

CLOSING THE GAP:

HOW A NARROW CURRICULUM DISADVANTAGES THE DISADVANTAGED



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General Secretary, ASCL



The Key Stage 3 curriculum: teachers and parents have their say

Over the past few years there has been growing alarm among education commentators that our obsession with exam performance is having a harmful effect on the broader school curriculum. Up until now, however, there has been little attempt to gauge if teachers and parents share those concerns.

This report, based on a survey we commissioned last autumn, is an attempt to plug that gap in our knowledge. It makes for sobering reading. By large majorities, both teachers and parents think that exam pressures are leading schools to narrow the curriculum as more and more time is taken up in exam prep. They also believe the problem has worsened over the past three years.

This is having serious consequences on student wellbeing and behaviour and, ironically, on eventual academic outcomes. And it is particularly true of disadvantaged children. As Sir Kevan Collins remarks below, all the evidence suggests that narrowing the curriculum and focusing on the basics doesn't help them perform better – rather the reverse. Nor does it give them the cultural capital that many children from deprived backgrounds lack.

Is there anything more demoralising for a child than to face a test they cannot hope to pass? Yet that is exactly what starting a GCSE curriculum prematurely at Year 7 involves. It shows children how high the mountain is they have to climb without preparing them in any way for the ascent. It destroys interest. It ignores incremental gains. It avoids the careful development necessary for eventual success and makes a travesty of what a broad and balanced curriculum at Key Stage 3 should be all about.

Broad and balanced?

It is hard to find anyone – teacher, employer, parent, politician or policymaker – who isn't in favour of a broad and balanced curriculum. Education authorities, from Ofsted to the Department for Education, regularly insist that this is what schools should offer. Indeed, in answer to our survey of teachers and parents on the matter, the DfE reaffirmed that point: “All pupils,” it said, “should receive a broad and balanced curriculum, and Ofsted inspects schools on this basis.”¹

Given this overwhelming consensus, it may seem surprising that there is so much concern that the curriculum being delivered in schools is not broad enough and is increasingly imbalanced. Yet experts, including Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, are warning that this is exactly what is happening². Curriculum content, they argue, is being squeezed as children are drilled to prepare for tests years before they need to. In some cases, this means that schools are starting to teach a GCSE syllabus as soon as pupils arrive in Year 7 rather than Year 10.

This can have particularly severe consequences for disadvantaged children. As Sir Kevan Collins, Chief Executive of the Education Endowment Foundation, points out: “It might seem tempting to narrow the curriculum at Key Stage 3 to help students focus on

the basics. But the evidence doesn't support this decision. In fact, a recent study³ found that pupils studying a broad curriculum at secondary school were more likely to achieve good GCSEs in English and maths, and they also achieved higher average grades across the board."

Hilary Fine, Head of Product at GL Assessment, echoed his warnings: "The most disadvantaged children are further disadvantaged if they are subjected to a narrow curriculum shorn of the rich, cultural capital better off children tend to accumulate outside of school. Their only exposure to education in the broadest sense is at school. Take it away and they become doubly disadvantaged – they're unlikely to access it elsewhere and academic performance is unlikely to improve."

How has our education system arrived at such a place? If there is general agreement that a broad and balanced curriculum is desirable, why are so many schools accused of offering the opposite? In a word, accountability: the way in which exams are used not only to measure a child's attainment but also to assess their school's performance.

"In England the accountability system wags everything else," says Stephen Tierney, CEO of the Blessed Edward Bamber Multi Academy Trust. "The issue isn't SATs or GCSEs per se; the greatest issue is what happens as a consequence of the exams with respect to Ofsted and a lesser extent the performance tables."

Geoff Barton, General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, is equally scathing about the consequences of an exam-driven curriculum. "The government's obsession with exam rigour is in danger of turning secondary education into a long grind towards GCSEs as schools have to squeeze new content-heavy courses into packed timetables and jump through accountability hoops. We need to put GCSEs back in their place as the outcome of a broad and rich secondary education and not the wheel on which everything turns."

