

Examification: Curricular, temporal, affective, and discursive dimensions of examination's effects on education

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Abstract

This article introduces examification, a new concept for understanding the far-reaching impacts of examinations on education. Examinations have long been integral to education systems, serving as markers of achievement and instruments of accountability. This article introduces examification as a new conceptual framework for analysing the wide-ranging and interconnected ways in which examinations shape curricula, pedagogy, temporal structures, emotional experiences and educational discourses. Far from being neutral tools for assessing achievement, examinations (whether 'high' or 'low' stakes) emerge as powerful mechanisms that dictate what is taught, how it is taught, how success is defined and how education is experienced. This conceptual paper examines four interconnected dimensions of examification; curriculum, time, affect and discourse. It highlights how examinations compress and narrow subject choices, intensify and reshape temporal rhythms, provoke diverse affective responses and perpetuate discourses that sustain hierarchies and the commodification of education. The article illustrates how these dimensions interact across individual, institutional, national and global scales. While the impacts of examification are often negative, they are not uniform or inevitable; the concept invites critical engagement with examinations' effects and possibilities for reform.

Keywords

Examification, curriculum, time, affect, discourse

Introduction

Examinations have long played a central role in education systems (Nóvoa, 2013), but their reach and influence have intensified in recent decades. From international comparative assessments such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) to national high-stakes

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qualifications and low-stakes internal testing regimes, examinations have become a dominant force shaping not only what is taught, but also how schools, teachers and students are monitored and evaluated, supported, streamed, and judged (Verger et al., 2019). Giving attention to this growing centrality has generated a vast literature critiquing the effects of test-based accountability (Airasian, 1987; Baird and Elliott, 2018). These analyses highlight many of the unintended and sometimes harmful consequences of exam-focused systems, such as curriculum narrowing, teaching to the test and heightened stress among students and educators. While this body of research is extensive, it is also fragmented – often isolating particular effects (such as performativity, emotional impact, or curricular distortion) or focusing narrowly on high-stakes testing. There is a need for a more holistic conceptual framework to explore the cumulative and interwoven dimensions of examination regimes across scales (individual to global), temporalities (daily to generational), and domains (curricular, emotional, institutional, and discursive). This article introduces the concept of *examification* to address that gap. Examification refers to the processes through which examinations – whether high-stakes or low-stakes, external or internal – work to shape the nature and experience of education. It encompasses the ways in which examinations intensify, constrain, and reorient educational practices, policies and subjectivities. While the term examification is new, the issues it captures are deeply entrenched and have received substantial attention, particularly since the development of large scale standardised tests (Martens et al., 2016; Ydesen et al., 2013). These tests are associated with the period beginning in the second half of the 20th century; a period referred to by Nóvoa (2013) as pedagogic modernity, and characterised by broad shifts in governance associated with neoliberal governmentality, audit culture and new public management (Ball, 2012), all of which are connected to the global politics of educational privatisation (Verger et al., 2019). The purpose of introducing the term examification is not to suggest that examinations are new or that their consequences have been ignored, but to offer a conceptual tool that captures the broad systemic logic through which examinations restructure education at multiple levels and through multiple mechanisms. Examification is not limited to high-stakes contexts, because low-stakes assessments – when embedded in accountability regimes or curricular targets – can produce similar effects (Levatino et al., 2024). By naming this broader phenomenon, *examification* might enable us to recognise and analyse the ways in which educational systems are increasingly governed by exam-oriented logics.

This article builds on and extends the literature on testing and accountability in a diverse range of countries (Levatino et al., 2024; Penninckx et al., 2016; Thiel et al., 2017; Verger et al., 2019) by foregrounding the intensification and interaction of examinations' effects across four key dimensions; curriculum, time, affect, and discourse. Through these dimensions, I illustrate how examification offers a more integrated and flexible lens for critically analysing the pervasive role of examinations in contemporary education. While many of the consequences discussed are negative, the term is not inherently pejorative. Across the dimensions of examification there are multiple and contradictory effects. For example, examinations create moments of elation and joy, but for others despair and regret. At times they narrow and constrain access to knowledge, but in other ways they expand and deepen it. Across this paper I argue that common to all of these effects is an intensification: examification is associated with a heightening, whether of emotion, experiences of time, debate around the curriculum or battle over the discourses surrounding education and its purposes. The concept of examification is offered as a provocation for re-evaluating how examinations shape education. By offering a fresh lens through which to view an old problem, the hope is to inspire renewed debates about the role of examinations in education and open possibilities for other futures. After offering a brief sketch of the wider context in which the concept is being offered through a discussion of qualification, examification and accountability, I present four interconnected dimensions of examification: curriculum, time, affect and discourse to examine how

examinations compress and narrow subject choices, intensify and reshape temporal rhythms, provoke diverse affective responses, and perpetuate discourses that sustain hierarchies and the commodification of education.

