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An Education Without Exams

Traditional education is built around exams and test scores.

Most teachers are evaluated based on their students' grades. The vast majority of teaching hours are focused on teaching the curriculum, in accordance with national or international board exams. For most schools, grades are the primary method of accountability. For most nations, they are the metric that policymakers evaluate. For most parents, it is the main indicator of their child' success.

We continue to let students (and society at large) believe that a greater number of A's is an indication of success, whilst anything lower than a C is often an indication of failure. For many students, it becomes the main measure of their talent, potential, self-worth and event status in society. Little do they know that we are lying to them.

The traditional narrative around exams is toxic, flawed and simply out-dated in the digital age. The obsession with test scores continues to be a huge barrier to innovation in education. This is because it leaves very little bandwidth for schools to focus on the things that actually matter.

As a best-selling author and education expert, Tony Wagner points out in [*Creating Innovators*](#), “We continue to believe that school is mainly about acquiring content knowledge. We under-emphasize the importance of skills. And of course, with far too many of our standardized tests are multiple choice, factual recall tests and with much more pressure on teachers to get students ready for those tests, they are cutting everything else out of the curriculum. What get’s tested is what get’s taught.” As Wagner points out, because we don’t test the competencies that matter the most, we neglect to teach them.

The Problem with Grades

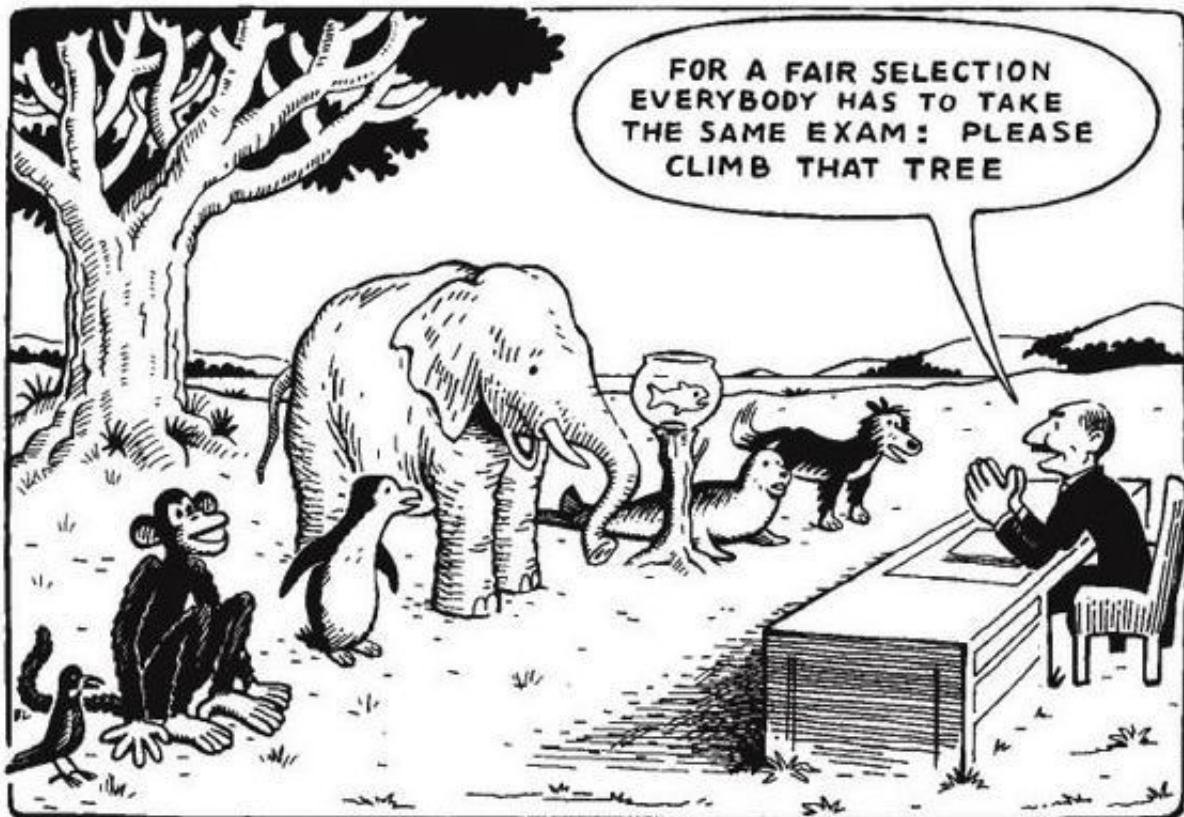
While traditional test scores may be one measure of the impact or effectiveness of learning, they aren’t and shouldn’t be the primary and most important metric. There is a breadth of information and potential about a given student that is simply not captured their report card.

The system wrongly pressures most students to prioritize their grades over real-life experiences, entrepreneurial initiatives, creative projects, networking opportunities, and skill development. The possibility of lower grades often demotivates many students from pursuing alternative paths in education.

There are many objective and fundamental issues with the obsession with grades and test scores, as they:

Do not measure all forms of Multiple Intelligences

Howard Gardner's renowned [theory of multiple intelligences](#) differentiates intelligence into distinct 'modalities', as opposed to a single general ability. These include musical-rhythmic, visual-spatial, verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalistic, existential and pedagogical. Based on two decades of brain research and evidence, the theory suggests that we all have all these competencies in varying degrees. However, traditional paper-based exams and standardized tests measure specific modalities such as verbal-linguistic or logical-mathematical. This leaves many students, particularly the artistic, athletic, social or existential ones, with the feeling that they are not intelligent. But the reality is that their specific type of intelligence is simply not being measured.



