

Chasing Scores: An In-Depth Exploration of the Root Causes and Impacts of Exam-Oriented Practice on Educational Policy and SDG4

Azizi Alias, Kamisah Osman

ABSTRACT

The revamping of education assessment policy has become an ongoing debate in Malaysia whether to abolish or continue the public examination. Exams are capable in providing information about the success of the curriculum but also deliver negative effects such as narrowing the curriculum, neglecting critical thinking and anxiety. The purpose of this study was determined factors that influence teachers be exam-oriented and its impact on educational policy and SDG4. In this study, washback models proposed by Watanabe, Shih and Pan were taken into account accompanied by expectancy theory in providing a clear understanding concerning the impact of examination on teachers' classroom instruction and factors leading to exam-oriented practice. This study was determined through semi-structured online interviews with nine secondary school teachers of factors influence them be exam-oriented. In-person interviews were performed via Zoom and Google Meets, and participants were sent open-ended questions to encourage more explanations and validating the transcripts. Two rounds of interviews were done, depending on the participants' availability. The study had found five factors that mediate teachers to teach to the test namely personal, external, contextual, school environment and resource and the examination itself. The findings showed that secondary school teachers tend to facilitate their students by giving drills, mock exams, discussing exam format, and test-taking strategies. The findings of this study will reflect on to certain extent the implementation of the educational policy and SDG also teachers' current classroom practice that impacted by exams. This will highlight deeper understanding of washback on educational assessment and what should be taken into account before a new assessment policy is established. This study provides a substantial literature on washback research enfolding wider factors mediating teaching to the test constructed by washback models and expectancy theory. It also indicates the misalignment of educational policy and SDG in promoting quality and equality in education due to high-stakes testing.

Keywords:

Washback, high-stakes examination and educational assessment

INTRODUCTION

The development of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) is crucial in transforming the quality of education in equality and opportunity impacting the instructional practice, societal structures and individual development. It is proved that by incorporating SDG encourages experiential learning and project-based approaches leading to students being active with higher engagement (Ruiz et al., 2024). It also promotes future teachers to exhibit favourable disposition towards integrating SDGs into their instructional plans as a commitment to sustainable education (Guo et al., 2024). Nonetheless, greater emphasis in preparing students for public exams inhibit teachers' creativity in fostering students' critical thinking and soft-skills plunging the SDGs initiatives.

As stated in the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (MEB 2013-2025), the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MoE) would make sure that the curriculum is comprehensive and benchmarked with international standards to foster students who have critical abilities to compete at the world stage (Ministry of Education, 2013). In addition, MoE will make sure that students are evaluated comprehensively through both school-based assessment (SBA) and national exams. To this end, the assessment framework will be improved by adding more Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) items and integrated with innovation, critical and creative thinking and skilled human capital (Ling, Pazilah & Ong, 2024). Even with revised curricula and education policies, there are still issues with Malaysian students' performance on international assessments like TIMSS (Mullis et al, 2020) and PISA (Nizam, Anuar & Rahman, 2024) indicating that the policy is still need to be reconsidered.

Exam-oriented practice among teachers encourages rote learning, stifling creativity and critical thinking (McNeil, 2002; Ahmadi Safa & Sheykhmololuki, 2022). Teachers report 'teaching to the test' as a common strategy due to exam demands (Owusu, 2021; Paxton, Yamazaki & Kunert 2022). To assure test performance, teachers provided exam-answering tactics to pupils before or after class (Polat, 2019;

Sumpada, 2019). Repeated questions are given a lot of weight by exam teachers (Rind, Mari & Heidari-Shahrez, 2019). How well students feel they can manage the test and what they are willing to do to achieve determines their academic performance (Chou, 2018). Under these conditions, the primary objective of exam preparation is to enhance student performance but likewise limits students' thinking and meaningful learning.

Additionally, teachers adapted classroom practices to focus heavily on test-specific preparation (Puspitasari, 2024). The content of instructional materials, the objectives and programs of education, and the value of specific test activities can all be impacted by high-stakes assessments (Estaji & Alikhani, 2020). According to Ibrahim and Bello (2020), practices associated with examinations are ranked higher than non-examination-related activities. To help students prepare for future tests, teachers should construct learning resources that follow the format of the exam (Barnes, 2017; Kim & Isaacs, 2018). Tests and exams have both good and bad effects on learning styles, material, approaches, and teaching and learning (Hoa, 2020). So, why do teachers are fonder to be exam-centric, although they realized that they were accountable to align their instruction with the new curricular and SDGs requisition.

Educational institution perceptions of the value and cost associated with student-centred teaching strategies are influenced by expectancy theory, affecting their implementation of these practices (Judson et al., 2017). Educators can leverage outcome expectancy by creating contingency-based strategies that enhance students' beliefs about the outcomes of their efforts, thereby improving motivation (Shell, 2023). That high task value can enhance motivation, but low expectancy beliefs can negate this effect, highlighting the need for a balance between expectancy and value (Meyer et al., 2019). Due the high-stakes testing value which has consequences on teacher performance evaluation, the effectiveness of school program and students' future as rewards, teachers were prone to imply exam-centric approach (Figure 1). Factors such as insufficient rewards and perceived challenges in teaching can hinder teachers' motivation for self-development. These barriers illustrate the practical implications of expectancy theory in understanding and addressing motivational issues in educational settings (Özaslan & Özaslan, 2022). Therefore, if the teachers believe that they will be rewarded based on their effort to facilitate students to perform in public examination, exam-oriented practice will become dominant compared to student-centred approach and instructions that emphasis critical thinking promoted in MEB (2013-2025) and SDG.