Qualification, examification and accountability

I now situate examification within broader debates about the purposes of education and the role of examinations in relation to those purposes. While qualification is often cited as a core aim of education – referring to the development of knowledge, skills and dispositions – examification marks a shift in which examinations become the dominant means through which qualification is interpreted, measured and pursued. In doing so, examification intensifies the role of examinations in shaping not only students' futures but also the structures of accountability governing schools, teachers, and education systems. The increasing dominance of examination systems is part of a broader historical shift in how assessments are used, expanding globally and moving from a function as primarily diagnostic tools to central instruments for enforcing accountability and steering school practices, particularly within decentralised systems (Verger et al., 2019). This shift is not confined to English-speaking systems: research from countries with relatively lower-stakes regimes such as Germany, Belgium and Italy offer strong evidence of examification reshaping pedagogical and organisational practices in multiple ways (Landri, 2021; Penninckx et al., 2016; Thiel et al., 2017). The three broad and interrelated purposes of education described by Biesta (2020) – qualification, socialisation and subjectification – open up critical questions about the aims of education in ways that resist a narrowing or reduction. He argues for an expansive conception of education as a force for human flourishing, framing these arguments within a wider societal context that he describes as being dominated by beliefs about qualification as the purpose of education that are articulated through a language of learning. In multiple fora, Biesta has argued that the language of learning is problematic because of the ways in which it 'tends to make these questions – about educational content, purpose, and relationships – invisible, or that it assumes the answer to these questions is already clear and decided upon' (p. 91). Against a reduction of education to only 'learning', he argues that 'the point of education is never that students simply learn. . . but that they learn something, that they learn it for a reason, and that they learn it from someone' (ibid.). Seen in relation to qualification, examification is a concept that focuses attention more specifically on the ways in which one aspect of qualification – that is, examinations – impact education's content, purpose and relationships across the broad dimensions of curriculum, time, affect and discourse.

Examification threatens broader visions of education by narrowing the content to that which can be assessed, the rationale to performance outcomes, and the people involved to deliverers and receivers of exam content. Pring et al. (2009) similarly warn against reducing education to test-based outputs because of the way in which this 'narrows the range of achievements thought worth learning' (p. 82), focusing on performance and selection, instead of questions about quality, value and purpose. They refer to an alternative vision in terms of 'rounded judgements' about system performance which they argue must:

necessarily involve more than simply counting young people in schools and colleges, and registering the number of examinations they have passed. For example, simply counting the number of GCSEs passed at different grades fails to capture what was deemed important in terms of the pursuit of excellence and the development of self-awareness or moral seriousness. (p. 63)

Here, Pring et al. make the argument that such judgements should use more than examination passes because these numbers of examination passes are a seductive proxy, but they are not

sufficient on their own. Their critique reinforces the need for a concept such as examification which helps name and analyse the systemic drift towards a narrowed educational imagination under pressure from measurable outcomes.

