

In defence of standards

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Standards are fundamental to both the quality and content of education. A nation with high educational standards is one where a majority of children leave school able to demonstrate successful mastery of complex subject knowledge. The determination of many parents in the UK to secure a place for their child at a good school suggests that, among the general public at least, high educational standards are valued. However, among teachers, policymakers and educational theorists, there is disagreement about the meaning of standards and little consensus that securing high standards is an appropriate aim for schools.

Over the course of several decades, many educationalists have dismissed talk of standards as implying a regressive focus on rote learning, exam passes and strict discipline, which they consider to be hostile to more progressive educational goals in general and the needs of emotionally 'vulnerable' children in particular. Their success is not just a long-term decline in educational standards but the broader problematising of the very aspiration for high standards.

This essay provides an unashamed defence of educational standards. In Section 1, I discuss what is meant by educational standards, how and why standards have fallen and, crucially, why this matters. Section 2 then considers the impact of different forms of assessment upon educational standards and makes the case for traditional exams in establishing high levels of attainment.

Section 1: Why standards matter

What do we mean by standards?

The most basic educational standard is that children should leave school literate and numerate. An ability to read, write and perform simple arithmetic is essential for full participation in a democratic society and a pre-requisite of further study. Ideally, all children should have mastered these basic skills before leaving primary school. To this end, the key stage 2 Standard Assessment Tests, taken by pupils in England during their final months in year 6 (11-year-olds), assess performance in English and mathematics. They are an important accountability mechanism and provide parents, teachers, schools and the nation with insight into the progress children are making towards meeting this educational standard. Such tests have, arguably, contributed towards improvements in the performance of England's schoolchildren in international league tables.

In 2023 (following testing in 2022), England's 9- and 10-year-olds took fourth place in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) which compared the reading ability of children in 43 different countries,¹ up from joint eighth place in 2017 (following testing in 2016).² This progress is vital to challenging entrenched illiteracy rates. One in four children in England do not meet the expected standard in reading when they leave primary school.³ Meanwhile, the Scottish government's own research has suggested that, as reported, 'one in three Scottish children are struggling to learn to read in schools'.⁴ In this context, it might be assumed that a formal mechanism for checking all children meet a basic educational standard is to be welcomed. Yet primary school tests are controversial.

In May 2023, the year 6 English reading paper was criticised for being too difficult. Children had 1 hour to answer 38 questions about 3 set texts. The BBC highlighted one question which asked pupils 'to find a similar word to "eat" in a passage that contained both "consume" and "feeding"'.⁵ The vice-president of the National Association of Head Teachers claimed that children had 'gone home really struggling because they hadn't finished the reading test'. Groups such as More Than A Score bring together parents and teachers in calls for all national tests for primary school pupils to be abolished.⁶ Many campaigners, including teachers and teaching unions, seek to overturn the means of holding schools to account for ensuring even the most minimal of educational standards.

The significance of knowledge

Literacy and numeracy are vital not just for participation in society but for enabling individuals to share in humanity's collective intellectual and cultural legacy. In terms of schooling, being able to read, write and complete basic arithmetic enables pupils to access knowledge in a range of subjects. For this reason, the concept of educational standards speaks not just to quality – a person's ability to calculate accurately, write grammatically and understand complex texts – but also to content. There are certain things people educated to a high standard are assumed to know and, to this end, dividing teaching time into subjects, each with its own distinct curriculum applicable to children of different ages, has traditionally been the form that schooling has taken.

In England, the first statutory national curriculum was introduced by Kenneth Baker in the Education Reform Act 1988. Prior to this, it was down to individual teachers, schools, subject associations and local education authorities to determine what children were taught. While some schools and teachers undoubtedly adopted an idiosyncratic approach to the curriculum, in general teachers had an

¹ Department for Education (2023) 'England moves to fourth in international rankings for reading' on Gov.uk, 16 May. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/news/england-moves-to-fourth-in-international-rankings-for-reading (accessed 17/09/25).

² Department for Education (2017) 'Pupils in England climb global rankings in reading and literacy' on Gov.uk, 5 December. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/news/pupils-in-england-climb-global-rankings-in-reading-and-literacy (accessed 17/09/25).

³ Department for Education (2025) 'Academic Year 2023/24: Key stage 2 attainment' on Gov.uk, 27 February. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-2-attainment/2023-24> (accessed 17/09/25).

⁴ Lawson, E. and Wright, M. (2023) 'Call for change in literacy teaching as study shows one in three kids struggle' in *The Sunday Post*, 26 November. Available at: www.sundaypost.com/fp/call-for-change-in-literacy-teaching-as-study-shows-one-in-three-kids-struggle/ (accessed 17/09/25).

⁵ Shearing, H. (2023) 'Sats: KS2 Year 6 reading paper revealed after row over difficulty' on BBC News, 18 May. Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-65624697 (accessed 17/09/25).

⁶ See: www.morethanascore.org.uk/ (accessed 17/09/25).

awareness of the key intellectual developments within their subject area. In English, music and art this might emerge from tradition, knowledge of the canon or popular understandings of what was considered significant work. In other subject areas, formal and informal ties between teachers and university departments helped shape the content of school leaving exams and, in turn, the curriculum.⁷

Establishing standards in terms of curricular content requires educators to pass judgement. They must discern, from among the sum total of human knowledge, that which is deemed sufficiently important for children to know. This act of passing on the best of humanity's collective knowledge, from one generation to the next, has been identified as the primary motivation for formal education by philosophers and sociologists including Émile Durkheim, Hannah Arendt and Michael Oakeshott.⁸ School inspector and poet Matthew Arnold famously argued for building and teaching a canonical body of knowledge premised upon 'the best which has been thought and said'.⁹ When understood in such terms, passing judgement – discerning the knowledge considered worthy of passing from one generation to the next – is to assume responsibility, not just for today's children but for the future of humanity, which will benefit from the survival of a collective store of wisdom.

Unfortunately, there are many trends that militate against judgement in the construction of the school curriculum today. Low levels of basic literacy skills militate against the teaching of literature or other texts deemed too complex. A longstanding driver towards relevance calls into question historical material. Similarly, moves to 'decolonise' the curriculum often see once-familiar works written off as 'pale, male and stale'. An assumption that knowledge is merely 'information' and readily accessible online deprioritises learning content in favour of accruing 'critical thinking skills' or 'learning to learn'. Low expectations of children more generally rule out the reading of lengthy books in favour of brief extracts. Taken together, we see a worrying fall in both the quantity and quality of what children know.

Falling standards

Concern about educational standards is not new. In the 1860s, when schools first began coming under state control, Matthew Arnold described the inadequacies of both secondary education for middle-class children and primary education for the working class. Thirty years later, in 1895, the Bryce Commission reported on the state of secondary education following government concerns that England was falling behind other countries, most notably Germany, in the teaching of science and technology.¹⁰ In 1950, the Ministry of Education for England and Wales published a report entitled *Reading Ability* in response to concerns that reading standards had fallen as a result of the Second World War. It opened with the question: 'Is illiteracy increasing in this country?'.¹¹

⁷ Sehgal Cuthbert, A. (2025) 'An Invisible Authority' in *Teach Secondary*, 2025;14(4):12–13. Available at: www.theteachco.com/uploads/special-issues/Teach_Secondary_14.4.pdf (accessed 17/09/25).