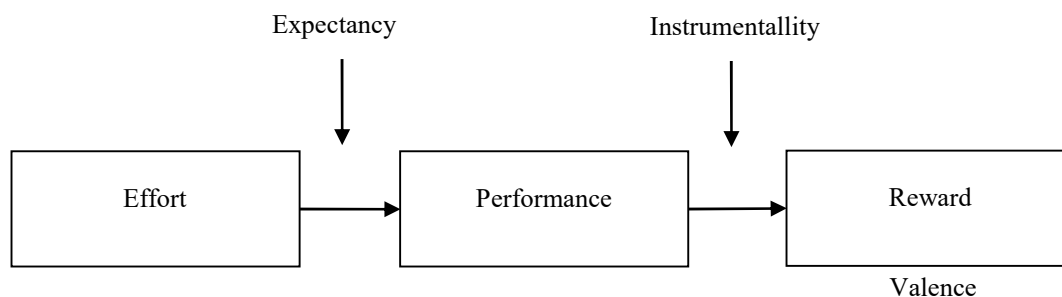


Figure 1: Basic Model of Expectancy Theory. (Source: Lunenberg, 2011)

High-stakes tests can influence critical decisions such as grade promotion and graduation, which may not always reflect a student's true abilities or potential (Cho & Chan, 2020; Christenson et al., 2007). Exams serve as to monitor student learning and responsibility (Chen & Chang, 2023), as part of learning to find out about students' development and achievements both during and after a course (Siahpoosh, Ramak & Javandel, 2019) and been used to assess and evaluate students at the end of the teaching and learning process (Chou, 2018). The pressure to perform well on high-stakes tests can lead to changes in instructional practices, often prioritizing test preparation over more holistic educational approaches (Demir & Keleş, 2021; Nahar, 2023). Nonetheless, testing act as a tool to regulate education system and its effectiveness objectively and scientifically.

Compared to other techniques of evaluation, the test is more impartial and trustworthy in determining the level of student competency across all subjects. It serves as a tool of educational quality in the exam-heavy educational environment of today (Saglam & Farhady, 2019). For those involved in education, the test result is crucial since it shows if learning objectives were met and whether investments were profitable (Zhang, 2024). Exams results benefit the stakeholders to inform the effectiveness of teaching strategies and elevate student outcomes (Oya & Nordin, 2024). It also offers a common framework

to analyse students' performance across different educational institutions, districts and states to ensure educational quality (Mittal, 2024). Standardized exam results are often used by ministry and state education authorities to inform their decision-making on the next steps (Bird, 2017).

In education terminology, this is referred to as "washback" as testing affects both teaching and learning (Alderson & Wall, 1993). It follows that backwash has an impact on teaching and learning since test results affect a student's future. Standardized examinations play a major role in the Malaysian education system for several reasons, such as the entrance to elite schools, science and non-science class streaming, and post-secondary education admittance. The Malaysian Certificate of Education is the last standardized test that students (between the ages of 17 and 18) must pass to be admitted to pre-university and higher education programs and to get minimum requirement to start their careers (UNESCO, 2021). Washback is a global phenomenon in nations that appreciate examination as indicator and tool of accountability and future undertakings impacted by various factors.

Exam material selection (Ali & Hamid, 2020; Khosravani et al., 2022), exam format implementation (Andrews et al. 2002; Cheng 1999; Lee 2019), and test-taking strategies (Alqahtani, 2021; Hughes, 2003; Wang, Zheng & Zhou, 2024) are just a few of the contexts and areas in which the washback effect of exams has been extensively researched. Though little research has been done, the magnitude of this influence is highly dependent on the opinions of several important parties involved (Booth, 2018). In order to develop a washback model that takes into account both micro and macro aspects, Pan (2008) merged five studies from Shohamy et al. (1996), Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996), Cheng, Horwitz, and Schallert (1999), Green (2007), and Shih (2007). According to Watanabe (2004), five elements affect teachers' decision to teach to the test: the exam itself, the belief system, the class environment (micro), and the external environment (macro). The model suggested by Pan (2008), Shih (2009) and Watanabe (2004) become the main guide in designing the interview protocol and prompting questions.

This research will investigate the variables that mediate teachers' decision to teach to the test to put forth a model in light of the findings. Despite the growing body of literature on washback studies, there remains a significant gap in understanding on the social and cultural context leading to it were not given enough attention in the past studies. This study seeks to fill this gap by exploring broader dimensions including contextual factor and the exams itself to predict teachers' behaviour in implementing exam-oriented practice or more diversified authentic approach in realizing MEB (2013-2025) and SDG4.

Research Questions

How do factors mediate teachers to teach "Teaching to the Test"?

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METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research has several goals, such as reporting, developing a key idea, elucidation, testing of hypotheses, and description (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). Online interviews with secondary school teachers were used in this qualitative study to get their thoughts and viewpoints on the variables that influence teaching-to-test methods. Researchers may now get information using online interviews, circumventing the limitations of face-to-face interviews such as financial limits, geographical dispersion, and physical mobility (Janghorban et al., 2014), saves time and money on trip expenses (Ridge et al., 2023) and researchers have the freedom to arrange interviews online, which guarantees participant availability and boosts participation rates (Maia, 2023). In-person interviews were performed two rounds via Zoom and Google Meets, and participants were sent open-ended questions to encourage more explanations. Research personnel who may detect any potential bias also joined online interviews in order to reduce any possible or potential bias.

