualifications which can count as four GCSEs (for example a level 2 OCR National), the concern over the amount of curriculum time that they take up is even higher. In other words, those pupils doing the vocational courses, a higher number of whom are from low-income backgrounds, are having their curricula *narrowed*.

A concurrent emphasis on the A*-C benchmark, together with a failure to implement the necessary improvements in schools, has led to a scenario where schools are encouraging pupils to opt out of academic courses. There is nothing democratic about this, although this is precisely the language which the strategies are couched in. The outcome is that for the weakest (and often the poorest) pupils, efforts to genuinely improve their achievement are being dropped. Adding insult to injury, the message loud and clear is that below a C grade at GCSE equates with failure. However the reality is that it would be considerably more valuable to have the learning experience of a useful and challenging course resulting in a lower grade, than a high grade gained through a course of questionable value and application. That is, more valuable to the pupil; to the target-chasers, the higher, opaque, grade is clearly more valuable. Researchers from the University of London’s Institute of Education have referred to pupils going into vocational qualifications at GCSE as ‘refugees’ fleeing from the academic subjects. With the driving force of the league tables, perhaps they would better described as ‘deportees’.⁴⁵

What is particularly striking about the entire approach in the equivalence game is just how anti-education it is. The value of participating in a course is insignificant compared to the grade the pupil gains at the end of the course. Within the system today, the course must *not* be challenging – one would imagine the point of learning – in case it jeopardises the grade gained.

⁴⁴ Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, General outline, p43

⁴⁵ University of London: Institute of Education: ‘English bac – solution for crisis in 14-19 education?’, 29th June 2008

Criticism of the vocational qualifications often comes under fire as snobbery or academic elitism. Whilst this may be the motivation for some, in this instance the criticism derives from precisely the opposite direction. The concern centres on the effect that using a nominally, or pseudo, vocational system as a mechanism for opting pupils out is having on vocational skills' status. The rhetoric around vocational qualifications at school level is all about raising their status: this could not be further from the truth. Moreover, the underlying message which is conveyed through the level of learning and the skills provided in the vocational courses strongly suggests that they have been designed and accredited by people who do indeed consider 'vocational' skills and jobs to be inferior. The reality is that low-expectations are being dressed up as a high regard for vocational education. These low expectations reveal the low regard for vocational education. In short, contrary to the purported aim, the introduction of vocational learning at 14 has been yet another nail in the coffin of vocational skills.

In the words of a Construction Ambassador for the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB):

'The poor image of the construction industry today is a direct result of amputating pupils' academic and intellectual development by feeding them shallow and superficial vocational introductions before they have grasped the fundamental core skills with which to excel in their specialisations. This leads to a large body of semi-educated and stagnating entrants to the industry who have to be supplemented by an (often far better educated) immigrant community.'⁴⁶

Futures are being carelessly traded as poor quality so-called vocational qualifications have become interchangeable with academic GCSEs. If the current scenario is to continue the future for both lower-income pupils and vocational education is bleak. The advent of the Diploma in September is potentially the inevitable next step.

Recommendations for a more equitable way forward

- No 'vocational' learning at GCSE level, including Applied GCSEs. Compulsory schooling should only offer core academic qualifications: the GCSE itself is far from perfect and we have seen what many regard as a decline in standards and a tendency for 'fashionable' causes to be introduced. However, the fundamental premise of the GCSE is not flawed as it is with vocational qualifications.
- A system which is clearer for all, including pupils. It is currently very complicated to understand what is on offer for pupils at 14. This exacerbates the potential danger of schools deciding what is 'best' for pupils in terms of league table performance.

⁴⁶ In interview, 13th August 2008

- Related to the above point, league tables must be truly transparent at GCSE. This will help to prevent manipulation. Furthermore true parity of esteem must entail vocational qualifications not being hidden within academic qualifications but standing in their own right. The move by the government (following considerable pressure) to include maths and English in the headline A*-C GCSE figure was heralded as 'brave'. This in itself is a grave indictment of the smoke and mirrors existing in the current system.
- Finally, and crucially, there needs to be genuine improvement at primary and secondary school level which negates the need to create both illusory progress and to make pupils 'opt out' at GCSE so as not to harm league table performance. The move to make learning more 'accessible' has largely been necessary because of a failure to address what is currently making it *inaccessible*: these relate in particular to serious weaknesses in basic literacy and numeracy on entry into secondary school, attributable to unsatisfactory conditions and curricula in primary school.