

False Binaries and Secret Gardens Politics and the landscape of English

From teacher recruitment to GCSEs, English teaching is not helped by simple answers to complex questions, **Peter Thomas** argues.

Ever since Callaghan's 1986 Ruskin description of education's 'secret garden', politicians have busied themselves as horticulturalists, landscapers and rubble clearance contractors, with English the main plot for attention. The problems come when they trust the legislation product more than the education process and when they favour short term interventions that are easily measured to show something has improved. Policy and practice are not helped by simple answers to complex issues.

Recruitment and retention

Take the crisis (long denied by Government) in teacher recruitment and retention. The quick way to an easily-measured recruitment boost was through new routes into teaching that avoided the selectivity and academic professionalism of university training. Predictably, these routes have not provided what recruits need to sustain the realities of teaching. Now Damien Hinds is addressing a complex retention crisis caused by a simple solution to a recruitment crisis. His financial incentive to teachers in their fourth year is welcome, but short term. It's not just money that affects teacher satisfaction and commitment. What's needed is a grasp of what made teaching stable and satisfying before SATs, MATs, League tables and DfE totems and taboos, as well as salary and underfunding. More promising is the new proposal for ongoing CPD.

Learners and learning

Despite obvious similarities, youngsters are predictably and unpredictably different, and they learn at different rates, for different reasons, and in different ways. No single teaching strategy suits all, or suits all the time. Some strategies suit some, some of the time. What matters is that a teaching strategy includes tactics suited to the variety of learners and learning. Learning to read is possibly the essential requirement for further learning, so I welcome any support for reading strategies. Part of that promotion involves decoding print based on grapheme-phoneme correspondence. Recognising phonic patterns is a necessary part of print-processing, but reading itself involves more reading-contextual and reader-focused dimensions.

Reading in English needs more than artificial texts constructed out of words chosen to demonstrate phonic regularities. It needs a strategy based on varied tactics, varied stimuli, varied motivation and varied teacher-student relationships.

Totems and taboos

Too often, policy and practice are distorted by reductive oppositional models. I think a spectrum is a better model than a binary in life, work and relationships, and in education. False binaries ('traditional/progressive') usually replicate a biblical Good vs Bad, instead of a secular Pick and Mix. For example, sometimes direct instruction works; sometimes group-work; sometimes guided independent discovery. Reliance on one denies human variety of motivation. Some kids learn by talking to each other; or by talking to teachers; or by not talking at all. So nobody is helped by setting synthetic phonics (Nick Gibb's 'first, fast and only') against all other methods; or by setting a 'knowledge-rich' curriculum against a 'knowledge-free' curriculum (if one exists), or silence against talk. Effective teaching and learning does not come from a universal formula (good for producing Coco-pops or gearboxes) but from a flexible, variable professional repertoire.

Curriculum and assessment: GCSE v iGCSE

The politics of education is more than party politics. I welcome Labour's opposition to unequal opportunity, but I'm worried by Lucy Powell's and Angela Rayner's objection to public schools' advantage in being able to enter candidates for the 'easier' iGCSEs. I think this is barking up the wrong tree. The reformed English GCSEs include a small increase in SPaG marks in English and a 'closed book' 19th century novel in Literature, but these are changes to assessment protocols rather than a more rigorous curriculum. The main claim for 'rigour' is the replacement of coursework by timed final exams. Whilst this eliminates some scope for manipulation caused by state schools' submission to league tables, it does not mean that iGCSEs are easier than GCSEs. Rather, my view, as one who has written questions and marked scripts for both, is that iGCSE is *more* demanding.

Firstly, the iGCSE 40% coursework specification I know best sets challenge in a way that that a timed exam can't. The task requires originality in preparing an article which critiques, synthesizes and develops from five separate and conflicting sources. Students also have to provide a commentary on the sources and a commentary on research methods. This is a pathway to the rigorous thinking, reading and writing required by higher education, as well as real-life professional communication. I think this is a better 21st century English model than the reformed GCSE throwback to the O Level I examined before GCSE.

Secondly, intellectual and scholarly rigour are not helped by the influence of the new exam protocol on question setting. GCSE English exams have become highly standardized with a formulaic questioning repertoire, targeting specific assessment objectives in the same order, with the same mark tariff, often with the same bullet points guiding student response. This helps an efficient marking process involving a vast new examiner workforce. But the standardising of questioning has led to standardised preparing of students, with an emphasis on memorising a narrow range of responses, often scaffolded by mnemonics.

I think the reformed GCSEs are less supportive of independent study, originality of thought and sustained commitment to reading and writing than iGCSEs. *That* is why so many prestigious UK selective public schools with a long record of 90%+ A*/A results in GCSE have opted for the iGCSE as more challenging for their brightest students. Labour's concern for educational equality would be more productive if it proposed the best of both systems for all. Accepting the myth of iGCSE's 'easiness' and GCSE's 'rigour' confirms the government spin justifying Michael Gove's disruption to 16+ education. And any claims about 'raised standards' need to be set against the awarding bodies' achievement of fairness and continuity with a 9-4 pass rate remarkably similar to the previous A*-C, and the top 9 award remarkably similar to the previous A*.

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