⁸ See, for example, Durkheim, E. (1961) *Moral Education*. New York: Free Press of Glencoe; Arendt, H. (1961) 'The Crisis in Education' in *Between Past and Future*. New York: The Viking Press; and Oakeshott, M. (1989) *The Voice of Liberal Learning*. Connecticut: Yale University Press.

⁹ Arnold, M. (1869) *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism*. London: Smith, Elder and Co.

¹⁰ Royal Commission on Secondary Education (1895) *Report of the Royal Commission on Secondary Education* (the Bryce Report). London: HM Stationery Office. Available at: <https://education-uk.org/documents/bryce1895/bryce1895.html> (accessed 17/09/25).

¹¹ Ministry of Education (1950) *Reading Ability* (Pamphlet No. 18). London: HM Stationery Office. Available at: <https://education-uk.org/documents/minofed/pamphlet-18.html> (accessed 17/09/25).

Four decades later, such concerns remained. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) compared literacy at key stage 2 between 1996 and 1999 and found that reading standards had fallen.¹² Some of the recent improvement in reading results, it ruled, were ‘illusory’.¹³ In 2008, the Institute of Directors questioned the credibility of government statistics showing improvements in education performance and argued that standards had declined over the past decade.¹⁴ In 2014, then head of Ofsted, Michael Wilshaw, argued that standards were falling in England’s secondary schools because a small number were ‘insulated’ from proper governance and ‘bereft of good leadership’.¹⁵ Most recently, there has been concern about the impact of Covid lockdowns on educational standards. In 2023, England’s A level results showed the biggest year-on-year drop on record.¹⁶

Discussion of educational standards can read like a tale of perennial decline. This has led some to write off such accounts as a ‘moral panic’.¹⁷ Reality is, of course, more complicated: there has been neither 2 centuries of decline nor 200 years of continual improvement. Comparing educational standards in historical context is difficult because there are many variables to be taken into account. For example, it was only with the 1944 Education (Butler) Act that free secondary schooling became available for all. This means that concern about falling standards needs to be understood in the context of a shift from an elite to a mass secondary education system.

Likewise, since 1944, there have been considerable changes in school structures: from a tripartite system of grammar, technical and secondary moderns, to comprehensive schools. And, as will be discussed more fully in Section 2, there have been changes in assessment methods: from O levels taken by the academically able and CSEs (Certificates of Secondary Education) taken by the rest, to GCSEs taken by all. Put bluntly, the UK moved from providing high-level education to a small proportion of the population to, arguably, a lower-level education to a far larger number of children overall. It would be wrong to understand this as either straightforward improvement or decline.

Rising grades, falling standards

When considering educational standards, we need to take into account both the expectations of the most able pupils and more general levels of attainment among the majority of youngsters. Comparisons over time become more meaningful when (almost) all children are sitting the same exams at the same age. However, even here there are difficulties. Since the introduction of GCSEs almost 4 decades ago, the content of the secondary curriculum has changed considerably in each subject area. Some of these changes have been to update topics covered, for example in science, or to make content more relevant and diverse, for example in English and modern foreign languages.

¹² Massey, A. *et al* (2003) *Comparability of national tests over time: key stage test standards between 1996 and 2001: Final report to the QCA of the Comparability Over Time Project*. University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate, Research and Evaluation Division. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a82d713ed915d74e6237e55/0102_Alf_Massey_et_al_comparability_report_96-01.pdf (accessed 17/09/25).

¹³ *Ibid*, p63.

¹⁴ Harris, M. *et al* (2008) *Education Briefing Book 2008: IoD Policy Paper*. London: Institute of Directors.

¹⁵ Ofsted (2014) ‘HMCI launches Ofsted’s Annual Report 2013/14’ on Gov.uk, 10 December. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/speeches/hmci-launches-ofsteds-annual-report-201314 (accessed 17/09/25).

¹⁶ Ofqual (2025) ‘A level outcomes in England’ on Gov.uk. Available at: <https://analytics.ofqual.gov.uk/apps/Alevel/Outcomes/> (accessed 17/09/25).

¹⁷ Smith, E. (2010) ‘Underachievement, failing youth and moral panics’ in *Evaluation & Research in Education*, 2010;23(1):37–49. Available at: www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09500791003605102 (accessed 17/09/25).

The nature of assessment has changed too, with coursework coming in and out of fashion, the introduction of an A* grade, and, most recently, a move from A–G to numeric 9–1 grades. All of this means that, even when considering a far shorter time frame, we are rarely comparing like with like.

The changing requirements of Ofsted inspectors and the publication of league tables have also had an impact on educational standards. There is evidence that some schools sought to ‘game’ results by opting to enter pupils for exam boards considered more lenient or steering individuals towards less demanding subject choices.^{18,19} Alongside this, there has been a general tendency towards ‘grade inflation’. In England, between 2010 and 2019, GCSE grades across all candidates and all subjects remained fairly constant, with around 67 per cent of entrants achieving a grade C or above (considered a ‘good’ pass) and around 20 per cent achieving an A or above (the highest marks).²⁰ However, prior to 2010, there were over 2 decades of sustained grade inflation. In 1988, 41.9 per cent of GCSE entries across the UK were graded A*–C; by 2008, this figure stood at 65.7 per cent and by 2012, just 4 years later, it had increased again to 69.4 per cent.²¹ This is an astonishing increase in a quarter of a century.

The decade of consistency in England, from 2010 onwards, stemmed the increase and even rode back on grade inflation slightly. However, this changed dramatically between 2020 and 2022 when, in response to the Covid pandemic lockdowns and school closures, exams were either cancelled in favour of teacher assessments or made easier through reducing content and allowing pupils to make use of ‘crib sheets’. During this period, A*–C (now grade 4 and above) passes rose from 67.1 per cent in 2019, to 76.9 per cent in 2021.²² In 2023, grades in England fell back to just above the pre-pandemic norm.²³ Grades in Wales and Northern Ireland did not fall as steeply and sat between 2019 and 2022 levels.²⁴ Meanwhile, Scottish National 5 (N5) results (the equivalent of GCSEs) remained significantly above the average pass rate in England. Specifically, 78.8 per cent of Scottish teenagers achieved grades A–C in N5,²⁵ compared to 67.8 per cent of pupils who received GCSE grade 4/C and above in England.²⁶ In other words, a higher proportion of students in Scotland achieved higher grades in their equivalent of GCSEs compared to their English counterparts.

¹⁸ Education Committee (2012) ‘Stop exam boards fighting to offer the easiest exam’, 3 July. Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/203/education-committee/news/179187/stop-exam-boards-fighting-to-offer-the-easiest-exam/> (accessed 17/09/25).

¹⁹ Harrison, A. (2011) ‘Vocational education not good enough, says Wolf report’ on BBC News, 3 March. Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-12622061 (accessed 17/09/25).

