



A Response to Fintan O'Regan's *Exclusion from School and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder* (4)

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Students in UK secondary schools are producing higher examination grades than ever before. As the percentage of 16 year olds gaining 5 or more GCSEs at A*-C has gone from 34.5% in 1990 to 74.8% in 2010 (Stubbs 2010), so also the percentage of A levels obtaining A grades has gone from 12% in 1990 to 25.9% in 2008 (Paton 2008). There are hugely greater expectations on teachers to be working against a whole series of measures which simply did not exist a generation ago.

Of course, one might argue that this increase in results represents a good thing – good for the pupils concerned who in times of yesteryear would have achieved much less, good for schools, and good for society. But there could be any number of reasons for believing that there is a price to pay here. The recent Government white paper on education (DFE 2010) warns that, in the drive for increasing KS2 results, children in their last year at primary school are engaging in “excessive rehearsal and repeated practice of tests” (page 16). It also notes that the drive for the 5 or more GCSE A*-C measure has resulted in pupils undertaking GNVQs deemed for the purpose of league tables to be equivalent of 4 such passes, with the result that, “some of the qualifications which have become very popular recently are not those which have the most support from employers and universities” (page 17). Concern has also been expressed that traveller children have been denied places at school because of the impact on the school's attainment profile (Mansell 2009), that vulnerable pupils in general are being marginalised for this reason (Mansell 2008), with case study evidence of a boy with epilepsy and Asperger syndrome being excluded during the GCSE examination period not having broken any school rule (Osler and Osler 2002). Back in 1999, Lunt and Norwich asked the question, “Can effective schools be inclusive schools?” (Lunt and Norwich 1999), broadly coming to the conclusion that the answer is no – and their thoughts would now appear to be prophetic.

Fintan O'Regan's important and timely article gives further evidence of the tension between working most effectively with individuals with diagnosed – or undiagnosed – conditions and otherwise vulnerable on the one hand, and working within the ethos of ever increasing results on the other. These tensions are not to be minimised. Of course it is good that secondary schools should seek to obtain the best possible results for

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pupils, and that all pupils should be able to work without undue disruption from others. But it is also good that pupils who genuinely find it difficult to operate within the confines of the conventional classroom should have their learning needs met in a supportive environment – with, arguably, good learning opportunities also for all pupils in learning to live with each other. And as O'Regan powerfully argues, there are all manner of economic and social reasons for giving all children the best possible start in life, beyond basic social justice arguments.

Ultimately, there are choices to be made. We can continue to put greater and greater demands on schools with higher and higher levels of accountability, with examination passes at all levels increasing in quantity and level. But if we do this, we can expect to continue to see groups of vulnerable youngsters become marginalised and excluded from school, whilst at the same time, the examination passes which are being so highly sought are degraded in value. Let us stop and ask what it is that we are wanting from the education system exactly. If it is the best for all our children, this is surely not the way to proceed.

References

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