



National Association of Language Advisers

National Association of Language Advisers (NALA) survey: **The languages curriculum and disadvantaged students**

Survey report

October 2020





National Association of Language Advisers

Report on the NALA survey investigating the opinions of language education professionals on the impact of the MFL curriculum, and in particular the GCSE examination, on disadvantaged pupils.

Why NALA carried out the survey

The link between poorer outcomes in languages and lower uptake of languages for those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged has been well documented for many years:

Language Trends 2003

"Schools with high percentages of students on free school meals are more likely to have withdrawn languages from the compulsory curriculum."

Language Trends 2015

"The practice of disapplication of pupils at Key Stage 3, and of restricting access to language study at Key Stage 4, is associated with socio-economic disadvantage. In the most economically-deprived schools, the proportion excluding groups of pupils from language study at Key Stage 3 has risen to 17 per cent and those excluding pupils from language study at Key Stage 4 has risen to 44 per cent."

Language Trends 2018

"The principal finding this year concerns inequity in access to language learning at school. Schools in more disadvantaged circumstances tend to dedicate a shorter time to languages in Key Stage 3, allow pupils to drop languages after only two years and have lower participation at GCSE. Independent schools have higher take up and more languages on offer, and provide more opportunities than state schools for international experience. However, both state and independent schools report an increasing concentration of high and middle-attaining pupils in GCSE languages, to the exclusion of those of lower ability or with special educational needs."

The Pie News 2020

<https://thepienews.com/news/hepi-report-crisis-uk-foreign-languages/>

"Fewer than half of GCSE pupils now take a foreign language, compared to 76% in 2002, with notable socio-economic and regional divides"

PISA 2018 Insights and interpretations, however, offers more optimism for UK education generally in terms of disadvantaged students:

"In Australia, Canada, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Hong Kong (China), Japan, Korea, Macao (China), Norway and the United Kingdom, for example, average reading performance was higher than the OECD average while the relationship between socio-economic status and reading performance was weaker than the OECD average." (Pisa 2018 : 20)

This is an improvement from the 2001 Pisa study:

"The UK was sixth from bottom in terms of equality of opportunity to achieve." Quoted in Lamb 2005.

Of course the reported improvement in reading found in 2018 may be challenged by some; but, whether or not reading has improved, we can be sure that outcomes in language learning across the socio-economic spectrum has not.

NALA drew this continuing situation to the attention of Education Select Committee William Wragg. Mr Wragg in turn questioned the schools' minister, Nick Gibb MP, who responded in January 2019. <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/wrans/?id=2018-12-19.203926.h&s>

The response outlined initiatives including:

- the EBACC performance measure,
- KS2 compulsory languages.
- Financial incentives for languages teaching including scholarships and tax free bursaries to train as language teachers,
- the Mandarin Excellence Programme,
- £4.8 million MFL pedagogy pilot programme which aims to improve uptake and attainment in languages at Key Stages 3 and 4, particularly for disadvantaged pupils. (NCELP)
- a pilot project for undergraduate MFL mentoring.
- a leaflet for parents about the benefits of studying a language.

NALA welcomed these initiatives but members were still expressing concern about the curriculum itself and particularly GCSE. In informal discussions, members regularly reported examples of the further disadvantaging of those already disadvantaged. As a result, NALA started by investigating the past two years of GCSE papers, particularly speaking and writing test questions. We looked at GCSE because this curriculum content often determines the contexts for learning for both KS3 and KS4. We found that many questions asked for responses based on candidates' personal experience.

This initial research revealed that questions about holidays, family relationships, descriptions of a student's house, restaurant visits, and live events were potentially problematic for vulnerable and disadvantaged pupils. NALA wanted to find out if other language professionals felt that such tasks could disadvantage specific groups of students.



The Survey

The aims of the survey were to identify language teaching professionals' views on:

1. The extent to which the current curriculum content at KS3 and KS4 disadvantages certain groups of students.
2. The extent to which the current curriculum content at KS3 and KS4 has the potential to demotivate and disadvantage some students by asking them personal questions on topics where their own experience is limited or sensitive.

