

# **A reflection on the Key Stage 4 curriculum reforms in English secondary schools and its impact on students' experiences of education**

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## **Introduction**

This paper utilises Amartya Sen's (1999) capability approach, which has the importance of human agency and liberty at its core, to reflect on the 2010 Key Stage 4 (KS4) curriculum reforms, particularly the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) and its impact on students' educational experiences. It is Sen's view that economic growth is very stative and does not aid in understanding the inequalities faced in society. He proposes the alternative of focussing on human capabilities which offers a diverse set of standards aimed at liberating the individual thus developing self-worth.

The paper argues that a curriculum defined in purely academic terms can marginalise or even exclude students from education and examines the following: How do the KS4 reforms enable students to excel and achieve? How the reforms help in fostering equal opportunities for all students. Does the EBacc promote an inclusive curriculum? And

the prospect of the new reforms to increase academic traditional subject-based knowledge at the expense of pupil creativity, motivation, and success. The paper will therefore be divided into the following sections:

1. the Ebacc, globalisation, and equality of capability,
2. the reforms and students' experiences,
3. race, socio-economic background and the EBacc,
4. the 'new' plague to the education system and
5. social justice, equality of education, and the reforms.

### **The EBacc, globalisation, and equality of capability**

Educational curriculum policy reforms aim to furnish learners with essential skills to excel in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond; therefore, policy reforms have become increasingly globalised (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010). Subsequently, the clear changes to the UK's KS4 curriculum, with the introduction of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) by the Conservative Coalition Government in 2010, was driven by the need for a curriculum linked to globalisation as a response to rising concerns about the English curriculum's inability to compete worldwide and the low selection of Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) (Taylor, 2011; DfE, 2012). Additionally, the Government sought to drive curriculum restructuring in schools by promoting a broader, balanced, traditional, and academic curriculum to encourage deprived students to take the core traditional academic subjects, such as English, Mathematics, two sciences, a humanities subject, and MFL (DfE, 2015c).

Since 2016, schools' performance tables were also reformed to include an accountability measure specifically linked to the EBacc. Morgan (2015) believes that the main purpose of the reforms was for a strategic global approach so that the improved performance of British secondary schools would be reflected in league table rankings and to cause a reduction in the number of students exiting school with zero qualifications or with qualifications that the government deemed to be substandard.

Since their introduction, the 2010 Key Stage 4 (KS4) curriculum reforms, particularly the EBacc. and its impact on students' educational experiences have failed to meet their stated purposes. Crucially, the restructuring that has occurred has motivated, and

in a sense mandated, students to take more EBacc subjects and fewer non-EBacc subjects, that is, Arts and vocational subjects. This corroborates Sen's (1999) idea that assessing a person's resources or material worth does not constitute what it is to be human or determine a person's liberty to value or enjoy their life. When the number of students being entered for the EBacc increased, the concern that the EBacc created an exclusion of disadvantaged and low-attaining students seemed to be potentially resolved since there appeared to be increased numbers of these students now taking the EBacc. However, in reality, what it did was create the risk of some disadvantaged students being expected to study EBacc subjects which placed unrealistic expectations on their capabilities, dooming them to failure before even beginning, therefore greatly reducing their chances of successfully accessing the curriculum (The National Union of Teachers, 2016). Additionally, some students were directed to complete further education not because of their desire to do so but as an intervention strategy by schools to advance league table rankings (Cook, 2013). What this does is remove students' freedom to choose the lives they value and the ability to truly participate in an existence that they have cause to view as useful or meaningful. Consequently, designing a blanket curriculum creates the problem of a 'one size fits all curriculum' which negates and contradicts the concept of equal opportunities for all because no two students learn or operate identically.

### **The reforms and students' experiences**

The EBacc as a performance measure is dominated by notions of standards and effectiveness; and as a consequence, it has negative effects on students' experiences of education. Its accountability measure pressures schools to think strategically by, for example, focussing on more able students, who are more likely to attain the EBacc thus ignoring less able ones (Hodgson and Spours, 2011).

