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## You May Start Writing Now

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**ABSTRACT** This article, an extract from the author's book *Head on the Block*, describes how the purpose of the school examination system has changed such that now it is to evaluate the performance of teachers rather than the performance of their students. It highlights some of the negative effects of school league tables - in particular, how the pressure on schools to improve results year on year and the tactics employed by some schools to achieve this have led to a distortion of the curriculum and a move away from real education. Can schools which claim 100% A\* to C success at GCSE for *all* their students be genuinely comprehensive?

As any education textbook will tell you, school tests and examinations perform a wide variety of functions. They supply information to students, teachers and parents as to how well subject material has been learned and understood; they provide a check on progress; they are used to make comparisons – between pupils, teachers and schools; they can act as incentives; they are used to differentiate between students for the purpose of setting by ability; and they can lead to the awarding of recognised qualifications and thence to gain entry to further and higher education. A student once surprised me with her response to my question, 'Why do we set tests in school?' Her unexpected reply was, 'To see how well teachers teach.' In her opinion, testing was not being undertaken to see how well she was performing but to see how well her teachers were doing. And to some extent she was correct.

The biggest change I saw in the use of examinations and their results during my time as headteacher was the gradual but relentless shift from their use primarily as indicators of *student* performance to being indicators of *school* performance. 'How well did your students perform?' has increasingly come to be replaced by, 'How well did your school perform?' This may seem purely a matter of semantics, and I would never suggest that schools should not be accountable for the achievement of their students, but the use of schools' exam results to establish league tables and the resulting increase in pressure on

schools to show year-on-year improvement has had significant consequences – not all positive by any means.

Occasionally, amongst the myriad junk emails that flood my computer's inbox, I find the odd gem which justifiably escapes the immediacy of the delete button. An item which was worth saving consisted of a series of cartoons, one of which admirably summed up this shift in responsibility for exam success. The cartoons were a series of a 'then' and 'now' variety, showing how life and work has altered over the space of forty or so years. The one which had particular resonance for me showed a schoolteacher sitting behind a desk, with a pupil in front of her. The child's parents were standing alongside holding a copy of some marked test papers which were clearly not of a very high standard. The 'then' picture had the parents waving the papers in the direction of the child, angrily shouting: 'What is the meaning of these marks?' The child was looking suitably admonished. The 'now' picture had the same characters, but this time the child was smiling as the parents were directing their wrath towards the teacher, who was shown looking extremely defensive and cowed. 'What is the meaning of these marks?' they are yelling at her.

So there it is in a nutshell: whereas the onus used to be primarily on the student to do well, now it is much more up to the school to do well. Not unsurprisingly, this has led to a consequent increase in teaching to the test and in coaching students – sometimes to excess – in order to achieve the highest possible grades at GCSE. There are schools where individual students are removed from certain subjects, such as PE, in their final year of education and dissuaded from taking part in extra-curricular activities in order to be fed a relentless diet of maths and English. But surely if students are taught well, given opportunity for, and help with, revision and examination technique, should it not then be down to them as to how well they perform? Has the pressure on schools to improve their results year-on-year not led to a situation where students are frog-marched through extra revision sessions, mentored to death and force-fed with information and exam technique with the single goal of improving their school's performance? Of course, pupils must be given appropriate assistance to achieve their potential, but it seems that we have arrived at a state of affairs where students are overly and overtly dependent on their teachers to get them through the exam, teachers who have been doing everything for them, short of sitting the test in their place. Actually – in 2011 – I read a report of a teacher being accused of doing just that: taking a maths exam in lieu of one of her absent pupils.

As a result of the increasing pressure on teachers and schools to show continual improvement, is it any wonder that schools are moved to use every trick possible to secure this? And whilst it cannot be justified, one can understand why some heads have succumbed to improper activity to boost their school's position in the league tables. Furthermore, to what extent do exams and tests any longer give the opportunity for candidates to offer imagination and creativity in their answers? Have students – afraid to take risks – moved from 'Let me tell you what I think,' to 'What is it I am required to say?' Is

passing the exam the sole reason for undertaking any course of study? Has the acquisition of knowledge for the purpose of regurgitation in the ensuing test taken over from a more open ended-education? Should we not be championing greater ingenuity and more original thinking?

