

Thoughts for today from yesterday's papers

TEST OF TIME

COMPARISON of today's GCSE papers with O-levels set 20 years ago show how fashions in exams have changed. Critics say these changes have had a fundamental effect on grades. O-level question papers tended to be just a few sheets of plain text. GCSE papers are often booklets featuring graphics, cartoons and diagrams as well as space for the answers.

The 1974 O-level papers of the Manchester-based Joint Matriculation Board (JMB) made clear: 'Careless work and untidy work will be penalised.' Not until last year were boards forced to allocate five per cent of marks for spelling, punctuation and grammar in the GCSEs.

A JMB history paper from 1974 made pupils show their knowledge in an intelligent way with questions such as: 'In what ways did Queen Elizabeth I overcome her enemies at home and abroad. Another question asked: 'Why was the Commonwealth (1649-1660) so short-lived?' Pupils were also asked to write on a series of topics such as the Somme, the entente cordiale, the Blitz and Pearl Harbour.

This year's history GCSE from the Northern Examinations and Assessment Board asks pupils to look at 'evidence' including an extract from The History of the Communist Party published in the Soviet Union in 1951 — and answer a series of questions on Five Year Plans. They are urged to use their knowledge as well as the sources to back their arguments.

Another question uses a school timetable featuring 'race studies' from a girls' school in Germany in 1935 as well as an extract from a speech by Adolf Hitler and a picture of a Nazi rally in 1934. Pupils are asked how useful the timetable is to a historian writing about education in Nazi Germany and told to use Hitler's quotes to explain why the Nazis set up their youth movement. They must also use their knowledge and the sources to explain why and how Hitler set up a dictatorship in Germany.

Critics say the answers can too often be gleaned from the 'evidence' — a charge denied by the boards.

Academic Brian Ford has made a study of exam papers going back more than a century and analysed their complexity. Mr Ford, a chartered biologist, fellow of Cardiff University and director of Mensa, said 'Most normal people could handle today's simple tests. I doubt whether our modern university students could pass the School Certificate set to the 16-year-olds of 1894.

'In 1894 the pupils needed a good understanding of essentials. Each answer involved depth, as well as knowledge. But the 1994 questions call for much simpler definitions. The level of understanding is now much less. You need little education to give the right answers.

'In this year's GCSE exams there is a drawing of the lungs. Inside is mucus. 'What is the job of this mucus?' poses the paper. Go back a century and you find a lung question. 'What is the essential nature of a breathing organ?' it said. Here was a chance for children to express their own understanding.' He added: 'My analysis shows that today's papers are a good ten per cent simpler to read than those set before the Second World War. Modern examiners know that their candidates aren't up to the standards of an earlier age.'

The following example compares two questions 100 years apart.

- Midland Examining Group science GCSE, 1994. (Pupils see diagram sequence of a boat being rocked by a wave). 'When Bill moored his yacht for the night he found it very hard to sleep because the boat was rocked by waves. Explain why Bill's yacht always returned to the upright position after the passage of a wave.'
 - Cambridge University Public Examination Board School Certificate, 1894. 'Define uniform velocity. Express a velocity of ten yards an hour in terms of feet and seconds. On a steamer which is moving with the velocity of 15 miles an hour a man crosses the deck in a direction at right angles to the steamer's motion with 8 velocity of ten feet per second. Find his resultant velocity.'
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