

THE MAPPING OF MEDIATING NEGATIVE WASHBACK OF THE NATIONAL EXAMINATION

Maya Puspitasari^{1*}, Muhammad Arifin Pelawi²

¹maya_p@ecampus.ut.ac.id, ²ari.pelawi@influx.com

¹UNIVERSITAS TERBUKA, ²INFLUX

ABSTRACT

The washback study is sorely necessary in the situation of the National Examination system, which selects candidates for the next level of education, due to its gatekeeping role in influencing test-takers' academic futures and supposedly life courses and in allocating power and instituting social order. This qualitative study explores the impact of the Indonesian national examination and how the washback interlinks students, teachers, and parents. The research aims to uncover (1) the objective of the national examination, (2) the washback impact of this high-stake test on students, teachers, and parents, (3) how teachers and parents perceived to be under pressure from the national examination while affecting the students as test-takers. This case study examined the three actors as stakeholders at play through the lens of the parents, teachers, and students as test-taker by conducting semi-structured interviews with teachers and parents and also focus group discussion with students. We probe their Indonesian National Examination experiences based on their beliefs and practices as individuals or professionals. The findings indicated that the objectives of the national examination for the participants were for determining not only the students' future but also teachers and schools. It then led the participants to have high level of anxiety in facing the national examination. Their practices of teaching, learning and parents were heavily influenced by the national examination.

Keywords: High-stakes testing, Indonesia, Pressure, Secondary School

A. INTRODUCTION

Based on coursework, the assessment shows society how well and how much kids learn (Wyse et al., 2018). The examination aids learning and tracks academic success (Yeager, et.al., 2019) Thus, all education systems—including Indonesia's—use assessment (ADB & OECD, 2015). Indonesia has few criteria for assessment. Assessment is meant to help students reach their academic goals. However, other segments of the Law on Education National Standards define it as a method of gathering data to determine student achievement (for example, the 2009 SNP Act). The 2016 Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture Act 23 emphasized the same idea.

Since 1960, Indonesian schools have had national exams with various names yet similar purposes. The national test (*Ujian Nasional*) assessed education quality from 2005 to 2021 under government law UU 20 of 2003. Indonesian students were evaluated primarily by the

national test since the Indonesian government used this testing to verify students' graduation. Final-year students from every schooling level (primary, junior secondary, and senior secondary) were eligible for access to good public education institutions based on their results in the national exam. Indonesian, maths, natural science, and English were tested by administering 50 multiple choice test items for each subject in the third grade of junior secondary schooling level. The last year pupils had the same test items nationally, and the examination was held at the same time around the nation.

As the national testing determined the students' future, the anxiety that this kind of high-stakes assessment created was inevitable. Students as test takers are under pressure from extrinsic factors like instructor evaluations, peer pressure, and family standards, and intrinsic factors like language skills and learning interests (Min & Park, 2020). This phenomenon also impacts teachers and parents, leading to a negative washback on their perceptions and practices (Ali & Hamid, 2020; Dawadi, 2020). It was in line with the definition of washback suggested by Pearson (1988). He defined washback as public examinations that impact learners, teachers, and parents' behaviours, attitudes, and motivation. Negative washback could occur when an exam and its preparation are harmful, resulting in outdated or ineffective methods and curriculum narrowing. The most apparent negative washback is anxiety both in students caused by having to take a test of any kind and in teachers if they are afraid the poor performance of the pupils will have consequences. Tests negatively impact the learning process when teachers concede to the fear of bad grades and the associated shame, guilt, or embarrassment that can force them to urge their students to score as high as possible. Teachers will use "test-driven education" in such cases. The exam could also increase the parents' anxiety about enrolling their kids in the school they had planned, as the national examination would determine whether their plan worked as expected.

Study about washback has been in English language assessment research for more than 25 years. It is because researchers are becoming more aware of the impacts of high-stakes examination on stakeholders, such as keeping or making social inequality worse (Jackson et al., 2020; Shohamy, 2020; Tsang & Isaacs, 2021). The idea of washback itself has changed with the complex mechanism nature found in the exam and learning relationship (Kuang, 2020; Tsang & Isaacs, 2021). At first, it was a link between assessment, teaching, and learning. More recently, it has been a socially situated concept embedded in complex webs such as socio-political aspects, including agents, contexts, systems, and power (Ali & Hamid, 2021; Tsang & Isaacs, 2022)—our focus on the negative washback and the link between testing, teaching, and learning. Little is known about the variables that interact to shape these adverse effects collectively, especially on the triangle relationship between individual test-takers with their parents and teachers. There is a need to investigate how actors and factors in the contexts associated with students' homes, classrooms, schools, and the overarching social reality where students and the exam are located mediate learning and determine the effects of such impacts on exams and learning.

