

HIGH-STAKES TESTING IN THE NEOLIBERALISM ERA

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ABSTRACT

A high-stakes test has been indicated to be negatively linked to teachers and students in the classroom. However, little is known about the impact of such tests on the teachers and students or those who are involved indirectly in their lives. Using an individual interview with eight English teachers from eight junior secondary schools, this study examines the correlation between the high-stake test with performativity mechanism in the pincer of markets and neoliberalism. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data taken from the interviews. The findings indicated how test results were used as a source of promotion by schools to give stakeholders the knowledge they needed to engage in the marketized educational system fully. For school administrators and policymakers, the conclusions of this article had significant ramifications. High-stakes assessments were logically sound and theoretically justifiable, but a reliance on them too much foreshadowed replacing traditional educational ideals with the market value of education. The study offered fundamental new insights into high stakes testing as a tool of social control and oppression for students, teachers, and schools for adopting a neoliberal paradigm in education. In addition to impeding learning and teaching, the employment of high-stakes tests as performativity mechanisms also altered the work of schools and teachers, who were the front liners of the educational system.

Keywords: Accountability, national examination, teachers, washback

INTRODUCTION

The favoured method of educational accountability continues to be high-stakes assessments, which are described as tests that have an impact on student grade advancement or graduation, teacher responsibility, the reputation of schools, or the funding of schools (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Fryer, 2013; Bae, 2018; Gershenson, 2018). Ball (2012) showed how neoliberalism was crucial in the embrace of high-stakes assessments as a means of policing teachers' performance. High-stakes exams are rationally and conceptually justifiable yet debates over their goals and efficacy have persisted for decades. A fuller understanding of how

teachers, students, and parents view the goals of high-stakes testing could offer substantial insights into test design and administration.

Indonesia has stopped administering high-stakes testing like the national examination since 2020. However, we need to understand that we still use high-stakes tests like UTBK (an entrance test to a state university). The neoliberalism stigma that grades are a principal factor for admission to a state school is still prevalent and many parents and scholars criticize zoning and affirmative as the main criteria. Thus, the study of national examination can still be relevant as grades can make every test a

high-stake test and promote "neoliberalisation" in the education system in Indonesia.

Several studies have shown that high-stakes examinations are used to propagate the ideals of the neoliberalism paradigm in the education of future generations (cf. Ball, 2012; Ambrosio, 2013; Levine and Eatman, 2016; Sterling, 2017; Yandell et al., 2021). Nevertheless, little is known about how these assessments affect teachers, students, or anyone who are only incidentally involved in their lives. Understanding how various educational participants see the importance of grades requires conceptualizing the relationship between high-stakes testing and neoliberalism.

This study's analysis of high-stakes testing transforms the focus of education on performativity, the quantification of educational outputs through exams, and how such assessments are utilized to reduce students' learning over many years to merely numerical values.

Two research questions are addressed, namely:

1. How do the teachers perceive the national examination?
2. How does the national examination affect teachers' performativity?

Marketisation of high stakes testing

Based on the literature review of 130 papers, Falabella (2014) shows how the market, and its competitive nature are ingrained in the educational system. He contends that symbiotic policies have deeply ingrained market forces throughout the education system. Then, he identifies high-stakes test policies as one of the primary measures of 'performing school'. The justifications for this policy are based on the notion that schools need to show performance on the results of their pupil's education and anticipated to promote

school diversity, parental autonomy, effectiveness, and personal accountability. According to Falabella (2014), those who support this view—most of whom are on the political right—believe that making this decision can improve school quality. In this view, schools function as producers who try to raise the calibre of their outputs by achieving high marks on essential exams. Scores gained in PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) for example, were frequently used to measure the quality of education within a nation (Biesta, 2015; Schleicher, 2019; Mahmut, 2020).

Tomlinson's study within the UK (2016) demonstrates that many stakeholders consistently view parents and students as consumers of what they refer to as 'consumerism of education'. The school funding regulations, which are based on the enrolment of students, support this position. According to Tomlinson (2016), the 'marketized' educational system has a means of punishing underachievers and rewarding good performers by cutting funds for underachievers.

