

*Firstly, thank you for sharing, for being vulnerable. I know this could not have been easy, I know that it probably does not feel very positive, being asked to remember results day. But, sharing your experience is valuable, not just to me, now, but to everyone who may benefit from hearing what you have to say.*

**Now, Abi, I want to help you understand why you feel this way**

Your referring to results day as **judgement day** immediately suggests that you are associating education with a negative feeling. What is being judged exactly?

***here it is, unopened***

What does *it* refer to? While the traditional view of what it means to be educated revolves around “learning” (Kohn, 1997:1) in (Burke & Grosvenor, 2003:68), your view of education is very different. *It* suggests a physical object, an item – not an experience. *It* is something that can be described, evaluated, inspected, talked about. *It* is something very concrete. Education, by your terms, is “a commodity” (Burke & Grosvenor, 2003:68), taking the form of grades. What happens with commodities? We receive, or gain them. The verb ‘learning’ should thus perhaps be replaced by a more appropriate term – ‘gaining’. We do not learn in education, we gain items – grades - from education. “A commodity” (Burke & Grosvenor, 2003:68) is the “metaphor” which influences the way you “perceive” and “think” about (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:3) your experience at school. The simple understanding of X in terms of Y, or education in terms of “a commodity” (Burke & Grosvenor, 2003:68), underlies your entire thought process, waiting for those results.

Describing your results as your **fate** suggests that gaining this “commodity” (Burke & Grosvenor, 2003:68) is not a positive experience. Instead, it evokes fear on you. The “place of learning should never be somewhere to fear” was once uttered by a child, Angela (Burke & Grosvenor, 2003:77).

Learning, perhaps not. Hooks (1994:3) stated that once, she “loved learning”. For “learning” has been described as similar to “play”, “a natural activity” (Burke & Grosvenor, 2003:68). But what you have spent most of your educational life doing, Abi, is not learning. Rather, you have been building

**Commented [AB1]:** In *Teaching to Transgress*, Hooks (1994:3) explains how her experience of “school” went from enjoyment to misery, as she was introduced to an alternate understanding of “education” concerned with “information” retention.

up to the important gaining of “a commodity” (Burke & Grosvenor, 2003:68). No wonder you are so terrified.

You describe others as *grasping their grades*. While, yes, they are physically holding these sheets of paper, this is not what you are referring to. You see, you have been conditioned to believe, by the countless reminders from your head teacher in Year 11 assemblies, that these results will “define” you “for most of” your existence (HuffPost, 2013). Students are given these letters and actively encouraged to think that these grades will not leave them. Students like you, Abi, are made to feel that grades will stay a part of you, even if you rip up that piece of paper, even if you hide the results away in the bottom of a drawer. It seems better to say, then, that grades have a hold of students, not the other way round.

After all, grades are paired with associations about the students, so that a student not only gains a grade, but also a fixed set of descriptions to describe themselves by, whether they desire this or not. A person with an “A” is “brilliant”, but a “C”? “not smart enough” (HuffPost, 2013). It is understandable why you were envious of people that looked happy with their results, Abi. You wanted desperately to grasp your grades happily as you have seen others do. You wanted to be evaluated by the grade, and the employers who would see the grade, in a positive way. You wanted grades to say something good about you. You want to be brilliant, Abi.

As a student, you take on a “passive” (Burke & Grosvenor, 2003:3) role, Abi. You are told you have to sit exams and do well, and so you do just this. But you’re so immersed in this state of inactivity, that you think you are active. After all, you had the freedom of choosing *most* of your GCSE subjects, and you get to choose how hard you work. This makes you feel worthwhile. But you are powerless. Remember what went through your head when choosing your GCSE options? Did you really like *Extended Science* that much, or did you take it for career prospects? Did you really ‘dislike’ *Art*, which is why you didn’t take it, or did you think you’d do better academically in *French*, even if this

**Commented [AB2]:** Kohn (2011:8) draws attention to how “academics is just one facet of a good education”. Yet, we are not introduced to this way of thinking at school. We are only encouraged to think in one way – that grades and anything else academic = education. This is why the results from education appear to mean everything, even if this is not necessarily the case.

