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978-1-107-64580-6 - The Case for Examinations: An Account of their Place
in Education with Some Proposals for their Reform

J. L. Brereton

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THE CASE FOR EXAMINATIONS

*AN ACCOUNT OF THEIR PLACE IN EDUCATION
WITH SOME PROPOSALS FOR THEIR REFORM*

by

J. L. BRERETON, M.A.

*Assistant Secretary,
University of Cambridge Local
Examinations Syndicate*



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PREFACE

THE PURPOSE of this book is to show that examinations are an essential part of the machinery of education; that is, the machinery for training children and adults to use their minds and bodies in new ways. It is advisable to state this at the outset, because many people now regard them merely as a necessary evil.

The most individual systems of education lay upon the teacher the obligation to *stimulate* and *direct* the interest of his pupils, so that they apply themselves to their work in the knowledge that it will bear fruit later. Unless modern mass education includes a means of stimulating teachers and students to effort, and of directing and co-ordinating that effort to suit the needs of a rapidly changing and developing society, the money spent on schools, textbooks, and salaries will be wasted. The 'joint examinations' which I see arising out of the old 'external examinations' have a vital part to play in solving these problems, for they can achieve the desired ends and yet allow scope for individual freedom and initiative.

The examinations with which we are concerned in this book are, by their very nature, linked with the course of study leading up to them and with the subsequent activity available to the successful student. They differ in this respect from intelligence and aptitude tests like those now being used for army recruits. These are intended to provide a means of classifying people according to their abilities in certain directions. They often open doors to further activity, but they have no concern with a previous course of preparation, and, in fact, presuppose that there has been no such course.

I do not wish to assert that examinations are the only means of stimulating and guiding the interests of boys and girls within a complex educational system. But no competent observer will deny that examinations are now woven into the fabric of English education and play an intimate part in holding it together. Part I of this book will describe how this has come

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about, and help to explain why our present examinations are warping as well as strengthening the fabric.

Changes in the organisation and control of school examinations are overdue, and, when made, will exercise a profound influence on the whole of education. Part II will describe the alterations which appear to the author to be indicated as a result of the analysis in Part I.¹

The book omits much of the technique and theory of examinations. Such subjects as the validity of tests, the standardisation of marks, the fallibility of examiners, the setting and moderating of question papers, etc., are barely touched upon; not because they are unimportant, but because they have been dealt with by other writers. As war conditions leave the day-to-day administrator little time for writing, I have concentrated on those aspects of the subject that seem to me to have been neglected, or to be of particular importance at the present time. Instead of attempting a direct answer to some of the many critics of our present examinations, I have tried to indicate a broader view of the whole subject in the light of which some of these criticisms may need to be reassessed.

The book is written from the point of view of one who has been concerned for sixteen years with the examinations of a single University Examining Body, and mainly with the science side of that work.

My examples are naturally drawn from the examinations about which I know most, but I think the principles deduced will be found to be general. Had I been concerned with London University, I might have had more to say about London Intermediate and less about the Cambridge Scholarship Examinations, but I think the conclusions would have been the same.

Since the book was started in September, 1942, many moves have been made in the direction of the reforms advocated, and I hope that by the time it is published a start will have been

¹ The Norwood Committee's *Report on Curriculum and Examinations* was published when this book was practically finished. I have devoted an additional chapter to it.

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made to secure the co-operation so urgently needed between different universities.

I am indebted to those of my colleagues and opposite numbers in the Secondary School examination world upon whose ideas and methods I have drawn for this book. This applies particularly to Mr W. Nalder Williams, Secretary of the Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate, and Mr J. O. Roach, my colleague as Assistant Secretary, and to many present and past members of the Syndicate. Mr Williams's liberal administration has guided the Syndicate through many of the historical changes described in Chapters iv and v. Mr Roach and I have thrashed out together so many of the problems dealt with in this book that it is impossible to make specific acknowledgments to him. I have to absolve my colleagues and the Syndicate itself from any responsibility for my proposals or my interpretation of the subject, with some of which they may not be in agreement.

I wish also to express my gratitude to the Local Examinations Syndicate for permission to use material obtained in the course of my work and to reprint extracts from early examinations; to several Syndics and Examiners for reading portions of the book in manuscript; to Mr D. Bassett for help with typing; and especially to Dr H. Godwin and Mr H. S. Bennett for their interest and advice. But my main debt is to my wife, without whose continual encouragement and help I should neither have started nor completed the book. Her part in clarifying ideas and expression has been so considerable that some parts of the book are really our joint work.

If the book does something to enable examining bodies, teachers, and universities to work together more closely, and if it imparts to a few of its readers some of the confidence in the future possibilities of school examinations that I have gained in writing it, I shall be satisfied.

J. L. B.

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