The critiques from Biesta, Pring and others help illuminate something of the logic underpinning examification: as exam results come to define qualification, they also become the foundation for accountability systems (including; league tables, inspections and resource allocation mechanisms). These forces contribute to producing cultures of performance optimisation that are referred to as ‘gaming the system’, involving students, teachers or institutions engaging in strategic behaviours aimed at maximising performance indicators. The dynamics of gaming might be understood through the lens of Campbell’s (1979) law, which warns that ‘the more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor’ (p. 85). In Ingram et al.’s (2018) account, the aim of this gaming is ‘to produce the best examination outcomes for individual pupils and for schools as a whole’ (p. 559). They argue that there are fine lines between ‘using the system, playing the system, manipulating the system, gaming the system, fiddling the system, and cheating the system’ (p. 559). Judging which of these descriptors best fits particular practices differs between individuals depending on their perspective. The influence of perspective is powerfully illustrated by the senior school leaders in their study who described practices in their own schools as being conducted for the benefit of their pupils. Whereas their descriptions of these same practices in *other* schools shift to a language of playing the system or gaming. There seems to be a danger of becoming so focused on the proxy goals of passing tests that schools lose sight of questions about educational purpose and then devote time to gaming and ‘teaching to the test’ (Meadows and Black, 2018). Meadows and Black explored school-based colleagues’ perspectives on activities intended to maximise qualification results by surveying 548 respondents, 92% of whom were actively teaching and are mostly teachers/lecturers and department/subject heads. Their list of student and teacher activities (p. 567) offer a range of concrete examples of examification, and so are presented here in some detail. While these examples are drawn from an English context, similar patterns of exam-aligned adaptation have been documented internationally, suggesting that examification is not exclusive to high-stakes systems, but emerges where examination outcomes become central to institutional accountability. The activities are listed in order of the teachers’ experience of them (with percentage of participants reporting experience of the activity whether themselves or others shown in brackets after the activity): intensive tutoring outside of school (50%); sharing coursework with other students (45%); working collaboratively on coursework (42%); gleaning tips on the content of controlled assessments via social media (27%); receiving parental support to produce coursework (25%); feigning illness or traumatic events to gain special consideration (13%), and; buying completed coursework (8%). The teacher activities (p. 569) included: focusing efforts on borderline ‘C’ students, which had been experienced by the highest percentage (83%); ‘question spotting’ what might come up on an exam and tailoring their teaching in response (80%); targeting enquiries about results to pupils just below key grade boundaries (74%); becoming markers to gain insight into the examination system (74%), to; changing teaching midway through a course in response to changes in policy (65%); considering school league table performance when choosing which qualifications to offer (65%); switching to ‘easier’ exam boards (61%); encouraging students to rote learn answers to likely exam questions (55%); using revision guides as opposed to textbooks (52%); not covering all specification content to focus on areas most likely to be examined (49%); encouraging students to memorise mark schemes (48%). The number of teachers having experienced the action is between 83% and 48% for all of these, but then drops markedly to 6% for Teachers opening exam papers before the specified time.

Examification is deeply entangled with regimes of accountability, with examinations being used as tools for assessing learning and also as public indicators of institutional effectiveness and system performance. The multiple functions mean that examinations (whether ‘high’ or ‘low’ stakes) carry non-trivial implications at a range of scales from individual students to schools and nations. The mechanisms of accountability – school inspections, league tables, allocation of resources – are often structured around examination outcomes. In this way, examification describes more than the prevalence of tests: it expresses how testing becomes an important means of control, evaluation, and policy steering within an accountability-driven educational landscape. The specific individual practices of students and teachers outlined above, along with multiple others, feature variously across the broad dimensions of examification that are now explored; curriculum, time, affect and discourse.

Curriculum

Curricular dimensions of examification are about the ways in which examinations affect the content of education, which in many countries are associated with the range of subjects taught and the content of those subjects. The main argument is that this relationship is strong; examinations exert a powerful influence over the curriculum. However, the consequences for the curriculum are not simple or uniform but instead result in some contexts as a narrowing and in others as an expanding. At the level of the subjects that students might choose between, the dominant argument is that examification of education results in curriculum compression; a reduction of the subjects that are available for students to choose from – and an resultant hierarchisation of these subjects – and also a narrowing in the range of subjects that students themselves decide to choose (Scott et al., 2024). The narrowing is felt most significantly by students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and across intersectional lines including gender, race and class which carry through beyond school in access rates to Higher Education (Richardson et al., 2020). Within the subjects themselves there are tensions between tendencies towards curriculum compression – such as in students only being taught a narrowed curriculum of those areas of the subject that are likely to be tested – alongside the ‘overloading’ and expanding of curriculum to include an ambitious range of content. Some of these tensions are illustrated in current debates about the curriculum in England; for example, many professional associations and learned societies have submitted evidence to the ongoing Curriculum Review in which they have argued that the current curriculum ‘needs revising to reduce test-driven content’ (UKLA, 2024) because it is ‘packed’ at all levels and ‘there is a strong sense in the teaching community that sufficient rigour and standards can be maintained by cutting the areas of study – keeping those that really do affect the future of our students. . .and radically trimming much of the rest’ (RGS-IBG, 2024). Yet there are potential tensions in the way these submissions also advocate for using the lever of examinations to expand areas of the curriculum. In the example from geography this includes calls to give greater attention to climate change and geographic information systems, and in English, to diversify reading lists and expand the range of authors that young people are introduced to. It is easy to suggest more content, and to make a case for the value of students studying it; it is harder to decide which areas students should not be introduced to through this particular course and so should be removed.

