

Is exam hysteria helping to breed a 'dangerous underclass'?

Last week this newspaper, together with others the length and breadth of the land, were filled with photographs of teenagers wreathed in smiles leaping into the air waving their examination results.

Inevitably there followed debates about whether the tests are being dumbed down, whether girls are doing better than boys and how our education system compares with other European countries and the emerging talents of Asia.

I find the whole hyped fiasco quite incongruous – just as I did when I was editing this newspaper.

As one who was not good at passing exams, I can sympathise with those not indulging in celebratory gymnastics but crawling slowly home, heads bowed, accepting that, despite their best efforts, they had not reached the academic heights.

In the forties and fifties, when I was being educated, parents were equally concerned that their offspring achieved good qualifications so that they could get onto the first rung of a lucrative career ladder.

But this was linked to a recognition that education was not simply about being the cleverest, the best, the brightest – its purpose was preparing you to deal with life.

We were taught that, as in sport where playing the game was more important than winning, the school curriculum was not a

contest to sort the sheep from the goats but to ascertain what career a child was most suited to embark upon.

Winners and losers there were none. Despite the existence of the eleven plus apartheid, it was always being stressed by teachers, politicians and the media that you were not necessarily a failure if you could not pen a meaningful essay or grasp the concept of logarithms.

It might be that your future might be in laying bricks, fixing leaking taps, driving a bus or sweeping the roads. Why should there be any shame in that?

Every labourer is worth his hire and we cannot all be doctors, lawyers, scientists, lecturers or bankers.

Indeed, in many ways, those trained to argue over the fine print of a law book or calculate the best mortgage repayments, can be less useful to society than someone who can unblock your drain or drive you safely from Kew to Hammersmith.

Education should not be an elbows-out scrabble to get to the top of the hill first – but an intelligent process of evaluation aimed at identifying the gifts in all of us and helping us to use them in a manner that is fulfilling.

A decade ago there was a general acceptance that the old apprenticeship scheme – even in journalism – offered a far more effective method of training for the

majority of careers than extended periods of academic studies.

On-the-job training linked with day release study was more efficient. Somehow the concept slipped off the public agenda and we were back to the banal Blair “education, education, education” mantra.

Richmond has always had a reputation for offering excellent schooling and a breeding ground to feed the country’s major universities.

The majority of the population here come from affluent families and start off with every advantage. Tutors at home by erudite parents they have every advantage in succeeding where those not so fortunate have a harder struggle.

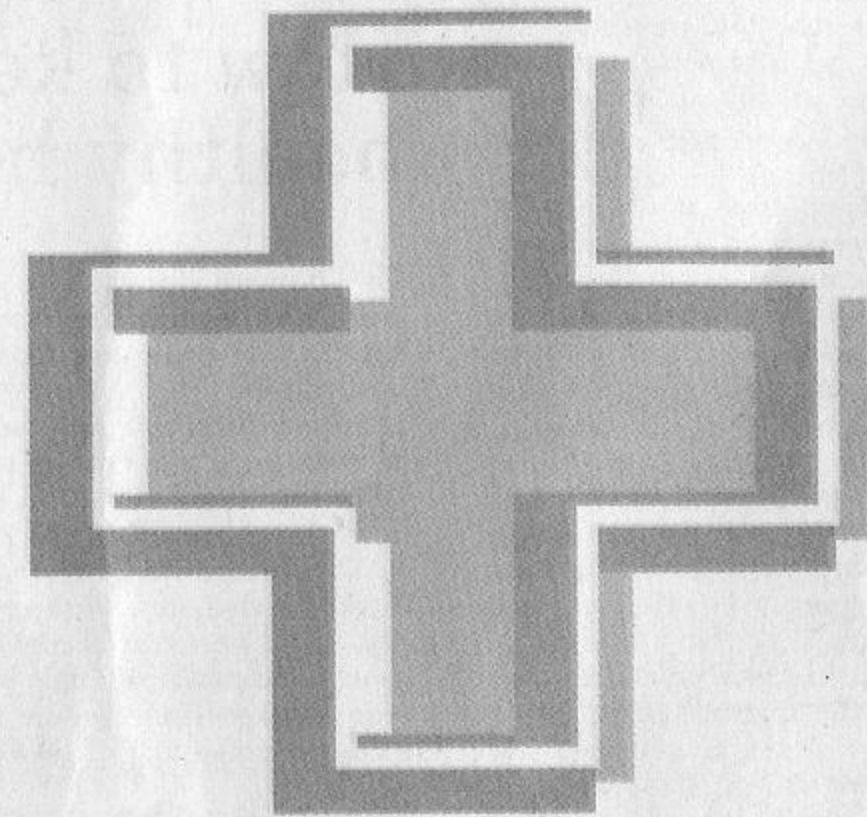
The competitive spirit which drives us all to improve and aspire can make the world a better place to live in but needs to be channelled by society into compassionate and useful outlets that recognises ability but also reminds us that concepts of superiority and hubris inevitably lead to fascism, racism, elitism and divisive attitudes.

Of course exams are an important tool in assessing the best way young people can contribute in an increasingly competitive world.

But let’s have a sense of proportion about this and not foster emotional hysteria that blindly worships shallow successes and in the process creates a dangerous underclass.

We are witnessing the results today as gang warfare and violence shows its ugly face among those who have no A-level

triumphs to wave at the cameramen – and brandish a knife or revolver instead.
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