Nine government secondary school teachers, ages 38 to 57, were included in this study. All of them were chosen by purposive sampling, five from urban schools, while four of them were from rural schools. Students in Forms 4 and 5, aged 16 to 18, were being taught by all teachers. At the end of Form 5, these students will take the Malaysia Education Certificate exam. The participants, who were divided into two male and seven female teachers, had teaching experiences ranging from 13 to 34 years. Malay, English, mathematics and science, were taught by the participants.

The nine participants all attended the test item development and scoring workshops offered by the Ministry of Education. Based on their wide variety of classroom experience and ability as examiners, the

participants were chosen. It may be said that the candidates comprehended the exam format. The interviews were held between December 2023 till March 2024. Prior to conducting the study, the researcher obtained participants' agreement by having them sign a letter of acknowledgement. According to Mahmud (2019), acknowledgement is a moral prerequisite for study in order to prevent coercion, pressure, deceit, and other forms of influence that need the participants' voluntary consent. Additionally, approval to conduct the study was sought from the State Department of Education and the Ministry of Education's Education Policy, Planning, and Research Division to ensure that all research methods adhered to ethical guidelines.

Every interview session lasted 60 to 90 minutes and took place according to the interviewee availability. Five components that were modified from the washback models of Watanabe (2004), Shih (2007), and Pan (2008) were used to build the interview protocols. Teachers were also contributed their previous lesson plan to identify their approach in the classroom. It may be possible to identify subtle patterns and associations that a single dataset would miss by combining different qualitative datasets, such as those from interviews and document analysis (Mohiya, 2024). Initial codes were created, the interviews were verbatim transcribed from the video recordings and data from open-ended questions provided via email were all triangulated to identify relevant features in the data. Themes from the data were found, examined, and presented in a comprehensible way using thematic analysis (Fuchs, 2023; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The names of the themes were picked to reflect their respective meanings, and after discussion and minor revisions, the themes were decided upon.

FINDINGS

Twenty-one themes, grouped into six primary themes and fifteen subthemes, were approved by expert committees. i) Exam/test factors; ii) external factors; iii) contextual factors; iv) school environment and resources factors; v) exam/test factors; and vi) how teachers educate to the test are the components of constructs. A suggested model was created based on the findings to provide a clearer understanding of the variables that influence teachers' decision to teach to the test (Figure 2).

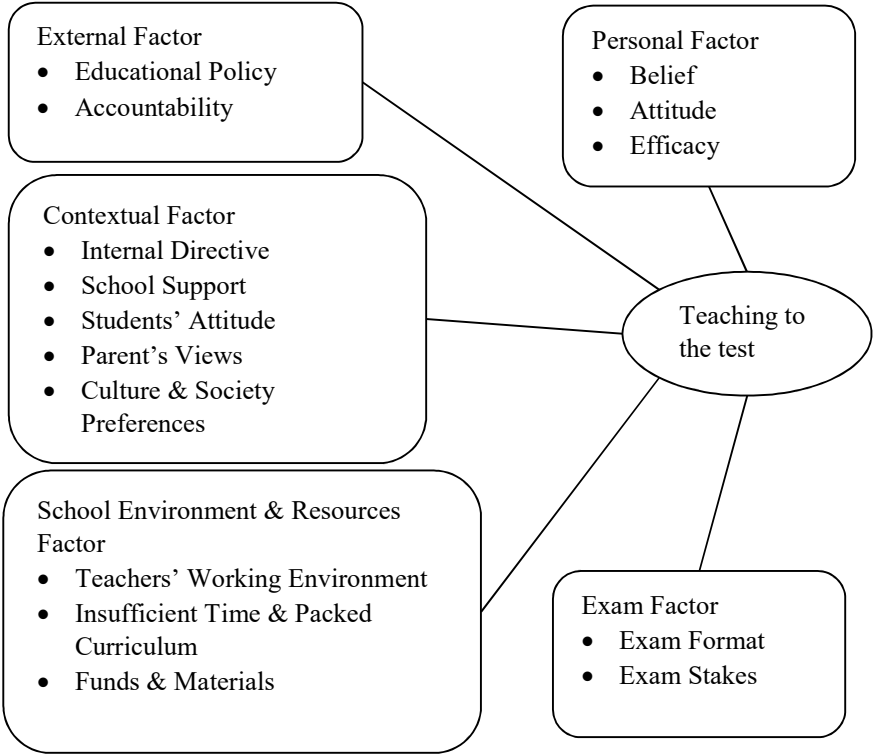


Figure 2: Proposed Model of Factors Mediating Teaching to the Test

Personal Factor

Belief

Example of Excerpt Statement

ROS.R1Line139-142: "...teachers believe that exam-oriented learning is preferable because it gives pupils a goal or objective to work forwards. Pupils will take ownership of their learning and have a stronger hold on their academics. I'm worried that students will not have enough help from me at this time due to workload.

The teacher reacts on the way pupils learn and are evaluated will be guided by their beliefs. According to the study, teachers who think tests are the easiest method to assess their pupils also tend to be exam-oriented since they think they will push their students to learn more and get better results. Teachers also believe that students will become more responsible in their study.

