

Pupils do better at school if teachers are not fixated on test results

Institute of Education study finds exam performance improves if students concentrate on learning rather than grades

Jessica Shepherd, education correspondent
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Preoccupation with exam performance could be a cause of underachievement in secondary schools, according to Chris Watkins of the Institute of Education.

Children perform best in exams when teachers are not overly concerned about their test results, according to research published today.

Pupils show greater motivation, are better behaved and are more likely to be independent and strategic thinkers when teachers are not obsessed by grades, the study by the Institute of Education found.

Government policy increasingly points teachers in the opposite direction, encouraging them to concentrate on students' results, said the study's author, Chris Watkins, a reader in education at the institute.

Ministers have placed teachers under so much pressure to ensure students perform well in national exams that they increasingly talk at their pupils, rather than talk to them and ask them open questions, he said. The latter leads students to deepen their learning and perform at their optimum, according to Watkins, who analysed the findings of more than 100 international studies on how teachers can best help pupils to learn.

The word "learning" was rarely heard in classrooms, he said, while teachers were more worried about their pupils' performance in exams. They had resorted to narrowing the curriculum and drilling pupils for tests, Watkins argued, and this made the students less motivated.

In one study, some teachers were told to help pupils learn while others were told to concentrate on ensuring that their pupils performed well. The students under pressure to perform well obtained lower grades than those who were encouraged to learn.

Another study showed that when teachers focused on their students' learning, the students became more analytical than when the teachers concentrated on their pupils' exam results.

A further study, of 4,203 students, showed classroom behaviour improved when teachers focused on learning rather than grades.

"Our preoccupation with exam performance could be a key element in explaining the ... underachievement in secondary schools in England," Watkins said. "If there is one new thing we need in our school system right now, it is a well-developed focus on learning."

However, this week figures appeared to show that 11-year-olds' knowledge of science had fallen from the previous year. The proportion of pupils achieving the level expected of their age dropped from 88% to 81%. It was the first year that only a sample – 5% – of 11-year-olds had been examined in science; in previous years every 11-year-old at a state primary school has been assessed and the results used to compile school league tables. Teachers said the results fell this year because schools did not need to "teach to the test".

John Holman, the director of the National Science Learning Centre, said preparing pupils for exams might lead to good grades, but this could be "at the expense of long-term learning and comprehension".

"Nowhere is this more apparent than in science learning where relentless preparation for tests and exams drives out the important and engaging aspects, especially the practical work," he said. "All the evidence suggests that 'teaching to the test' results in superficial learning and a level of boredom that can turn pupils away from science."