Shohamy (2020) emphasizes examining how tests' uses, abuses, justice, biases, and discrimination affect stakeholders. Dawadi (2020) examined stakeholders' (students' and parents') perceptions of parents' involvement in preparing for the high-stakes national exam in Nepal in her most recent study. The research looked at parents' involvement in the process and how students perceived the involvement in their language learning. No matter how many times they had taken the exam before, all parents were highly motivated to help their kids study. But it might have unfavourable effects. For instance, people who have taken the test

before may impose their strategies, such as memorizing the responses and disregarding their kids' preferred test preparation method. The research also discovered that even parents who had never taken the test could use general strategies for rigorous practice in the run-up to the test but that doing so might compromise their kids' well-being and test performance. The research discovered that most involvement of parents in test preparation was focused on raising test scores rather than enhancing their children's language development. The structure of the exam itself may have encouraged this.

Society, School administrators, students, and parents push teachers to direct their methodologies (Ali & Hamid, 2020; Rahman et al., 2021). Therefore, this may present instructors with a predicament that Spratt (2005: 24) describes as a tension concerning ethical and pedagogical decisions. They either need to follow what they would prefer to teach based on their viewpoint of real education or be caged by teaching to beat the test to help their pupils pass exams with good grades, mainly when those tests are ill-fitted to measure the measure. Thus, high-stakes exams can lower teachers' professional status and knowledge by pressuring them to boost test scores or face shame, embarrassment, guilt, anxiety, and anger (Rahman et al., 2021).

The literature also shows that high-stakes exams pressure teachers to cheat, sometimes subtly. For example, Amrein-Beardsley et al. (2010) classified three gradations of teachers' cheating in order to beat high-stakes tests: the first and gravest degree is inexcusable and unforgivable will and intentional behaviour, which some educators do with forethought and malice; the second one can be inflicted by the lack of concern from the teachers; and the last degree may be caused by carelessness or indifference, but not intended or premeditated. Students' test behaviour was also similar. They assumed that the situations under which teachers now perform, and the high-stakes assessment policies by which they are now regulated, have compelled more teachers into cheating even though most people disapprove.

The negative washback brings teaching to the test, such as focusing more on test preparation. The test preparation thus reduces the level of instruction for inflating test scores (Koretz, 2017). Koretz (2017) maintained that two main factors created bad test preparation: reallocation and coaching. Reallocation narrows the curriculum educators use by exclusion competencies or subjects not included in the test. This negative consequence creates imbalances because of the superiority of items in the specific knowledge and the importance of that knowledge in classroom practice. Many expert educators and articles also explicitly tell teachers and parents to reallocate, and coach based on the test as a good teaching practice (Koretz, 2017). They make it clear that once it is clear what kinds of questions will be on the end-goal test, schools should work to make or choose interim tests that match the specific needs of the end-goal test. The actions that put the test more important than the knowledge become common sense. The Act that Koretz (2017: 115) labelled as "to put the cart before the horse."

This study explored three main research questions:

1. What are the objectives of the national examination for teachers, students, and parents?
2. What is the washback impact of this high-stake test on students, teachers, and parents?
3. How do parents and teachers perceive being under pressure from the national examination while affecting the students as test-takers?

B. METHOD

A case study research approach was used in this study to explore the negative washback of the national examination. This qualitative research investigated how the national examination and the mediated factors from teachers, parents, and students created a negative washback in one council in *Kabupaten* Bandung, Indonesia. Purposeful sampling was employed to select the participants centred on assessing the necessary participant traits (Creswell, 2014). Participants were chosen based on their eagerness to engage, a mix of genders, and a variety of backgrounds, among other factors (i.e., For the participating teachers based on instruction experience, grades for the students, and employment for the parents). These selection criteria were used to guarantee access to a broad range of viewpoints. Eight out of fifteen junior secondary schools within the council agreed to participate in the study. Along with ten parents, the teachers took part individually in the semi-structured interviews. Meanwhile, 29 students divided into four groups joined in focus group discussion (FGD). Both interviews and focus group discussions lasted 30 to 60 minutes and were video recorded to capture the participants' expressions. For the participants' convenience, both interviews and FGD used the Indonesian language.