**Commented [AB3]:** It is drilled into us that these grades will dictate our future success, yet, Lemke (2002:37) describes education as “a bridge to nowhere”. This raises the consideration that we gear ourselves up for life beyond school with grades, and it turns out, we are actually very ill equipped for handling the world. Thus, our fear associated with these grades appears irrational, and what we should really be fearful of, is our lack of knowledge concerning how to act in the outside world. Of course, we are never encouraged to think in this way. This is why we are so convinced that it takes good grades to be deemed a success.

wasn't as enjoyable? Our thought processes concerning important decisions such as these are heavily influenced by what we think we *should* do in education, not necessarily what we *want* to do.

But just because you are "passive" (Burke & Grosvenor, 2003:3), this does not mean we cannot envision having a more active role in our own education. While we cannot necessarily change the top-down structure of examinations being set, we can alter how we think about education. I start asking *What if* questions to you Abi. It is vital, that within the space in which you convey your emotions towards education, we also make space for opening up the dialogue. Creating space in this way means that space is available for change, or at least, hope towards change. Lorde (1977:81) speaks of the crucialness behind changing "silence into language and action". You may not know that you are silent, Abi, and you may not think it. After all, you have been provided with a platform to share your emotions, which is hardly silence. But, if I were to read your dialogue, Abi, and not at least hope for a time in which *you are allowed to be proud regardless* of the grades you gain, then I would be leaving you in silence.

Telling the world how we feel but doing nothing with this information, is an inactive approach, Abi. Asking questions underpins what it means to reinvent education. If we cannot take a step back and ask such questions, even if it makes us vulnerable and exposed due to the "self-revelation" associated with telling our story (Lorde, 1977:82) then, we cannot create "action" from "language" (Lorde, 1977:81). "Action" (Lorde, 1977:81), in this sense, does not have to mean doing a lot, but rather, thinking a lot.

The questions themselves are not to be viewed as a form of interrogation. Questions, typically, as speech functions, demand information. I am not demanding that these questions are answered, Abi. Let these questions function as an offer, an offer to one day, think differently to how you are thinking, waiting for those results. It might be that these questions never can be brought into action, because sitting here, I still have a very much grade-oriented view of education. But, now, now I am a grade-oriented student who has a voice to ask questions about what life were to be if I was not.

Questions are better than statements. Statements are closed, questions are open for discussion and debate.

Allowing ourselves to ask questions, to be curious about how life could be, makes this project, this discussion, a utopia. What is a utopia? Is it where a person, in an educational context, imagines “a better world”? (Papastephanou, 2008:89) . When looking at your feelings expressed in the dialogue, Abi, they are dismal, they are dystopian. But these questions, they spark utopian ideas throughout this misery, which is enough, in my opinion, to call this a utopian piece. We should question, importantly, whether utopias should “be acted on” (British Library, 2020). This is because it may be true that these questions never transform into statements such as **these results do not mean everything to me**. Does this make this project unqualified for a utopia? Reflecting on what a “different world” could look like, is a good enough starting point for “change” (James & Brookfield, 2014:3). I am therefore happy to call this piece a utopia.

You attempt to reassure yourself, Abi, by recognising that you have worked **incredibly hard**. This reassurance does not last long though, as a label, a term to describe yourself is introduced – **a good student**. The function of this term is unclear. Is this mediocre phrase, with the unexciting adjective **good** and the ordinary noun **student** supposed to reassure you? The world is full of students, so why does this label make you proud? When we think of education as viewed in consideration “of the person who learns” instead of “what we learn” Lemke (2002:35), your description makes more sense. Perhaps, you like being **good** at learning. Or rather, not learning, but gaining, as we have established. Essentially, you are **good** at using your “stored” “knowledge” (Hooks, 1994:5). And you take pride in this, more than the effort you put into your work.

