



# THE SUNDAY TIMES

## THE SCHOOLS BLOG



### **Britain's children are not taking too many exams - but too few**

"Too many exams are ruining school life for Britain's children." It sounds like the motion for a sixth form debate, or maybe the earnest conclusion of a middle school council meeting. In fact, this is how newspapers summarised the views of Professor Mick Waters, a former government educational advisor.

Needless to say, his actual words were more nuanced, even bland: "We should investigate seriously what the exam system is for...does every child need this volume of exams?...It doesn't get investigated properly because grown-ups went through the system and look back with a wry smile and think it's what childhood is all about." However, he went further, and suggested children were being robbed of their right to enjoy school because they feel "they need to achieve some imposed and questionable targets."

The intuitive response is to agree: childhood is innocent and exams are of course the serpent in the pedagogic garden, poisoning children's instinctive creativity and love of learning.

But even a moment's reflection raises doubts. Do we really need to ask what the exam system is for, or isn't it rather obvious? Is it the case that for generations the exam system has been taken for granted, or is it, as my experience over the last thirty years in teaching tells me, analysed, turned

upside down and then the right way up, commented on and fiddled about with to the point of madness?

Most importantly, is it true that a formal education, with its syllabuses, its "imposed" targets, and, of course, its exams, is the thief of childhood? Would the summer's rioters, or the thuggish and racist youths involved in the murder of Stephen Lawrence, or the perpetrators of thousands of knife attacks on other teenagers in our cities over the last few years, have been better people had they been spared "too many exams"?

I don't at all mean to trivialise the issue: it is profoundly important, and has its roots in the liberal educational thinking of the 1960s that increasingly dominated the comprehensive school I attended for seven years in the 1970s. Nothing "imposed", the child at the centre of his learning, hexagonal tables, lots of coursework and no exams. It all seemed so idyllic...and yet sadly, we didn't learn anything. Those from middle class homes with their own inherited educational imperative, or lucky enough to be taught by one of the closet traditionalists on the staff, did well, of course. Such few pupils then seem to be endorsements of the very system that failed so many - so it pains me to see Professor Waters, however carefully and gently, recycling the old canards.

Our exams may not be good enough. New Labour put schools under atrocious pressure to cook the books with absurd and worthless exam initiatives, short-selling many thousands of young people. That legacy is still with us.

But the truth was there to be seen on the very same day as Professor Waters' sweet meanderings were given such prominence. Official figures published last week show that in 13 years under Labour, the number of pupils taking the core academic subjects at GCSE fell from 50% in 1997 to 22% in 2010.

These subjects, including English, maths, languages and science, are at the heart of what it is to be not just educated, but employable in a vast range of careers across the world. In nine local authorities, fewer than one in ten pupils were entered for these exams. In one authority, a mere 3% of children gained good results in these subjects - 107 children.

My colleagues in the independent sector may indeed feel pupils in their schools are taking too many exams, although they at least have the ability to change that, but the plain fact is that the UK's children are not taking too many exams - they are taking too few.

Andrew Halls  
Head Master, King's College School, Wimbledon