Examification complicates the relationships between subjects, feeding into discourses of competition for students, resources and time and leading to a hierarchisation of school subjects. This process prioritises disciplines that are heavily assessed (including by international comparisons), such as mathematics, science and literacy, while marginalising others including the arts, physical education, and vocational studies. Such hierarchisation influences educational priorities, resource allocation and students’ learning experiences. In many education systems, subjects that are central

to standardised assessments receive heightened attention and resources. This focus is often driven by policies aimed at improving national performance metrics and economic competitiveness. In a metasynthesis of 49 studies, Au (2007) concludes that the dominant impact of high-stakes testing is a narrowing of the curriculum to those areas being tested, along with shifts towards particular ('teacher-centred') pedagogical approaches. However, they also find some evidence of the opposite in which certain kinds of high-stakes tests lead to an expansion of the curriculum and a greater diversity of pedagogical approaches. The particular tests in those cases were associated with Social Studies (at High School level in the US), and state-specific development of tests that attempted to examine critical literacy skill sets through document-based essays. These small numbers of exceptions prove the rule that there is a strong relationship between examinations and the curriculum and pedagogy through which students are prepared for it:

high-stakes tests encourage curricular alignment to the tests themselves. This alignment tends to take the form of a curricular content narrowing to tested subjects, to the detriment or exclusion of nontested subjects. The findings of this study further suggest that the structure of the knowledge itself is also changed to meet the test-based norms: Content is increasingly taught in isolated pieces and often learned only within the context of the tests themselves. (p. 263)

In the example of the United States, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) emphasised standardised testing in reading and mathematics, which strongly correlated with reductions in curriculum time for subjects including social studies, science and the arts (Saatcioglu et al., 2021). A different policy intervention in England – the introduction of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) which prioritised 'core' academic subjects – was similarly associated with a narrowing of the curriculum offered to students (Neumann et al., 2020). Even for subjects included within the Ebacc, such as Modern Foreign Languages and Mathematics, the implications – the examification of the subjects – are complicated by other assessment and governance levers such as the Progress 8 measure (Parrish, 2024) and the increased pressure on the subjects that these policies generate.

There are trends indicating that students are choosing to study a narrowing range of subjects. Scott et al.'s (2024) analysis of student-level data on subject choices illustrates this narrowing, with data drawn from the National Pupil Database and the Individualised Learner Record from 2003 to 2022. They identify falls in take up across all major subject groups, narrowing the range of subjects chosen by students with the most significant declines in students studying combinations of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), Humanities and Social Science subjects and also declines in those choosing a combination of a STEM subject with either Humanities or Social Sciences. Their study offers a powerful illustration of the ways in which high-stakes accountability measures can lead to a narrowing of the curriculum: the examification of students' choice narrowing the range of subjects. The relationship between examination results, policy and accountability regimes – which in the example of England is particularly felt through the schools' inspectorate Ofsted – is complex (discussed further below), but at times has also been quite simple because of the weight placed on examination results driving a judgements for all areas of a school. The seductiveness of seemingly objective, neutral data from examination results contributes to their power (Gulson and Sellar, 2019), including power over how the curriculum is taught.

The importance of examination results has led to the phenomenon of 'teaching to the test', where teaching is closely aligned with the content and format of examinations. Jennings and Bearak (2014) offer a spectrum of pedagogical approaches under the term, including: reallocating time that is given to and within subjects in ways that align more closely to those that are tested; focusing on specific concepts that are predictably represented on the tests, and; teaching skills using the same formats in which they appear on the tests. They argue for two kinds of

consequences – validity and experiential – to describe these approaches. Validity consequences refer to the impact these practices have on the inferences it is possible to make from students' test scores (with the possibility of such inferences being reduced the more students are taught to the test), and experiential consequences refer to the impact on the quality of students' education (particularly in terms of the areas of knowledge they are not taught about at the expense of areas drilled in preparation for the test). In terms of the former, they conclude that 'there are many reasons to worry that schools' responses to accountability pressure may complicate (and, in some cases, invalidate) the inferences one can make based on test scores' (p. 388). In part, these responses are inevitable given the combination of pressure, and limitations of time.

