

VOICE OF THE ICONO CLASS ROOM

We have a strange relationship with mathematics in this country.

Few would deny its value as an area for study, or its considerable intellectual rigour, and yet we perfectly accept, sometimes even revel in, being crap at it.

I am now accustomed to the involuntary facial flinch when new acquaintances discover I teach mathematics at secondary school, but I still struggle with how many people will readily share their numeric shortcomings: "I was rubbish at maths", "I hated maths", "What's that x business about?" And how often have I seen a speaker, when describing a subject that students definitely hate, choose mathematics? Once you notice it, you can't help but fall over more examples; the most public being the title sequence for Channel 4's excellent "Educating Essex":

Voiceover: Your school days. Love them ...

[cut to science teacher and student enjoying a light-hearted, informal chat about the nature of the universe]

Voiceover: ... or loathe them

[cut to mathematics lesson and Carrie's poignant plea, "What is Pi? Where did it come from?"]

See! It's fine to loathe maths ... it said so on telly.

It is against this backdrop that Professor Sparks argues that all students should study mathematics until 18. In the era of individualised learning pathways, are we seriously going to insist that everyone takes a mathematics qualification post GCSE? I agree that every pupil should leave education functionally numerate, the same way I would want them functionally literate. But since I wouldn't expect (or indeed want) every student to be able to extol the virtues of Chaucer, do we really need everyone to go on to grapple with calculus?

One of the oft-repeated advantages of Academy status is the chance to free ourselves from the strictures of the National Curriculum. As my Head helpfully explained, now we could tailor our provision to our students and

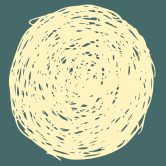
stop forcing them to do subjects they have no desire to do.

Shouldn't we, therefore, be considering moving in the opposite direction and start questioning why GCSE mathematics is compulsory? Is the GCSE programme of study truly the best option for every single student? A C grade in GCSE remains a decent measure of mathematical competency, and an easy one for employers to understand; but enter secondary school with a Level 3, make 3 levels of progress and... congratulations, your target's a D. I've seen the faces of students when they realise that their target is to fail, and no matter how many times they are reminded that their targets are not limits, it's clear that the letter hangs around their necks like an albatross from a 18th century poem that we wouldn't expect them to read, never mind analyse. English can mix and match with language and literature separate, but there's no such freedom for the one-course-fits-all world of mathematics.

In my NQT year I was privileged to have a Year 10 class who were exceptionally clear on their future careers. There were eight hairdressers and six mechanics. I was often asked by their 'leader', one of the hairdressers, "when am I ever going to need this?" Easy to make a case for basic numeracy; after all, surely she harboured dreams of running her own salon, so would need to handle payroll, stock, taxation etc. Area of a trapezium though... my justification about problem solving and developing logical thought processes fell on deaf ears. Mathematics – as opposed to numeracy – was getting in this cohort's way, and doing it for six hours a fortnight.

With ALAN already available and BTEC being mooted, isn't it time we made GCSE mathematics a KS4 option? It's an option I would sincerely hope that the vast majority of students would see the value of, and choose. However, for those learners for whom GCSE is not a good fit, let's find an alternative route for them to leave school equipped with the numerical skills they actually need.

As the chairman of the Advisory Committee on Mathematics Education attempts to persuade the government to make the study of maths compulsory to the age of 18, at least one teacher of the subject has an alternative suggestion



WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Are we effectively restricting children from being able to compete in the future global job market by allowing them to drop maths after GCSE; or should we encourage certain students to focus their efforts elsewhere? Email editor@teachsecondary.com, and join the debate. And if you fancy being the next Voice of the Iconclassroom (anonymity guaranteed), we're waiting to hear from you...