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THE SCHOOLS BLOG



Don't fear the reaper: Gove takes his axe to GCSEs in Nail Technology and Fish Husbandry

The educational establishment has spent so many years criticising government policy that it must virtually invent from scratch a lexicon of praise, should the day ever dawn that it wishes to give thanks to its masters. That may be too much to ask of a traditionally defensive constituency - and, in fairness, it has had little cause to thank governments over the last few decades. Headline-grabbing and short-lived initiatives have wearied even those who wish to believe the best of ministers' intentions.

A year ago, in this blog, I asked if we might be seeing at long last a government that has set its mind to cleanse impurity and strengthen weakness within our education system. I still feel encouraged by the signs. Sacred cows are being asked to justify their divine status, and some are being calmly slaughtered by an education minister who has taken to the task of grim reaper with engaging enthusiasm.

Take "nail technology services", for example. Incredibly, this is a certificate that the previous government allowed to count as equivalent to two GCSEs. Fish husbandry, tourism and horse care also provided good investments for any school that wished to rise up the GCSE league tables without fretting pupils with anything too cerebral.

Mr Gove has axed the GCSE status of such courses and he is right to do so. Professor Alison Wolf, who reviewed vocational qualifications last year, concluded that some schools taught these courses not for their value to the pupils in question, but to attract more points in league tables. Vocational teaching is an essential part of the state's educational provision, but it must be good in itself, properly resourced and well taught, not an empty package with a spurious GCSE wrapping. Nor should we disguise the fundamental need of pupils to be literate and numerate, with some understanding of languages, science and humanities, by the time their compulsory education is complete.

The focus on the English Baccalaureate, not welcomed by all, has been an excellent way of reminding schools of a crucial core to any young person's education. Tightening up requirements for new teachers, and addressing the serious issue of the high numbers of weak or incompetent teachers in UK classrooms are all welcome measures, as is the appointment of Michael Wilshaw as Ofsted's new chief inspector. The addition of the starred A at A level and talk of an extended essay, as we see working so successfully in the International Baccalaureate, all indicate a return to the gold standard that A level so nearly relinquished. Practices that existed within public examination boards, effectively chasing customers rather than acting as the guardians of assessed scholarship and learning, are also now at last under scrutiny. The renewed emphasis on free schools and academies has yet to be fully tested by experience, but the philosophy behind it is liberating.

It is easy to be contemptuous of government – we have had enough reasons over the years for this to become a habit of mind. However, these changes may yet be a turning-point, or the first steps, at least, towards a bolder and far more pragmatic educational vision for our schools than we have seen for decades.

Andrew Halls