²⁰ Ofqual (2025) ‘GCSE outcomes in England’ on Gov.uk. Available at: <https://analytics.ofqual.gov.uk/apps/GCSE/Outcomes/> (accessed 17/09/25).

²¹ *The Guardian* (2012) ‘How have GCSE pass rates changed over the exams’ 25 year history?’ on the Datablog, 17 September. Available at: www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2012/sep/17/gcse-exams-replaced-ebacc-history-pass-rates (accessed 17/09/25).

²² Ofqual (2023) ‘Infographics for GCSE results, 2023’ on Gov.uk. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/infographic-gcse-results-2023/infographics-for-gcse-results-2023 (accessed 17/09/25).

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ BBC News (2023) ‘England GCSE results show widening north-south divide’, 24 August. Available at: www.bbc.com/news/live/education-66575574 (accessed 17/09/25).

²⁵ SQA (2023) *2023 National Qualifications and Awards Results*. Available at: www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files_ccc/nq2023-chief-examining-officer-report.pdf (accessed 17/09/25).

²⁶ Ofqual (2023) ‘Infographics for GCSE results 2023’ on Gov.uk. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/infographic-gcse-results-2023/infographics-for-gcse-results-2023 (accessed 17/09/25).

The most recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) test scores show a marked decline since the previous assessment in 2018 in the performance of the UK's 15-year-olds in both maths and reading.²⁷ This drop in performance was more pronounced in Scotland than in England, suggesting that higher GCSE (equivalent) grades are sitting alongside falling attainment.²⁸

In England, the period from 1988 to 2012 saw the number of 'good' GCSE passes (grade C or above) rise from just over 40 per cent to just under 70 per cent.²⁹ If exam results are an accurate measure of performance then attainment would have risen to a similarly large extent during this period. However, as we know from our earlier discussion, respected bodies such as the QCA, Ofsted and the Institute of Directors were all raising the alarm about falling standards over these years. This leads to a situation, outlined in a 2005 Civitas report, where we have simultaneously both increasing grades and falling standards.³⁰ While this no doubt served a political purpose for the New Labour Government of the time, the clear danger is that rising grades mask the true extent to which educational standards are falling. This situation is not unique to England, and has been identified as a problem in the US, for example in California.³¹

Halting decline

In England, this situation was halted by Michael Gove, who served as education secretary between 2010 and 2014. Throughout his time in post, Gove battled against the union leaders, teacher-trainers, members of local education authorities and academics he named 'The Blob'. He challenged the pervasive culture of low expectations by introducing a knowledge-based curriculum with more rigorous exams to match. With Nick Gibb, who served as schools minister, Gove also tried to end the practice of schools opting for exam boards considered more lenient or steering pupils towards less demanding subject choices.³² Gove believed that children were capable of mastering the basics of literacy (through the teaching of phonics) and numeracy, but also of learning poetry and times tables, reading literature and understanding the chronology of history. Gove ended a system where (often adult-assisted) coursework counted towards final marks, modularised exams could be taken early and taken often, and low-level vocational courses were deemed to be equivalent to academic exams for the purposes of league tables.^{33,34} For this, his many opponents turned him into a pantomime villain.

Inevitably, given one of Gove's key successes was ending grade inflation, the impact of his changes cannot be straightforwardly measured in improved national exam results. Indeed, changing the ethos

²⁷ OECD (2023) *PISA 2022 Results (Volume I and II) – Country Notes: United Kingdom*. Available at: www.oecd.org/en/publications/pisa-2022-results-volume-i-and-ii-country-notes_ed6fbcc5-en/united-kingdom_9c15db47-en.html (accessed 17/09/25).

²⁸ Hepburn, H. and Seith, E. (2023) 'Scotland's Pisa scores drop across the board' in *Tes magazine*, 5 December. Available at: www.tes.com/magazine/news/secondary/scotland-pisa-scores-drop (accessed 17/09/25).

²⁹ BBC News (2012) 'First fall in GCSE grades in exam's history', 23 August. Available at: www.bbc.com/news/education-19349444# (accessed 17/09/25).

³⁰ Green, D. et al (2005) *Education: Better results and declining standards?*. London: Civitas. Available at: <https://civitas.org.uk/pdf/educationBriefingDec05.pdf> (accessed 17/09/25).

³¹ Esquivel, P. (2022) 'L.A. students' grades are rising, but test scores are falling. Why the big disconnect?' in *Los Angeles Times*, 22 December. Available at: www.latimes.com/california/story/2022-12-22/la-student-reports-card-grades-are-high-test-scores-are-low-why-the-big-disconnect (accessed 17/09/25).

³² Gibb, N. and Peal, R. (2025) *Reforming Lessons*, pp108–111. London: Routledge.

³³ Coughlan, S. (2013) 'GCSEs: Gove pledges "challenging" exam changes' on BBC News, 11 June. Available at: www.bbc.com/news/education-22841266 (accessed 17/09/25).

³⁴ Richardson, H. (2012) 'Most GCSE equivalents axed from school league tables' on BBC News, 31 January. Available at: www.bbc.com/news/education-16789215 (accessed 17/09/25).

of the teaching establishment is not a task to be completed in just a couple of years. Cultural shifts take time to embed. For this reason, perhaps Gove's lasting legacy can best be seen in the progress England's children have made in international league tables since 2010, first consolidating performance, and then gaining ground, until 15-year-olds obtained a record high average score of 504 for maths in 2018's PISA survey,³⁵ up from 493 in 2015.³⁶

In 2016, Michael Wilshaw, then chief inspector of schools in England, said that PISA results from Wales and Scotland were 'dragging the UK performance down'.³⁷ His remarks were in response to Welsh students ranking below the average of 72 countries taking part in the tests in maths, science and reading and, for the fourth time running, performing worse than their counterparts in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Scotland, meanwhile, recorded its worst ever results with all three subject areas classed as 'average'.³⁸ When PISA tests were repeated in 2022, on average Scottish schools performed below their 2018 score in both reading and maths (and also science), and pupils fell further behind those in England.³⁹

One key difference between the nations is the content of the school curriculum. As Scottish educationalist Lindsay Patterson writes on standards in Scotland's schools: 'the decline started to become noticeable at the moment when the new curriculum started to impinge systematically on children's learning'.⁴⁰ Thanks to Gove's reforms, pupils in England have a curriculum that is grounded in knowledge, as opposed to the skills approach taken in other UK nations.

The fall in performance of England's pupils reflected in the 2022 PISA results shows that the rise in educational standards that followed Gove's curricular reforms is not secure.⁴¹ We see continual efforts from the teaching unions to turn back the clock and undo the progress towards raising standards that Gove established. When Nick Gibb, appointed schools minister by Michael Gove, announced his resignation in November 2023, Daniel Kebede, general secretary of the National Education Union, complained that the Department for Education had been too 'Preoccupied with Gibb's own ideology' and 'his preferred method for the teaching of reading'. Kebede wrote: 'In the name of "standards", these policies are actually reducing the quality of education, worsening the conditions of teachers and lessening pupils' motivation and enjoyment.'⁴²

³⁵ Sizmur, J. *et al* (2019) *Achievement of 15-year-olds in England: PISA 2018 results, Research report*. London: Department for Education. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/pisa-2018-national-report-for-england (accessed 17/09/25).