The thing is, though, that this is not a simple case of an adjective describing a noun which you assign to yourself. This label, this categorisation of yourself is complex. In fact, it is who you are. The grades you gain affect how you feel with regards to your identity as a **student**. And this identity has been shaped and fed from the **gold stars** you received on your first day of school, right up to **the grades**

**Commented [AB4]:** In *Engaging Imagination*, James & Brookfield (2014:3) discuss how “imagination is the key to human progress”. Often, in education, too much imagining could be seen as hinderance to our progress. I am therefore happy to be encouraging myself to imagine without limits.

**Commented [AB5]:** The “banking system of education” refers to “gaining knowledge that could be deposited, stored and used” (Hooks, 1994:5)

on GCSE results day. But it is not just objects like these that feed into this identity. Comments about how *clever* you are from your family, and your label as *a good writer* from your teacher has made this identity grow and gain power. With each positive comment as you engage “with ... the adult other” (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998:145) – teachers and parents, your “core identity” as a student maintains its “consistency and continuity” (Lemke, 2002:41). What other people are saying and ascribing to you is happily lapped up, because it makes you feel, and appear *a good student*. And because “school is the first” out of “home” experience we “identify” with (Burke & Grosvenor, 2003:6) it is unsurprising that this identity developed in the first place. “Childhood” is, after all, “a structured process of becoming” (Jenks, 1996 in James, Jenks & Prout, 1998:148). It is a lane we follow, as children, to find out who we are. Are we not, as children, already people? Are we not established enough to decide the kind of person we want to be, possessing the identities we wish to possess?

A contrasting identity is revealed - *a bad student*. Importantly, our identity is also “who we are not” (Lemke, 2002:40). What makes a student *bad*? A bad person might be unkind and immoral, but a *student*? Is an individual assigned the identity of a bad student if they are overly “curious” (Berliner, 2020), if they make “a joke” (Lemke, 2002:41), or if they “ask questions” in class? (Berliner, 2020). Is a student *bad* if they do anything that interferes with the set “passage from child to adult” life (Burke & Grosvenor, 2003:6) in the classroom, by allowing students to have fun, to engage in discussion? Whatever it is, you want no part of it, Abi.

You reflect on subjects at school. English is your *favourite*. You might actually be experiencing learning, here, because you engage with the subject *-the poetry, the stories*. A more dominating thought cuts you off, though – *always been my strongest one, too*. You see, your thinking is heavily situated in “the evaluative context of” learning (Pollard, 1985:85) in (Burke & Grosvenor, 2003:110), with the dominant narrative playing that you can be a “success or failure” (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998 in Burke & Grosvenor, 2003:93). Therefore, anything that disrupts gaining the more desirable

**Commented [AB6]:** In *Schools are killing curiosity*, Berliner (2020) discusses how particularly “high performing students” viewed “curiosity as a risk to their results”

status of successful, sets you up to be positioned at the other end. This narrative is positioned as more important than your enjoyment of education, which is why how you feel about yourself – your **happiness**, is affected by where you are positioned on this continuum of failing or succeeding.

I can't help but notice a difference in how you are describing yourself as your dialogue goes on, Abi.

**Good student** turns to just – **good**. Is it the case that your identity, your sense of who you are as a person has become so fused with **student**, that you now just describe yourself in terms of being **good** or **bad**? Is your identity interchangeable with these adjectives? Frustratingly, Abi, you could have picked a better adjective. 'Excellent' would at least give yourself more sense of achievement than **good**. But you couldn't possibly describe yourself in this way, not when there is a chance that someone will get better grades than you. Perhaps they can call themselves excellent. Perhaps they'd be worthy. You're about to open the page to 7A\*s, but you see, someone else will have got **8**. And

this is the result of your view of education taking on another "metaphor" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:3) that is foundational to your sense of what education means – education is also a contest. As companies compete for items, you are competing for your grades alongside your fellow classmates. Your friends are your competition.