The study aims to investigate how the national test has affected teachers', parents', and students' experiences. The results of the semi-structured interviews and FGD were documented, transcribed, and organized. The data was first read and grouped before being coded to simplify the research. As this study involved human subjects, ethics clearance was granted by the College of Social Science Ethics Committee at the University of Glasgow, United Kingdom in 2015 before the data were collected. The initial ethics application included a justification for the study. There is also written consent proof from school principals that would be necessary to grant access to the participating teachers. In addition, the details on the selection criteria, an explanation of how the data would be collected, and information on how the data would be handled to ensure confidentiality, safely stored, and disposed of. To prevent any breach of confidentiality, all participants remained anonymous and were labelled using pseudonyms throughout this article. To analyse the data, thematic analysis was chosen. The data were transcribed and translated into English to adjust to the familiar themes within the literature.

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The discussion and findings about how the national examination impacted teachers, parents, and students are condensed in this section. This section combines the analysis and discusses three perspectives drawn from the findings and talks to weave the views drawn from the three components—teachers, students, and parents. This part discussed three themes found in the research, which are (1) the objective of the national examination for teachers, parents, and students, (2) the washback impact of the national examination on students, teachers, and parents, (3) how teachers and parents perceived to be under pressure from the national examination while affecting the students as test-takers.

1. The objectives of the national examination for teachers, parents, and students

Most participants—especially teachers and parents—agreed that teachers and parents encouraged students to study for the national exam. This study found that students' reluctance makes learning require parental and teacher support. Kids had less worry than most teachers and parents. Teachers and parents thought students were disinterested.

The national exam's goal of mapping education quality and pupil achievement can be disputed. This study found that classroom activities focused more on exam preparation or teaching the test than teaching students, biasing the national examination's measurement of student performance. Alqahtani (2021: 23) argued that "an exam is perceived as valid if it effectively measures what it aims to measure." It then leads to the purpose that the national examination can be contested. If the classroom focused on how to beat the test rather than learning English skills such as speaking and writing, a high national English test score would not indicate good English skills. Students with low national exam scores could have had higher competencies. "Score inflation" has resulted as a result, where scores have increased much more rapidly than the purported gains in achievement (Koretz, 2017). Nearly decades ago, measurement specialists anticipated this issue, and more than 25 years of study have demonstrated that false improvements are frequent and frequently quite large (Koretz, 2017). Gains on exams with high stakes are frequently several times larger than they ought to be. Consequently, there are false impressions of progress made regarding student performance. It deceives parents, pupils, and the general public because they are continuously fed positive news that is gravely deceptive.

Data showed that the national exam did not assess pupil learning. Teachers may have yet to assess deep thinking skills because the national assessment did not. Teachers, pupils, and parents agreed that surface learning was better for national exam preparation, even if this method prioritized test prep over subject understanding. The national exam may have underestimated students' expertise and skills. The government may need another assessment tool besides the national test to ensure reliability and validity.

Most teachers, parents, and students in this study felt the national test was unfair. Fairness was questioned because the national exam relied on one high-stakes test score. Teachers and students compete for good national test scores to move up a grade. It is not always about competence but also luck factor. In addition, the national test may have disadvantaged students at schools with fewer learning tools. Thus, gifted students in good schools may find such standardized exams easy, while low-achieving students in low-funded schools may struggle.

This study's result aligns with research findings conducted by Endriyati & Anggraeni (2019). They found that the standard of the institutions also has an impact on the washback result. Lower-quality institutions typically have negative washback, and vice versa. Teaching subjects related to the national examinations are frequently challenging in low-quality institutions. Especially during national exams, their pupils frequently struggle to provide accurate answers. Even though, the government's primary goal in conducting national examinations is to collect data or plan out the country. Yet teachers fear receiving poor results on their pupils' national examinations. Therefore, they try to find tricks to beat the test. In the alternative, good washback is typically found in good-quality schools. These institutions tend to attract intelligent students. They are more competent at providing answers. Thus, the classroom activities did not affect the need to learn how to beat the test.