Attitudes

Example of Excerpt Statement

TAN.R1Line120-125: "...in order to improve the student's performance on the impending test, the teacher must then alter the method, approach, delivery method, kind and style of strategies, training discussion, and so on. My approach and preference in the classroom include exercises like previous examinations and prediction questions and students love it"

As a result, the teacher had a good attitude towards tests and preferred to use drills and former exam questions to help pupils do better on the upcoming test. When students feel anxious about how well they will perform on tests, they would rather study for the test, and teachers will adjust their instruction accordingly to meet students' expectation.

Efficacy

Example of Excerpt Statement

SAH.R1Line035-40: "In addition to enhancing the school's reputation, teachers must possess the abilities and methods necessary to assist students in improving their exam scores. I've gone to seminars and online class to improve test performance for students and their ability to score in accordance with the exam's scoring system also to develop my confidence in helping students"

As a result, students who are motivated by their teachers to do well on tests are encouraged to seek advice from more expert classmates in order to improve their exam-taking strategies. Teachers improve their motivation and effectiveness by learning the requirements of the tests, including the structure, exam items, and scoring methods, through courses offered by the Ministry of Education, State Education Department, and private tuition. This gives them the confidence to better prepare students for future exams.

External Factor

Education Policy

Example of Excerpt Statement

SAK.R1Line011-014: "Although the KSSM (new curriculum) approach is more student-centered and formative, teachers still use the conventional techniques that they are more familiar with and comfortable with although they are mandated by national policy to decide how teachers are assessed"

Education policy has a big impact on how teachers do their work and how they utilize tests to gauge how well students are meeting their learning goals. The effective execution of educational policies and the assessment of teachers' performance depends on the alignment between practice and policy. Test accomplishment also determines the quality of education, effectiveness of teaching and students' performance thus, teachers must concentrate on maintaining and raising test scores.

Accountability

Example of Excerpt Statement

HAR.R1Line100-103: "In addition, educators have a duty to develop a system of scoring, grade students' responses, assess their performance, and notify relevant stakeholders of the outcomes. Teachers are held responsible for the exam performance of their pupils.

The study discovered that teachers are required to use the information they obtain from students' exam results to improve teaching and learning. Teachers are held accountable for providing high-quality education. Teachers were forced by the weight of accountability to tie their instruction to the test in order

to improve exam scores, ensure that they had performed their duties honourably, and avoid raising red flags with stakeholders.

Contextual Factor

Internal Directive

Example of Excerpt Statement

NIS.R1Line108-111: "Horrible experience; in order to satisfy the desires of the parents and school, the school strives for an improved rating each year. All manner of courses, workshops, events, and activities that result in outstanding exam scores will be made available indirectly."

The study supports the idea that internal directive or school policies have an impact on teachers' practices and that the administration of the school places pressure on them because of how these rules affect children's academic achievement. Exam results affect both teachers' evaluations and the school's main performance index. As the primary stakeholder, the school administrator, together with school policies, influences teachers to practice teaching to the test.

School Support

Example of Excerpt Statement

SAK.R1Line162-168: "Teachers' feelings are impacted by school support as they prepare for exam-focused assessment methods. The school also supports the allocation of budget for test-taking strategies workshops by experienced educators to offer exam-answering techniques. Colleagues support educators by sharing resources, inspiration, and expertise to help kids get ready for tests.

When school administrators provide teachers with emotional and financial support, and professional development the chances to improve their teaching skills, teachers can improve student performance in exams. This study also discovered that the school's annual plan includes initiatives to help students do better on tests, such as test-taking techniques, student motivation, and exam-related courses for teachers.

Students' Attitude

Example of Excerpt Statement

MIC.R1Line070-075: "By employing the study strategy (memorization and performing several exercises), as well as the type of exercise, my pupils' performance will increase. They enjoy this type of activity since they are aware of how beneficial it will be for their examinations, and underachievers prefer simpler assignments."

Teachers will adapt their instruction to suit the preferences of their students. According to this study, when there are tests and worries about their performance, pupils take their studies more seriously. Exam-focused class activities are perceived by students as more beneficial than long, project-based assignments that require a lot of time investment.

Parents' View

Example of Excerpt Statement

TAN.R2Line180-183: "Parents want their teachers to help their kids do well on tests. If their child fails the exam, a lot of parents will be upset. Teachers find it extremely difficult to implement school-based assessment. This set of parents puts pressure on teachers"

According to this study, parents were worried about how well their kids did on tests. Exam results allow for individual comparison and are simpler to convey to parents than criteria-based assessments. When their children didn't do well on tests, some parents put pressure on their teachers to ensure their kids will be able to attend higher education and getting scholarship.

Culture and Society Preferences

Example of Excerpt Statement

SAK.R2Line023-027: "The setting in which students' accomplishments are evaluated is gauged by the quantity of A's they receive, particularly in exams that are given in public. The public's and community's opinions have a big impact and compel school administrators to concentrate on exam-oriented"

Most people in society think that getting excellent grades guarantees a brighter future and shows that the person can contribute positively to society. Exams are a common practice in Asian cultures and are

used to identify high achievers and poor achievers as well as to determine a student's eligibility to continue their education in order to earn respect and a decent salary.

School Environment & Resources Factor

Teachers' Working Environment

Example of Excerpt Statement

AZE.R2Line094-098: "However, there's no doubt that the lack of information-gathering resources contributed to the tension that was felt. Additionally, there is not enough space in the laboratory, so many tasks that call for it are limited to paper-based assignments that students must complete in order to pass the practical test."

