

What Role Do High-Stakes Tests (Hsts) Have in Education Systems?

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Abstract: People currently live in an educated society characterised by the principle of meritocracy. The use of HSTs to identify elites is a manifestation of meritocracy and neoliberalism. Using appropriate literature and studies from others, this essay critically analyses the impact of high-stakes tests (HSTs). The positive and negative implications of HSTs on schools, teachers, and young people are investigated. Moreover, this essays also discusses other topics related to this topic in depth and complexity, involving connections to other supporting government policies, such as the discussion of the impacts of performativity on schools and instructors. Despite the fact that many academics have conducted extensive study on the function of HST in the educational system, there are still several issues within this topic. Finally, this essay identified the limitations and recommends for additional study on this issue to enhance the educational system.

Keywords: High-Stakes Test; Education System; Meritocracy; Neoliberalism; School Choice; Accountability; Performativity; Professionalism

1. Introduction

It is true that people nowadays live in a schooled society characterised by the concept of meritocracy. Meritocracy means that, regardless of one's socioeconomic status at birth, society should provide sufficient chance and mobility for 'intelligence' to unite alongside 'work' in order to 'move to the top' ^[14]. On the one hand, in their research, Jin and Ball have shown their criticism towards the idea of meritocracy, pointing out that it allows working-class high achievers to 'escape' from their working-class backgrounds, but it also differentiates and distinguishes them from middle-class learners in terms of the chances and lifestyles they aim to attain and replicate ^[11]. On the other hand, meritocracy is a social justice philosophy founded on the concept of equality of chance. It holds that social justice may be accomplished if everyone has an equivalent chance to compete for socioeconomic capital based on merit instead of heritage or money ^[11]. Thus, the results of assessments increasingly play an important role in the selection of society's elites. When the results of an exam are used to make crucial choices that affect many elements such as students, educators, managers, neighborhoods, institutions, and districts, it is considered as a high-stakes test ^[4]. Within this framework, examples of high-stakes tests (HSTs) might be easily identified globally, such as Gaokao or Nationwide Unified Examination for Admissions to General Universities and Colleges in China, The General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and The General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (A-level) in the United Kingdom. Neoliberal policies in education have emphasised the expansion of HSTs ^[10]. Numerous studies are being conducted on the role of HSTs in educational systems as it becomes more firmly established in the educational environment ^[20]. The positive and negative impacts of the HSTs on schools, teachers, and students are examined in this essay.

2. Literature View

Historically, the term "neoliberalism" clearly translates "new liberalism," and it initially appeared in the post-Great Depression 1930s as part of a movement of thinkers who considered that previous forms of laissez-faire "classical liberalism" had weakened society, resulting in the 1929 Wall Street Crash and the Great Depression ^[22]. Researchers define neoliberalism as a political economics ideology that prioritizes private property rights, free markets, and free trade, and permits the functioning of marketplaces to create answers to social and economic issues ^[1]. Neoliberals argue that free markets are the

most effective method to operate an economy, and they push for the government to intervene as little as possible ^[1]. In terms of education, according to Trowler ^[1], neoliberalism holds that due to the greed of people and the intricacy of society, societal organization is difficult; community institutions use provider takeover, which means they determine who has what and when, instead of the customer, based on reasonable decision and adequate information; municipal educational leaders, for example, are unnecessary since the marketplace would settle out education for the public good; there should be competition amongst schools; parents should be recognized as, and enjoy the advantages of, customers; variety should be supported inside the system. While the consequences of neoliberalism are not 'the same' worldwide, it is evident that neoliberal approaches of administration have had far-reaching repercussions on education systems across the world ^[22].

3. Discussion

HSTs could be used to assess academic achievement and progress across different schools, while also affecting parental school choice and increasing competition among schools. For example, the results of GCSE examinations have been used to create annual school league tables since 1992, which reflect the overall learning outcomes of children in every state-funded secondary school in England ^[13] and are a key component of the Government's school accountability by results regime ^[13]. Moreover, the school league tables also help to facilitate the quasi-market in schooling through influencing parent educational selection ^[13]. Parents might make their school selection decisions based on school league tables annually. Thus, competition among schools may intensify because school progress measures are frequently regarded as the more equitable and valuable means of comparing the successfulness of schools, for both school choice and accountability reasons ^[13]. In this case, fierce market rivalry encourages schools to constantly raise their qualities to attract additional parents as customers of their educational 'product' ^[3]. Because schools are striving to be selected, schools that are enterprising may participate in indicating their 'distinctiveness' to leave a good impression on parents and to show they are worth in comparing with other schools ^[3]. If less than 40% of students obtain 5 A*-C in the GCSE examinations, the school is deemed underperforming ^[13]. Subject choosers, including parents, require a purportedly objective foundation on which to make crucial judgments regarding 'excellent' and 'poor' schools; consequently, a system of HST and other accountability systems has been developed ^[3]. As a result, HSTs could be used to track school performance and motivate schools to enhance their teaching abilities; and meanwhile, HSTs could stimulate market competition among schools. However, HSTs, on the other hand, may cause certain problems. For example, local student involvement issues are entangled in performance frameworks as schools attempt to prove that they achieve and surpass legislated requirements and do well on HSTs ^[3]. Moreover, individualism, commercialization, and market concepts have led to 'poor' student achievement being portrayed as the fault of particular schools and poor parental decisions instead of as the outcome of political, cultural, and economic issues ^[3]. Besides, HSTs and school choice mutually reinforce each other. Test results have a significant connection with a student's parental income ^[9]. Because of the intense stress from HSTs and the high expectation placed on children to perform well in HSTs, parents may decide to enrol their children in schools that are not generally open to less privileged children ^[3]; hence, HSTs may indirectly contribute to class reproduction.