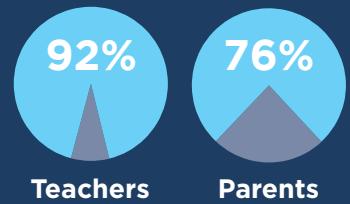
Do teachers and parents share these concerns? In an attempt to find out, GL Assessment commissioned pollsters YouGov to ask them if they believed exam pressures were forcing schools to narrow the curriculum.

Main findings

Over 900 teachers and 1,000 parents of children under 18 were polled in September and October of 2018⁴. The results were conclusive. Over **three-quarters of teachers (76%)** and **three-fifths of parents (60%)** agreed that schools were offering a more restricted curriculum from an earlier age over the past three years than they had been previously.

There was little doubt among respondents about what was to blame – **92% of teachers** and **76% of parents** cited the pressure placed on schools to deliver good exam results. **Two-thirds of teachers (65%)** said parents ought to be worried about children being moved onto a so-called 'GCSE flight path' too early, with **almost as many parents (61%)** agreeing.

The percentage that cited the pressure placed on schools to deliver good exam results as the reason for a more restricted curriculum.

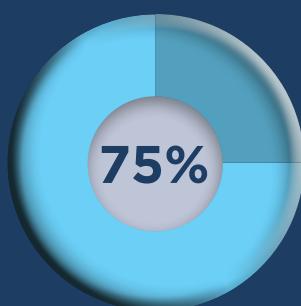


Nine in ten teachers (90%) think too many schools are pressuring teachers to concentrate on an exam-driven syllabus to the exclusion of the wider curriculum.

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Over half of teachers (51%) believed student wellbeing was the primary casualty of an exam-driven curriculum.



75% of parents believe that too much of a focus on exam results might negatively affect their children's wellbeing.

Geoff Barton agreed that the constricting curriculum was a real problem: "It is vital to preserve the early years of secondary education as a time when children build the firm foundations and love of subjects upon which academic success and their life chances are built."

Stephen Tierney, however, said the problem was even more pressing in primary schools. "The narrowing of the curriculum can be a bigger problem in primary schools, where it can become very focused on KS2 SATs – reading, writing and maths – with, in extreme cases, other subjects not covered until after the May exams."

Regardless of the type of school, teachers believe the problem is widespread. **Nine in ten of them (90%)** think too many schools are pressuring teachers to concentrate on an exam-driven syllabus to the exclusion of the wider curriculum. This is despite the fact that similar proportions believe that **teaching a more rounded curriculum from a younger age would better prepare children for later academic success (87%)** and for **life after school (91%)**. Parents echo those beliefs, with **76%** and **78%** respectively agreeing with those propositions.

Unwanted consequences

Teachers strongly believe that there are other costs associated with an over-emphasis on exams. **Seven in ten (71%)** are concerned that teaching a more restricted curriculum has a negative impact on classroom behaviour, almost **eight in ten (78%)** think it doesn't address children who develop at a later stage than their peers, with similar proportions saying it is **bad for pupils who have minor learning difficulties (71%)**, those who have **switched off from school because of earlier experiences of exams (72%)**, those with **behavioural problems (61%)** or **children with latent but not obvious potential (55%)**.

Parents agree, with **three-quarters (75%)** believing that too much of a focus on exam results might negatively affect their children's wellbeing and **half (50%)** worrying that it would make school less enjoyable for their children than their own time at school.

Student wellbeing was a real concern for teachers, according to our survey. Over **half of them (51%)** believed it was the primary casualty of an exam-driven curriculum and it was the issue that concerned them most. A **fifth (21%)** cited the neglect of a child's individual learning needs as their most serious concern and **17%** the fact that too much time was spent on exam practice.

David Crossley, Executive Director of Whole Education, said teachers were right to be worried about student wellbeing: "The best curriculum inspires, builds confidence and prepares our young people for life and work. If all students are asked to do is focus on examinations, as well as increasing stress and exacerbating fear of failing, it negates the real purpose of learning."



Ms Fine said: "Understanding the whole child is the best way to improve academic performance and student wellbeing. Assessment shouldn't drive the curriculum or narrow it but rather provide helpful insight into the whole child and their progress."

She also warned that constant tracking and onerous assessments risked adding to teachers' workload. "Assessment should be smart, reliable and easy to use. It shouldn't be a burden to teachers. So, digital, standardised assessment that is robust and allows teachers to compare their children nationally is ideal."