The study discovered that teachers often teach to the test rather than emphasizing deeper, more meaningful learning because of a lack of resources and workload, and that tests are simpler, quicker, and less expensive to administer. Teachers are under pressure because of this, which limits their attention to subjects that are expected to be covered in the near future and narrows the curriculum to make up for the inadequate resources and workload.

Insufficient Time and a Packed Curriculum

Example of Excerpt Statement

NIS.R2Line189-193: "Teachers are overworked, and pupils must concentrate on their examinations, making school an unpleasant place to be. I have conflicting emotions. Exams are loved or hated by some pupils. I do feel bad for them since there are moments when I can't give them my whole attention. It becomes stressful when lesser number of students attended extra class"

Teachers would rather finish the curriculum early to give pupils more time to study for upcoming examinations, as a result of time constraints and an overburdened curriculum. In order to complete the syllabus, review the prior material, and help low-achieving pupils pass exams and accomplish as much as their high-achieving peers, teachers typically provide extra sessions after school.

Funds and Materials

Example of Excerpt Statement

MIC.R2Line093-097: "Since I oversee exams as the examination secretary, it is critical that I make sure the question bank is accessible so teachers may use the questions. Exam materials are widely available, and the school purchases them from the market as well. Our school gives teachers access to a copying machine so they may make things for the children."

The investigation discovered that test materials were widely available in the market and generously supplied by the institutions. Schools often set aside budget for activities and test materials to help pupils get ready for exams. Teachers have no trouble giving students the resources they need to get ready for tests. Teachers tend to teach to the test since resources like last year's exam questions and practice tests are simple to prepare.

Examination Factor

Exam Format

Example of Excerpt Statement

SAK.R2Line085-090: "Test variables have an impact on how teachers teach. Exams continue to remain the focus of education in Malaysia, and this is reflected in the way teachers conduct drills, particularly in the lead-up to test season when they employ exam-formatted practice questions. Teachers must become proficient in exam structure. It really benefits pupils to do well on tests with less anxiety."

According to this study, teachers must become proficient in the exam's format in order to guarantee that their pupils do well on it. In addition, teachers must be able to help students complete test questions according to the scoring system. Students are introduced to the exam structure to verify their familiarity with it and reduce their uncertainty about taking the test.

Exam's Stakes

Example of Excerpt Statement

HAR.R1Line025-027: "The majority of educators and learners believe that passing a test will provide them access to a better future. Students who perform well on tests will have more options to pursue further education and be eligible for scholarships."

Exams have consequences even if they help teachers determine how well their pupils learn and how well they are taught. The results of the tests determine how well students do in terms of teacher assessment, requirements for continuing education and receiving scholarships, distribution of school finances, and school reputation. Teachers who have a lot stakes on the examinations are more likely to practice teaching for the test.

How teachers teach to the test

Example of Excerpt Statement

SAK.R1Line165-168: “Teachers must also employ a variety of initiatives to help students prepare for exams. When it comes to tests, teachers frequently utilize sample questions and prediction questions from the market and practice sessions in the classroom. Now, I usually use exam questions that available online and can be easily share with students”

According to this study, all teachers practice teaching to the test by assigning extra courses to students, conducting drills and mock tests, going over prior exam questions and formats, practicing test-taking techniques, and choosing subjects that are expected to be covered. With this, kids can lessen their worries and perform better on examinations in the future. Because pupils' career depends them on passing exams and being exam-oriented, teachers experience less anxiety.

DISCUSSION

The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 agenda focus on ensuring inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all while promoting lifelong learning opportunities. (Mackatiani et al., 2023; OECD, 2019). Education plays a crucial role in sustainable development by empowering individuals, reducing inequalities, and fostering economic growth (Joseph & Said, 2020). It promotes fair and inclusive education systems that eliminate discrimination and provide equal learning opportunities (Shulla et al., 2020). This goal is particularly relevant which can play a significant role in advancing quality data collection and assessment methods to monitor progress in their own education systems and globally (Yasin et al., 2023). Furthermore, it also be achieved by fostering diversified and authentic educational assessment to develop students that are sustainable in an ever-changing world. (Bosevska & Kriewaldt, 2019)

Through Malaysian Education Plan (MEB) 2013-2025, it is hope that the education will be able to nurture holistic development of future generation and empowering teachers with adequate facilities, professional development and leadership skills. It also aims to achieve academic standards comparable globally by 2025, requiring effective strategic planning in all educational level (Jaafar et al., 2022). The plan focuses on the for education to foster a sustainable mindset, addressing environmental concerns and promoting a balance between technological advancement and ecological well-being (Yean et al., 2024). A significant emphasis is placed on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) to equip students for Industry 4.0 with 60% of students pursuing STEM fields (Muhamad et al., 2020; Ramli & Awang, 2020). Do traditional exam-oriented mindset and washback effect can be changed in engaging teachers to implement approach parallel to current students' needs to be future-ready.

Washback is a well-known condition that exam affects people everywhere, including Malaysia. Exams provide a benchmark for academic performance and measure students' knowledge, skill and mastery of the curriculum (Rao & Banerjee, 2023). Through retrieval practice, test can act as powerful learning tools in promoting retention and understanding (Murphy, Little & Bjork, 2023). However, exam potentially foster negative social dynamics related to pressure leading to increased stress and competitive behaviours among students and parents (Babacan, 2024). The use of exams needs to be taken high consideration because it is not only influence what happened in the classroom but educational community as a whole. The model developed by Shih (2009), Pan (2008), and Watanabe (2004) have been extremely helpful to this study in understanding what goes on in the classroom, particularly in terms of the behaviours of teachers and the global setting as a result of the exam's implementation. Thus, it will further understand that how expectancy theory mediated by the value brought by exam resonates with the education reforms in realizing MEB (2013-2025) and SDG.