Temporality

The phrase 'limitations of time' speaks to the finite nature of human experiences of time as something like the tide; a force out of our control that we are subject to. Teachers describe having 'no time' and needing 'more time' (Hargreaves, 1990), experiencing and understanding time in quite different ways to others with different roles in the school (Easthope and Easthope, 2010). The condition of temporality uncovers our 'state of existing within or having some relationship with time' (Ho, 2021: 1668), highlighting the significance of the differences between these relationships and of the strength of their interconnections with multiple aspects of education: 'time and temporality contribute to and reflect the spatial exercise of power and the outcomes of intersectional identities, thereby organising social life' (p. 1674). The concept of examification pushes discussion of the impacts of examinations on education to analyse the temporal dimensions of these interactions. Similar to other dimensions of examification, I argue that these relationships are strong and not uniform. Processes of examification work at multiple scales in compressing, elongating, intensifying and arranging educational time through distinct temporal horizons that periodise education into (among other things) 'before' and 'after' moments of examination.

In describing the experience of time in education, metaphors of speed and distance are often invoked and tied to other dispositions. In places this connects with the length of 'term', contrasting long- and short-term approaches towards education. As Pring et al. (2009) argue: 'the examination and testing industry is reducing so much learning to doing well in tests, and encouraging schools to take short-term measures to ensure success in the tests' (p. 81). A dichotomy is set up between reductions and short-term measures and richer, broader, longer-term aims. Similarly, adding the contrasting pairs of fast and furious / slow and patient, Biesta (2020) argues that much of contemporary education is 'characterized by a rather single-minded focus on qualification and socialization: fast and furious rather than slow and with a degree of patience' (p. 98). The notion of an accelerated approach favours measurable outcomes, such as test performance, over deeper, exploratory learning and Biesta develops this particular argument with a reminder that the Greek word *scholē* – from which the word 'school' derives – meant 'free time', unburdened by productivity demands to highlight what is often lost in this shift: the opportunity to slow down, to experiment, and to embrace failure as part of education. The temporal dimensions of examification in these examples all push towards notions associated with constraining and intensifying, in which education is also likened to a 'pressure cooker' environment (Perryman et al., 2011). These intensifications create conditions where change is often perceived through the lens of urgency and productivity. One manifestation of this examification of the organisation of curriculum time in England was through the compression of Key Stage 3 (KS3), which many schools reduced to 2 years so that GCSE preparation could begin a year early, in Year 9. The examination event not merely being a moment in time, but a force reshaping the temporality of the curriculum. In response, organisations such as the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) have advocated for reforms to protect the integrity

of KS3. Also in its response to the Curriculum Review in England, they argued that ‘KS3 needs to be a protected three-year entitlement with no encroachment of curriculum time to start teaching GCSE content’ (RGS-IBG, 2024). Such calls emphasise the need to reimagine educational time, resisting the pressures of examification in favour of fostering richer educational experiences.

For institutions, yearly cycles of examinations feed narratives about their health and success that shape their subsequent improvement plans and performance management. Over a longer period, the triennial cycle of PISA’s testing and reporting drives nations’ self-reflection and global discourse about winners, losers, front-runners and those playing catch-up. From a temporal perspective, it is the structuring of these processes into distinct periods that is foregrounded; the horizons towards which the systems and people are looking and framing work around. Large scale international assessment – particularly PISA – has created a new set of time-horizons against which the relative success of countries’ education systems might be judged (Grek, 2009). These horizons also have intensifying effects on the way timescales for educational reform are set so that any improvements might be felt before the next round of reporting. The examification of these temporal regimes has multiple implications, including in the opening up of educational systems to new networks, agendas and particularly markets in response to narratives about ‘declines’ in results and the urgency of delivering improvements (Brunila et al., 2025).

The importance placed on examination results as proxies for the quality of an institution is complicated by the temporal relationship between past and future results. The annual cycles of this information and the disconnect between these cycles and the practices implemented in a school at the start of a young person’s educational journey creates challenges for parents making choices about where to send their children. Similarly, Bokhove et al.’s (2023) analysis of the relationships between Ofsted inspection judgements and school performance leads to them advising parents to ‘not place much emphasis’ on Ofsted judgements, because they ‘are not going to provide much information about the academic environment and the outcomes of pupils during the period when their children will be going there’ (p. 56). These findings are particularly interesting in the context of the depth of feeling often held individually and across societies about inspection and about school choice.

