

THE FORGOTTEN THIRD

Commission of Enquiry



ASCL Association
of School and
College Leaders

March 2019 Interim Report

“Here is Edward Bear, coming downstairs now, bump, bump, bump, on the back of his head, behind Christopher Robin. It is, as far as he knows, the only way of coming downstairs, but sometimes he feels that there really is another way, if only he could stop bumping for a moment and think of it. And then he feels that perhaps there isn’t.”

Winnie-the-Pooh, AA Milne



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WHAT IS THE AIM OF THE COMMISSION?

In October 2018, ASCL launched an independent, national commission of enquiry entitled 'The Forgotten Third' (the Commission). ASCL recognises the need to take a policy and practice lead in this vital area of national concern with standards achieved by young people at the end of compulsory schooling. In the first instance, the Commission has focused on English, in the knowledge that many of the same questions could be asked in relation to the companion core subject of mathematics.

The remit of the Commission is thus as follows:

To ensure that all students receive meaningful recognition of their achievements in English at 16+, marking twelve years of compulsory education

To ensure that all children and students in the English school system reach a level of competence in the national language in order to flourish as 21st century citizens

To make recommendations on how to achieve the above goals in the nation's primary and secondary schools and colleges, reviewing the current assessment and accountability system in England.

WHO ARE THE COMMISSIONERS?

The ASCL Commission comprises 15 members: teachers and school leaders who collectively through five decades have over 200,000 hours of teaching English in primary and secondary classrooms in different parts of the country.

Lilian Bell, primary headteacher and Vice Chair, ASCL Ethics, Inclusion and Equalities Committee

David Birch, former secondary headteacher, English examiner

Roy Blatchford (Chair), former secondary headteacher, English teacher

Debbie Gillibrand, early years leader

Tiffnie Harris, secondary deputy headteacher and head of English

Kathleen Higgins, headteacher, English teacher

Siobhan Horisk, primary headteacher

Misbah Mann, secondary headteacher, former primary headteacher

Julie McCulloch, ASCL Director of Policy

Julia Maunder, secondary headteacher, English teacher

Marc Rowland, author of *A Practical Guide to the Pupil Premium*

Melanie Saunders, former secondary headteacher, international adviser, English teacher

Catherine Sezen, Association of Colleges Senior Policy Manager, English teacher

Iain Veitch, secondary headteacher, English teacher

Rachael Warwick, executive secondary headteacher, English teacher.

They have brought to the Commission the views of many teachers and leaders with whom they work. Formal requests for evidence have been via ASCL's website.

The Commission has met formally three times since October, taking evidence from a wide range of sources. The Education Policy Institute (EPI) is providing additional research capacity.

A final report will be published in June 2019.

WHY THE COMMISSION OF ENQUIRY?

Background

Each year in England over half a million 16-year-olds take their GCSEs. A third of these students do not achieve at least a standard pass (grade 4) in English and mathematics¹.

Why is it that a third of 16-year-olds, after twelve years of compulsory schooling, cannot read or write English at what the Department for Education (DfE) describes as 'standard pass' level?

Why is there not proper recognition of the progress these young people have made as they move on to further education and employment?

At age 11, as they leave primary school, a similar third of children fail to reach expected national standards in reading, writing and mathematics.²

What is happening in homes and schools that means too many children and young people are judged not to be competent in English at a basic level?

Does the answer lie with the students; their parents; early years, primary and secondary teachers; the content of GCSE English Language; the design of the examination system; the national accountability measures?

One 17-year-old student, with a grade 3 in English Language, asked the Commission: *"Do a third of us always have to fail so that two-thirds pass?"*

ASCL's Commissioners are asking these questions in the spirit of Winston Churchill's view that: *"To improve is to change; to be perfect is to change often"*. Their explorations and recommendations shape the story of 'the forgotten third'.

1 [Key stage 4 and multi-academy trust performance 2018 \(revised\)](#). Department for Education. 24 January 2019. Table 2a. In 2018, 35.8% of pupils in all state-funded schools did not achieve grade 9-4 in English and maths GCSEs.

2 [Key stage 2 and multi-academy trust performance, 2018 \(revised\)](#). Department for Education. 13 December 2018. In 2018, 36% of pupils did not reach the expected standard in reading, writing and maths in key stage 2 tests.

Dignity and moral purpose

"I am a better person than these grades show."

"This grade makes it look as though I can't read or write."

"If you fail, you are nothing."

"I feel as though I am trapped in the English and maths waiting room."