Teachers thought national exam results measured school reputation and teaching skills. This study's teachers supported high-stakes national testing for school and teacher responsibility. In this study, private school teachers thought national exam scores affected a school's reputation. If parents sent their kids and the limit was met, the private school stayed open. Even though the private school could ask for tuition fees as high as needed, the private schools where this study was conducted would be hard to set high tuition fees for parents

due to their socioeconomic status. Raising tuition to maximize income was impossible since private schools primarily served low- to middle-class families. Tuition-dependent schools had to enlist parents. Teacher S and I assumed that passing the national test would attract parents. Failures worried them. They worried that society—including parents—held teachers accountable through the high-stakes national exam and punished schools by do not let their children attend their institutions.

National test results publicized affected teacher accountability. Society thought the national exam rated teachers and schools. Problematic since teachers were only accountable for national test marks. Teacher quality was unaffected by national exam grades. The national accountability test could enhance school and education quality, according to Government Law Number 19/2005 article 68. The government planned to analyse national exam data to aid underperforming schools. Meanwhile, this purpose led stakeholders, including study teachers and students, to rely on national exam scores rather than learning (Ali & Hamid, 2020; Shohamy, 2020). Accountability scores help teachers, students, and parents. Grades may affect training and learning. Teachers and students prioritized national exam marks over learning. Stobart (2008: 118) said learning "what is tested, especially if it holds important consequences," is faster and cheaper than carefully creating curriculum and pedagogy.

Only one teacher mentioned the consequence for teachers whose students scored low on the national exam, but its effect on teaching and learning from other participants was evident. Fera, who taught in a private school, prioritized national exam scores. Fera's private school's motto was "succeed in the national test," so teachers and final-year students were tense. She believed national exams determined school prestige. The principal and teacher worked on test preparation in the class because they expected their students to score highest in the national exam among 18 junior schools in the council like last year. Teachers felt pressure in class because their professional accountability relied mainly on the national exam.

The national accountability test could help teachers improve yet it remained problematic. The benefits of using the results to improve teaching performance relied on teachers' choice to align their practices with the standard or focus more on teaching to the test. They thought the latter could impact national examination results. Teachers focused more on testing than teaching due to the national assessment. The national examination, the goal of teaching, needed to be revised to assess students' achievement correctly.

2. The washback impact of the national examination on students, teachers, and parents

Teachers and students reorganized their study time for test themes and subject areas. This study showed teachers and students that the national test extended students' learning time. The school's enhancement class showed that national exam preparation took longer than other areas. Two teachers interviewed hinted that they did not have an enhancement class even though they needed such preparatory tasks. However, adding more test preparation time to class hours solved the problem.

Teachers and students noted what would help pupils prepare for the national exam. Both participants said practice tests were best for preparation. Exam-style questions and old test papers dominated teaching and learning at that time. As stated, reviewing academic content was less critical than reviewing exam papers. Most teachers prepared students for tests on the school principals' advice.

The study confirmed Indonesian findings. Furaidah et al. (2015) interviewed 11 English teachers and observed five schools in Malang. Their results indicated that the learning activities focused heavily on practicing to answer multiple-choice questions. "The teachers talked more than the students did, and peer-interaction among the students was minimal because of the absence of group work and communication activities" (Furaidah et al., 2015: 53).

The reallocation, which emphasized national exam topics, showed that the preparation was meant to inflate results. The national exam's suggested classroom procedures were altered by practice materials that resembled test questions. Koretz (2017) says coaching test-taking techniques and practicing multiple-choice may boost test scores but not general knowledge. A common reaction to the news of score booster was to attribute it to multiple-choice testing. To inflate the results, however, all that is necessary is for the question that was used to create the test to be predictable. This predictability could be based on the material tested, how it is being given, the format of the test items, or how the students' answers are graded. For inflation to occur, teachers or students must take advantage of this predictability by concentrating on the test's details at the cost of the greater need.

The alignment addressed the curriculum's washback from the national exam. Speaking and listening, two of the curriculum's four skills, were not included in the English part of the national assessment. Thus, the second semester's instruction focused on reading and writing. The curriculum then focused on assessed topics. The participant teachers probably should have noticed other skills as crucial for students' future success as reading. Even though students needed a much more comprehensive range of skills for daily life, the national examination often disqualified them from gaining those skills.