Affect

Examification profoundly influences affective dimensions of education, shaping how students, teachers, parents, policymakers, politicians and more experience and respond to the pressures and outcomes of examinations. These emotional impacts are not only negative and stress-related, but span a spectrum encompassing pride and elation, despair and anguish and a complex range of responses in between. Examinations heighten emotions, and the affective dimensions of examification operate at multiple levels, from individual experiences to national and international discourses. Globally, the cultural spectacle of results day exemplifies this emotional intensity, as seen in the widespread framing of examination success through celebratory photographs. These images frequently feature students – often girls and young women – clutching their results letters and jumping for joy at the moment of success. The phenomenon is not restricted to secondary schools. Figure 1, for example, portrays a group of primary school students in Malaysia jumping in celebration after receiving their examination results, reinforcing the positive emotional associations with examinations for those who succeed.

Yet, these moments of triumph coexist with feelings of despair and failure for others. The ripping open of the envelope, whether literal or metaphorical, is charged with epistemological uncertainty as students confront the unknown outcomes of their efforts. This ritual encapsulates the high-stakes nature of exams, where the emotions are amplified by social and institutional weight.



Figure 1. Malaysian primary school results.

Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f2/Malaysia_Primary_School_Girls.jpg Creative Commons.

There are interesting questions about who bears this weight across complex networks of people taking responsibility in different and contested ways for educational outcomes (Lauermaann and Karabenick, 2011), further complicating the affective landscape. Affective dimensions are also felt unevenly in ways that are classed, gendered and racialised. For example, Heissel et al. (2021) found that high-stakes testing raises students' stress levels, and this negatively impacts their performance. The impact is not felt uniformly, and chronic stress from outside school (such as neighbourhood violence, poverty and family instability) can all affect how people respond to other kinds of stressors, including examinations. They found that large increases or decreases in cortisol relative to their baseline week were associated with low test scores, arguing there is 'evidence of differences in cortisol changes by level of disadvantage, with the largest cortisol effects for those living in high-poverty and high-crime neighbourhoods' (p. 185).

The affective implications of examinations extends beyond students to teachers, school leaders and policymakers, including through 'affective aspects of governmentality in localised school practices, such as the use of student testing data to produce fear or shame as a putative means to improve teacher performance' (Sellar, 2015: 140). Teachers often internalise the pressure to produce good results, and high-stakes accountability systems exacerbate stress. As Baird and Elliott (2018) argue, 'the insidious thing about [metrics] is that they do not just control us externally. We do not only accept these norms as individuals, but we also internalise them as part of our identities and we can define ourselves in relation to them' (p. 534). The broader societal discourse around examinations reinforces their affective significance. Each year, during the results season, social media platforms and news outlets are filled with stories of celebrities or public figures who claim to have 'failed their exams but succeeded in life'. While these narratives ostensibly aim to reassure students that examination results do not define their futures, they simultaneously reinforce the emotional weight of exams by positioning failure as an exceptional hurdle to overcome. These narratives, while purporting to comfort, highlight the dominance of examinations in shaping life trajectories.

On a broader scale, examinations are positioned as tools of nationalist and political agendas, wrapped in affective discourses of pride, fear, and competitiveness. Piattoeva et al. (2023) examine the case of Russia's planned introduction of the Unified State Exam (USE) in English, which was later reversed in 2020. Both the policy and the media discussions surrounding it – focusing on the use of English as the medium of examination – were emotionally charged. Advocates framed the exam as a vital tool for state-building, tied to national identity and progress, while critics highlighted fears of cultural erosion and educational inequality. Both illustrate how examinations are deployed as affective instruments in constructing nationalistic narratives, shaping both individual experiences and collective identities that span multiple emotions – pride, joy, regret, shame and more. These themes are echoed in the so-called PISA effect (Grek, 2009) in which countries' rankings generate affective responses of pride or shame (or at least project narratives of these affective responses), which fuel discourses legitimating judgements of success, constructions of 'problems' and the framing of 'solutions'.