These are the words of four young people amongst the 187,000³ students who in August 2018 were informed by the examination boards that they had failed to secure at least a standard pass (grade 4) in English and maths combined.

There is a fundamental matter here of common dignity, and what perceived failure does for the self-worth of so many young people.

When 2017 GCSE results were published, ASCL General Secretary Geoff Barton commented:

"It's those middle and lower-attaining students who need our relentless focus – the ones for whom learning is neither intuitive nor always enjoyable; the ones most likely to become disaffected by a shoe-horned curriculum diet."

None of our international competitors will take the same gleeful delight in designing a tougher qualification that leaves more children and their parents feeling disappointed at the end of 12 years."

At some point we must give our attention – undistracted and laser-sharp – to the students at the margins, to those least well served by today's new GCSEs."

And one headteacher of a secondary school recently judged 'outstanding' interviewed by Commissioners observed:

"33% were Grade 3 or lower in English Language this summer and we anticipate a similar percentage in future years. It's grim for a third - and professionally very frustrating."

As a professional association representing 19,000+ school and college leaders across the UK, ASCL speaks on behalf of members and acts on behalf of children and young people, with the moral purpose of teaching at the core of its members' work.

3 [Key stage 4 and multi-academy trust performance 2018 \(revised\)](#). Department for Education. 24 January 2019. Table 2a. Figures refer to all state-funded schools.

High on the Association's current agenda are:

- the appropriateness of the current examination system at 16+
- the accountability measures for the school system
- the challenges for schools to address social justice
- the need to resolve curriculum discontinuity between primary and secondary phases.

'Half Our Future' and 'The Forgotten Third'

In 1963, John Newsom and his colleagues presented to the government of the time a beautifully crafted, 300-page report titled *Half Our Future*.

The landmark report painted a picture of success and positive self-esteem for 50 per cent of the nation's 15-year-olds. It went on to identify that the other 50 per cent languished with an unsuitable curriculum resulting in poor or no qualifications. The report's various recommendations led to practical improvements in schools and, crucially, to the raising of the school leaving age – a decade later in 1973.

Five decades on and that 50 per cent identified by John Newsom has its current equivalent in 'the forgotten third'.

In 2018, 48%⁴ of 16-year-olds did not secure at least a 'strong' pass (grade 5) in English Language GCSE. 57% did not achieve at least a grade 5 in English and maths combined⁵ - a remarkable statistic to mark the 'school leaving age' of one of the world's leading economies and advanced democracies.

The 2018 GCSE results record that 36% of 16-year-olds failed to secure at least a standard pass (grade 4) in English and maths combined. The figure for English Language was 32%⁶. That equates to around 168,000 pupils across England, on average 43 in each school. These students were awarded grades 1, 2 and 3 (the unfortunately-dubbed 123ers), with disadvantaged youngsters disproportionately represented.

Why has little changed?

4 Ibid. Table S2b

5 Ibid. Table 2a

6 Ibid. Table S2b

KEY QUESTIONS BEING ADDRESSED BY THE COMMISSION

1. How can we engage more effectively with parents and carers to ensure that all children entering school have a better command of spoken language?

Over recent years there has been significant investment in programmes and projects with families to highlight the importance of very early language development in the home. Research demonstrates the language gap; some children hear and rehearse many millions of words before they go to school, some children hear and rehearse just thousands. Are there particular local initiatives which have been highly successful and need promoting nationally?

2. What needs to be done to strengthen language teaching in early years settings?

While much has been done to strengthen teaching in formal and informal early years settings, there is still undue variability, particularly with regard to the explicit teaching and learning of language. There are clearly issues around quality and availability of appropriately trained teachers and support staff. And linked to point 1, are there particular local initiatives and programmes which have been very successful which could be spread nationally?

3. How can we more effectively teach and assess pupils' language development and learning across all phases?

It remains the case in the English education system – and repeated often to the Commission – that there is weak practice in primary to secondary continuity in how language is taught and learned. For example, Year 7 English classrooms are a very different beast from Year 6 English classrooms. How does the profession crack this one? We keep trying, but we have not been successful. Are there lessons to be learned from the increasing number of all-through schools? What best practice should the Commission promote?

4. How can schools secure confident oracy and articulacy for all pupils?

Most schools argue that they promote oracy and articulacy in a wide range of curricular and extra-curricular contexts. Yet employers regularly comment that young people do not have the requisite confidence and fluency in speaking. The Commission is strongly of the view that the explicit promotion of oracy – for all pupils – needs a higher profile in primary and secondary schools. How is this best achieved?