³⁶ Jerrim, J. and Shure N. (2016) *Achievement of 15-year-olds in England: PISA 2015 National Report*. London: Department for Education. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/pisa-2015-national-report-for-england (accessed 17/09/25).

³⁷ BBC News (2016) 'Pisa tests: Wales and Scotland "dragging UK performance down"', 6 December. Available at: www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-38230328# (accessed 17/09/25).

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Picken, A. (2023) 'Scottish education performance falling, says study' on BBC News, 5 December. Available at: www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-67580173 (accessed 17/09/25).

⁴⁰ Paterson, L. (2023) 'PISA 2022 in Scotland: declining attainment and growing social inequality', Enliven, 5 December. Available at: www.reformscotland.com/pisa-2022-in-scotland-declining-attainment-and-growing-social-inequality-lindsay-paterson/ (accessed 17/09/25).

⁴¹ Ingram, J. *et al* (2023) *PISA 2022: National Report for England, Research report*. London: Department for Education. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/pisa-2022-national-report-for-england (accessed 17/09/25).

⁴² National Education Union (2023) 'Nick Gibb departure', 13 November. Available at: <https://neu.org.uk/latest/press-releases/nick-gibb-departure> (accessed 17/09/25).

His use of ‘scare quotes’ around the word ‘standards’ is revealing of the derision of many in the educational establishment. Kebede forgets that reading is far more enjoyable when people can actually decipher text. At the beginning of 2022, Gibb himself noted that ‘The counterattack has begun. To win this battle, ministers must engage with the argument and maintain a clear focus on the curriculum and on how it is taught.’⁴³

Why are standards being eroded?

There are many reasons why educational standards have fallen over a long period of time. Most significant are changing political and cultural understandings of the purpose of education, the role of the school and the teacher, and the nature of childhood. Over the course of a century, most countries in the West have moved from viewing secondary education as an elite preoccupation to an institution of mass participation, and from a project concerned with academic merit to social equality. Teaching has become less preoccupied with imparting knowledge than with inculcating values, and children are no longer viewed as robust young scholars but as ‘vulnerable’ and in need of nurturing.

High academic standards require teachers to be subject enthusiasts, deeply committed to passing on the body of knowledge judged most significant to their discipline. This love of knowledge drives teachers to ensure children leave school having mastered complex bodies of work. Yet, for a century now, educational theorists and academics involved in teacher training have promoted the idea that the good teacher is child-centred rather than knowledge-centred.⁴⁴

From knowledge-centred to child-centred pedagogy

A focus on knowledge implies teachers have one foot in the present – they are aware of the capabilities and interests of their pupils – but also, significantly, one foot in the past – they are aware of the best that has been thought and said in their chosen subject and have a desire to preserve this knowledge in the minds of the next generation. This connection between education and the past was called into question by John Dewey in the first decades of the 20th century. Dewey argued that:

*As a society becomes more enlightened, it realizes that it is responsible not to transmit and conserve the whole of its existing achievements, but only such as make for a better future society.*⁴⁵

This future-orientation shifts the goals of schooling. A teacher’s job is no longer to transmit society’s collective knowledge from one generation to the next but ‘to emancipate the young from the need of dwelling in an outgrown past’.⁴⁶ Pupils are not to imbibe old ideas but to develop modes of thinking that will create the society of the future. Dewey is clear: teachers are to ‘shape the experiences of the young so that instead of reproducing current habits, better habits shall be formed, and thus the future adult society be an improvement on their own’.⁴⁷ This assumes the teacher’s role is not to preserve

⁴³ Gibb, N. (2022) ‘Resist the “progressive” attack on phonics’ in *The Telegraph*, 26 January. Available at: www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2022/01/26/resist-progressive-attack-phonics2/ (accessed 17/09/25).

⁴⁴ Johnstone, R. (2017) ‘My teacher training was firmly rooted in Progressive ideology – and it was wrong’ in *Tes magazine*, 24 July. Available at: www.tes.com/magazine/archive/my-teacher-training-was-firmly-rooted-progressive-ideology-and-it-was-wrong (accessed 17/09/25).

⁴⁵ Dewey, J. (1916) *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. New York: The Macmillan Company.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

the past but to shape the future according to their own preferences. As the future is uncertain, the worth of any body of knowledge can be called into question in favour of teaching generic skills of possible future relevance and capable of holding a child's interest in the short term.

Over the course of several decades, Dewey's approach to education gained a considerable following among education policymakers, academics, teacher-trainers and teachers themselves. By the 1960s, the UK was well on the way to adopting this supposedly 'progressive' approach to education. In the more liberal climate of the times, the comparatively short-lived experiment in tripartite selection at age 11 was slowly being dismantled and streaming pupils according to ability within non-selective schools was falling out of favour. Primary schools no longer needed to prepare children for 11-plus entrance examinations and teachers had more freedom than before to shape the curriculum according to their own concerns. The Plowden Report, published in 1967, captured the spirit of the times with its assertion that: 'At the heart of the educational process lies the child.'⁴⁸

Making the child, rather than knowledge, the focus of a teacher's efforts fundamentally alters the purpose of education. Rather than the child being prepared to master humanity's collective wisdom, the curriculum is made subservient to the immediate interests of the child. Content is not selected on merit but on the basis of perceived relevance. Ultimately, what is considered most relevant to the child is him or herself. Rather than being awed at the wonders of the world and human ingenuity, children are encouraged to dwell only on their existing narrow preoccupations. Ironically, social inequalities come to be entrenched as the child rather than the curriculum takes precedence in the classroom. Children from culturally rich backgrounds are rewarded for the knowledge they already possess while less privileged children are not taken beyond their present limited horizons. At the same time, the challenges associated with learning, the at times painful process of intellectual struggle, are reinterpreted as potentially harmful rather than a necessary battle for entry into the world of adult knowledge. The upshot of the progressive, child-centred, century-long revolution in education is that standards decline: knowledge is degraded in importance and children are not tested against its accomplishments.

Persistent inequality

For all the talk of child-centred education, it is not children that construct lessons, but adults. In moving away from knowledge, contemporary – often political – concerns take centre stage. Since Dewey, education has been seen as a means of changing society. In 2023, the Scottish Government proposed a new school curriculum based on 'phenomenon-based classes'. Rather than studying traditional academic subjects such as history and geography, the school day would instead be organised around lessons in topics such as climate change and 'global problems'.⁴⁹ In moving away from teaching knowledge as an end in itself, education becomes politicised. This is unlikely to help close the gap in performance between English and Scottish schools. Nonetheless, politicising the curriculum is, it seems, an attractive proposition to many teachers. Turning the classroom into a pulpit

⁴⁸ Central Advisory Council for Education (England) (1967) *Children and their Primary Schools* (the Plowden Report). London: HM Stationery Office. Available at: <https://education-uk.org/documents/plowden/plowden1967-1.html> (accessed 17/09/25).