Do not measure critical 21st-century skills and future fluencies

Through investigating the education sector, interviewing industry leaders and studying the global workforce at large, experts have identified the [survival skills](#) of the future. These include critical thinking and problem-solving, creativity and imagination, agility and adaptability, collaboration across networks and leading by influence. Many of these higher-ordered abilities, especially those involving creativity and innovation, are not tested in standardized tests and exams.

Do not measure emotional intelligence or wellbeing

A student's report card is no indication of their emotional intelligence or wellbeing. And in many cases, the efforts to get better grades may come at a cost to their mental health. Traditional test scores don't tell us if a student is fulfilled in life, or if they are getting closer to finding their purpose. They don't tell us if they know how to build and maintain meaningful relationships, or if they possess valuable social skills.

Do not measure personality traits, values or virtues

Another failing of our educational model, is we don't put enough emphasis on developing positive personality traits such as self-responsibility, kindness, empathy, wisdom, love for learning, wisdom, curiosity, or even powerful enlightenment values. Young people need guides and mentors to not only help them acquire professional skills but also to develop their personal growth.

Do not measure progress or effort

Most standardized tests and international board exams measure the ability of a student to take a test, in an average of a two-hour setting. The final result does not give an indicator of the student's progress (let's say in the last year) or the effort and determination that they put in. Their learning and determination are reduced to their ability to take one exam and as a result, a lot of information is lost.

Do not measure performance or effectiveness in a professional setting

There are [many studies](#) who have found little or no correlation between academic performance in university and SAT scores. [Other studies](#) have found that straight-A students are not good innovators. There is no denying that a student's performance on a test or exam, does not tell us much about their leadership skills, ability to collaborate in teams, navigate the complexities of a professional environment or come up with ground-breaking ideas.

More Effective Metrics of Success

So how do we evaluate learning? How do we measure the impact of a given teacher, curriculum or policy? What metrics should we be measuring? These are all very valid questions. Many educators continue to be under the false illusion that standardized tests and subject-based exams are the most effective way to measure learning. In fact, many people will struggle to imagine education without an emphasis on these exams. However, there are many other powerful and impactful alternatives out there, such as:

Formative and Project-based Assessments

[Formative assessments](#) are a wide-range of innovative day-to-day assessment techniques that are often done throughout the year in order to evaluate student learning and provide feedback.

Traditionally, they have been considered “informal”, because they are often low-stakes and non-threatening. The best formative assessments are often project-based as they involve students working on tangible products and ideas, whether it be posters, podcasts, blogs or research projects.

Resumes & Portfolios

In the workforce, the most effective recruiters will evaluate a candidate based on their experience. This is usually evaluated based on their portfolio and resumes. So instead of focussing on report cards, why shouldn't we focus on developing students portfolios and experiences? We know that that the latter is a far better representative of their skills development and determinant of success in the workforce. This can be populated through a curriculum that places emphasis on internships, apprenticeships, mentorships, volunteer work, entrepreneurial or creative projects.

Creative Expression

What if instead of testing a students knowledge on a subject, we measured their ability to use that knowledge to create something new and innovative? Imagine if we evaluated students' learning based on their unique works of art, film productions, scientific findings, philosophical musings, startup ideas, and performances? Education would be far more powerful if the entire curriculum was

focussed on empowering and skilling young minds to creatively express themselves.

The Positive Impact on the World

Founder of the *Global Future Education Foundation* and best-selling author Marc Prensky advocates for a “[Real-World Accomplishment-Based Education](#).” In such an education model, the biggest measure of learning would be a student's ability to solve local and global challenges. Consequently, the curriculum would be focussed on equipping them with the skills, mindsets, and values required to have a positive impact on humanity. Prensky ponders, “How different would it be if our students left school not with a diploma and a transcript, but with a resume — a list of real-world personal and team accomplishments that they could proudly point to and by which we could judge their capabilities and merits?”. In such a model, our primary methodologies for learning evaluation would be competency, project and solution-based.



Redefining the Purpose of Schools

Right now, the primary goal of many schools is to prepare their students for better exam results. Many school leaders will disagree and argue that they are focussed on developing “future leaders” and positive personality traits. But in most cases, the majority of the school day and curricula are focussed on teaching the standardized syllabus and optimizing for better results on the next board exams. And due to the many downsides of traditional exams, this means that the majority of the school day and year are wasted on out-dated methods.

Schools should be a place where students are empowered to find their massive transformative purpose, creatively express themselves, to become wiser humans and solve the global challenges facing our

species. Traditional exams and tests fail to measure or evaluate these goals. In order to revolutionize the future of education, we need to develop far more exciting and meaningful definitions of success.

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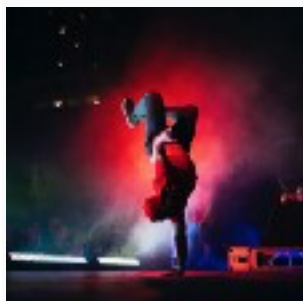
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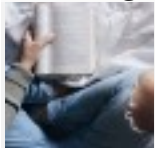
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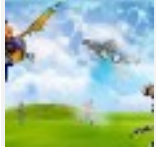
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