Moreover, HSTs could be used to access the accountability of teachers in classroom practices, however in the meanwhile, it may generate some issues with teachers. According to Johnson et al. ^[21], HSTs have repercussions for student performance, teacher responsibility, school reputation, or school financing. HST was chosen as an evaluation system to examine student performance and evaluate school development, and it was then utilised to judge schools' success in attaining ^[8]. Performativity is connected to greater accountability and monitoring, in which teachers and their schools are graded on result and achievement ^[18]. Therefore, as having teachers responsible for their teaching is reasonable ^[8], the teacher's teaching results may be deduced from the students' outcomes in HSTs. At the same time, because teachers are considered accountable by HSTs, HSTs may drive them to educate properly, especially if they are used to push the most slackers to work much harder ^[2]. However, inspectors have the authority of knowledge in the areas of inspection rather than teachers ^[19]. In the context of school inspection, this indicates that classes are given in a specific manner, and instructors may lose their feeling of professional autonomy as a result ^[18]. As a result, HSTs contribute to weaken teacher professionalism. According to Mahoney and Hextall ^[18], "progressively there are groups of regulations, requirements, and anticipations constructed around certain

teachers who are at the highpoint of their professional knowledge and yet don't have the independence to define how they work"—it is this discontent of external mechanisms which can have significant impacts on the emotional responses of teachers having undergone inspection. Meanwhile, because of the pressure to boost test results, teachers are pushed to teach just the skills and information that will be assessed, ignoring others, typically more complicated elements of the topic and even abandoning certain subjects entirely ^[9]. Taking Chinese Gaokao as an example, the teaching-to-test phenomenon is common ^[15], and it limits students' creativity and critical thinking skills ^[16]. Furthermore, Chinese academics have criticised the form of exam questions in Chinese Gaokao because they measure subject knowledge and theory instead of the capacity to solve issues or conduct out practical activities ^[6]. Thus, HSTs also play an important role in shaping classroom curriculum and pedagogy. What is taught in the classroom is what would be tested in HSTs ^[15]. Besides, educating is a very involved occupation, and educators must invest themselves in their job ^[18]. But too much pressure can lead to unpleasant feelings in teachers ^[18], and Brown et al. ^[18] reported that one-third of educators were stressed in the UK. Furthermore, stress from external causes, including such inspection regimes, can cause negative emotional trauma, making completing the work effectively far more challenging ^[18]. In addition, the emotional impact of the examination resulted in dissatisfaction, and teachers began to reconsider their jobs ^[18].

Additionally, individual students may potentially be affected by HSTs. HSTs could have a negative impact on students' physical and mental health. Taking Chinese Gaokao as an example, Chinese students are under a lot of pressure since Chinese Gaokao is highly significant in China. The Gaokao exam emphasises persistence as long as all students put effort into obtain the desired results ^[16], hence Chinese students are often highly industrious and spend a significant amount of time studying each day. Meanwhile, according to Chen et al.'s research, there has been a significant rising prevalence of shortsightedness amongst secondary school learners in eastern China over the last 15 years, particularly high and very high shortsightedness ^[5]. Although there are numerous variables that contribute to myopia, the stress of HSTs cannot be ignored. Furthermore, obesity has been noted as a growing health concern amongst children and teenagers in the majority of developed countries, as well as, more frequently, in developing countries such as China ^[12]. This might be due to spending too much time studying every day or having too little time to exercise. In addition to physical issues, students' mental health is another concern that requires attention under the pressure of Gaokao. The problem of psychological and social stress on students is highlighted by ^[16]. More seriously, such a testing has resulted in several documented incidents of psychiatric difficulties and suicides ^[16]. However, as a double-edged sword, HSTs such as Gaokao may have a positive impact on young people. Assessment can be seen as forcing learners to pay more attention to and put more effort into meeting the requirements of the educational system ^[17]. For example, Gaokao's framework of "motivating learning through assessment" could be used to motivate students ^[15]. The motivating role of Gaokao is significant, and this is due to the fact that testing allows candidates to rely on themselves, and they have some influence over their exam achievement ^[15]. Vast numbers of people are motivated to study hard because they have a sense of control ^[15]. As a result, students can improve their academic performance and knowledge by preparing for HSTs. Furthermore, taking HSTs may change one's life because outcomes of tests are all that matters. University rankings influence career outcomes ^[7], and HSTs such as Gaokao or other university entrance exams determines which institutions to attend. As a result, by performing in HSTs and gaining admission to a reputable institution, regardless of students' backgrounds, HSTs have the potential to positively impact a student's life.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, HSTs are a double-edged sword that may have both positive and negative impacts on schools, teachers, and students. HSTs might be used to measure academic success and development across schools, while HSTs and school choice mutually reinforce each other, promoting school competition. Furthermore, HSTs might be used to assess instructors' responsibility in classroom procedures, however, this could present some issues for teachers. Besides, while HSTs may provide some benefits to students, such as motivating them, they may also have a harmful influence on their physical and emotional health. Meanwhile, additional roles of HSTs are identified, such as shaping the curriculum and pedagogy and leading to class reproduction indirectly. Testing programmes can be described as both monitoring systems and pedagogical reforms ^[17]. Therefore, HSTs could be used to enhance educational policies, instructional techniques, curriculum, etc. Finally,

because this essay has limitations in that it only discusses a few aspects of HSTs, more research is needed to address additional difficulties in this area to further enhance education system.

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