NEQMAP Webinar
The Culture of Testing
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Definition – ‘Culture of Testing’
A culture in which high-stakes standardized testing is accepted as a foundational practice in education and shapes how education is understood in society and used by its stakeholders (Smith, 2016).
Design and Methodology
To examine
• the manifestations of a ‘culture of testing’
• the relationship between sociocultural factors, education and examinations
• how this ‘culture of testing’ both shapes and is shaped by education policies and systems

○ Nine case studies: Bangladesh, Fiji, India, Japan, Kazakhstan, Republic of Korea, Philippines, Tonga, Viet Nam
○ Desk study and primary data collection through surveys, focus groups and interviews with students, teachers and parents
○ Sample sizes ranged from 100 students, 30 parents, 30 teachers to over 5000 students, in public and private, urban and rural areas
**Purposes of Examinations**

**Selection**
Controlling access to different levels (generally secondary) of schooling and higher education institutions.

**Certification**
Obtaining knowledge of and reporting on student achievement.

**Accountability**
Evaluating the effectiveness of instruction and schools.

Source: UNESCO 2013a

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**Figure 1. Most common points for high-stakes examinations**

- **End of primary**
- **End of lower secondary**
- **End of upper secondary**
### Frequency of Testing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Subjects</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>• 57% reported 1–2 per semester</td>
<td>• 44% reported 1–2 per semester</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiji</td>
<td>4-5</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>• 30% reported more 1–2 per semester</td>
<td>• 44% reported more 1–2 per semester</td>
<td>• 44% parents reported once a month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kazakhstan</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>• 38% reported more than once a month</td>
<td>• 80% reported 1–2 per semester</td>
<td>• 38% reported more than once a month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republic of Korea</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>• 49% reported 1–2 per semester</td>
<td>• 56% reported 1–2 per semester</td>
<td>• 55% reported 1–2 per semester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>• 30% reported 1–2 per semester</td>
<td>• 29% reported 1–2 per semester</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tonga</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>• 61% reported 1–2 per semester</td>
<td>• 41% reported 1–2 per semester</td>
<td>• 36% reported more than once a month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viet Nam</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>• 42% reported more than once a month</td>
<td>• 40% reported more than 2 per semester</td>
<td>• 30% reported 1–2 per semester</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:
1. Subjects: this is the average number of subjects students are required to take per semester.
2. Fiji: the case study presented information by school, not by individual respondents. All rural schools reported having tests more than once a month, while urban schools split between once a month and more than once a month.
3. Japan did not conduct a questionnaire.
Figure 2. Hours spent preparing for tests or exams inside the classroom

Trend 1. Number of hours studying for exams increases as students progress

Trend 2. Females report studying more (both inside and outside class)

Trend 3. Rural students study more (both inside and outside class)
Too many tests?

**Figure 4.** Are there too many tests or exams?

Shapes of student, teacher, and parent opinions, with notes:
1. Japan did not conduct a questionnaire.
2. No data available for disagreement in India.
3. No data available for parents in Bangladesh and Fiji.
Culture of Testing: Key Findings

• Social mobility/economic opportunity
• Social, cultural and family expectations
• Implications for learning
  – Competition - stress and anxiety
  – Teaching and curriculum
• Relationship between testing and policy
Social Mobility

- Career path
  Student responses: 89% India, 94% Tonga, 100% Fiji, 86% Philippines, 93% Kazakhstan

- Students and families strive for:
  - better courses/education tracks
  - better schools
  - better economic and employment opportunities

- Influences urban and rural disparities, migration for education and economic opportunities

*The exam is very important because it will affect my whole life.*
  – Student, Japan
Social and Family Expectations

- Family pride, honour, prestige, ‘face’ and reputation
- Family support and ‘tiger-parenting’
  - Private tutoring and coaching (90% of students in Bangladesh)
- Hard work and diligence as a virtue
Social and Cultural Legacies

- Confucian heritage
- Colonial legacy and the impact of western education systems across the globe
- Testing as a ‘tradition’
- Testing as a rite of passage

**Tradition:**
1. a time-honored practice
2. the passing down of elements of a culture from generation to generation
3. an inherited, established, or customary pattern of thought, action, or behavior
Relevance and Effectiveness

- Most students, teachers and parents agreed that exams were positive, effective and objective tools.

- This positive perception has significant impact on the importance placed on examinations, socially, culturally and academically.
Impact on Learning: Competition

- Competition increases across all actors:
  - students
    - awards, scholarships, schools and employment
  - parents (compete for status)
  - teachers (appraisal and salary)
  - schools (funding)

Leads to:
- Stress, anxiety and lower well-being
- Corruption and cheating
- Increased private tutoring and shadow education
Impact on Learning: Teaching and Curriculum

We just teach the tests. That is what is expected, isn’t it?

– Teacher, Fiji

- Simplifies and narrows curriculum
- Teachers teach to the test
- Teacher reputation and evaluation
- Alternative methods for assessments
  - mixed results for class-based and performance assessments

Ahh...standardized test season.

Love that my reputation as a third grade teacher is in the hands of an 8 year old.
Several countries have repealed and then reintroduced exams due to public pressure.
Implications and Recommendations

- Promote a balanced and holistic education that emphasizes the relevance and effectiveness of learning
  - i.e. emphasize holistic learning and learner well-being

- Improve classroom strategies and evaluation of transversal competencies, 21st century skills and soft skills

- Create effective assessment frameworks for classroom and school-based assessment

- Providing more resources and support for teachers to teach and undertake alternative assessment methods, rather than prepare students mainly for standardized tests.

- Limit the influence of national and international rankings based on examination and assessment results

- Balance *assessment of learning* and *assessment for learning*
Thank you!

Learn more in the full report: https://bit.ly/2v63MhE

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