Falabella (2014) traces how the markets got firmly ingrained in the educational system through accountability policies and high-stakes testing. These Acts introduced new testing procedures at various levels and published results as league tables. Along with this, schools that did not fulfil the goals were publicly shamed and punished. Like Indonesia today, the government-run exams introduced a "marketized" educational system. According to Falabella (2014), testing has changed from being a support piece of information to holding teachers and schools accountable. The rationale behind these initiatives was to offer parents the knowledge (consumer information) required to make educated provider selections (schools).

Potterton (2020) argues that markets and parental choice did not function as intended since some communities were stuck by their underperforming schools. Although there are few empirical studies, anecdotal evidence suggests this may be the case in Indonesia. However, the reasons are not based on loyalty but on the fact that they cannot access high-performing schools, especially in rural areas where there are not many high-performing schools available (Rosser et al., 2021). Gaps in terms of academic ability between state, private and low-cost private schools thus are likely to be inevitable.

Additionally, admittance requirements for high-performing institutions frequently consider a student's test-taking ability and parents' financial situation (high-performing private schools are expensive). Middle-class families that can enrol their children in traditionally well-funded schools appear to have the privilege of exercising parental choice (Fahmi et al., 2013; Asadullah, 2018). In that regard, parents in Indonesia can be viewed as consumers who have no options (captive consumers). According to Stevenson and Wood (2013), the inclusion of testing in school inspection has caused managerialism to be connected to the marketization of education. Poorly performing schools are frequently the target of school inspections, among other measures.

The marketization of the educational system is made possible by high-stakes testing (Kelly, 2018). It offers the details that buyers require to choose producers more wisely. According to Kelly (2018), test scores represent a numerical expression of a school's output that acts as a signal to consumers as they are encouraged to express their preferences,

underscoring the importance of tests in the marketization of education. But because the state decides what counts as valuable, this worth is not set up by supply and demand in traditional markets (knowledge) (Falabella, 2014). Although this makes economic sense, especially to those on the right of the political spectrum, it is not valuable (Falabella, 2014). Ball (2012) defines the marketization of education as the disintegration of the social agenda of education and its replacement with one that is driven by budgetary and school image concerns, as well as the replacement of a caring school ethos with an academic ethos. The current competitive mindset among neighbouring institutions can prevent collaboration and idea-sharing. Each institution might compete with the other to be in a higher rank or more reputable than the others.

Neoliberalism in high-stake testing

The high-stakes testing policy serves as the foundation for neoliberal education (Yandell et al., 2021). Many countries' education administrators use this policy extensively (Falabella, 2014). The policy mechanisms that support whole-school evaluation and performance management reflect the embrace of private-sector practice in the management of schools and education. Test results of the students highlight not only the performance of the students but also of teachers and the school. Educational administrators and government contend that teachers' and students' development are monitored using the test results in numerical form. The accountability of teachers and students is therefore at stake.

High-stakes tests control teachers' and students' attitudes and behaviours (Morgan, 2016). Additionally, it assesses student, teacher, and school performance

through limited grade results and controls rewards based on these measurements. It turns into a culling process that favours the more powerful one to win. For the strong to prevail and the weak to fall behind, competition is then employed to put students, teachers, and schools against one another. In a neoliberal educational system, success and failure are defined in specific ways. To look more objective, neoliberalism tries to cloak its subjective presumptions in the guise of quantitatively observable facts from high-stakes tests.

Neoliberal educational reform creates a specific type of person controlled by competition and focuses on a narrow definition of success based on outcome only. Neoliberalism has thus caused a loss of critical thought, democracy, and social justice, as well as an erosion of equality and social justice (Kelly, 2018). The overarching and guiding ideology of modern education, with its pervasive effects, is neoliberalism. Schools, teachers, and students were then surrounded by the neoliberalism paradigm. The situation would lead to strong competition to gain higher scores in the high-stakes test.

Assessments, however, should primarily focus on evaluating the level of learning for the sake of enhancing teaching and learning, which means it supposedly functioned as a supporting actor (Kelly, 2018). Instead, they act like the protagonists, the ones that teachers, students, and school administrators focus on to be enhanced. All of this occurs in the educational environment infected by the neoliberal paradigm. The intentions of high-stakes testing are not always clear or consistent in the minds of various educational stakeholders. In Indonesia, which is still showing signs of its highly divided society and is emerging from it, this is even more complicated because the social system as a whole and the

educational system are both easily affected.