⁴⁹ Puttick, H. (2023) 'Exams for 14 and 15-year-olds to be replaced by "real-life skills" test' in *The Times*, 22 June. Available at: www.thetimes.co.uk/article/exams-for-14-and-15-year-olds-to-be-replaced-by-real-life-skills-test-2gb06qknx# (accessed 17/09/25).

hands them huge power and many are, understandably, reluctant to relinquish this power. Then schools minister Nick Gibb acknowledged in 2022:

The school reforms that so successfully helped raise academic standards over the last decade have been achieved by a relentless challenge to the prevailing orthodoxies beloved of education professors, local authority advisers and others in the 'educational establishment'.⁵⁰

Meanwhile, teachers intent on maintaining standards and insistent upon teaching subject knowledge are spoken of derisively as 'trads' and stand accused of not acting in the best interests of children.

Today, we have evidence to show that a knowledge-centred approach to schooling is integral to high educational standards. Michaela Community School in Wembley, London, combines traditional teaching methods, a strict approach to discipline and a focus on core academic subjects. Michaela is ranked best in the country for Progress 8, a measure comparing a child's performance at the end of primary school with their GCSE results.⁵¹ In other words, children from disadvantaged backgrounds make huge educational gains when presented with a knowledge-rich curriculum and a clear focus on subject teaching. They receive an education that is not just valuable in its own terms, but that allows them to continue to university or into employment. Their individual success strikes a blow for social equality yet, ironically, it is made possible because Michaela focuses on education and the transmission of knowledge (rather than social welfare).⁵²

Britain is still a country where the accident of birth largely determines a person's chances in life, and this first becomes apparent in relation to education. Disadvantaged pupils are half as likely to get a good pass in GCSE English or maths compared to their peers from better-off families.⁵³ Few today argue that social class is inherently linked to intelligence: children who grow up in poverty are just as capable of learning and passing exams as their more privileged peers. As the tremendous results achieved by children at Michaela demonstrate, neither genetics nor home circumstances are to blame for the underperformance of poorer children. Instead, school success is driven by the rigorous application of high expectations and the enforcement of high standards. Campaign groups rush to blame low educational outcomes on poverty and call for 'systemic change' to ensure greater equality.⁵⁴ But this is often a thinly veiled demand to erode educational standards still further. When this happens, better-off families pay for tutors, move house to areas with better schools or opt out of the state sector altogether. As a consequence, social inequality continues to widen.

⁵⁰ Gibb, N. (2022) 'Resist the "progressive" attack on phonics' in *The Telegraph*, 26 January. Available at: www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2022/01/26/resist-progressive-attack-phonics2/ (accessed 17/09/25).

⁵¹ Compare school and college performance in England (2024) 'Progress 8 scores at end of key stage 4 in 2024 – all pupils' on Gov.uk. Available at: www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk/schools-by-type?step=default&table=schools®ion=all-england&for=secondary&basedon=Progress%208%20scores%20for%202023%20and%202024&show=All%20pupils (accessed 17/09/25).

⁵² Michaela Community School, Wembley, 'Curriculum & Vision'. Available at: <https://michaela.education/home/secondary-school-wembley/curriculum-wembley/> (accessed 17/09/25).

⁵³ Education Endowment Foundation (2024) 'Disadvantaged pupils half as likely to get a good pass in GCSE English or maths compared to peers', 5 December. Available at: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/news/education-endowment-foundation-eef-comment-disadvantaged-pupils-half-as-likely-to-get-a-good-pass-in-gcse-english-or-maths-compared-to-peers> (accessed 17/09/25).

⁵⁴ Education Policy Institute (2020) *Education in England: Annual Report 2020*. Available at: <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/education-in-england-annual-report-2020/> (accessed 17/09/25).

The 'vulnerable' child

One reason why campaigners argue for changes in schooling is that many have come to view poverty as having not just material but psychological consequences. Child-centred teachers are encouraged to view pupils as victims, or potential victims, of trauma, with poverty, family breakdown and unemployment all having a damaging psychological impact. But it is not just children suffering material deprivation who are deemed to be at risk; increasingly, childhood itself is being redefined as a state of inherent vulnerability.

Growing numbers of children are being diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or dyslexia,^{55,56} or with mental health problems such as anxiety, or with more general social and emotional problems.^{57,58} When children are viewed as emotionally fragile, insisting upon high standards at school seems inappropriate and even insensitive. Lesson time is given over to 'therapeutic' interventions such as meditation and circle-time.⁵⁹ This is a distraction from knowledge-centred teaching. Again, we see a further irony to child-centred teaching: for children who are experiencing difficulties at home, it is often subject knowledge, and reading in particular, that can take them beyond their immediate troubles. The Reading Agency notes studies that have shown that those who read for pleasure have higher levels of self-esteem and a greater ability to cope with difficult situations.⁶⁰ Reading for pleasure is also associated with better sleeping patterns. The Reading Agency has also found that adults who read for just 30 minutes a week are 20 per cent more likely to report greater life satisfaction.⁶¹

Having high expectations of children depends upon them being perceived as mentally robust enough to be competent and capable students. Understanding childhood to be a uniquely vulnerable state turns teaching into a therapeutic exercise that is entirely antithetical to maintaining educational standards.

Why standards matter

Standards are fundamental to both the content and quality of education. As such, standards are important as an end in themselves. This is not, ultimately, a question of individual psychological gains, social mobility or increased social equality, important though these things are. Rather, establishing and maintaining high educational standards is a moral question. It speaks to the capacity of adults to demonstrate a commitment to the next generation and assume responsibility for guiding their entry

⁵⁵ National Institute for Health and Care Research (2023) 'Significant rise in ADHD diagnoses in the UK', 18 July. Available at: www.nihr.ac.uk/news/significant-rise-adhd-diagnoses-uk (accessed 17/09/25).

⁵⁶ Knight, C. and Crick, T. (2021) 'The assignment and distribution of the dyslexia label: Using the UK Millennium Cohort Study to investigate the socio-demographic predictors of the dyslexia label in England and Wales' in *PLoS One*, 2021;16(8). Available at: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8384203/#> (accessed 17/09/25).

⁵⁷ Children's Commissioner (2024) 'Children's Commissioner responds to new figures on children referred to mental health support for anxiety', 6 September. Available at: www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/blog/childrens-commissioner-responds-to-new-figures-on-children-referred-to-mental-health-support-for-anxiety/ (accessed 17/09/25).

⁵⁸ The Children's Society, 'Children's mental health statistics'. Available at: www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/our-work/well-being/mental-health-statistics (accessed 17/09/25).

⁵⁹ Ecclestone, K. and Hayes, D. (2019) *The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education*. Second Edition. Routledge: London.

⁶⁰ The Reading Agency, 'Reading Facts'. Available at: <https://readingagency.org.uk/our-work/our-research/reading-facts/> (accessed 17/09/25).

⁶¹ Ibid.

into the world of knowledge and culture. And it speaks to the expectations a society has for its own future: high standards tell children they are worthy of knowing the best that has gone before them and intellectually capable of meeting the challenges to come.