On paper, the reforms seem to ensure a curriculum for all which would not only improve the life chances of all students, especially the most disadvantaged ones, but empower students to compete more successfully for employment in a global context. It would also allow the curriculum offerings of the new General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations to be more scholastically challenging, restoring accuracy and surpassing standards worldwide. Unfortunately, this is not the case

since the curriculum, despite its reforms, is still not designed for all and does not promote the importance, Sen (1999) places on capabilities that define egalitarianism and human welfare.

This belief is supported by Neumann, Towers, Gerwitz, and Maguire (2016) who reported that the curriculum reforms have created a narrow and less inclusive curriculum that has negative effects on its students and allows their experience to be increasingly shaped by data-driven demands. The report reveals that 84% of a sample of secondary teachers expressed concerns about the reforms propagating and reinforcing an exam culture that only served to undermine students' health and welfare (Neumann, Towers, Gerwitz, and Maguire, 2016). Not only did the report highlight that teachers could not devote sufficient time to students' real learning, but 89% of the teachers also said their workload relating to data analysis had risen (Neumann, Towers, Gerwitz, and Maguire, 2016).

Though the reforms proposed to stop "the constant treadmill of assessment" while allowing "more time for teaching" (DfE, 2016a, pg. 92) the truth is that they have not managed to accomplish this goal entirely and are detrimental to non-EBacc subjects. This has resulted in creative and expressive arts subjects being considered inferior thus disadvantaging deprived students who could excel academically in these subjects (Mansell, 2011). For instance, the proportion of students taking at least one Arts subject declined from 57.1 percent in 2014 to 53.5 percent in 2016 after the introduction of the EBacc (DfE, 2016a). Similarly, a report from the Education Policy Institute found that entries to Arts subjects by KS4 students dropped to their lowest level in a decade due to the introduction of EBacc and Progress 8 (Johnes, 2017).

The introduction of the new KS4 reforms has created a curriculum that still cannot yet be fully used and accessed by all students regardless of backgrounds and capabilities. Teachers are now starting GCSE courses in Year 9 with Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) students, who are struggling to read and write but are also expected to study and excel in pre-1900 literature. Foundation or Higher tiered papers no longer exist in English; therefore, teachers must teach all students the same Exam and Assessment Objectives. This has led many to question the focus of the new reforms and their applicability to all students, particularly those who have some sort of

learning disability since it seems to be reproducing the prevailing socio-economic inequalities maintaining the advantage of the privileged while continuing to handicap the disadvantaged's quest to obtain the means for economic and social advancement. In broad terms, the reforms to the KS4 curriculum might be characterised as a move to becoming more academic by sacrificing vocational subjects (Parameshwaran and Thomson, 2015). A curriculum that sacrifices creativity and independence of thought; having excluded certain creative and expressive arts subjects such as Design and Technology, Music and Drama (Taylor, 2013). These reforms have ultimately negatively affected schools' decision systems regarding the entry of students to subjects and qualifications. Welch (2012) acknowledges the need for the curriculum to place greater emphasis on the Arts since failure to do this will be a grave injustice to the younger generation.

### **Race, socio-economic background, and the EBacc**

Henderson et al. (2018) postulate that having an advantaged social background is consistently connected to taking a more challenging and prestigious curriculum. Consequently, the question of the EBacc's impact on race is a relevant one and is also a question that needs to be addressed here. There is an emerging body of evidence indicating a complex pattern of differences in educational attainment and participation across ethnic minority groups. Noden, Shiner and Modood (2014) argue that the qualifications taken by some minority ethnic groups disadvantage them when it comes to them going through the process of university admissions. Similarly, The Race into Higher Education Report (Kerr 2010) showed that even though Black and minority ethnic (BAME) students are proportionately well represented in the university sector, this is not the case across all types of university or all subjects.