Pressured teachers

Teachers, it seems, are feeling the pressure. According to our survey, over **four-fifths of them (82%)** said that if they had to teach an exam-driven curriculum they would find teaching less enjoyable. And **well over half (56%)** said they would support their school in efforts to make the curriculum more than just about the final exams.

Stephen Tierney said he believed radical solutions were required: "By taking a step back and radically rethinking the external accountability model, we can rethink school improvement from the inside out. A key aspect of this would be a broadening of the curriculum in primary schools and through Key Stage 3, providing secure foundations – academic, personal and social – on which success in important GCSE exams and life beyond could be built. This approach would most benefit our disadvantaged pupils."

Conclusion

There seems little doubt that both teachers and parents share the views of many education experts that exam pressure is leading to an unacceptable narrowing of the curriculum, particularly at Key Stage 3 but also in primary school in the run-up to Key Stage 2.

There are, too, widespread fears about the immediate and negative effects exam pressure is having on student wellbeing and behaviour, as well as the long-term implications of a narrower curriculum on later academic performance and career success. Yet there is also an acknowledgement among parents and teachers that schools are not to blame for this. The responsibility for that they lay firmly at the door of school accountability.

Footnotes:

1. 'Schools force pupils to focus on GCSE curriculum from age of 11', The Times, 16 November 2018.
2. 'Children drilled for exams from the age of 11', Amanda Spielman, The Times, 21 August 2018.
3. 'Changing the Subject', Dave Thompson and Rebecca Allen, Sutton Trust, 20 July 2016.
4. Research was commissioned by GL Assessment and carried out online by YouGov among a random sample of 911 UK teaching professionals between 21 September and 3 October 2018 and a random sample of 1,022 parents with children under 18 years old between 2 and 4 October 2018.



Eight in ten (78%) teachers think a restricted curriculum doesn't address children who develop at a later stage than their peers.



87% of teachers believe that teaching a more rounded curriculum from a younger age would better prepare children for later academic success.

OUR FOCUS ON READING



Stephen Tierney,
CEO of the
BEBCMAT, a blogger
(www.leadinglearner.me) and author of
Liminal Leadership

It's difficult to refute the idea that being able to read fluently and grasp key ideas within a book or text will help a child be successful in their learning. The challenge for many schools is moving beyond the obvious logic to the systematic and rich development of reading. Schools have a critical part to play in vocabulary acquisition, access to a variety of different books and providing a broad curriculum in Key Stages 2 and 3. However, the approaches of schools to these three different elements vary hugely.

The teaching of phonics is a start. Although children come to school with a difference in their knowledge of letters and their corresponding sounds – some may be able to read a number of words – the gap between those from more advantaged or disadvantaged backgrounds is relatively small. Post phonics, children from more advantaged backgrounds tend to accelerate as their extended vocabulary, acquired at home, allows them to access and understand texts more readily.

There are a number of reading comprehension strategies – inferring meaning from context; identifying key points; developing questioning strategies; and monitoring their own understanding – that are useful to teach. However, comprehending a text requires children to be able to 'read between the lines'; that is, to have the background knowledge, the knowledge in the author's mind which s/he used when writing the piece.

"Stephen and Cath are thinking of visiting the northern (Nordland and Trom) Norwegian fjords. Stephen can go on holiday any time but Cath can only get time off from work in January. Stephen and Cath have decided not to go."

Where are Stephen and Cath thinking of going on holiday? When can Stephen & Cath go? Why did Stephen and Cath decide not to go?

The first two questions can be answered by retrieving information from the short passage above; many pupils are able to do this even if they don't know what a fjord is. The third one can't; the reader would need to understand that during January it is dark pretty much all day and so Stephen & Cath would see very little of the fjords. Some readers might think that in winter the fjords would be frozen so access would be limited. However, the fjords don't tend to be, due to the warming effect of the Gulf Stream. Science and Geography both have a significant part to play in understanding the passage above.