Section 2: In defence of exams

Changing assessments

The expansion of state-supported secondary education in the early decades of the last century made a formal, standardised system of national exams necessary for the first time. Between 1918 and 1951, School Certificate Examinations were taken by 16-year-olds, with passes in five subjects needed for youngsters to obtain a certificate. This provided a useful means of recognising and grading pupils' achievements and allowing employers to differentiate between applicants for jobs, at a time when the overwhelming majority of people completed their formal education aged 16 or younger. But in the post-war period, as academically selective grammar schools became established across the country and attention was turning to the need to expand higher education, a new exam was considered necessary to determine which youngsters were deemed capable of further academic study, first in the sixth form, and later at university. The General Certificate of Education was introduced in 1951 with exams at two distinct levels: Ordinary Level (O level) designed to be taken by pupils aged 16+, and Advanced Level (A level) for 18-year-olds.

The fact that O levels and A levels were designed in tandem is significant. It meant that, from the outset, O levels had an expressly academic purpose. They were tightly focused not on skills but on subject knowledge and, until 1975, were graded on a simple 'pass' or 'fail' basis. They were intended to assess which students had mastered sufficient prior knowledge to continue studying at a higher level. For this reason, they were deliberately rigorous; the intention was to rule out students who did not meet the required academic standards. Marks could be deducted for poor spelling, grammar or handwriting.⁶² O levels were not designed to provide a school leaving certificate for all youngsters, and in this regard they were unashamedly elitist. They were intended to be taken by the top 20 per cent of the ability range,⁶³ assumed to be primarily grammar school pupils.

Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) exams, introduced from 1963, were intended to be taken by the next 40 per cent of the ability range.⁶⁴ They would allow pupils not continuing on to further academic study to demonstrate their attainment to employers and/or vocational training providers. However, in practice, close to 90 per cent of pupils were entered for at least one O level or CSE exam, with increasing numbers of secondary modern or technical college pupils opting for O levels. This trend escalated following the raising of the school leaving age to 16 in 1972. By default, O levels had begun to move from being an elite formative exam (intended to prepare a small proportion of students for A levels), to a mass summative exam (providing a record of attainment for a majority of school

⁶² *The Telegraph* (2012) 'O-levels v GCSEs – how do they compare?', 17 September. Available at: www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/9548083/O-levels-v-GCSEs-how-do-they-compare.html (accessed 17/09/25).

⁶³ Chitty, C. (2013) 'Secondary School Examinations: a historical perspective' in *Forum*, 2013;55(3):355–366. Available at: <https://journals.lwbooks.co.uk/forum/vol-55-issue-3/article-5613/> (accessed 17/09/25).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

leavers). However, the rigorous, academic nature of O levels, along with a marking system designed to penalise rather than reward, meant the exams were poorly designed for the purpose they had come to serve.

General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) exams were introduced by Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Government in 1986. They replaced both O levels and CSEs and became the national examination taken by all pupils aged 16+. From the outset, GCSEs were fundamentally different to O levels. Significantly, the link with A levels was broken. This meant that rather than a rigorous focus on the subject knowledge deemed foundational for further study, entrants were assessed on more generic skills. Indeed, in many subjects the examination element of GCSE – the timed, unseen, written test, completed in silence and without recourse to help or resources – was either replaced entirely or in part by coursework that pupils could complete at home or during lessons. For example, in the early 1990s, about two-thirds of 16-year-olds taking GCSE English language and literature were assessed entirely through coursework.⁶⁵ Following concern about falling standards, coursework was later capped at 40 per cent for English and 20 per cent for other subjects. But the need to produce exams that were accessible to pupils of all abilities was in fundamental opposition to the unashamed academic elitism of O levels.

For the past 4 decades, government education secretaries have grappled with the problem of managing a mass school leaving examination, designed to be taken by pupils of all abilities, with the need to maintain academic standards. Over the years, coursework has been introduced, reduced, removed and re-introduced. In some subjects, tiered papers (where pupils are entered into higher or lower levels depending upon their ability) have likewise been introduced and then replaced. An additional A* grade was considered one way of demarcating excellence, but this was removed when grading changed from letters to numbers. These changes have occurred in the political context of concern about grade inflation and the content of the curriculum. The upshot is that an uneasy compromise between mass participation and academic rigour is maintained, to the dismay of seemingly everyone involved in education.

Testing times for exams

Calls to abolish GCSEs for 16-year-olds have become an annual ritual, one that has escalated since the Covid pandemic. Voices on all sides of the political spectrum are now making this demand. In 2020, the heads of some of the UK's top independent schools, including Eton, Bedales, St Paul's Girls' School and Latymer Upper School, joined with leading academy chains to champion an end to GCSEs.⁶⁶ In an open letter, they declared that the national GCSE system 'neither measures the right things nor is very reliable – and leaves in its wake a trail of stress and unfairness'.⁶⁷ Eton said GCSEs had an

⁶⁵ Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (2006) *A review of GCSE coursework*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a822c58ed915d74e34021fa/0106_QCA_courseworkreport.pdf (accessed 17/09/25).

⁶⁶ Tapper, J. (2020) 'Private and state schools bid to kill off GCSEs' in *The Guardian*, 20 September. Available at: www.theguardian.com/education/2020/sep/20/private-and-state-schools-bid-to-kill-off-gcse (accessed 17/09/25).

⁶⁷ Rethinking Assessment (2020) 'Open Letter to the Sunday Times explaining the reasons for Rethinking Assessment', 12 October. Available at: <https://rethinkingassessment.com/rethinking-blogs/open-letter-to-the-sunday-times-explaining-the-reasons-for-rethinking-assessment/> (accessed 17/09/25).

unhelpful ‘stranglehold over schools’ and hindered youngsters from ‘finding their talents’.⁶⁸ Sarah Fletcher, High Mistress of St Paul’s Girls’ School, said GCSEs ‘stifled children’s creativity’.⁶⁹

In 2021, the National Education Union debated a motion at its annual conference calling for the abolition of GCSEs. Then joint general secretary Kevin Courtney pointed out that the future of the exams was being called into question by former Conservative education secretary Kenneth Baker (who introduced GCSEs) and around 100 Conservative MPs.⁷⁰ The following year, the Ulster Teachers’ Union urged the Department for Education to consider the future of the exam, calling for greater ‘parity of esteem’ between academic and vocational qualifications and for the UK to fall in line with other European countries that do not assess pupils aged 16.⁷¹ Meanwhile in Scotland, in 2023 the SNP-led government proposed abolishing exams in favour of teacher-assessed ‘real-life skills’.⁷² The Tony Blair Institute has also called for GCSEs and A levels to be scrapped in favour of low-stakes assessments for pupils at the end of secondary school based on creativity and collaborative problem-solving.⁷³

Arguments against GCSEs often correspond to longstanding criticisms of academically rigorous, knowledge-based education. Those leading the charge want to shift the focus of schooling onto skills, creativity and ‘real life’. More specifically, there are questions around why pupils should be assessed at age 16 when the school leaving age is now *de facto* 18. These arguments show that academic exams are perceived to have little inherent value. Encouraging pupils to revise what they have been taught, work on topics they found challenging, and consolidate their learning, is not seen as an important process in its own right.