5. Should all primary and secondary teachers be trained in learning-to-read techniques, and in the best practices in the teaching of English as an additional language?

International evidence indicates that in a global society all teachers should have a good working knowledge of how children of all ages acquire language and how they learn to read. Evidence also indicates that children whose first language is English benefit from being taught some of the techniques used in EAL (English as an Additional Language) and ESL (English as a Second Language) settings. And given many students arrive at secondary school unable to read fluently, what are the training needs for all secondary teachers? ‘Language Across the Curriculum’ was the pivotal recommendation from the 1975 Bullock Report – research by the Commission indicates that this ambition eludes us in 2019.

6. Do we examine and recognise what students know and can do in English, in the way GCSE was originally designed?

The Commission has looked in detail at what the current English Language syllabuses are examining, and is minded to suggest that the content has moved away from the original design of GCSE. All students should have access to the English Literature GCSE. Why then are parts of the English Language examination rooted in literary analysis? And are we assessing, for example, writing for different everyday audiences appropriately? Are we valuing speaking and listening?

7. Should we introduce a *National Certificate of Competence*, examined partly online, which employers value highly?

Feedback to the Commission from employers and business indicates there is a serious lack of understanding about what is actually being tested in a GCSE English Language examination. Perhaps the profession has been weak at communicating this? Is there an argument for replacing GCSE English Language with some kind of National Certificate which values the achievements in speaking, listening, reading and writing of all 16-year-olds, at the conclusion of their 12 years of compulsory schooling? And what is the future for online assessment in the 21st century by ‘stage’ not ‘age’?

8. Should students have to resit GCSE English (and maths) post-16 when the failure rate is so high?

There is strong emerging evidence from many stakeholders across England that the compulsory resitting of GCSE English (and mathematics) is not working – and indeed is a significant waste of student potential and teachers’ resources. The Commission has received further views on the sustainability of the unfortunately termed ‘Functional Skills’ programmes for the 16 to 19 age range. What should be done in this area in the coming years?

9. Should we retain an assessment and examination system that year in, year out creates ‘the forgotten third’ at ages 11 and 16?

Underpinning all of the above lies the fundamental question posed to the Commission by a 17-year-old: *“Do a third of us have to fail so that two-thirds can pass?”* Commission members are much exercised by this question, linked to the high-stakes accountability systems that still dominate England’s school landscape. We are interested to hear the views of teachers, headteachers, governors, parents, and employers on this subject. ASCL itself is talking about ‘inclusive accountability’. Political rhetoric in recent years has been about the school-led system. We welcome further comments here.

WHAT LIES AHEAD?

The Commission continues to collect evidence and will publish a final report in June 2019. At this point in March 2019, members are minded to present the final report in three parts:

Part One

A number of recommendations to support current good practice in language teaching across the education service, and to highlight the effectiveness of 'doing more of the same'. There is much that is good and excellent practice in early years settings, schools and colleges which the Commission has observed and wishes to applaud. For example:

- the transformative work of 'Peeples' www.peeples.org.uk with parents and babies
- the high impact of Voice 21 www.voice21.org with primary and secondary pupils.

Part Two

A number of recommendations to argue that 'doing more of the same' will not lead to all students reaching a required level of competence in the English language, nor give dignity and meaningful recognition to the many youngsters whom the current system judges to be failures at 16+. Specific changes will be suggested which can realistically take place over the coming years if there is collective effort by key stakeholders. For example:

- revisions to the current content of the GCSE English Language syllabuses
- ensuring all teachers place students' oral and written competence in the English language at the heart of their classroom practice.

Part Three

A number of policy recommendations to focus on the longer term, for example:

- changes to a GCSE examination system rooted in 'comparable outcomes'
- examining students by stage not age.

Part Three's national system recommendations will move beyond English Language matters and seek, ambitiously, to change the thinking space. We must create a mood in which the education profession can act more effectively over the longer term, rather than feeling imprisoned by the system in which it currently finds itself. Winston Churchill observed: *"If you don't take change by the hand, it will take you by the throat."*

As the UK enters the 2020s, the continuing existence of 'the forgotten third' in our national schooling and examination system demands both a moral and practical solution.

HOW CAN YOU CONTRIBUTE?

We are interested to hear your views on the various issues the Commission is examining. Do you have answers to any or all of the above questions? Are there any key questions you feel we have missed?

If you have comments or information you would like the Commission members to consider, please contact the Commission by email theforgottenthird@ascl.org.uk

Closing date: 23 April



Roy Blatchford CBE

Chair, Independent Commission of Enquiry on
The Forgotten Third

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