METHOD

A total of eight English teachers were questioned in the semi-structured interviews. The participants were from one state school, one high-cost private school, two medium-cost private schools and four low-cost private schools. The interview used Indonesian as the first language of both interviewer and interviewees to provide ease of conversation and clarity of communication. The purpose of using the language was to facilitate the participating teachers to express their opinion freely without worrying about the language barriers that could happen if the interview was conducted in the English language. Individual interviews allowed us to delve further and elicit data that teachers would have refrained from sharing in front of their peers. Examples of generalizations, over-generalizations, and powerfully charged value judgments were sought in the probes. Using both strategies gave us more detailed data. The length of the teacher interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 1 hour.

This study used a phenomenological technique to analyse interview data because we saw teachers' perspectives of testing policy as a phenomenon articulated by Hycner (1985). Interview data describe how this testing experience seemed to individuals engaged (i.e., teachers and parents) through their conscious and focused thoughts about testing by putting findings in a phenomenological perspective. Data collapsed after analysis of the focus group and individual interviews and both interview groups. We read each audiotaped interview conducted in response to two emphasis areas we identified: teachers' perception of the national examination and

its washback on teachers. Two researchers in this study then noted the categories that formed and recurred across interviews. Interviews were divided into units of meaning and organized into categories within these groups. To support context where necessary, units of meaning were double-coded. The codes were accountability and washback.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The transcripts of teachers' interviews were categorised into two themes: the important thing is the result and beat the test.

The important thing is the result

Education is transformed into economic subjects or subjects of value and depending on the outputs, schools either count or do not in the neoliberal paradigm (Ball, 2021). Students, teachers, and schools are urged to invest in achieving the 'enumerated result' to increase their value in these terms and gain rewards in the form of money, respect, or reputation. Education collapses into its use value in the form of the test result. Thus, it was the common answer for respondents to get the first inkling that the high-stakes test was the result. For instance, one teacher said:

They passed the try-out test and there are (our) children who got the three highest scores within the council. Last year we also got the highest average score. Alhamdulillah, we got an award (from a local government agency). So, we reflected on that, the important thing is the result. (Teacher F)

The ongoing pressure to perform well on high-stakes exams is evidence of the indisputable impact of neoliberal policies on educational frameworks (Falabella, 2014). In addition to being held

accountable through their professional appraisals, which are mostly dependent on the quantifiable test results of their pupils, teachers are also relevant to how well kids perform on standardized tests. Due to this influence, states and school districts establish and enforce strict policies to regulate and stifle the teaching and learning process and ensure that the curriculum and educational experiences are primarily focused on essential topics and skills needed to succeed on these assessments.

As a result, the accountability tool from this audit culture—high-stakes standardized testing—strictly assesses small bits of knowledge for a specific goal (Kelly, 2018). School is not about the enjoyment of learning. It is about how to make oneself (students) become a good commodity. It is an anomaly and something that need to be rectified if students just enjoy the time before school and not get stressed about it:

"When I was in lower secondary school, the national examination was frightening. I was forced by my parents, by the school and by my friends. Then I thought about my future. It became my fright. By today, the children seem to enjoy their time more since the school doesn't pressurize them, then their parents less care for their children. Most of the children here were coming from broken homes... So, they enjoy it more, they don't feel quite stressed. "
(Teacher H)

The limited scope of high-stakes oversight is stifling and does not provide a comprehensive picture of student progress (Morgan, 2016). Neoliberalism, however, makes it clear that this is more than enough to assess whether regions and schools are successfully achieving their

goals and highlights the necessity of quantitative accountability metrics in decisions about student advancement and teacher effectiveness. This could negatively affect students' educational paths, teachers' ratings, and the institution's standards.

The result of the high state test is significant as the allocation of resources depends on it, and it is substantial for expensive private schools. The parents, who are also customers paying to make their children good commodities, need a school that can become a factory with fewer defective products. In this case, the graduation rate and the score are an advert for the marketization of the ability of the school:

If there were one or two students who didn't graduate, the following year, the parents would reconsider enrolling their children in this school. It will impair the school image... ((In my personal opinion)) If I follow the children's interest, if they said they couldn't do it, I will let them not do it. Probably they don't have any interest in the subject... Well, of course, that's the advert for private schools. What is the other consideration? Moreover, they pay tuition fees here. There is a private school which is free of tuition fees, let alone in the state schools. This is a private school; the students need to pay the tuition fee and it's expensive. So that's the obvious advert. (Teacher I)