To help respondents to frame their responses, we invited teachers to consider the following types of students:

Student 1: vulnerable pupils with Child Protection Plan

This student may be suffering from or has suffered previously neglect and is living in a family where there is drug addiction and some violence. He/she is subject to a Child Protection Plan.

Student 2: low income pupil premium student

This student lives in a low-income family, possibly in a family where adults have struggled to work for more than one generation. The student may have little experience of travelling outside of the immediate local community.

Student 3: Looked-After Child or post Looked-After Child

This is a student who may have suffered neglect and/or abuse when young and who has been in Local Authority care for years but is now in a stable household, either adopted or in long term foster care. The student has access to some additional support as part of a personal plan to support social and emotional needs, but these difficulties might not appear to pose any great barrier to learning specific subjects.

The survey was planned before the coronavirus pandemic. The pandemic has highlighted many of the issues covered in the responses. See Appendix 1.



Survey responses

The survey received 556 responses from language teachers, consultants, advisers, teacher trainers, and trainee teachers. NALA is very grateful for all responses and the time colleagues have taken to write detailed explanations. In all there were 1734 extended responses explaining the opinions given. In this report NALA has tried, therefore, to let these comments speak for themselves and has included a representative sample to illustrate teachers' views.

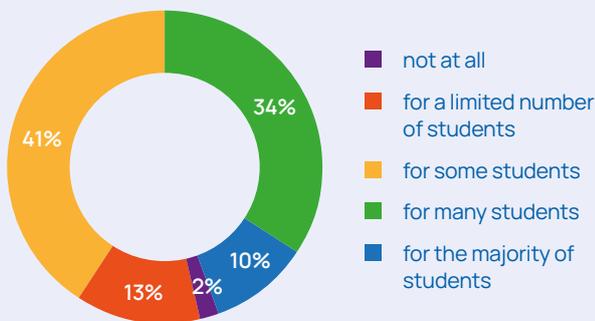
The responses came from across the UK with the significant majority of answers from England. 94% of respondents were teachers currently working in secondary schools.

What teachers said about school contexts and the languages curriculum

Teachers were asked to think about the context of the school where they work and the content of the current GCSE examination. 14.8% said that they thought that the social background of students would have little or no effect on candidates' ability to answer GCSE questions. 85.2% of respondents said that some, many or the majority of students would have difficulty.

Q4 - Thinking about the content of the current GCSE examination, would you say that the social background of students in your school means they have difficulty in answering GCSE questions ...

552 responses



"When asked to discuss topics they have little or no first-hand experience of, such as holidays, or when looked after children or children with difficult home lives are asked to talk about their homes and family relationships."

A number of teachers explained that the background of the students often meant they had little to draw on in terms of personal experiences to answer many of the questions. Colleagues told us that this made it harder for students to give meaningful answers to some examination questions.

However, many explained that it was not a simple issue of not having any experience to draw on. More concerning were comments suggesting that the personal nature of the tasks could be distressing for students.

"Some of the questions for writing and speaking can be challenging – describing family members when they are in foster care, describing holidays when they can't afford them etc. We often get around this by giving them characters. Sometimes we have had to move on from the family topic when a child has lost a parent. One heart-breaking moment was a child whose mum had terminal cancer describing his mum in a speaking test: (my mum is bald, she sleeps a lot)"

Some respondents felt that there was an assumption of knowledge or "cultural capital" which their students do not have:

"The topics centred around holidays, aspirations, work and volunteering need lots of background teaching as some pupils don't know about gap years or a wide variety of careers. They also don't recognise lots of other places for tourism, for example why people go on holiday to the south of France."

Colleagues, in particularly disadvantaged areas, felt that they had to cover these contexts, as well as the languages curriculum, thus eating into valuable teaching time for many disadvantaged students.

Some comments referred to teaching exam technique to help students with the content ...