Additionally, the figures of EBacc achievement concerning race on the government's website reported that in 2017/18 pupils from the Traveller community of Irish heritage were the least likely to achieve the EBacc with 0.0% of pupils in this group managing to obtain the EBacc. Additionally, White and Black pupils were both below the national average for EBacc achievement with White pupils achieving 15.7% and Black pupils achieving 15.1%.

Furthermore, across all ethnic groups pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) were less likely to achieve the EBacc than those not eligible. The DfE's (2017) report elucidates the differences in the progress of FSM pupils compared to non-FSM pupils who had similar attainment at Key Stage 2:

“FSM pupils make between 0.26 and 0.35 of a GCSE grade less progress depending on which subjects are considered. Meanwhile, non-FSM pupils make between 0.06 and 0.09 of a GCSE grade more progress. The largest gap relates to the Attainment 8 subjects, where differences in progress between non-FSM and FSM pupils add up to almost half a GCSE grade (0.44) on average” (DfE, 2017, pg. 1).

Since the advent of the EBacc, instead of ensuring a broader curriculum offer, students from deprived households, students of certain ethnic groups and students with SEND have received fewer qualifications. This serves to limit and confine their subject choices (Parameshwaran and Thomson, 2015) which then acts to disadvantage them because these decisions not only impact a student's current autonomy but also the autonomy they will have in the future. For example, denial of educational opportunities will decrease the opportunities, liberty, and agency students experience in adulthood. Therefore, the journey of education and becoming a lifelong learner begins from a student's earliest starting points and is the key to a better future (Sen, 1999).

In the UK, whilst the gap in attainment at GCSE level between boys and girls is relatively stable across the social class groupings (that is to say that the effect of gender does not differ to any great degree across the social classes) however, it is important to note that the gender gap at GCSE does seem to vary by ethnic group. For instance, Black Caribbean and Black other pupils experience broader gender gaps than other ethnic groups (DfE, 2017). In fact, Black pupils are reported as being most deprived with a quarter of Black pupils qualifying for FSM (Free School Meals).

Not only are Black pupils considered as facing deprivation but there is also conscious and unconscious prejudice linked to their underachievement. This is highlighted in the data which reported that 21.7 percent of Black Caribbean pupils are documented as

pupils with SEND. This is a stark contrast to the 15.2 percent of all pupils who are identified as SEND (DfE, 2016). This concern with social equality experienced by Black pupils is further revealed because the probability of Black pupils receiving a fixed-term exclusion in 2013-14 was three times more likely, at 12 percent than the average pupil, at 3.95 percent (DfE, 2016). The problem of Black boys' educational underachievement is even more worrying since according to Gilborn et al. (2012), in their study interviewing 62 Black Caribbean parents, teachers tended to have lower academic expectations for Black pupils, especially Black boys, which ultimately have very damaging effects for these Black boys in the British educational system.

### **The 'new' plague to the education system**

The new KS4 reforms are viewed by some as similar to the biblical plague the Israelites experienced in the bible in Exodus chapters 7 -11 since they reflect some of what is wrong with society. Adams (2013) uses religious imagery and the pejorative adjective 'philistinism' to describe the new KS4 reforms which he believes have submerged English education. The idea is explored here that this is almost a plague on the English education system which is geared towards one social class and therefore only serves to replicate and reinforce the social status quo; resulting in a socially unjust system. This idea is supported by Reay (2012) who argues that social justice will never be fully addressed in British education until social class is recognized as a fundamental division. Reay believes a socially just education system would need to address inequalities of gender, race, sexualities, disability and class, since inequalities of class were inextricably interested with these and therefore could not be addressed in isolation.

