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THE LONG GAME

COULD A PROPER BACCALAUREATE BE THE QUALIFICATION THAT WILL SERVE OUR YOUNG PEOPLE BEST IN A DECADE'S TIME? IF WE DON'T START GIVING IT SERIOUS CONSIDERATION NOW, ARGUES FIONA MILLAR, WE'LL NEVER KNOW...

I was recently asked to speak at a seminar on the subject of "assessment in 2025 and beyond". It sounds like rather a dry and distant topic doesn't it? Exams, grade boundaries, levels and measuring progress have become the stuff of school life and are probably more important to pupils and parents than many of the more hotly debated educational policies of the day. But they don't really capture attention until something – like the contentious grading of the GCSE English papers in 2012 – goes wrong. At the moment we are undergoing another turbulent period of change. The outcome – more focus on academic qualifications and exam-based assessment – will undoubtedly be with us for a while. Forcing more reform on an already weary profession is not a realistic option, but that shouldn't preclude discussion of what longer-term alternatives might look like.

I should say at this point that I am not one of those people who think education policy should be divorced from politics. How we educate our children is vitally important to creating the sort of society we want. And we have a lot more work to do in England's highly stratified school system if we are to give equal chances to all. Nevertheless, this is one area where government could set out its broad aims and then take a step back, leaving an independent body to form a long view of what sort of curriculum and assessment would help to meet those aims over a 25-30 year period, rather than leaving reform to the vagaries of the political cycle. My guess is that something more substantial than the current narrow diet of tests and exams would emerge.

Of course *all* children should have access to the sort of academic pathways and elite universities that often seem to be the preserve of the better off, but what about the young people for whom a vocational qualification might be suitable? At the moment their needs are barely visible.

And there is growing interest in the role played by non-cognitive skills – variously described as character, grit and resilience – in longer-term outcomes. Whether it is the 'happiness' lessons at top public schools like Wellington, the growth mindset/ building learning power programmes being tried in many state schools or the call from the CBI for a greater emphasis on ethos, behaviour and attitudes, the development of personal skills is now being seen as crucial to both narrowing gaps and outstanding academic achievement.

The killer question is how you wrap up all these aspects of a 'good education' in high status, rigorous qualifications that allow young people



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to prepare for the outside world while pursuing the pathways that interest and engage them, without being seen as wishy-washy or 'dumbed down'. The idea of a proper baccalaureate qualification is increasingly attractive; not just Michael Gove's little collection of GCSEs but a final qualification at 18, which measures academic and vocational achievement and values creativity, practical or technical education and personal development. No one accuses the International Baccalaureate of being 'dumbed down' yet it promotes the education of the whole person, emphasizing "intellectual, personal, emotional and social growth."

A number of interesting ideas are already being trialed. The Modern Baccalaureate has been developed at the Archbishop Sentanu Academy in Hull; the Head Teachers Roundtable group, who came together via Twitter in frustration at the lack of innovative alternative education policies, are piloting their Baccalaureate Qualifications Framework; and now the Labour Party Skills Working Party has mooted the idea of a National Baccalaureate. The underlying principle is the same – parity of esteem between academic and vocational qualifications within a single diploma (which could be taken at an intermediate or higher level); involvement of other non exam-based forms of assessment and the inclusion of awards or credits for personal development, extended project work, enrichment or community activities.

At the moment all three are taking the small 'c' conservative approach and basing their final awards on existing GCSE, A level and vocational qualifications. But you could go further and question whether, in an era when young people must stay in education or training until they are 18, we really need exams at 16 at all? Why not have external assessments for maths and English at 16, teacher assessment for the other subjects and a final diploma at 18?

Government would have to 'let go' and trust teachers more, and schools would need the confidence and training to take on more responsibility for assessment. But the potential is there for a more liberating, stimulating and personalised secondary education than we have at the moment.

It wouldn't be the first time this idea has been pursued. Ten years ago Sir Mike Tomlinson concluded a painstaking study into 14-19 education that came up with a broadly similar conclusion. It was ditched by the then Labour government but, had his proposals been adopted, the Tomlinson diploma would have been coming into force this year.

Which makes me realize that maybe 2025 isn't so far away after all...