Since the national test questions covered only some of the material provided to final-year students, it may be unclear whether the curriculum should be adjusted to meet their needs. The curriculum alignment helped the national exam by focusing teaching and learning methods on test content. Teachers, parents, and students interviewed for this study knew of the national examination's positive washback impact. The national test motivated students, they said. Because it would determine students' academic and professional futures, participants believed studying for the national exam was important. Alignment may boost test scores by focusing classroom activities on national exam themes. Students may have liked learning materials meant to help them get high marks, but since they were frequently given, they may have become discouraged from learning.

One of Alderson and Wall's (1993: 120) fifteen washback theories was that high-stakes tests affect "the degree and depth of learning". This study verified that the national exam restricted learning to what would be tested. The data showed that most teachers focused on teaching for the national exam from the start of the second semester until the exam.

Instead of focusing on deep learning, the teachers gave students sample exams, practice tests, and tips for beating the competition. Marton and Säljö (1976) separated surface and deep learning. When a student focused on memorizing the material, he engaged in surface learning, but when he contemplated its meaningful content, he engaged in deep learning. This study found that students preferred surface learning to obtain high national test scores.

Coaching in this part only related to students' outside-of-class preparation for the national exam since reallocation and coaching could be combined (Koretz, 2017). The exercises

included touring a cram school and studying exam-like questions at home. Performance-based exam tutoring may be offered. Focus groups with students and parent interviews outlined what students learned after school. Despite most students and parents believing that school exam preparation was sufficient, three students attended a private cram school to practice exam-like queries and past exam papers. Bray (2006) states that enrolling in a private tutoring program or cram school, popular in Asian countries like Indonesia, allows students to obtain the best secondary education and improve academically. Because the cram school taught them how to master prior exam questions and test-taking techniques, students may become proficient at passing the national exam. Two mothers said they sent their kids to cram schools to prepare for the national test. This research found that students in state-run and expensive private schools spent more time outside of class studying for the national exam, doing homework, and visiting cram schools, which exhausted them.

Meanwhile, parents helped their children prepare for the national exam at home. The students' poor test scores may have been caused by their low socioeconomic status and inability to obtain learning assistance. They then pressured their children to do well on the national exam. The parents believed their children's futures depended purely on the national examination, as shown by Siti's (parent) threat or Nina's (student) acceptance. Parents had high expectations for the national exam, according to student focus groups and parent interviews yet the data did not detail parental involvement.

Researchers found parental involvement and pupil achievement fascinating issues (for ex. Dawadi, 2020). On the other hand, this study found that society, including parents, blamed schools and teachers when pupils scored poorly on national exams. Epstein (1985: 18) states that schools would improve if teachers, parents, and schools understood "each other's potential for improving the education of the children." Both parents and teachers recognized the national test's importance for kids' futures. Teachers and parents not communicating could also be a factor. The analysis indicated that parents did not need to participate in classroom activities, even though the parent interviews did not reveal much evidence of their involvement in students' learning. During the interviews, most teachers voiced concerns, possibly because they believed they were solely responsible for the students. Harlen (2010: 40) argued that "When students and parents expect teachers to be the only ones to say how students are doing," collaboration was unlikely to happen. Only the national test results would be relied on by teachers, and society would appear to disregard the parents' role. After that, teachers took full responsibility for student performance on the national exam.

3. How teachers and parents perceived being under pressure from the national examination while affecting the students as test-takers

This current study indicated that teachers, students, and parents valued the national test. Teachers thought the national exam assessed their teaching. Students needed the national test to move up. Then the parents evaluated the national examination's assessment of children's learning and school and teacher performance. Coniam & Falvey (2018: 3) defined "high stakes" as "an assessment or battery of assessment instruments is used to make decisions that affect individuals' lives in significant ways". The national exam in Indonesia that had been abolished in 2021 decided students' next grade and assessed teachers.

Teachers, students, and parents reported that the national test increased anxiety. This study's stakeholders were concerned about the national examination's effect due to its increased importance in school admission. They consistently ranked national exam preparation as an

essential classroom activity. The data analysis did not suggest that the teacher, students, and parents were confident that their national examination scores would be among the highest of the junior secondary schools in the study area. Students are stressed over national test scores determining school admission. The parent feared the national test results because of the child's desire to attend a particular school. Thus, they put more pressure by "motivating" them with tales of individuals who had achieved success because they had good scores (Dawadi, 2020). In addition, parents would speak of their own experiences and chances lost due to low test scores.

