

For decades, the most important basic skills taught in schools were the Three “Rs” - reading, (w)riting and ‘rithmetic. In recent decades, becoming ICT literate has been added to these functional skills of literacy and numeracy. While the texting and Xbox generation have become adept at embracing technology, more so than older generations, the same is not necessarily true for literacy and numeracy. Too many of our young people leave school without mastering these basic skills. This leaves them ill equipped for the world of work and dealing with life in general. Are we doing enough to address this? Every August (bar the one just passed) social media is awash with stories on results day. Best grades ever etc. You would be forgiven for thinking we had a world class education system. That holds true for some but it is a lousy system for a significant number of others. Northern Ireland society’s fixation with school league tables breeds a one-dimensional view of educational performance. Meanwhile, Northern Ireland continues to churn out a higher proportion of school leavers without any qualifications than any other UK region. This fact receives little airtime but we can’t sweep it under the carpet. We have an unusually high tolerance threshold for this failure in our education system. This is surprising when you consider the cost associated with the social problems that flow from these sub-optimal education outcomes.



Inequality of educational outcomes was a major issue for Northern Ireland before COVID-19 and this gap only looks set to widen. The reality is that too many young people in Northern Ireland leave school each year without achieving the key threshold measure of five GCSEs grades A*-C. Many young people are also failing to achieve the required levels of literacy and numeracy. These are considerable issues for the economy when it comes to productivity and availability of skills. It's something Northern Ireland has struggled to deal with; and something that will become an even bigger issue in the years ahead, exacerbated by this year's lockdown. As we seek to build an economic recovery, it is essential that we support our young people to catch-up on the schooling they lost out on during 2020 - particularly in areas such as Maths and English - and also to close the underlying educational attainment gap that already existed.

To put this year's challenge in some kind of context - children across NI had their education disrupted for months during lockdown. In Northern Ireland, schools closed in March, exams were cancelled and estimated grades were awarded. For learning to continue in this scenario, internet access was key. Learning switched to online (for some) with children swelling the ranks of those 'working from home'. Despite best endeavours, every one of the 350,000 pupils in Northern Ireland's schools and nurseries will have suffered as a result of the pandemic. The only question is - to what degree? Some will have suffered much more than others, and the reality is that it will likely be young people from the same groups who already underachieve.

Overall, just as we have seen a range of freak economic indicators this year it is likely we will see a spike in educational underachievement. We have heard lots of big shocking numbers on the health and economic side of the pandemic. But when a post-mortem is done, it will be on the education side that we might gulp loudest when we see the statistics.

Perhaps the response to underachievement in core subjects should involve repeating a year to achieve a certain standard. Given the unprecedented circumstances we are in, the stigma of repeating a year will be lessened. Indeed, under normal circumstances many countries require pupils to repeat a year if they fail to meet the grade. Surely that would be much preferable to not meeting the grade at all?

According to an OECD study for 2009 - in Brazil, France, Spain and Portugal over one-third of primary / secondary school pupils repeated a year. In Germany over one-fifth of pupils were 'repeaters' while in Ireland the figure was more than 1 in 10. The UK on the other hand had one of the lowest rates of 'grade retention' within the OECD with only 3% of pupils repeating a grade. Clearly the smaller the proportion of repeaters the bigger the stigma. In Northern Ireland the stigma of repeating a year should be less than the stigma of achieving no skills and qualifications. Sadly that is not the case. Embracing grade retention

and tackling the stigma of being a 'repeater' surely is a better approach than churning out a disproportionate amount of pupils with no qualifications whatsoever.

Clearly pupils who leave school with no qualifications didn't just run into problems in their final year. Issues are likely to have been at play for many years. It would appear that Northern Ireland's education system is not good at providing timely interventions to stop educational deficits growing over time. Given the disruption caused by COVID-19 repeating a year may be the best solution for swathes of our school population. I actually had two years in P7 due to my age and two years in Upper Sixth because of my grades! Given this is Maths Week I am also happy to disclose that I failed my Maths A' level amongst otherwise good grades. This provided a wake-up call and one of the best life lessons to date. I subsequently repeated to get into the only university I wanted to go to - Loughborough University. Repeating provided me with a second chance to get back on track. For others, repeating a year earlier on in their careers may be more beneficial. In the USA there is the *No Child Left Behind Act (2002)* which recommends that students (primary and secondary school) are required to demonstrate a set standard of achievement before progressing to the next year or grade. Around 10% of children in the US are held back at least one year between 3rd Grade (P4) and 8th Grade (Year 9). I think this model has merits.

So whilst three Rs are important, perhaps we need to upgrade it to 4 Rs - adding Repeating to reading, (w)riting and 'rithmetic.

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