Teachers' beliefs strongly reflect exam-focused culture and high-stakes exams shape assessment practices contrary to curriculum goals (Ha, Tran & Tran, 2021). Beliefs about assessment purposes shape practices and perceived pressure impacts instructional strategies (Tóth & Csapó 2022). Teachers' resistance to change in educational policy stems from deep-seated beliefs (Martinez, Diaz & Whitney 2024). Also,

teacher self-efficacy was identified as a mediator between instructional strategies, motivational strategies, and student academic performance (Sarfraz, Vlăduț, Cioca, & Ivascu, 2022). Not only belief and self-efficacy, teachers with positive attitudes towards their teaching roles and responsibilities tend to foster better academic performance among students (Alibakhshi, Nikdel & Labbafi, 2020). Teachers are more likely to provide tests because they are dissatisfied with the constantly evolving evaluation system (Kim & Isaacs 2018). These personal factors influence teachers to implement exam-centric approach that is prominent in their classroom practices despite the current educational policy requiring to be more student-centred.

Educational policies particularly those focused on accountability, have been shown to influence teachers' classroom goal orientations, often fostering environments that emphasize performance goals over mastery goals (Hinnant-Crawford, 2023). Understanding on how these associations may be used to impact policy actions targeted at improving student learning and accomplishment may be made easier with knowledge of the associations of policies and outcomes (Fischer et al., 2020). Accountability measures influence teaching practices and teachers feel pressure from multiple stakeholders (Tóth & Csapó 2022). The idea that standardized testing will guarantee that schools and students fulfil academic requirements is the driving force behind the push for accountability-focused policies (Gebriel & Eid, 2017). According to Jamila and Kabir (2020), school officials put pressure on teachers to do well on tests, which leads them to adopt the "teaching to the test" strategy. External factor such as educational policies and accountability made teachers modify classroom practice consummate the obligation to secure students' achievement demand administrative and peer support.

The way in which teachers perceived the degree of administrative assistance was one of the elements influencing student achievement in schools. Higher levels of school support can buffer the negative effects of poor performance on student engagement, promoting educational equity (Moreira, Dias, Matias, & Oliveira, 2018). Academic support from peer support playing a significant role in student engagement and academic success (Gutiérrez, Tomás, Romero, & Barrica, 2017). According to Fischer et al. (2018), students perform better when principals and other school officials believe that their teachers are supported. It shows that internal directive and support facilitate to boost students' motivation and driving teachers to focus more in preparing students for the exams.

An exam-centric education system can lead to students viewing education merely as a means to pass exams, which can stifle their imagination, creativity, and sense of self (Kirkpatrick & Zang, 2011). Over emphasis on exams often results in diminished motivation and interest in students' learning (Kao & Huang, 2023). However, some students may find traditional exams motivating and fair, as they perceive them to be a standard measure of success (Opstad, 2023). This will boost their confidence in their ability to prepare for tests (Chou, 2018). Positive styles, characterized by support and encouragement, enhance students' motivation and achievement, while negative styles, such as excessive control, can hinder performance (Wu, 2023; Yang & Xu, 2024). As needed to boost students' exam result, teachers' fond to be exam-centric, also cultivating students' interest and motivation to learn.

Authoritative parenting styles foster self-efficacy and motivation in students, which are essential for academic achievement (Hayek et al., 2022). Consequently, parents, educators, and students follow the recommendations for remedial coaching in preparing for exams (Mackatiani, 2017). According to parents, a good school must have strict policies about exams and tests (Lutfiana & Suwartono, 2020). Furthermore, parental expectations regarding educational attainment and future careers are crucial, as they serve as a form of cultural capital that enhances student performance, especially in mathematics (Tan, 2017). Parents were concerned about their children future to enter higher education put pressure on teachers in ensuring excellent exams result.

The educational culture is heavily influenced by high-stakes exams, which dictate student trajectories and societal perceptions of success (Yu, 2023). Exams are seen by society as proof of the merits of meritocracy (Loh & Shih, 2016). Because tests are considered crucial in deciding children's futures, the public views the exam-oriented paradigm as a predictor of a brighter future (Mackatiani, 2017). High-performance cultures can lead to increased stress among students, particularly in exam-oriented settings, where the pressure to excel may adversely affect mental health (Högberg, 2023). It's clear that how contextual factor relating to school administrators, peers, students' attitudes, parental view and cultural preferences do shape teachers' exam-oriented practice.

How a teacher teaches depends on several aspects, including the kind and size of the class, the teacher's experience and skill, the school's supply of teaching materials, texts for examinations, and other elements (Ibrahim & Bello, 2020). Due to the limitations of the traditional school structure, including the schedule and classroom layout, teachers faced several difficulties during the school growth process (Grevle, 2022). Public secondary schools found a positive correlation between smaller class sizes and better exam performance, indicating that smaller classes can enhance student outcomes in certain educational contexts (Abizada & Seyidova, 2024). It shows that the size of the class impacted teachers' practice and exam-oriented approach may help students results and an easier way compared to authentic assessment which is time and resource consuming.

