

GUEST COLUMN – February 2023

Mathematics for all?

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When Rishi Sunak announced in his first speech of 2023 that all students should continue to learn mathematics to the age of 18, I am sure I wasn't the only educationalist to be somewhat surprised. When had this major policy announcement been discussed with the profession?

Until the summer of 2022, I was the headteacher of a large secondary school in Essex. Of course, ensuring that as many students as possible achieved at least a grade 4 in their GCSE maths was a perennial occupation. We knew that achieving less than that 'standard pass' affected their life chances and their self-esteem.

Students achieving grade 3 or less were required to re-take their maths GCSE, or alternative level 2 qualification, and the 'pass' rate for second-timers was crushingly low. Students did not enjoy taking the same qualification again; it was an addition to their chosen post-16 curriculum and often the relevance of doing again what they had studied for the previous 11 years eluded them. What was going to change? Sadly, and for too many, not much.

Meanwhile, a large percentage of students had achieved their grade 4+, and some went on to study mathematics at A Level. Hearing Rishi Sunak's announcement, I wondered what sort of mathematical experience the Prime Minister had in mind up to the age of 18. I also wondered where he thought the ability to provide the right level and quality of staffing was coming from. Recruiting good mathematics teachers has always been a challenge.

So, where do we go from here? The actor Simon Pegg delivered a rant on Twitter about what he considered to be the idiocy of making young people learn more maths if their talents lay in other areas. As a headteacher, I always promoted the arts and decried the narrowing of the curriculum which was never in the interests of young people or of society.

Professor Marcus du Sautoy's reply to Simon Pegg gave me pause, however. 'Maths is a hugely creative subject that underpins many creative industries: architecture, animation, special effects, music. To equate mathematicians with a drone army of data-entering robots shows why a maths for artists 16-18 course would be a great idea.'

The final report of the ASCL Commission of Enquiry '[The Forgotten Third](#)' recommends a 'passport' for maths (and English) where young people work towards skills appropriate to their individual needs and employers' requirements. Maybe there is some more pondering we can do to ensure that mathematical thinking - and how it underpins creativity - is also worthy of further consideration.

As a headteacher, I know the frustrations of ensuring quality staffing for maths, engaging young people, and doing the best for them, as well as your school's accountabilities. It's a challenge.

In my current role working with all secondary headteachers across Essex, I am also a part of the county's [Education Task Force](#). Having done some great work on the [Essex Year of Reading](#), we are now embarking on the [Essex Year of Numbers](#). I trust our discussions will be wide-ranging and fruitful, and perhaps offer the detailed thinking and the plan for implementation that the Sunak policy announcement lacked.

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