When this is the case, exams soon come to be seen as, at best, a waste of time and, at worst, standing in opposition to ‘true’ learning. In 2021, Mary Bousted, then the NEU’s other joint general secretary, said that schools were ‘spending a huge amount of time teaching to the test, which is eating into children’s learning time’.⁷⁴ If exams are anti-educational and a waste of time, then the stress they are assumed to cause is also pointless. Writing in *The Guardian*, commentator Simon Jenkins expressed

⁶⁸ Sawyer P. (2020) ‘Eton joins call for “unfair and stressful” GCSEs to be scrapped’ in *The Telegraph*, 26 September. Available at: www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/09/26/eton-joins-call-unfair-stressful-gcse-sscrapped/ (accessed 17/09/25).

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Woolcock, N. (2021) ‘It’s time to abolish GCSEs, says biggest teaching union’ in *The Times*, 26 March. Available at: www.thetimes.co.uk/article/abolish-gcse-ssays-biggest-teaching-union-njmmxw2d7?gad_source (accessed 17/09/25).

⁷¹ Bain, M. (2022) ‘Time to consider abolishing GCSEs, says teaching union’ in *Belfast Telegraph*, 28 June. Available at: www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/education/time-to-consider-abolishing-gcse-ssays-teaching-union/41796149.html (accessed 17/09/25).

⁷² Puttick, H. (2023) ‘Exams for 14 and 15-year-olds to be replaced by “real-life skills” test’ in *The Times*, 22 June. Available at: www.thetimes.co.uk/article/exams-for-14-and-15-year-olds-to-be-replaced-by-real-life-skills-test-2gb06gknx (accessed 17/09/25).

⁷³ Coulter, S. et al (2022) *Ending the Big Squeeze on Skills: How to Futureproof Education in England*. London: Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. Available at: <https://institute.global/insights/public-services/ending-big-squeeze-skills-how-futureproof-education-england> (accessed 17/09/25).

⁷⁴ Woolcock, N. (2021) ‘It’s time to abolish GCSEs, says biggest teaching union’ in *The Times*, 26 March. Available at: www.thetimes.co.uk/article/abolish-gcse-ssays-biggest-teaching-union-njmmxw2d7?gad_source (accessed 17/09/25).

this starkly. He labelled the school exam hall a ‘torture chamber’ and derided ‘This wasteful, costly, cruel and pointless ritual of teenage evaluation’.⁷⁵

Although GCSEs remain in place, the continual questioning of their worth, combined with the recent return to grade inflation, undermines public confidence in the exams. This filters into other areas of the education system too. Former Prime Minister Rishi Sunak used his 2023 speech to the Conservative Party Conference to call for a new ‘Advanced British Standard’ for 16- to 19-year-olds.⁷⁶ This would involve scrapping A levels, once known as the ‘jewel in the crown’ of the UK’s education system.

Why the tide has turned

One of the main arguments made by critics of GCSE exams is that they are ‘too high stakes’. A report by the Independent Assessment Commission (IAC) argues that ‘high-stakes examinations’ should not be used as ‘the only mode of assessing student achievement’.⁷⁷ The Institute for Government likewise notes that:

*Secondary assessment in the highly centralised English system is particularly high stakes and multi-purposed – being used to test young people’s understanding of the national curriculum, provide the basis for their further and higher education applications and hold the schools they attend accountable for performance.*⁷⁸

It is because exam results are considered so significant to the success or failure of a young person’s future plans and to the reputation of their school that the one-off, timed assessment is viewed as high stakes. The argument is that as so much rides on what happens in just a few hours, a student who is having a bad day risks losing a great deal.

However, criticism of exams for being ‘high stakes’ often confuses cause and effect: the education system takes the blame for broader social changes that have occurred over several decades. For example, as previously noted, O levels and CSE exams combined were originally intended to be taken by 60 per cent of the population. Yet there was no sense that everyone else was destined for unemployment. It was understood that there were employment sectors (manual work, some manufacturing jobs or the caring professions) that did not require academic qualifications. Today, this is less likely to be the case. Higher rates of qualification overall allow employers to use exam results as a crude sorting mechanism. This raises the stakes of exams for individuals, but it is a result of changes in the economy and labour market, not changes in the nature of exams.

⁷⁵ Jenkins, S. (2022) ‘Wasteful, costly and cruel: it’s time to bin GCSEs for good’ in *The Guardian*, 7 February. Available at: www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/feb/07/gcse-exams-pandemic-education-system (accessed 17/09/25).

⁷⁶ Department for Education (2023) *A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard*, 4 October. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-world-class-education-system-the-advanced-british-standard (accessed 17/09/25).

⁷⁷ Independent Assessment Commission (2022) *Qualifications for a new ERA: Equitable, Reliable Assessment*. Available at: www.neweraassessment.org.uk/findings (accessed 17/09/25).

⁷⁸ Freedman, S. (2022) *The exam question: Changing the model of assessment reform*. London: Institute for Government. Available at: www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/The-exam-question.pdf (accessed 17/09/25).

Likewise, when only a small proportion of the population took O levels, their success or failure was not seen as a statement on the quality of the school. That this is now the case speaks to the pseudo-market in education created by parental choice, not a change in the nature of exams. When continuing education courses and evening classes were more widely available and affordable, failing an exam aged 16 was less of a problem. A determined student could retake exams even many years later.

Attempts to mitigate the high-stakes nature of exams often end up making the exam process more difficult for both schools and pupils alike. For example, single paper, 3-hour exams are considered too onerous for 16-year-olds nowadays. But their replacement with several, shorter papers, taken over a number of days, makes the exam period extend over several weeks, with students spending far longer sitting tests than previously.

Blaming assessment methods for social changes speaks to the educational establishment's confusion about the purpose of exams. When exams became separated from distinctly educational goals (such as when O levels were linked to A levels) and attached to social goals (employability and social mobility), their purpose in relation to learning was lost. It is not exams *per se* that have changed, then, but society: exams have become high stakes because society has burdened academic qualifications with so much significance in relation to the economy, the labour market and the quality of schools. This suggests that exams are currently serving an important purpose, but it is a social, economic and political purpose that is only loosely connected to education. In other words, if exams were abolished tomorrow, employers, schools and universities would simply find other mechanisms for grading performance and ranking people.

Exam stress

It is because exams have lost meaningful connection with educational goals that their value can be so readily called into question by such a broad spectrum of figures from the world of education, politics and business. This lack of educational purpose, combined with the increased social significance of exams, means teachers and parents are less likely to view exams as a positive intellectual challenge and more likely to see the feelings of stress and anxiety that testing can prompt as potentially damaging to a young person's mental health.^{79,80}

The word 'exam' has become almost synonymous with 'stress'. Mental health campaign groups such as Young Minds give advice to young people on how to cope with exam stress. Young Minds starts from the assumption that: 'Pressure to do well in exams can be a lot, and it can affect your mental health.'⁸¹ The NHS, Childline and Mind all express similar assumptions and offer advice to students.⁸²

⁷⁹ Bloom, A. (2019) 'Two-thirds of parents say exam stress affects mental health' in *Tes magazine*, 15 May. Available at: www.tes.com/magazine/archive/two-thirds-parents-say-exam-stress-affects-mental-health (accessed 17/09/25).