Teachers are discouraged from using a range of teaching strategies because of a lack of time and a hefty workload (Moradi, 2019). Teachers with higher administrative workloads tend to spend less time on instructional preparation and providing feedback on students' assignments, which can negatively impact the quality of teaching and learning (Kim, 2019). High demands from students particularly in provision towards exam lead to high academic workload and increased stress among teachers (Sciotto et al., 2024). Increased work strain may have influenced teachers approach to exam preparation and assessments (Cotter et al., 2024). This pressure can lead to an emphasis on rote learning and potentially undermining meaningful learning due to standardized testing (Jacobsen, 2024). Test preparation in case to overcome expectation pressure may also impact teacher's selection of teaching resources.

Commercially available products and previous exam papers were among test materials used by Teachers to acquaint pupils with the exam (Sumpada, 2019). According to Shih (2009), educators embraced commercially accessible resources because they closely resembled the structure and subject matter of "clone questions." In order to help students, prepare for tests, textbooks are used extensively in the classroom (Barnes, 2017). Supported by adequate financial resources, can improve student engagement and academic achievement. However, challenges like limited infrastructure and inadequate teacher preparation can hinder the effective use of these resources (Osmani & Tartari, 2024). Teaching to the test is more feasible compared to authentic and student-centred approach in terms of availability of resources and preparation.

Active familiarization of exams format has been shown to improve students' performance (Neuwirt et al., 2024). Exam format has an impact on classroom learning (Jamila & Kabir, 2020). Test-taking strategies were found to be impacted by a heavy focus on exam preparation, specifically on the format and organization of the test (Shih, 2009). A review of previous test paper analyses is also done in the classroom (Ibrahim & Bello, 2020; Mackatiani, 2017). Teachers often design their curricula with exams format focusing on content that is feasibly tested (Liu et al., 2023). It's crucial to adhere to the test's formats and teachers exclude any material from the curriculum that isn't tested (Ibrahim & Bello, 2020). Teachers need to be well-versed in test-taking strategies and mastering exams format in order to guarantee that students pass tests and meet the exam stakes.

Stakes brought by standardized test making teachers to start implementing a test-based curriculum (Ibrahim & Bello, 2020; Pan, 2013; Wiswall, 2009). Test performance is the key to admission to colleges and only those who score best on important examinations may get into prestigious schools, land rewarding careers, and take advantage of possibilities that aren't open to others with lower scores (Kirkpatrick & Zang, 2011). High-stakes exams often lead teachers to prioritize summative assessments over formative ones, where teachers associated performance assessment with summative evaluation (Bui, 2023). The pressure to perform well on these exams can result in a focus on rote learning and test preparation, limiting opportunities for deeper learning and critical thinking (Tahir et al., 2023). teachers who successfully integrate local and standards-based success often employ more demanding instructional practices, which may be influenced by the expectations of high-stakes assessments (Covitt et al., 2023).

This study has succeeded in proving that there are factors that mediate washback in changing teachers' classroom practices. Exam preparation was the primary emphasis of classroom instruction among enrolled students (Saglam & Farhady, 2019; Zaki, Darmi & Selamat, 2022). It is because of the value brought by the examination results which are the determinants of a brighter future. Social theory has proven in this case expectancy theory that individual actions are greatly influenced by the value brought by a task or job. Test scores and good grades are highly valued by society more than student learning (Ali & Hamid, 2020). Teng and Fu (2019) found that educators expressed their willingness to adapt their pedagogical approaches and prepare educational resources to align with the new test structure. Understanding the washback phenomenon and social theory opens up space for a deeper understanding if a new education policy is to be introduced.

Does the development of educational policies, both at the local and global levels, take into account social theory and local culture, causing its main intention to not be fully achieved? The design of education policies must consider the ideational coherence and the functions of policy instruments, as these factors affect compliance and strategic responses from public organizations (Capano & Lepori, 2024). Transformation from old habits to current needs is a major obstacle and requires a period of time that is difficult to identify and identify the effectiveness of the policies that have been implemented. Despite these challenges, some argue that education policy can still be effectively balanced between efficiency and inclusion, suggesting that political mediation plays a critical role in shaping outcomes (Carstensen & Emmenegger, 2023). For that reason, it is important to review a policy as guided by the values or rewards that can be achieved based on social theory, but it needs to be viewed through critical social theory in challenging the old paradigm.

Critical social theory highlights the role of neoliberal ideologies in perpetuating educational inequalities, as seen in the competitive education system where students from different backgrounds perceive social mobility differently (Chan & Tang, 2025). Despite well-intentioned policies aimed at reducing racial disparities, local interpretations and implementations often reflect existing cultural and political dynamics, complicating efforts to achieve equity in special education (Ko et al., 2024). High-stakes testing puts teachers under a lot of pressure to begin "teaching to the test," which fuels the need for exam books and creates a demand for private tutoring services (Loh & Shih, 2016). In a capitalist society centered on the market, certification is frequently accepted as evidence of skill and knowledge. For example, the SAT and ACT are required to be taken by around three million students in the US each year in order to be admitted to colleges (Castellane, 2019). McCahill (2015) and Fox (2015) provided data to back up their claims that community and family characteristics can predict test outcomes. According to Ferguson, Bovaird, and Mueller (2007), parents who earn less are less likely to be able to give their kids the books, computers, internet, tuition, and private tutors they need to do well on exams. This indicates that tests have the potential to widen the educational divide between families from high- and low-socioeconomic backgrounds.