These affective experiences are deeply entangled with the temporal logics of examination systems. Feelings of triumph or disappointment are often compressed into short, high-stakes moments (such as results day, inspection cycles, annual performance reviews) that function as thresholds in educational journeys. These rituals produce an affective intensity that is amplified by the anticipation, acceleration and finality of the temporal structures in which exams are embedded. The emotional charge of these moments is heightened because the preparation time is relatively long, particularly in relation to the short moment of judgement: affect and temporality intersect through the structuring of educational time through the anticipation of emotionally saturated moments of consequence.

Discourse

Discourse cuts across and deeply shapes all dimensions of examification. Curriculum, temporality and affect are produced, structured, and maintained through discourses that influence how examinations are perceived, implemented, and experienced. These discourses underpin debates about the role of education, the value of examinations and their consequences for individuals, societies and nations. They act as frameworks for understanding and mechanisms for generating new conditions, shaping educational systems and practices in profound ways.

Examinations hold a paradoxical position within educational discourse: they are widely regarded as essential components of education systems, and simultaneously critiqued for their inherent flaws. On one hand, they are seen as critical tools for accountability and meritocracy; on the other, they are criticised for perpetuating inequality, exacerbating grade inflation, and reducing education to narrow measures of success. There are powerful economic dimensions and market forces driving questions about examinations (Ball, 2012), and it is now a global multi-billion dollar industry which also feeds multiple other rapidly growing industries such as those associated with tutoring, examination preparation, surveillance and security (Piattoeva, 2016). These industries are sustained by an increasing reliance on high-stakes assessments, creating a self-reinforcing system in which examinations become both the means and the ends of education. Discussing the examples of England and Wales, Pring et al. (2009) argue that '...the position that GCSEs and A-Levels have occupied and continue to occupy in the public imagination. . .and their sheer dominance numerically means that they exert a powerful effect on other qualifications' (pp. 115–116). Affective dimensions of results day discussed above illustrate the power of discourses about examinations in terms of the media attention given to them, the strength of feeling conveyed through them and the hopes for the possible futures that might be realised through them. They also offer interesting examples of the particular ways in which public discourses about education are affected by examification in these times and places.

At the global level, discussion surrounding large-scale comparative assessments illustrate a similar relationship between discourse, scale and control. The more countries that are committed to an international comparative exercise, the greater the pull to be included and to buy in to the project and its agenda. Critiques – such as those of reductionism and the promotion of a ‘synoptic and largely economic view’ of education (Gorur, 2016: 599) – are easily weathered through the scale and the discursive construction of the aims as non-objectionable: surely you want to understand and improve reading and mathematics levels globally? The nature of the discursive construction of the exercise means that PISA is not merely descriptive but performative, actively creating the conditions it seeks to measure: ‘PISA is much more than a way of representing existing conditions. It is creating new conditions’ (p. 600). These discourses position examinations as tools of both assessment and system construction that shape educational priorities worldwide, even if the local enactment is neither straightforward nor uniform. For example, Landri (2021) emphasises the role of translation and ‘school singularities’ (their capacity – which is emergent, dynamic, and based on complex networks of knowledge – to react to changing external forces) in complicating the relationships between external assessments and the reconfiguration of internal logics. Attention to discourse highlights ways in which examinations do not merely measure but also produce. The language surrounding examinations constructs realities, shaping what is considered valuable within education. Sellar (2015) describes how ‘PISA shocks’ – in which countries receive unexpectedly low rankings – create crises in public perception and open policy windows for sweeping reforms. These crises are discursively constructed, amplifying the stakes of educational performance and fostering a culture of competition. The examification of these discourses both reflects and drives change, shaping not only education policy but also broader societal narratives about success, failure and progress.

The performative power of examinations is also manifested through the discourses producing schools’ identities and influencing parental decision-making. Examination results serve as critical data points in the evaluation of schools, contributing to rankings and reputation management. Parents often rely on these results to make school-choice decisions, reinforcing a market-driven logic within education (Bokhove et al., 2023). This data-driven approach fosters what Perryman (2006) describes as ‘panoptic performativity’, where schools, teachers and students are subjected to surveillance and accountability measures. In some cases, this performativity extends to extreme forms of monitoring. Piattoeva’s (2016) research on the use of video surveillance in Russian high-stakes state examinations reveals how technology is employed to uphold the ‘fragile assessment-network’. Surveillance coerces participants into roles as ‘docile data producer’ (p. 82), endorsing a deep mistrust of human integrity within the examination process. Such practices illustrate how examination discourses intersect with technologies of control, embedding mistrust and reinforcing the commodification of education.