You take a breath and commit to opening them.

I see the grades. I am so proud of you! Which is why your extremely mediocre response to these extremely above average results startles me – **Phew. Phew** is a sigh of relief, maybe made by someone who thought they had failed and managed to pass. Not someone with 7 A\*s, Abi. But it is clear why you reacted in this way. All you have ever sought to do is maintain the status of being **good**, or, perhaps, more importantly, avoid the label of being **bad**. These results reveal that you are not **bad**, which provides you with this temporary reassurance – your identity has not been threatened. Not until the next set of exams, **anyway**.

At this point, I ask a question, but not one that takes the form of **What if**. This time, I do not wish to reflect, I want to intercept and ask you whether you have actually gained anything from 12 years at

**Commented [AB7]:** Booth & Gerald (2011:630) : "high self-esteem is associated with educational achievement" (Marsh, Byrne, and Yeung 1999). Achieving good things, educationally, clearly impacts how good you feel about yourself, Abi.

**Commented [AB8]:** Smith in Kohn (2011:2) states that "what we remember from ... efforts to memorise are the stress and the failure inevitably involved". While this result is far from a failure, it is still possible that someone would have got higher than me, who worked less hard. In this sense, I feel like a failure, for putting everything into these exams, only to be outdone by someone else. This builds on from the fact that I have never been very naturally clever and have had to work extremely hard to get good results.

**Commented [AB9]:** I now realise how damaging this identity formation has been. I have spent so much time trying to be clever, when, as Kohn (2011: 3) describes, there are many levels of being intelligent. The sad truth is, having knowledge of "a lot of facts" will not "make you smart" (Kohn, 2011:3). I have spent all my academic life trying to be seen as intelligent, when in fact, I might not even fit this description. This is an unsettling thought to engage with.

school, besides a “forced ingestion of facts” (Smith in Kohn, 2011:2). I ask you a radical question, about what you have **learned**. Now, we have established that your view of education is very much centred away from learning, but even writing this, it seems so difficult to believe that you feel no valuable knowledge has infiltrated your mind. You respond with **what I have learned?** You are confused. You mention **good student** again – I don’t think you understand the question. I try and engage you in creative thinking, **the poetry, the stories** – remember?!

You understand now, stating confidently, **I got an A\* in that**. You have answered my question, Abi. Learning has in fact been occurring this whole time. But not learning about the world. Not even really about **English, your favourite subject**. It appears the only valuable thing you have learned, is that you possess this identity, you are a **good student** with **good** grades that will make the school look **good**. I think if this is the only thing you have learned, some serious unlearning needs to happen.

This is great for your school’s reputation, and for educational reports. Thanks to you, their rankings will be higher. You will contribute to their “overall pattern of ... achievement” (U.S Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, 1999: 4). You are seen, by education, as a metaphor. You are a percentage, a statistic, combined with all of the other statistics to make one huge statistic that gets slapped on a yearly report.

But was it worth it? Do you feel better? Do you feel worthwhile? Or, this time in 2 years, waiting for your A levels, will you feel worthless again, waiting for your results? Desperate for that brief confirmation that you are a **good student**, only for it to fall apart again waiting for your first university results?

I can save you the bother, Abi. You get 3 As in your A levels and a first in your first year of uni. Is that ok? Do you feel **good** now?

**Commented [AB10]:** My response demonstrates what Lemke (2002:35) means by school “is paying too much attention to what we study and not enough to who we become”.

**Commented [AB11]:** “Education is that which remains if one has forgotten everything he learned in school” (Kohn, 2011:3).

**Commented [AB12]:** It is evident that while I am a victim of this flawed system, it very much works for me. I am lucky to work hard and have good results. If it works for me, why am I questioning it? I am questioning it because it doesn’t actually make me happy. I work hard, it pays off, but at what cost? My happiness, who I feel I am? It only takes one bad grade for my entire sense of who I am to come crumbling down. I am just lucky that I am yet to experience much of this.