Parenting style was also linked to student national test anxiety. This study's focus group discussions included a state school student whose mother chose to be authoritarian because she wanted her child to do well on the national exam. Nina's mother encouraged her daughter to study for the national test because she believed it motivated students.

In Indonesia's present examination system, parents may be unable to choose a school. National test results influenced parents' school choice. If grades were below the school's minimum, parents said they had to give up their child's happiness (prospects). Yani's and Tari's (both area parents) higher anxiety showed their belief that their child's future depended on the national test results.

According to the research, teachers faced the most national examination pressure Larsson & Olin-Scheller (2020). Teachers felt more pressure than students and parents because they believed they were responsible for helping students score well on the national test. Hattie (2003: 3) called the teacher "the largest source of variance that can make the difference." Teachers felt ashamed and guilty because they thought the pupils' low scores were their fault. Teachers had to ensure that every final-year student, which could be hundreds, passed the national exam. Unlike parents with one kid, teachers felt their vocation was at risk because the results showed their teaching quality.

This study did not show that pupils or parents pressured teachers. Students' and parents' anxiety about failing the national test did not mean they valued teachers more. The focus group results did not indicate how students communicated with teachers about the national exam. Most students in this study were anxious about the national test, but they did not pressure their teachers to help them score well. This study's parents were also uninvolved in their children's teaching practice. They probably thought teachers would help students thrive. Most parents in this study feared failing the national test but did not mention their engagement in school activities in their interviews. Thus, the teachers in this study were not pressured by pupils or parents.

The pressure is primarily due to the accountability that makes teachers pressure pupils to score well. The teacher's expectations of students scoring well on the national test and receiving awards affected their relationship. Teacher Putri's remark proved it. Teachers, Putri's goal of motivating students for the national test may be successful. It also showed her self-esteem and national test views. Teacher Putri wanted her students to do well on the national test for her self-esteem. She encouraged pupils to get good grades to boost their self-esteem. Two private teachers in this study reported extreme shame and guilt from low national test scores. According to Smith (1991: 9), "The publication of test scores produces feelings of shame, embarrassment, guilt, and anger in teachers and the determination to do what is necessary to avoid such feelings in the future".

The national test was a teacher evaluation. Teachers felt anxiety ranging from moderate fear to extreme shame of failing pupils because they believed their success depended on national exam results. These conditions may have pressured teachers to teach to the exam and lessen learning. This study's association between national test scores and teacher self-esteem may be limited by other variables related to teachers' extreme feelings.

D. CONCLUSION

This qualitative study has explored the causes of negative washback on national examinations in junior schools in a district in Indonesia. By presuming that negative washback can exist and that the relationship between the testing taker and exam could have a mediated internal and external factor, the research thus got off to a new conceptual start. These aspects allowed us to investigate the reasons behind the actions test takers and teachers with parents around them take about negative washback. It can be claimed that the national exams had a detrimental effect on education. We can find in this research that students as test takers feel less pressure than the stakeholders around them. The tests have more influence on parents and teachers to bring negative washback by pushing more to concentrate on what is tested while ignoring the non-tested competencies. According to teachers, the curriculum had been condensed, and they were only instructing for the tests. At the same time, the parents pushed the students to have embedded notions that test takers' life trajectories depend on the test's results. The conceptual framework created and the anxiety with accountability served to investigate the phenomenon outside the direct testing-test-taker relationship.

The results indicated that accountability and economics variables might have a more significant impact on the connection. The paper's main addition is its demonstration of the complexity of the testing-test-taker relationship and the need for washback research to acknowledge the significance of mediating factors information in understanding the phenomenon. The research has investigated mediated elements negatively and caused washback in a small area with abolished national exams. Future studies may investigate the phenomenon from the admission exam to Public Universities and with a more extensive reach. Regarding the study's limitations, future research may incorporate a mixed method of quantitative approach with a questionnaire to increase the validity of evidence. Specifically, these studies can also focus on another subject testing besides English teaching and look for mediating factors like peer pressure. In a changing political, social, and economic setting, assessment worldwide may benefit from studies trying to generate situated, local, and thorough knowledge of variables influencing examination and teaching.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The data were collected during the first author's doctoral degree. The project was under supervision of Professor E. Louise Hayward and Professor Oscar Odena from the School of Education, University of Glasgow.

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