Both the Labour and Conservative governments have implemented education policies and initiatives that have not done the job of creating a more socially just society. Black Caribbean, Black African and Pakistani heritage children are still the lowest achieving in mathematics and English at sixteen years when they take their GCSEs and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) children do even less well than all these groups (DFE, 2016). In addition, according to the Sutton Trust (2010), privately educated pupils are fifty-five times more likely to go to Oxbridge and twenty-two more times likely to go to one of the Russell Group universities than students at state schools who qualify for free school meals, whereas only 7 per cent of the population attend private schools

(Crozier, 2013).

## **Social Justice, Equality of Education, and the Reforms**

Equality indicates justice, fair treatment, and similitude or homogeneity (Sachs, 1992). Brighouse (2000) points out that having equality in schooling, with access arrangements being made to include all students, is a social justice issue which all governments should aim at tackling. It is essential that students, regardless of their background, have access to education that will change their lives.

Therefore, a truly just society is considered just by all its members, regardless of their social class, race, religious, or moral beliefs (Rawls, 1971). Subsequently, a just society relies on conditions and procedures that everyone regards as fair. The EBacc is founded on a university-based curriculum and promotes a more traditional academic curriculum for all students. Here, the operative adjective is 'all' hence the belief that if all students follow the same traditional academic curriculum as those at fee-charging schools, inequality, unemployment, and poverty will be eradicated is highlighted. However, this concept highlights the ability for equal treatment or homogeneity to create further inequality since being academically inclined is not the only pathway to equality of educational opportunity.

There are numerous stories told of successful entrepreneurs who were not great academics, for example, Walt Disney, Sir Richard Branson, Henry Ford, Mary Kay Ash, and Coco Chanel, who have become multimillionaires because they had the opportunity and freedom to utilise their efforts and abilities. Here it was capabilities that led to opportunity and equality.

Parameshwaran and Thomson (2015) suggest that this drive for a new KS4 reform has compromised equality of opportunity. As a result, students who are deprived, low attaining, vocationally oriented, from BAME groups or fascinated with creative subjects continue to be entered for fewer eligible qualifications and subject choices are becoming increasingly restrictive and alienating. The use of the EBacc mandate has not been successful and this is seen by the resistance of some schools to continue to subject both their students and staff to this accountability measure. In 2017, Progress



8 superseded the need for the EBacc with only 34.9% of students entering the EBacc in all schools and 38.1% of students in state-funded schools, a decline of 1.5 and 1.7 percent compared to 2016 (DfE, 2017). The Government's aim with the introduction of the EBacc was to drive curriculum restructuring in schools, promote a broader, balanced, traditional, and academic curriculum to encourage deprived students to take the core traditional academic subjects, such as English, Mathematics, two sciences, a humanities subject, and MFL (DfE, 2015c). However, this decline in students entering the EBacc in all schools underline its failure because the EBacc has not created equality for all in access to subjects or qualifications. This also supports Marxist understanding of the education system that it is a mechanism for the reproduction of class inequality and a vehicle of oppression (Reay, 2012).

## **Conclusion**

A major social injustice faced by students in English secondary schools is that students who face social deprivation also fail to progress or access the curriculum as their more affluent counterparts. In fact, the disparity between the two groups has increased; since 2012 students who face social deprivation have experienced a lower rate of progress yearly when compared to their more affluent counterparts (DfE, 2017).

Despite the reasons for the reforms to the KS4 curriculum and the recommendations given by Wolf (2011) in his review on vocational education on how to help improve, create and maintain vocational education for 14–19-year-olds, the constant and rapid changes to the KS4 curriculum, together with accountability measures have led schools to encourage low performing students to choose subjects that will have limited worth or significance to their lives thus, sacrificing students' futures, legitimising inequality, and creating a sense of instability to the KS4 curriculum design. This results in students exiting the educational system with mediocre qualifications which diminishes their ability to compete in the global marketplace; a situation that could, therefore, be used to justify further new reforms hence propagating the cycle of inequality and instability in curriculum design (Wolf, 2011).

What will be the next 'new KS4 reform'?

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