

*All of this testing is driving me crazy!*

In bedrooms up and down the country, Justin Bieber posters are being plastered over by colour coded timetables, stationery stores' supplies of Post It notes are depleted and energy drinks are being consumed in staggering quantities...yes ladies and gentlemen, exam season will soon be upon us.

Since a very young age, children like me, like many of you in the audience today, are thrust into an educational system that systematically pokes and prods them, analysing their performances against factors such as their gender, their parents' financial stability and their ethnicity, before churning them up and spewing them out on to an Excel spreadsheet and highlighting them in green, amber or, God forbid, red...There can be no doubt that testing serves a purpose in schools but one must consider whether the sheer volume of testing is damaging children's wellbeing and question the effectiveness of the rigid forms of examinations currently in place.

There are few months of our school life that do not contain some form of test: from SATS, to mocks, to GCSEs, to AS exams, to A levels. We must step through a veritable minefield of acronyms and abbreviations along our pathway towards the little brown envelope which holds a cascading list of broken alphabet that is used, by many, to define us as people. The stakes are high. And, increasingly, so are the levels of anxiety. The Family Doctor Association, which represents GPs in more than 1,000 surgeries across Britain, has reported a rise in the number of teenagers seeking help for exam-related stress and, according to figures published by the charity YoungMinds, the number of calls regarding exam anxiety has increased from 27 per cent in 2009 to almost 40 per cent last year. While I'm not standing here this evening calling for a system with fewer meaningful tests than the Russian Olympic Federation, I do think that something needs to change.

And changes are occurring but these are compounding the issue further. Perhaps spurred on by clichéd cries that 'GCSEs are getting easier', the assessments we are asked to complete appear to only be getting harder; examinations in maths and science have removed equations from their papers, with English favoring a closed-book format, requiring students to learn poems, Shakespearean plays and formulae off by heart, testing the capacity of a student's memory over their ability in the actual subject itself. It seems that across the curriculum, enjoyment of a subject and genuine interest in its intricacies comes a distant second to preparing for an hour and forty five minutes of your life, sat in a drafty sports hall, answering a question set by a group of adults on a text that another group of adults decided you *really should* learn which another group of adults will later determine was too easy...

Trying to learn more by taking more tests is like trying to grow more by measuring your height - the process is being undermined by an obsession on the end result and the enjoyment of it therefore, is being stunted. Every inevitable failure and short-coming is placed under scrutiny and, as a result, the willingness to think in a way that challenges what a text book tells us decreases - it seems as if the educational system has become obsessed with enabling students to pass tests at the expense of teaching them to be able to think as individuals. Like a giant Facebook newsfeed, every piece of information gained by us is thrust from the privacy of an individual's mind into the public domain where it awaits validation by the giant "Like button" in the form of an examiner's red pen.

I leave you with the following thoughts:

Success: how is it measured?

It seems so subjective.

An A or a B?

A met learning objective?

A small step for one,

Is a leap for another,

A few stumble and fall,

But get up and recover.

That benchmark C that seems so achievable,

Is to others inconceivable.

Some won't see,

Some can't see,

Some are lost at sea.

But as the water rises,

Up to their chin,

They refuse to give up

And refuse to give in.

We owe it to them to reassess,

Whether letters and numbers equal success.