In this neoliberal movement for educational reform, parents are customers who have the option to send their kids to a school different from the one in their neighbourhood by using the market of options (Kelly, 2018). However, some families have opportunities made available by the promotion of choice alternatives, while others do not:

the children enrolled in this school because they followed their siblings who studied at this school as well. Then we promoted that the tuition fee is free, or they would get a discount. The other reason is probably those who were not accepted into the state school. Regarding the tuition and book fees, this school is the cheapest. That's what the public considered. (Teacher H)

Market-based education asked for competition among educational institutions (Ball, 2018). Neoliberal policies stratify educational experiences and outcomes between privileged groups and disadvantaged groups. This form of Neoliberal practice is the marketization of school choice alternatives.

Unfairness emerges from the competition between state schools accompanied by high-paying private schools compares with low-fee private schools. As one teacher said, "I think it doesn't affect the state school like this school since the people look for the state school, so we don't need a direct promotion"(Teacher P). Due to the state school's ability to do 'cream skimming', they enjoy deciding which high-score pupils to admit and which low scores students to keep and get good subsidies from the local government and central government. The expensive private school only admitted students from high socioeconomic status families, which mostly have better grades on high-stakes tests and have valuable resources from expensive tuition fees. This condition is not available for low-cost private schools:

Because a teacher would feel ashamed or would feel bad when there were students who failed the national examination. The students would also have the burden when they failed the national examination... but

in reality, not all of the schools have the same human resources, as the teachers or even the students, the potential is not similar. Then the facilities that the schools have are not the same. For example, this school, though it's included in the urban area, is different (low-cost private school). It would be different in everything, the way the students study, the media and so on. So indeed the national examination has a big influence, the most burdensome issue is that the students who are taught, the media (learning facilities) and so on are not the same. That might be the hard thing. (Teacher M)

Individualization, competitiveness, and standardization are features of neoliberal reform in education that direct performance outcomes through accountability metrics (Kelly, 2018). This sort of reform's economic underpinnings control behaviours that stratify schools to create disparate outcomes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and privileged ones. These standardized and competitive processes burgeon the result-oriented ideals without any concerns about the process.

Beat the Test

The audit culture shapes the conditions and methods of teaching and learning in schools. Performativity is a consequence of the audit culture, according to Falabella (2014). Performativity is the method by which the audit culture controls judgments, decisions, and actions. As one of the teachers said:

The positive impact is by having this national examination; we can read the students' competence through it. We notice how far this student's competence here is. Is there any

possibility that in the following year we can improve (the average scores) regarding the sources (of problems) we have so far? (Teacher M)

A measure of productivity, such as performance, not only about the students but also the worker, such as the teacher who moulds the commodity (students) and organization such as the school), can be assessed depending on the calibre of that performance (Falabella, 2014). Therefore, because of this audit culture that derives from neoliberal ideology, the value or worth of an individual or an organization is understood through the assessment of productivity:

Because I'm afraid. Afraid of what? I'm afraid the [students'] score will be low; the school will be ashamed then. Even the school principal said this maybe all the time to the teachers (that) the (average) score of the national examination is low because the teachers who can't [teach] (Teacher N)

The use of performative measures promotes competition, individualism, and measurable results. One sign of neoliberal ideological practices at work is taking ownership of one's work product and comparing it to others (Falabella, 2014). Additionally, because individual teachers' and schools' scores on these assessments are competitively compared, performativity fosters and embraces the motivations of accountability intrinsically and extrinsically through the inherent sense of obligation to accomplish to meet the demands of assessment measures.

There seems to be a difference between what writers or neoliberal supporters say that competition will make teachers innovate in educating children with the data obtained from interviews with teachers. They do innovate, but not

innovate to make their students have better competency but how they can beat the test:

In facing the national examination, the first thing we look at is guidance. Which material will appear in the national examination, and which SKL that needed to be delivered. From those points, we develop the materials. Then the next preparation as the national examination is getting closer, each school holds an enhancement or enrichment class or whatever it is. The important thing is we have additional material to discuss the past exam questions. It's added with tips and tricks on how to face such questions. (Teacher P)

Another teacher stated:

The most challenging thing is based on the material aspect, the vocabulary. Sometimes, when I give an assignment to them, there's rarely a student who understands the whole text. So probably the weakness is in the vocabulary... In the enhancement class, I review past exam papers. Then I sometimes give them tricks about how to answer such questions; I told them not to read the whole text since the time will run out; that's probably the least I give the tricks.