The problem often comes as our hyper-accountability system can push some primary schools' curriculums towards a more limited diet aimed at success in the end of Key Stage 2 SATs. The very subjects that would support reading – Science, Geography, History, Religious Education and the Arts – can be squeezed out or given very limited time. The most pernicious and unjust impact of the current accountability system is experienced by those schools serving our most disadvantaged communities; the narrowing of their curriculums can be greatest. These schools often have to put additional time and effort into securing the basics of literacy and numeracy as well as the extra challenges of safeguarding and enhanced pastoral care that is required. In our zero tolerance accountability system the disadvantaged can easily become more disadvantaged.

Time for reading and what is read can vary massively between primary schools and across classes within the same school; outside of English it can be pretty much non-existent

in Key Stage 3. In Key Stage 2, class readers, where they exist, can consist of the same two or three authors and be exclusively fiction based. There is a strong argument for central co-ordination of a school's reading programme; what some schools refer to as a literary canon. At Key Stage 3, there is the challenge of finding bespoke time for reading. Given the potential benefits, we shortened lessons at St Mary's by ten minutes in September 2018 (we had 100-minute lessons) to introduce a thirty-minute daily reading period with form tutors. We now have a list of just under fifty books all pupils will read, from the middle of Year 2 to the middle of Year 10, if they attend the primary and secondary schools in the Trust.

Nothing on this scale should ever be introduced without a clear idea of how the impact will be evaluated; sadly the reverse is so often the case. As part of the evaluation of the reading programme, we will be using a suite of standardised assessments from

GL Assessment – the *New Group Reading Test*, the *Progress Test in English* and the *Pupil Attitudes to Self and School* measure – to help us judge whether the programme is having the required impact.

To get better at reading you need to read more; what you read matters, as does the breadth of the curriculum and the explicit teaching of tier 2 and 3 vocabulary. A focus on reading isn't an event, rather a staged, well thought-through and well implemented multi-year development for any school.



THE IMPACT OF A NARROW CURRICULUM ON LEARNERS WITH SEND



Dr Adam Boddison,
*Chief Executive,
nasen*

It was only a few years ago that, everywhere I went, I was hearing about the ‘broad and balanced curriculum’. But something seems to have changed. Some schools have been able to sustain a diverse curriculum, but increasingly school leaders have been telling me how they have had no choice but to focus on what they describe, in commercial terms, as their ‘core business’.

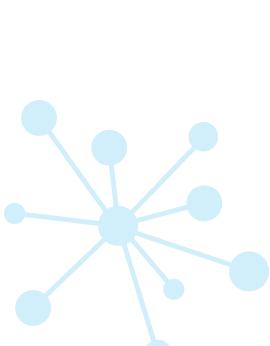
The commercial analogy here helps to understand what is happening. When businesses have to make tough decisions, the deciding factor can sometimes be more about the financials than the ethics, since this is ultimately how their success is determined. In our secondary schools, it is the metrics of the EBACC, Progress 8 and Ofsted that are used to determine success, all of which actively discourage schools from offering a broad and balanced curriculum.



The reality is that our current system of accountability for schools rewards academic progress and attainment above all else. In too many cases, this leads to a narrowing of the curriculum in order to maximise academic outcomes, which has a disproportionate impact on learners with SEND (special educational needs and/or disabilities).

As a former mathematics teacher, I understand the importance of English and mathematics, but the disproportionate focus on these areas has limited the space available in the curriculum for other subject areas. The availability of the arts in particular has been squeezed, which is leading to a cultural inclusion crisis in our schools. It is through the arts, heritage and culture that some learners with SEND can access education, but instead these learners are spending increasing amounts of time on the subjects that carry the most value within the accountability frameworks.

The drive to improve academic outcomes has also reduced the flexibility of timetables in some cases, making it increasingly difficult to accommodate important therapeutic interventions. For some learners with SEND, their preparation for adulthood is as important as their academic outcomes, but initiatives that support this are disappearing in too many schools. The SEND Code of Practice (January 2015) is clear about our responsibilities to ensure that learners with SEND have the skills to live independently and to access employment, so we need to ensure that this is happening consistently across all schools, not just in those cases where we have strong ethical leadership.