Discourses of expertise further complicate the landscape of examification. At the micro-level, the role of chief examiners has been likened to that of ‘prophet and priest’ (Puttick, 2015), highlighting the quasi-religious authority vested in those who design and administer examinations. At the macro-level, multinational examination bodies wield immense power over education systems, shaping not only curriculum design but also societal expectations around assessment. These dynamics illustrate how examinations are embedded in complex networks of authority, trust and power, with discourses reinforcing their centrality to education. Golding and Kopsick’s (2024) critique of Cambridge Assessment International Education (CAIE) offers a stark example of discourses around a particular set of examinations shaping international education systems and perpetuating inequalities between the Global North and South. They argue these practices sustain colonial legacies, functioning as ‘a global assemblage that instrumentalizes colonial governmentality’ (p. 261). The examification of these systems privilege Western epistemologies and assessment norms, marginalise local knowledge systems and reinforce structural inequities through complex discourses around expertise, knowledge, prestige and multiple forms of capital.

Discourses of examination are also tied to economic rationales for qualification and the material interests they represent. Qualifications enable access to opportunities that have particular values attached to them. These values are often mobilised through economic metaphors (such as investment, return, and performance) and are tied to policy agendas prioritising measurable outcomes. These narratives reinforce the commodification of education, where examinations serve as gatekeepers of individual futures, institutional funding and national success on global rankings. At the global level, international assessments such as PISA do not simply reflect educational quality: they create markets for interventions, expertise, and reform agendas. The discursive and economic dimensions of examification co-produce one another, embedding examinations in global assemblages of power, capital and legitimacy.

Conclusions

Examification has become a defining feature of contemporary education systems. As a concept, examification offers a framework for understanding how examinations shape and transform education across multiple dimensions. Far from being neutral tools for assessing achievement, examinations emerge as deeply embedded mechanisms that influence curricula, pedagogy, temporal structures, emotional experiences and the discourses through which education is understood and valued. I have argued that examification intensifies all of these relationships, heightening their effects whether productive or constraining: across curriculum, time, affect and discourse, the interplay between examinations and education has been shown to be far-reaching, complex, and deeply consequential. I have argued that the effects of examification are not uniform but are shaped by the design of accountability systems and the broader educational and institutional contexts in which examinations are embedded. As Levatino et al. (2024) argue, even low-stakes regimes – often assumed to be less harmful – can generate implications such as curriculum narrowing and teacher stress when assessment data is tied to reputational pressures and external scrutiny. In high-stakes instances, where results are tied to other consequences, examification has been associated with gaming and teacher attrition. The use of examinations do not necessarily produce any of these particular effects, relationships or manifestations: variations are contingent on the particular ways in which they are operationalised and interpreted. As a concept, examification is not tied to a normative account of the impacts of examinations on education. In the particular systems discussed the impacts of examinations do come with much negative baggage – whose ‘role in recent years has been almost entirely negative’ (Pring et al., 2009: 131) – and so much of the discussion does engage with unfavourable effects. However, this is not an assumption of the concept which instead aims to open space for critically analysing the impacts of examinations on education across the overlapping dimensions of curriculum, time, affect and discourse.

Through curriculum, examification is associated with both narrowing and expansion, depending on context and policy frameworks. While examinations often compress subject choices and content to align with testable material, they also possess the potential to expand curricular breadth when designed to promote diverse and inclusive learning goals. Similarly, examinations structure temporal experiences, not just as discrete events but as forces shaping educational rhythms, timelines, and reform agendas. By compressing and intensifying educational time, they create cycles of preparation and accountability that frame individual, institutional and national priorities. The affective dimensions of examification illustrate the profound emotional stakes tied to examinations. From the elation of success to the despair of failure, examinations provoke a spectrum of responses that reverberate across students, teachers, school leaders and policymakers. These emotional dynamics are not incidental, but are central to the power of examinations, reinforcing their

perceived legitimacy and driving the narratives that sustain their dominance. Discourse, as the connective thread of examification, illuminates how examinations are positioned as both essential and problematic. Exam-related discourses perpetuate hierarchies, inequities and commodification within education while also creating opportunities for systemic change and reform. They construct and reconstruct what is considered valuable knowledge, who has access to it, and how it is measured, embedding examinations within global networks of power, capital and expertise.

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