For the progress of market and efficiency logic and the need to develop a standardized human being, teachers must adapt to the neoliberal ideology established in education. Teachers' professional responsibilities have evolved to accommodate new managerialism reliant on market discipline by following the need for high-stakes assessments. This view was brought about by neoliberal educational reforms (such as accountability testing and school choice), which also influenced how teachers perceived themselves in those roles.

Teachers have been forced into a climate of neoliberal accountability. As one of the teachers said:

We're confused about where the government wants to lead this education system. In the national examination, sometimes the government teaches us to be dishonest. When the graduation was decided by the national examination, we looked for a cunning solution how to help the students pass the national examination. Recently, the national examination no longer determines graduation; we then found a solution how to help the students to enrol in their favourite upper secondary schools. Regarding education, it is (about) the teachers who (need to) become smarter... We haven't had a good pattern of education for this nation.

Standardization and accountability have made the environment for teachers more daunting. Teachers must run within market-driven changes rather than enlightenment-driven ones because of the pressure for more standardized tests. Undoubtedly, the ideal image of education and teaching as an enlightenment enterprise is at odds with the neoliberal accountability paradigm from high-stakes tests. Teachers who enter the profession with clear moral goals would face conflict with the dominant educational philosophy and its narrow concentration on test outcomes. To be sure, the education policy that supports high-stakes tests continues to convert the enlightenment work of teaching into simply about the outcome of grades.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we looked at how high-stakes tests influenced Indonesian education with neoliberal philosophy. This method of accountability influences how educational policies are put into practice, as well as how processes are put into place that subjects' educators and students to ongoing policies and practices that diminish their value and lead to significant institutional and cultural change that focuses on outcomes and bring stratification on the students, teacher, and school-based on unfair competition. Because of their extreme concentration on efficiency, tightly defined measurable results, and harsh accountability methods, these changes, which are influenced by corporate and market-based approaches, impede efforts to advance school as a place for learning for the sake of knowledge enlightenment.

The neoliberal worldview in education reform positions its practices as reasoned, testable, and quantified (Kelly, 2018). The demands of education, however, are much more intricate and subtle and cannot be restricted or defined solely by high-stakes exams. Despite seeming scientific and reasonable, quantifiable measurements and formulaic approaches can be easily manipulated and deceptive. Therefore, this kind of reform results in significant inequity and inequality for vulnerable communities due to the commodification of education and accountability.

Neoliberal educational policies influence classroom procedures that uphold outcomes rather than processes and worsen structural and systemic injustices that significantly impact marginalized groups' educational experiences, products, and trajectories. High-stakes tests do not challenge intellectual endeavour and the

enjoyment of learning and teaching. The complexity of teaching and learning requires comprehensive and systematic enlightenment-focused approaches. Enlightenment, responsive pedagogy practices, value knowledge acquisition, and the practices that bring creativity, researcher curiosity, critical thinking, and public-speaking skills (Kelly, 2018).

Assessments need to be learning support, not goals for learning. Assessment for Learning (AFL) might be adapted in the classroom to support learning. Farikhah et.al. (2022: 501) define AFL as "any evaluation that may offer information to instructors and students that can be utilized as feedback in learning and making decisions regarding students' improvement". Such evaluation that offers flexibility delivers feedback to assist students in improving their learning and does not take over the curriculum. It employs more than one metric to gauge students' learning while informing instruction to assist teachers in bettering their education and assuring student learning. Thus, the assessment helps the teacher bring enlightenment and joy of learning to their students instead of acting as the "monster" that needs to be conquered and feared. In addition, law No. 20/2003 of Indonesia mandated:

Education is a conscious and planned effort to create an atmosphere of study and process learning so that participants educate by actively developing their potential to have spiritual power religion, self-control, personality, intelligence, noble character, and skills needed by themselves, society, nation, and state.

In this case, the focus on the outcome without much concern for the process is not a paradigm that has alignment with what our law-mandated education must do.

There is a need to reform so there would be no high-stakes tests that push students and teachers not to care about the process of learning.

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Conflict of Interest

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.