

Ofsted is biased towards ‘jazzy’ teaching, think tank says

Ofsted is biased towards ‘trendy’ child-led learning and ‘jazzy’ lessons, and prejudiced against traditional ‘chalk and talk’ styles of teaching, according to a recent report by right-wing think tank, Civitas.

The study, conducted by Civitas education research fellow Robert Peal, is based on an analysis of 260 Ofsted reports.

The first 130, taken from schools inspected in September and October last year, show clear evidence of bias, says Civitas, with more than half (52 per cent) of these reports showing a preference for lessons in which pupils learned independently from teacher instruction and 42 per cent showing a preference for group work. Eighteen per cent criticised teachers for talking too much.

The second 130 reports Civitas analysed were from schools inspected after the release of new guidance at the end of last year, saying inspectors should not show a preference for a particular teaching style.

Though the percentage showing a preference for pupil independence in the second batch of reports fell to eight per cent and none criticised teachers for talking too much, Civitas’ report says the change in the language of the reports was ‘superficial’.

It claims inspectors were given a list of ‘banned phrases’ criticising the lack of child-centred learning that they could not use in their reports. In some cases, reports have been edited after they were published to delete child-centred language.

‘Such a shallow approach to combating the preferred Ofsted style of teaching relies on changing the language of the reports but allowing the fundamental judgement to remain the same,’ Civitas say.

Their report calls for the Ofsted quality of teaching grade to be removed from inspections, with schools graded on achievement, behaviour and leadership and management only. According to the report, this would give schools the ‘professional autonomy to focus on what teaching methods work best’.

An Ofsted spokesperson responded: ‘The arguments put forward in this report are largely reheated ones. What matters to Ofsted is what matters to parents – ensuring that schools are delivering the best possible education for their children.’

‘As HM Chief Inspector Sir Michael Wilshaw has repeatedly made clear, Ofsted does not have a preferred teaching style. It is up to the classroom teacher to determine how they should teach.’

Introducing the A-level in ‘selfies’

Sixth-formers taking their A-levels will now be able to study the culture of ‘selfies’, as part of a new qualification drawn up by exam board OCR and approved by exam regulator Ofqual.

Students who choose to study sociology will now cover topics such as social media, online safety and privacy as part of a new course.

The exam board said that it will include looking at ‘evidence-based research on globalisation’, such as studies on why many young people claim they could not live without the internet and how men and women behave differently online.

Victoria Hunter, OCR subject team manager, said: ‘We have brought our syllabus bang up to date with exciting new content that tackles some of the biggest issues facing societies today.’

‘Globalisation and digital communication are transforming work, family and leisure life. No sociology



A-level would be complete without making it compulsory to study how people are responding to the new rules of the digital global village.’

She added: ‘Students will apply sociological theories and methods to explore weighty questions around online censorship, how to police the rising tide of global organised crime, if the selfie culture encourages sexualisation of young girls, whether social networks unite or isolate people and the role of digital networks in creating virtual communities.’

The new A-level, which will be available from September 2015, is split into three parts. The first looks at core sociological themes such as socialisation, culture, identity and power, and the second looks at research methods, including data analysis taking into account inequality, class, gender, ethnicity and age. The third focuses on ‘globalisation’, allowing students to explore different methods of social enquiry and develop their understanding of social processes, change and policy.

Arts and crafts marginalised by focus on core subjects

Budget pressures and the government's emphasis on core subjects such as English and maths have resulted in significant cuts in arts, crafts and design provision in over half of secondary schools, according to a recent survey.

The poll of 172 heads of department (HODs) and teachers by the National Society for Education in Art and Design (NSEAD) found that 54 per cent of secondary schools had seen funding slashed for art departments in the last three years.

These budget cuts have resulted in restrictions on what arts departments are able to teach, schools having to ask students to cover the costs of their craft materials, limited professional development opportunities and losses of staff, as management teams replace departing arts specialists with non-art teachers or no one at all.

The government's emphasis on core subjects in the English Baccalaureate has also had a negative impact, with only 32 per cent of those surveyed agreeing that art, craft and design subjects are highly valued by senior managers and/or governors.

The survey also revealed that due to the pressure of the EBacc and upcoming Progress 8 measure, some schools are discouraging higher achieving students from choosing practical subjects at GCSE. In fact, one teacher revealed that 'pupils of higher academic ability (sets 1-2) are unable to



take art as an option at Key Stage 4.'

Sophie Leach, assistant general secretary of NSEAD, said: 'Performance measures that exclude or marginalise art and design are impacting on Key Stage 3 and 4 provision. A significant number of specialists in posts rarely or never receive training (29 per cent) and opportunities for pupils to work with creative practitioners or visit galleries and museums have been reduced.'

Headteacher Peter Nutkins of Humphrey Perkins School in Loughborough added: 'The two main things that would help are for Ofsted to insist on a broad and balanced curriculum – it's in there, but watered down – and to have the arts explicitly included in the key performance indicators such as Progress 8.'

'A lot of headteachers are under immense pressure and if you are on the brink of closing because Ofsted say your results are bad, you are going to focus on what they are measuring.'

DfE releases sample questions from new primary tests

The Department for Education has released a number of sample questions for the new tougher tests to be taken by seven- and 11-year-olds.

The sample questions show the higher standards expected for reading, writing and arithmetic which, according to the DfE, will further the government's objective of ensuring nobody leaves school without being able to read or write and with a solid grounding in maths.

The new tests will come in from 2016, reflecting the greater demands of the rigorous new curriculum, which will be taught from this September. All topics in the curriculum – including the most complex – will be tested in these new assessments, whereas at the moment, 11-year-old pupils are only fully stretched if they are also entered for the separate level 6 tests.

Former Education Minister Elizabeth Truss said: 'We know that for children to get on in life, a solid grounding in maths and English at primary is vital.

'This means learning times tables up to 12x12 and being able to carry out long multiplication and division without the aid of a calculator. It also means proper spelling, grammar and punctuation.'

Government figures show that some 83 per cent of pupils who reached the expected standard in both English and maths at age 11 went on to achieve at least five A* to C GCSE grades including English and maths in 2013.

In addition to rigorous, more demanding curriculums and tests, the government is also establishing a national network of 32 maths hubs which will seek to match the standards achieved in high-performing East Asian countries, and be open to other schools to learn from. Hubs will implement the Asian-style mastery approach to maths which has seen children in these jurisdictions often around two years ahead of English children by age 15.

'There is no reason why our children cannot match the best performers around the world in these vital subjects,' Elizabeth Truss added.