Like many other nations, Malaysia places a high value on student assessments in order to evaluate students' performance and progress. The goal of reforming Malaysia's educational system is to improve classroom instruction and student accomplishment (Mansor et al., 2021). Achieving substantial improvements in students' academic performance hinges on the ability of school administrators to cultivate a robust command of novel strategies and methodologies (Adat & Mosin, 2021). Teachers have been accused of overemphasizing test preparation at the expense of other, more important learning objectives due to the detrimental washback effects of these assessments. In response to this issue, the Malaysian government implemented several reforms, including a shift to competency-based evaluation and an increased focus on project-based learning and higher-order thinking abilities.

Conversely, some educators advocate for a shift towards more student-centered assessment practices, arguing that this could alleviate the negative impacts of an exam-focused system and foster a more comprehensive learning environment (Marzaini et al., 2024). Teachers often lack the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively implement new assessment practices such as Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) and Assessment for Learning (AfL). This is due to insufficient training and support, which hinders their ability to conduct assessments that align with the intended educational reforms (Oya & Nordin, 2024; Thomeeran et al., 2024). There is a need for continuous professional development to enhance teachers' understanding and execution of these assessments, particularly in areas like Malay language speaking skills (Shaari & Jamil, 2024).

The shift towards teacher-centered assessments has led to concerns about inconsistency and subjectivity in evaluating student performance. Aligning new assessment practices with existing curriculum standards poses a significant challenge. Teachers struggle to integrate AfL practices effectively within the constraints of the current curriculum, which can impact the overall effectiveness of teaching and learning outcomes (Oya & Nordin, 2024). Due to the constraints faced in transforming from teacher-centered to student-centered and ever-changing educational policies, teachers tend to stick to old practices which emphasize exam-oriented. We were unable to depend solely on students' exam results as indicator of outcomes because these would lead to overemphasis on exam not on all-inclusive student's growth. (Jones et al., 2021). Therefore, teachers are more motivated to implement assessments that students like, so to change the assessment to be more authentic, teachers need to change the assessment method in line with the requirements of education policies (Bower, Torrington & Lai, 2024).

Teachers are forced to employ conventional assessments and lack trust in often changing regulations because they lack the infrastructure and resources to satisfy the criteria of the new test style (Kim & Isaacs, 2018). Because they are more accustomed to outdated practices, teachers do not want to adjust to new test forms (Zou & Xu, 2016). Teachers are more at ease with the conventional method since they don't have the time to apply School-Based Assessment (SBA) because of their administrative obligations (Alla Baksh et al., 2019). The way lessons are delivered and how students learn in the classroom is influenced by the Malaysian educational system and culture, which strongly emphasizes the number of A's pupils receive (Veloo, Ramli, & Khalid, 2016). According to Guo, Diaz, and Liyanage (2016), formative assessment is preferred by teachers, whereas tests are preferred by the general public. Authentic assessments often involve real-world tasks, enabling students to apply theoretical knowledge in practical contexts (Ha & Lim, 2023). Consequently, teachers need to be given confidence that CBA or AfL is an assessment approach that is in line with the latest needs to prepare students' performance for uncertain future careers.

Performance-based learning, which focuses on process mastery and product development, may evaluate students working on complicated projects that call for teamwork, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills (Tomar et al., 2023). Evaluating portfolios, which are collections of student projects over time, show the students' knowledge, abilities, and development in addition to self-evaluation and feedback from teachers. Low-stakes assessments reduce the anxiety associated with high-stakes exams, fostering a more supportive learning environment (Loosveld et al., 2023). Authentic assessments encourage self- and peer-assessment, promoting reflective practices among students (Ketonen et al., 2023).

New approach in educational assessment needs to be taken into account to personalize and differentiated assessment to cater inclusivity in providing equality and holistic outcomes. Simulations may be used to provide students with an immersive assessment experience by offering real-world scenarios in which they can use their knowledge and abilities. Immersion simulations that make use of augmented and virtual reality provide a controlled, realistic environment in which students may display their knowledge and skills, enabling a more thorough evaluation of specific capabilities (Choudhary et al., 2023). Creating a personalized assessment driven by artificial intelligence (AI) that matches the learners' talents and gives a more precise formative measure of their level (Vashishth et al., 2024). Additionally, this will provide students with continuous feedback and foster innovation in teaching and learning methodologies. Through collaborative assessment methods like peer evaluation and group projects, students may evaluate one another's work, exercise critical thinking, function as a team, communicate clearly, and contribute to the group's objective. These approaches, which place a stronger emphasis on adaptation, real-world application, continuous learning, and the development of essential 21st-century skills, are more in line with the demands of SDG and VUCA society.

CONCLUSION

In the realm of education, "washback" refers to the effects of assessment on instruction and student's learning. It illustrates how the process of assessment may impact the learning objectives of students as well as the education policy. It's easy for the impending exam to take precedence over other learning objectives, including equally crucial skills and concepts, in the classroom. This may lead to "teaching to the test," in which educators focus more on teaching content that will be assessed than on giving pupils a well-rounded education as intended by MEB 2013-2025 and SDG. MEB 2013-2025 is a comprehensive plan that aimed in transforming Malaysia education system to meet global standards and prepare students for future adaptation and challenges. The blueprint aligns with particularly SDG 4 that focuses on realizing inclusive and equitable quality education and fostering lifelong learning opportunities to all. By prioritizing student outcomes, teacher's professional development and digitalization will empower student-centred approach and authentic assessment in providing an education system that nurtures skilled, empowered, and resilient individuals capable of contributing to a sustainable future.

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