"...hence the need for a lot of modelling, making a lot of their answers sounding similar across the year group."

... and that this further impacts on spontaneity and potentially their personal integrity:

"I always need to give the children ideas of what they can say. I ALWAYS find myself telling them that they need to show off their Spanish not tell the truth, which beats the opportunity for spontaneity of the children to have to be talked through what to say."

Poor literacy skills were mentioned as a barrier for some:

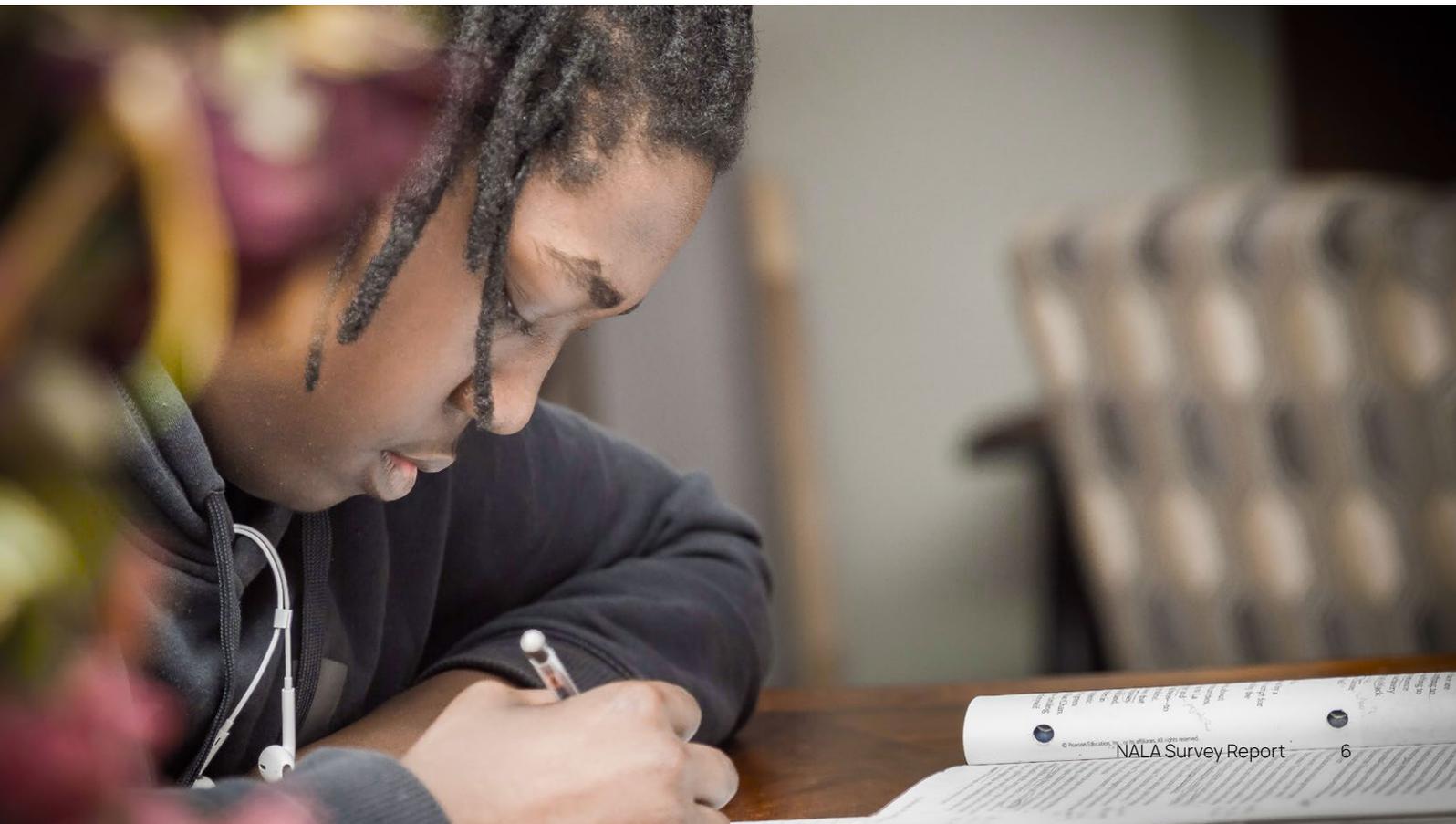
"Literacy levels are a major issue in my area and this means students have fewer English words to supply

cognates so that they can access reading texts. They lack confidence and first language literacy issues reduce their confidence in accessing MFL texts."