Given this challenging context, it seems fair to consider how some leaders have sustained a broad and balanced curriculum and a culture of inclusion. Here are five things that I have picked up from schools that offer excellent support for learners with SEND:

1 Prioritise SEND.

This might sound obvious, but SEND is sometimes an after-thought of strategic decision-making rather than being at the heart of it. I often hear school leaders tell me that they want to be inclusive, but they cannot afford to meet the needs of learners with SEND because of budget pressures. Conversely, I rarely hear school leaders tell me that they cannot afford to deliver maths, English or science, so it really is about priorities. Being inclusive does not always come with a high price tag. Developing strong relationships with parents is invaluable and costs nothing. Similarly, some school leaders have given SEND a parity with Pupil Premium in relation to the monitoring of effective spend and reporting to governors.

2 Maximise the use of free resources.

Over time, a significant bank of resources and expertise has been built up that is now freely available to all schools. There are many charities offering support, and the government has funded a range of materials to support SEND in schools that are available for free under Crown copyright. A good starting point would be to access the free resources from the government-funded SEND Gateway (www.sendgateway.org.uk), where you can also join the Whole School SEND community of practice. As part of this community, you can find out how other schools are tackling similar challenges.

3 Take back control of accountability.

I recently read that 92% of all special schools have been graded as Good or Outstanding by Ofsted. It is unlikely that all of the learners in these schools have excelled academically, which shows that Ofsted is prepared to recognise a broader notion of outcomes, even under the existing inspection framework. Mainstream schools might want to look to special schools to see how they have presented their case.

4 Value ethical leadership.

The SEND Code of Practice (January 2015) is clear that every teacher is a teacher of learners with SEND. For this to happen, every leader must be a leader of SEND. I do not believe that anybody working in our schools sets out to provide a poor offer to learners with SEND, but the pressures on the system are driving non-inclusive behaviours. Find ways to recognise the ethical and inclusive actions of school staff.

5 Support your SENCO.

In the most inclusive schools, the responsibility for SEND is spread well beyond the SENCO, and the SENCO has excellent support. For example, if the SENCO is spending much of their time on paperwork, then they are an expensive administrator! An Assistant SENCO might well allow more time for engaging with families and supporting quality first teaching. Ensuring that SENCOs have access to appropriate diagnostic tools will save them time and save the school money. This will also ensure that needs are identified as early and as accurately as possible, a principle that is important to protect, particularly when the curriculum itself is under pressure. Lastly, you might also consider whether you have provided your SENCO with enough protected time¹ to deliver their role effectively.

Footnote:

1. 'Protected time for SENCOs' refers to a finding from the National SENCO Workload Survey.
<https://www.bathspa.ac.uk/media/bathspaucuk/education-/research/senco-workload/SENCOWorkloadReport-FINAL2018.pdf>

UNLOCKING THE TRANSITION INTO ADULT LIFE



By **Zoya Wallington**,
Director of Impact at Right to Succeed, a charity that aims to eliminate the effects of poverty and system failure upon the achievement of young people.

Since Michael Young's speech on 'Powerful Knowledge'¹ there has been a lively debate about the role of the curriculum in increasing social mobility. Many leaders before and since have addressed the 'why' and the 'what' of education and will continue to do so.

In our work in the recently formed DfE Opportunity Areas, we are focusing on the 'how'. 'What Works Centres' in education have begun to retest the results from promising projects². These trials have shown that the careful consideration of how to implement an intervention in a school's own context may be the factor that makes a measurable difference to the outcomes of disadvantaged pupils.

Increasingly, we are learning about why it is not just the content of the curriculum but the way that it is designed and implemented in schools that unlocks the full value of the curriculum for educational and social equity, particularly for children for whom school is not an easy or natural transition into adult life.

A broad and rich curriculum for all

Alongside growing interest in curriculum design from teachers and leaders, there have also been far-reaching concerns from Ofsted³ about the narrowing of the curriculum to focus on exams. In particular, research by Ofsted suggests that 'some secondary schools were significantly shortening Key Stage 3 in order to start GCSEs'.

GL Assessment's recent YouGov poll also found that 87% of teachers believe that teaching a more rounded curriculum from a young age would better prepare children for later academic success, while 91% believe a more rounded curriculum better prepares them for life after school. Parents echo those beliefs, with 76% and 78% respectively agreeing.

