

PASS OVER THE PASS RATE

You cannot fault the man who said “Statistics have shown that those who have the most birthdays live the longest.” However you cannot flaunt him as a wise man. If you do, perhaps you should remember that “Statistics say that one in four people are insane. So take a look at your three best friends and if they are all ok then you are insane.”

Yet we all seem to love statistics, in all areas of life, be it sport, business or education. In soccer, analysts will provide endless statistics – the percentage of possession and of territory the team had, the percentage of shots on target, the percentage of shots on target that resulted in goals, the percentage of passes completed successfully. The problem with all of those is that none of those guarantee victory – the shots on target that resulted in goals do not indicate if they were poor shots or brilliant goalkeeping; a team who took ten passes to get the ball to the striker is not a better team than the one that took one pass. The team with the higher percentage of possession or territory is not necessarily the team that will win. Think Leicester City 2015-2016.

Benjamin Disraeli famously said that “There are three types of lies - lies, damn lies, and statistics.” In other words, you can say what you want with statistics – they are in effect simply lies. Criss Jami has written that “With enough mental gymnastics, just about any fact can become misshapen in favour to one's confirmation bias.” So it is intriguing that so many parents are still eager to find out the Pass Rate for a school, more so when there is a seventy percent chance that ninety percent of parents who ask have no idea why they are asking! Why on earth do you want to know?

Aaron Levenstein put it interestingly and differently: “Statistics are like bikinis: what they reveal is suggestive but what they conceal is vital.” Pass Rates may suggest that a school is great but it is not proof. The Pass Rate is simply stating that so many per cent of those pupils who sat those exams in those subjects in that school in that year passed; it is not a prediction of how many will pass next year, just as it is no guarantee that because one soccer side has always beaten their opponents that they will beat them this time. Do parents think that if the pass rate is seventy-eight percent then their child has a seventy-eight percent chance of passing? That is illogical! Their child has a hundred percent chance of passing depending on her aptitude and attitude. Lastly, in soccer, you can make lots of passes or score many goals but not win – it may look good but it may not produce the important result. It is the same with the Pass Rate.

What the Pass Rate conceals is far more vital. To look at one school's Pass Rate in the light of another school's or in the light of a previous year's Pass Rate, conceals the obvious yet vital fact that there were different children with different abilities sitting different subjects answering different questions with different resources and different variables. It conceals the number of pupils taking the exam – if one out of two pupils failed an exam, the percentage pass rate is low but if one out of one hundred and two pupils failed then the percentage pass rate is high – yet in both cases only one pupil failed. The Pass Rate also conceals how much time was spent in achieving those results.

As soon as we start talking of statistics and percentage pass rates we dehumanise people and pupils, as Joseph Stalin highlighted when he said that “The death of one man is a tragedy. The death of millions is a statistic.” Children are not numbers or percentages; schools are not about percentages but about personalities. We need to have the same understanding as Richelle E. Goodrich who said, “Statistics, likelihoods, and probabilities mean everything to men, nothing to God” - Pass Rates mean everything to parents but nothing to educators. It is time we stopped asking for (and giving) Pass Rates. The Pass Rate is not the same as the Interest Rate in. Chris Hart declares that “All the statistics in the world can't measure the warmth of a smile” while Khang Kijarro Nguyen notes that “Stats don't measure an athlete's hunger.” Forget the Pass Rate; consider the Progress rate.

It would not be surprising though if sixty percent of readers of this article are still trying to think of a reason why they do need to know the pass rate of a school – and twenty percent are probably still thinking of the bikini. Do not be the insane one!