Although not directly related to disadvantage, some respondents pointed out that many candidates feel that some of the tasks were unrealistic, for example, going to a tourist office to book an excursion when this would more than likely be done online. Others felt that some content was simply irrelevant:

"Moreover discussing TV is pointless as this generation don't watch TV – they watch YouTube or TikTok clips."

A small minority of comments described the content as appropriate.

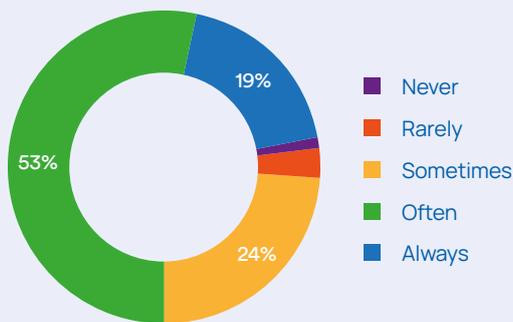


What happens when students make up answers

The survey asked two questions about inventing answers where a student had no direct experience of the context of the prompt or question or does not want to share their reality.

Q5 - Do students in your school find it difficult to make up answers to questions where they have no direct experience of the topic?

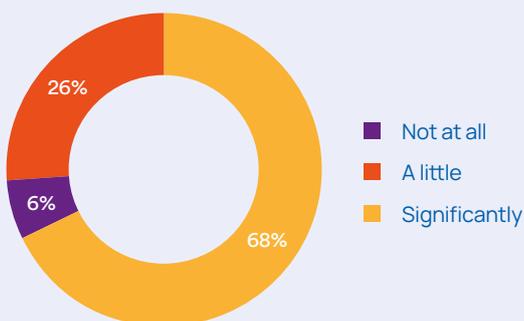
553 responses



Over 95% of respondents said that at least some of the time students find it difficult to make up answers where they have no experience.

Q6 - In your opinion, if a student has to invent the content of an answer, how likely is this to disadvantage them?

553 responses



93% of respondents said that they felt making up an answer disadvantages students. 68% said that this disadvantage would be significant.

Many commented that students feel they should be 'telling the truth' and teachers have to reiterate that it may be necessary to make up an answer or 'lie'. Many said that this is problematic for students:

"I have bright capable students who struggle with answering many of the questions and I am constantly telling them that their answers don't have to be true and they can just "make it up". Unfortunately however, this makes their learning less meaningful as they are talking about things that are not relevant to them or even true so their willingness and motivation drops..."

Respondents were concerned about asking follow-up questions to imaginary events, which can be important to give access to higher grades.

"It is a real block for some students that they have to narrate imagined events. Obviously it makes follow up questions harder - and they tend to gravitate towards simple, familiar answers (I played football) which in turn limit their marks. It's an unfair increase in cognitive load to have to fabricate your answer and then translate it."

Less than 1% of respondents commented that students need not have experience of a particular context to be able to respond meaningfully:

"I don't feel that students necessarily need to have had personal experience of a skiing holiday to be able to say that a disadvantage is that it is cold, for example."

"They are being tested on the vocab and structures they have been taught and can use that to inform their answers, true or made up."

Many felt that it was unfair to base questions on students' personal experience:

"It feels hugely unfair that some of my students are basing their work on real, lived experiences whilst others are having to 'make it up'."

"It's difficult to give an account of a day on holiday if you have never been on holiday."