Evidence on the development of the brain during adolescence seems to support these concerns. Restricting the development of the capabilities, knowledge and skills that cannot easily be tested by an examination could be limiting for all pupils but is likely to be felt most acutely by those children with the least access to positive academic or life experiences.

Key Stage 3 - developing reasoning through adolescence

In recent years, education, economics and policy have focused on the early years and there is established evidence that this is a primary period of development.

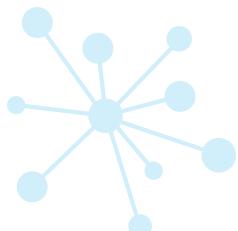
The regions of the brain dedicated to higher-order functions, which involve social, emotional and cognitive capabilities, are affected by early influences. They continue to develop,

however, into adolescence and early adulthood⁴. A burst of brain development happens between the ages of 9–12. These areas of the brain responsible for reasoning continue to develop through adolescence into adulthood.

Viewed in the light of this evidence, periods of child development, such as the transition from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3, can each be a critical time for development of the child, both in and outside the classroom.

Capabilities such as verbal reasoning appear to be highly correlated⁵ to GCSE outcomes, and the Key Stage 3 curriculum is a significant opportunity to support a pupil's development through adolescence.

As the science about brain architecture continues to develop, we have an opportunity to apply this learning in the classroom, in particular through ensuring that dialogue, spacing of learning and explicit teaching of problem-solving continue to be a key part of every child's school experience.



Supporting a child's cognitive development through adolescence

- Include pupils in dialogue on a variety of topics, issues and current events
- Actively encourage pupils to share ideas and thoughts with you
- Encourage pupils to think independently and develop their own ideas
- Explicitly assist pupils in setting their own goals in relation to learning
- Stimulate adolescents to think about possibilities for the future
- Compliment pupils for well thought-out decisions and problem-solving
- Assist pupils in re-evaluating poorly made decisions for themselves in relation to learning as well as behaviour⁶

Footnotes:

1. The curriculum and the entitlement to knowledge, Young, 2014
2. Testing, Testing, Testing! How do we respond when trials produce different results? Education Endowment Foundation, 2017
3. HMCI commentary: curriculum and the new education inspection framework, HMCI, 2018
4. National Scientific Council for the Developing Child, 2007
5. CAT4 Technical Guidance, GL Assessment
6. Stanford Children's Health

HELPING STUDENTS ACHIEVE THEIR FULL POTENTIAL THROUGHOUT KS3



Hilary Fine,
Head of Product,
GL Assessment

Good assessment is intrinsic to broad and balanced learning because it helps schools evaluate their curriculum, measure student progress and identify the children who need more support or greater challenge.

As this report has demonstrated, both teachers and parents share the views of many education experts that our obsession with exam performance is leading to an unacceptable narrowing of the curriculum, particularly at Key Stage 3. Our contributors have explained what schools can do to implement a balanced curriculum, informed and supported by robust assessment, and what teachers can do to engage parents and disadvantaged children.

Working in partnership with schools for almost 40 years, we have developed a suite of assessments that supports better outcomes for students. Our tests are designed to help you to enable every child to realise their full potential by taking a ‘whole pupil view’, which takes into account their ability to achieve, their current attainment, and which identify any barriers to learning they may have. We work with expert partners, including King’s College London and the University of York, to ensure that our assessments are rigorous, academically sound and in line with current best practice. Our assessments are also widely used by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) to measure the impact of their intervention research.

Our *KS3 Assessment Package* is a powerful combination of our *Cognitive Abilities Test®* (CAT4), *Progress Test Series®* (covering English, maths and science), *New Group Reading Test®* (NGRT), *New Group Spelling Test®* (NGST) and our *Pupil Attitudes to Self and School®* (PASS) attitudinal measure. Together they can identify your students’ potential achievement, measure their attainment and progress in core subjects, and uncover any barriers to learning they may have so you can plan appropriate interventions. It is specifically designed to support you through the crucial KS3 years and for GCSE decision-making.

For further information please visit gl-assessment.co.uk/KS3.

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To contact your local area consultant to organise a school visit or to discuss our KS3 Assessment Package in more detail, visit gl-assessment.co.uk/consultants, or to discuss your specific requirements call **0330 123 5375**.