The examination industry is now big business: commercial pressure is the driver; getting young people to pass exams is the exam boards' mission – that and making money no doubt. The boards also compete heavily with each other, some promoting themselves as patrons of exams which are easier to pass. In December 2011, a national newspaper caught officers of an exam board disclosing to teachers the details of up and coming GCSE and A-level papers: the topics which were expected to be examined, and the questions likely to be asked. Teachers had paid to attend courses where this information was disclosed. Examiners, it seemed, could boost their incomes substantially by offering a service of this kind. In a competitive free market, it is surely in each exam board's interest to secure the highest possible pass-rate, thereby guaranteeing the largest number of future customers. All highly immoral, if not the less completely legal; sadly though, somewhat inevitable.

Students' responsible for their own learning? I think not. Naturally the school has a duty to provide appropriate teaching, but the current government-stated intention of the purpose of education seems not to be for the nurture and development of young enquiring minds, eager to learn about the world around them. It seems the point is not to enthuse students to widen their interests or to instil love of subject and desire for further study; it is purely for the achievement of exam passes. And if pupils fail to achieve those passes, it is now the fault of the school.

Then there is the question of entering students early for exams. This is a practice increasingly used by schools to secure passes in some subjects so that the results can be 'banked', giving more time to concentrate on others. Figures released by the Department for Education showed that in 2011 a quarter of students nationally were entered in year 10 for GCSE maths and English, a year earlier than the norm. Students who score below the magic grade C – mostly those with a grade D – retake their exams in order to pull themselves over the grade boundary. But, significantly, those who do gain C grade do not necessarily resit. Research shows that students who sit exams early do not perform as well as those who take them later (surprise, surprise!). Able students who sit early may well obtain a C grade but, if they do not retake – and there is little incentive for schools to encourage them to do so – they are denied the higher grades, perhaps As and A\*s they might otherwise achieve.

And what drives all this? The league tables of course. A constant desire to measure, record and publish schools in rank order. Every year in August, I would be contacted by my local newspaper for the school's results. Not the students' results note, the school's results. Headteachers were invited to comment on their success and the improvement on the previous year. Photographs of teenagers shown leaping for joy, waving their results slips aloft have become something of a cliché. No one would want to take away from

their individual achievements, but one suspects that school self-promotion, competition and marketing are more the intention here – some schools being better at this harnessing of the media than others.

Politicians have found it increasingly difficult to resist interfering in the country's exam system. So we have had government pronouncements on modular exams – once popular, now distinctly out of favour; changes to the syllabus of subjects like history, to suit the prejudices of ministers; variation in coursework requirements and controlled assessments. Continual interference and tinkering, causing constant and unnecessary distraction for teachers and students alike. Each new initiative requires cash for resources and training, money that has to be found from increasingly limited budgets. In September 2012, following disputes over grade boundaries in the summer's GCSE examinations, the Secretary of State for Education announced proposals to abolish the GCSE altogether, and replace it with new English Baccalaureate Certificates. For the next three years, until teaching for the new certificates begins in 2015, students and teachers will need to continue motivating themselves for exams which have been described by Michael Gove as 'unfit for purpose'.

There is also the issue of schools' willingness to admit children with special needs who, however much cramming is employed, simply do not have the ability to achieve GCSE success at the league table's required level. In my school we welcomed children whatever their ability, knowing that some would never achieve the magic five passes. For some, a single grade E represented huge personal achievement, even if that achievement went unrecognised in the results tables. I can never be other than sceptical of schools which claim to be fully comprehensive and yet manage a 100% exam record. Most eye-wateringly of all, I spotted an advertisement aimed at recruiting staff for one of the just-opened free schools, stating that the new all-ability school would enable every child to transfer to sixth form and go on to a good university. Not any university note, but a good one. Surely this is a complete non-sequitur; what it is implying – no, clearly stating – is that children of any ability can make it to Oxford, Cambridge or any other high-ranking university. This has to be plain nonsense. I am all in favour of encouraging young people to aim high, but surely it is immoral to suggest that a school can get a student *of whatever ability* to this level.

Countries such as Finland, which are top performers on the world stage as judged by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), do not publish school-by-school tables of examination results. The PISA tests which are held every three years are used to rank 15-year-old pupil performance of 65 countries. Yes, another league table, and one in which Britain does not come higher than countries with less rigid school regimes. Finland, which has been at or near the top since the tests were first conducted in 2000, not only has no league tables but also no Ofsted-style inspections.

The United Kingdom has now had twenty years of Ofsted and school league tables. Twenty years of top-down interference in every aspect of secondary education, and there is clearly more on the way. But state education

continues to attract a bad press, and we are still being repeatedly told that schools and teachers are not performing well enough.

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