Several comments implied that students with special educational needs or disabilities may also be at a disadvantage:

"Although most students are able to make up answers this does not take into account how it affects their self-esteem and also students with ASD find it more challenging to make up things they have not experienced. Having to make something up also affects the depth of their answer and means follow-up questions are not possible, or further disadvantage the student."

Some teachers said that the least able face particular challenges.

"The lower ability they are, the harder they find it. They struggle with the concept of playing the exam game."

Many commented on the cognitive load of having to imagine something, remember what has been imagined as well as find the correct language.

"They are faced with linguistic challenge – how to explain something complex in a few words? – but also have to remember what they have said – e.g. I have no pets (to avoid talking about a dog that recently died) and then remember the story that they have created."

"You are asking students to be creative and speak a new language – two difficult skills – speaking authentically about your life doesn't require as much creativity and is less cognitively draining"

There were a limited number of respondents who found advantage in invention:

"I do encourage them to invent their answer anyway in order to get more interesting and original content"



The Themes and Topics

Respondents were asked about the topics covered. 71.4% of respondents felt the topics covered disadvantaged some students and 73.1% said that they did not think that GCSE topics were necessary for effective language learning.

61.9% believe the topics made learners feel uncomfortable and 75.1% said that this discomfort impacted on students' performance and motivation.

Respondents identified some topics as more problematic than others. Family and friends, house and home, holidays, leisure activities, charity and volunteering, lifestyle, social issues and work were rated the most challenging for disadvantaged or vulnerable students.

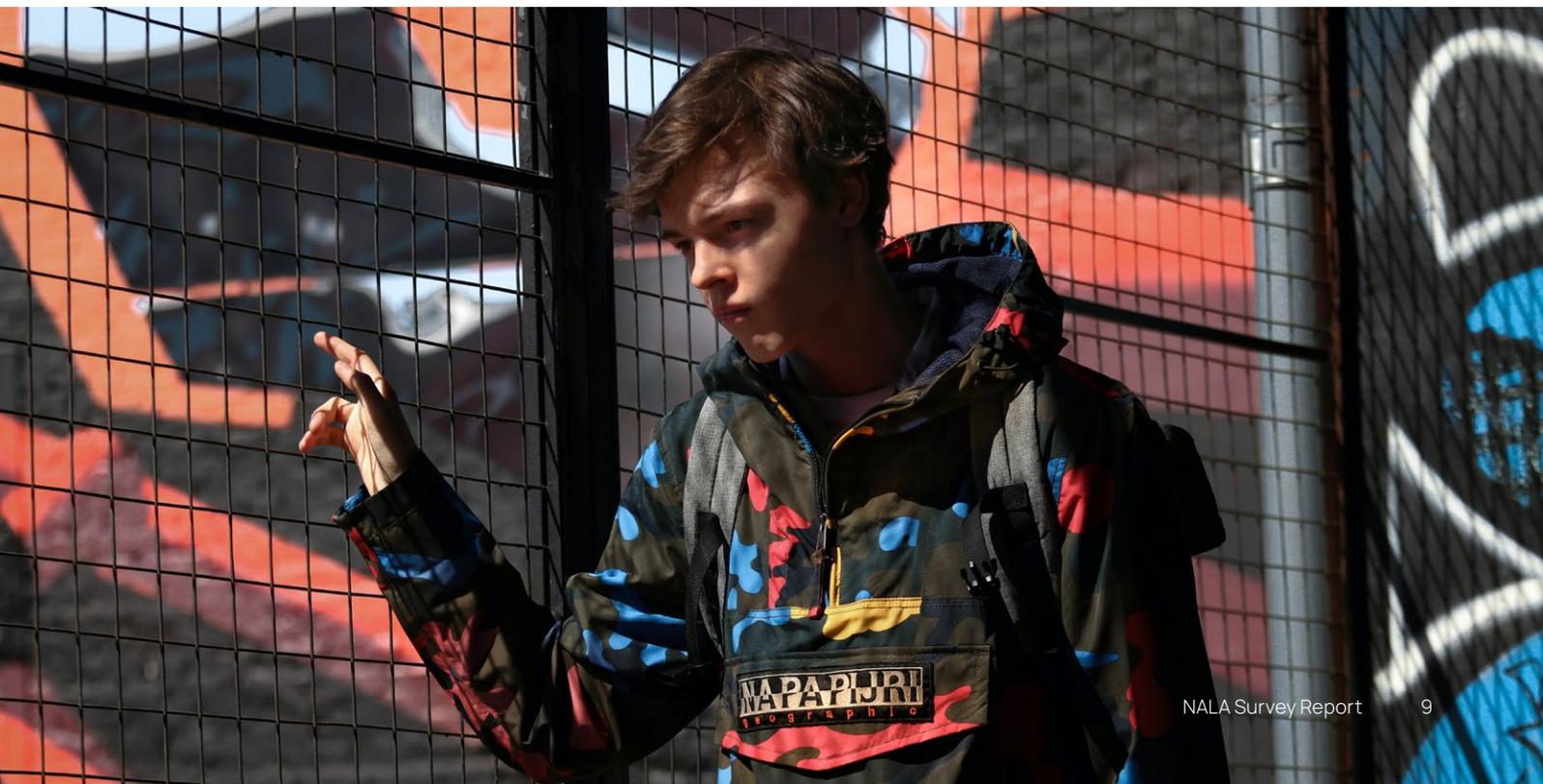
Most comments relate to speaking and writing although one teacher also outlined problems in listening and reading:

"It's mainly in the reading and listening that pupils are disadvantaged. Foods that certain pupils will never know (crudités!) or ideas that they wouldn't understand (au pair) Some of the reading topics cover areas that only middle class pupils would understand making the content inaccessible and disadvantaging them"

Many responses pointed to content as a reason for lower numbers opting for languages. .

"Languages have always been seen as an academic and difficult subject and we have problems with students opting for further language study. We need to ask ourselves why. Is this because the context excludes a large proportion of those who study them at an earlier age?"

"Last year one of my pupils was unwell and dropped Spanish before the exam to avoid the oral and personal essay. She dropped no other subjects (she had an eating disorder and this was the only subject in which this could have been a direct topic of her GCSE, essentially)."



Respondents' suggestions for a way forward

Respondents had a variety of suggestions to address the issue. These ranged from remaining with the status quo to full scale reform. This range is outlined below starting with the least radical changes:

Teachers adapt how they teach

Less than 1% of respondents felt that the challenge lay in the classroom with teachers responsible for ensuring all can achieve appropriately:

"We are supposed to provide pupils with the language to talk about anything, regardless of personal experiences"

Tweaking the examinations to give more choice of questions

"maybe have a choice of 3 writing and let the teacher pick the cards because we know our students so we wouldn't ask one about a skiing holiday who's never left their local town."

Adjust the assessment criteria

"I don't believe that students are rewarded for trying to communicate what they want albeit with mistakes. The exam boards would prefer that students spoke perfectly about something they didn't actually believe."

Ask the learners

Speaking with pupils, and this was a key area of research for Terry Lamb research into languages as far back as 2005, is seen as important by some. There would undoubtedly be a need for guiding pupils through this process meaningfully as one respondent points out:

"Pupils may not even be aware of the fact that the content is to blame. They may be used to feeling excluded in school and to feeling of failure. They may well interpret their feelings in MFL in such circumstances as a lack of ability."

Speaking to students may provide a route to making the curriculum content relevant to all socio-economic groups:

"The comments I've had from the students that didn't opt for the subject, even though we thought they probably

would because they are able linguists, were that they didn't know what to say for some of the topics or it wasn't relevant for their future life"

Avoid content based directly on personal experience

"This would not be so much of a problem if everyone had to 'invent the content' – creative writing and speaking tasks where they studied a film or a book or interviews and put themselves in the shoes of another person. Then we would be actively teaching creative writing and everyone would be in the same position."