⁸⁰ Martin, M. (2024) 'Heads' concern over GCSE exam impact on student mental health' in *Tes magazine*, 21 August. Available at www.tes.com/magazine/news/secondary/concern-over-gcse-exam-impact-on-students-mental-health (accessed 17/09/25).

⁸¹ Young Minds. 'Exam stress'. Available at: www.youngminds.org.uk/young-person/coping-with-life/exam-stress/ (accessed 17/09/25).

⁸² For example: Childline, 'Exam stress and pressure', available at: www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/school-college-and-work/school-college/exam-stress/; Mind, 'Exam stress – for 11-18 year olds', available at: www.mind.org.uk/for-young-people/feelings-and-experiences/exam-stress/; and NHS, 'Tips on preparing for

The government's Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) features blogs from children who have experienced exam stress and warns that, for some, 'levels of stress and anxiety are high enough that their well being and exam performance can be negatively affected'.⁸³ Each year, the association between exams and stress is reinforced in the media. Newspapers issue dire warnings about 'Pupils in England showing high anxiety in run-up to GCSEs and A-levels'.⁸⁴ These warnings are accompanied by advice for parents: 'Exam stress: how to help children cope with GCSEs and A-levels'.⁸⁵

No doubt taking exams can be stressful. But rather than encouraging students to see stress as adrenaline, motivation, or a normal response to a challenge, exam stress is pathologised as something potentially overwhelming and even dangerous. This situation is exacerbated by the previously noted trends to see childhood as an inherently vulnerable state and exams as a high-stakes determiner of future life chances. Yet there is surely a risk that the association of exams with stress and anxiety becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The more children are told that exams are stressful, and that they must take measures to protect their mental health, the more children interpret their experiences through this lens and come to see themselves as stressed. Ultimately, this perception of exams as emotionally harmful lends weight to arguments that exams should be abolished.

Conclusion

Over the course of a century, schools have moved away from knowledge-based education to child-centred teaching. The first section of this essay shows the damaging impact this has had on educational standards. In the second section, I have shown how the very existence of exams can be called into question when they are no longer perceived to be linked to a body of academic subject knowledge. With so many now arguing for the end of GCSE exams, and some – including Former Prime Minister Rishi Sunak – mooted the end of A levels, it is vital that those concerned about educational standards make the case for exams. To conclude this essay, I offer four arguments for why it is important not just to maintain exams in their current form, but to further ensure their intellectual rigour.

1. Exams test knowledge mastered

Too often, exams are written off as merely testing memorisation and rewarding those most able to regurgitate facts. This is an unhelpful caricature. First, the capacity to memorise (or learn) information is an important skill in its own right. Second, knowing key facts is not simply a party trick, useful only

exams', available at: www.nhs.uk/mental-health/children-and-young-adults/help-for-teenagers-young-adults-and-students/tips-on-preparing-for-exams/ (accessed 17/09/25).

⁸³ McCaldin, T. *et al* (2019) 'What is it like to experience exam stress? A student perspective' on The Ofqual Blog, 8 March. Available at: <https://ofqual.blog.gov.uk/2019/03/08/what-is-it-like-to-experience-exam-stress-a-student-perspective/> (accessed 17/09/25).

⁸⁴ Weale, S. (2022) 'Pupils in England showing high anxiety in run-up to GCSEs and A-levels, teachers say' in *The Guardian*, 6 May. Available at: www.theguardian.com/education/2022/may/06/pupils-showing-high-anxiety-run-up-gcse-a-levels-teachers-say (accessed 17/09/25).

⁸⁵ Weale, S. (2022) 'Exam stress: how to help children cope with GCSEs and A-levels' in *The Guardian*, 6 May. Available at: www.theguardian.com/education/2022/may/06/exam-stress-how-help-children-cope-gcse-a-levels (accessed 17/09/25).

for success in pub quizzes. Rather, facts are the basis of knowledge. It is when we are able to discern which facts are important and why, and how facts relate to one another, that we begin to truly understand a concept.

For this reason, exams for pupils aged 16+ should not be straightforward multiple-choice questions or tests requiring simple, brief answers. Rather, they should require pupils not just to know facts but to demonstrate their understanding through longer, more complex written answers and, in humanities subjects, essays. This ability to analyse a topic and synthesise a reasoned response, under timed conditions, shows true mastery of a subject. To this end, exams that are intrinsically linked to a body of subject knowledge (such as O levels) have a crucial role to play in directing learning and assessing current levels of understanding. In this way, exams are vital to maintaining and improving educational standards.

2. Competition is not harmful

We need to stop telling children that exams are stressful. Too often, this is an unhelpful projection of adult emotions and expectations onto children. If children are taught that exams are simply a routine part of life and a necessary – even exciting – intellectual challenge then they are more likely to come to see them in this way.

One reason why adults problematise exams, in addition to the concerns with childhood vulnerability already noted, is that competition itself is viewed as potentially damaging to a child's self-esteem. The idea that children should be graded and ranked contradicts currently fashionable theories about child psychology. However, it is worth reminding ourselves of some of the benefits of competition. An element of competition can be a strong motivating force and inspire people to perform not just better than other people, but better than their own previous best. When seen this way, competition can be helpful in raising standards overall.

3. Equality

As universities and employers require a mechanism to differentiate between large numbers of applicants, some form of classifying children's achievements at the end of their time in formal education is necessary. Exams provide the most equal means of measuring achievement. Too often, coursework, or continuous assessments completed in the classroom or at home, end up as an evaluation of far more than simply what a child knows. Parents with a high level of education, or with access to financial and cultural resources, are better able to help guide their child's work than parents in a less privileged position. The home environment also allows children to draw upon AI programmes, other online resources or private tutors for additional help.

Meanwhile, work conducted in the classroom lets teachers direct pupils' responses. And, as the chaos of teacher assessment in the year that exams were cancelled due to the Covid pandemic demonstrated, teachers are not always best placed to assess the performance of their own pupils. Indeed, the close relationship that develops between teacher and pupils militates against objectivity. Ultimately, an exam hall, where all pupils answer the same questions, in identical circumstances, is the fairest means we have of testing a child's knowledge. Exams are vital if we are to raise educational standards for all pupils, not just a privileged few.

4. The moral case for exams

There is a moral case to be made for exams. Education should be understood as primarily concerned with passing a body of valuable subject knowledge from one generation to the next. When seen in this way, we move away from instrumental, individual goals relating to employability skills, social mobility or self-esteem. Instead, when knowledge is considered important for its own sake, education becomes viewed as an intrinsically important project. Preserving and contributing to the sum total of knowledge benefits humanity. To this end, it becomes a moral imperative for society to identify those most capable of mastering knowledge and, in the future, contributing to its transmission and pursuit. Rigorous, knowledge-based exams enable teachers (and society) to determine which pupils are capable of higher learning and playing a further role in relation to knowledge.

Exams are about far more than certificates or credentials. They speak to the capacity of adults to assert educational standards in relation to both quality and knowledge content and to pass on to children the aspiration that they will live up to these goals. This makes exams vital to maintaining and raising standards. They must be defended.

Author

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