

Setting Standards in England

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The notion of a standard in the English education system is one that is suffused in complexity and scepticism. Since its introduction into educational settings in the 1880s (Williams, 1961), the term has become synonymous with a simplistic model that often reifies a particular practice. Such binary perceptions of how we discuss and recognise standards are unhelpful because they fail to provide a suitably nuanced discussion of both the strengths and limitations of just how standards are determined in contemporary educational contexts. A well-defined explanation and sensitive discussion of just how standard setting is conducted has the potential to challenge many of the urban myths that surround the subject and Opposs and Taylor's (XXXX) chapter is to be welcomed in this regard.

A striking aspect of this chapter is its depiction of the constantly changing landscape of educational policy in the English state-maintained education system. Starting with a condensed description of the present education system and then focusing on that elusive "gold standard" qualification, the Advanced (A) GCE Level provides a conduit to the detailed descriptions of processes related to high-stakes assessments. A clearly written guide to the processes involved in awarding is long overdue. The examination boards in England provide guides, but stakeholders (e.g. teachers, parents, examination officers etc.) might believe that boards differ in their approaches to standard setting and this negates the reality that practice is carefully regulated. Educational standards debates have intensified in England since the late 1980s and the introduction of a national curriculum and nationally reported testing in schools. Stricter codes of accountability in schools have also added fuel to concerns about standards and public discourses in 2018 are characterised by fast paced comment in public spaces via the Internet, and more specifically, in the more personal realms of social media.

Debate about education is to be welcomed, but it is important to be cognisant of the standard of the arguments that frame such debates. Too often, as Murphy (2013) argues, memorable headlines are not always built on strong foundations and it is opinion, anecdotal experience and personal belief that underpin the claims. It is the detail that matters in the processes of standard setting in education, yet the facts are often overlooked, misunderstood or simply ignored when standards are discussed in public domains such as print media, or online via social/news media. Opposs and Taylor (XXXX) acknowledge the fact that the methods used by examination boards and regulatory bodies such as Ofqual cannot be "immune to challenge"(px), but it is crucial to state that such challenges require evidence based on fact rather than belief. Here they present

an argument that is systematic in its critical examination of different awarding processes and also conscious of the inherent lack of 'one perfect way' to determine a standard. Opportunities to have open, public discussions about the complex nature of standards in England are vital in sustaining trust in awarding systems. Such difficult conversations are worthwhile because the trust they inculcate then underpins the value of our education system and endorses the importance of being educated.

Murphy, R. (2013). Media roles in influencing the public understanding of educational assessment issues, *Oxford Review of Education*, 39:1, 139-150,

Williams, R. (1961). *The Long Revolution*, London: Chatto and Windus.