Make the curriculum content more intellectually challenging and culturally enriching in order to motivate

"The GCSE MFL curriculum is rather shallow compared to the content of, say, History or Geography. Why can't we look at meatier, deeper topics that in addition have clear cross-curricular links such as French/Belgian resistance in WWII, climate change affecting Francophone Africa... these can be included as one-off lessons but I think it is worth considering how the curriculum could be deepened and broadened so that children learn more than how to describe where they live, state what they did with their friends last weekend and justify their ideal job."

"We should be looking at enriching [students'] outlook and their experiences through a programme of study that looks at the lives of others – through film and books and poetry and historical events. This is particularly relevant at the moment, as we all start to think about how history is taught in schools with the Black Lives Matter movement."

Alternative qualifications to GCSE

"I think there is maybe a need for an additional, different qualification that focuses more on everyday / holiday / etc. language without the extensive grammatical and cultural knowledge required. I know in music they provide alternative qualifications (Rock School) which is far more accessible to students"

Summary of findings

- The majority of language teaching professionals who responded, feel that the current GCSE content disadvantages some students including:
 - socio-economically deprived students
 - students with less typical family life - e.g. children in care
 - those who are less able
 - those with special educational needs
- The majority of respondents feel that this disadvantage impacts on pupil motivation, engagement, and performance.
- The current content disadvantages some students and is considered unnecessary for effective language learning by the majority of respondents.



Recommendations

- The current languages GCSE and languages curriculum should be reviewed carefully to ensure that no particular group of students is disadvantaged. The on-going work of the GCSE review body should make this aspect a priority of their work.
- A curriculum which motivates, engages and allows all to achieve needs to be intellectually challenging and meaningful. In languages the curriculum should be enhanced by encouraging study of the culture and peoples of the countries where the language is spoken.
- To meet the needs of all learners the languages curriculum should be made accessible through a reformed GCSE and a wider range of qualifications.
- Content should be devised in such a way that students feel that they are making progress from the outset, and that the programme is able to sustain that progress through KS3, KS4 and beyond.

Although not asked about specifically in the survey, the current pandemic also raises immediate concerns about fairness in the 2021 awarding process. Students have missed a large chunk of learning and evidence is that the disadvantaged have missed most. In the immediate future a plan for awarding grades fairly for the coming academic year should be considered in light of potential disruptions.



Appendix 1: Impact of the Coronavirus pandemic

The survey was planned before the lockdown due to the pandemic and did not ask directly about it. However, the pandemic has further drawn attention to socioeconomic disadvantage in education.

Andy Burnham tweeted on 16 August 2020:

"One of the things that's always been wrong with this country is the casual and in-built discrimination against kids from a working class background."

The TES reported May 29:

"Nearly four-fifths of teachers and school support staff say the attainment gap between poorer pupils and their peers is widening as a result of lockdown partial school closures." (Dave Speck TES)

And the Institute for Fiscal Studies:

"Pupils from better-off families are spending longer on home learning; they have access to more individualised resources such as private tutoring or chats with teachers; they have a better home set-up for distance learning; and their parents report feeling more able to support them." (Institute for Fiscal Studies May 2020)

There is the possibility of local lockdowns and further disruptions to learning and possibly even examinations in 2021. The NEU is calling for the government to take urgent steps to ensure learners are treated fairly and that none are disadvantaged.

A respondent to the survey makes the point that the period of lockdown will have reduced the opportunities to gain the experience often asked about in the examinations:

"Cohorts are also going to be impacted on negatively as a result of Covid 19 pandemic. This is particularly the case for current year yr10 students especially - For example, - work experience hasn't happened, no big cultural events or/and no social events have taken place and, family celebrations have been adversely effected, - In addition the impact of the pandemic on shopping, holidays and leisure activities means that students can no longer address all topics"

In the wider education community the pandemic has renewed calls for a shift altogether from the current examination system:

"Traditional high-stakes exams are out of date. They distort the purpose of learning and the focus of teaching." (Alison Shaw)

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