IMPACT OF A HIGH-STAKES TEST ON EDUCATION: EVIDENCE FROM PUBLIC MEDIA

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RATIONALE

• **TEST IMPACT** refers to the influences of a test on individuals, policies or practices, within the classroom, the school, the educational system or society as a whole (Wall, 1997).

• Test impact studies
  
  • Teaching and learning within the classroom (i.e., washback)
  
  • Teachers’ practices, learners and their learning, teachers and learners’ attitudes toward testing, test preparation behaviours, content and nature of textbooks, etc.

  (Andrews, Fullilove, and Wong, 2002; Borrows, 2004; Hayes & Read, 2004; Wall, 2005)
RATIONALE (CONT’D)

• China:
  • Exam-driven culture
  • University entrance exams (aka Gaokao)
    • A large-scale test with extremely high stakes
    • Extensive news coverage during Gaokao season (June-August)
  • Empirical studies on test impact of Gaokao: few and micro-level focused
    • Washback in classroom teaching and learning (Dong, 2014; Qi, 2005)
RATIONALE (CONT’D)

• News articles
  • Public, ongoing records of a society’s activities (Merriam, 2009)
  • A useful research tool
    a) For a broader, more holistic understanding of Gaokao impact
    b) As stimulus to further inquiries to uncover meaning and discover insights, when used together with other tools (e.g., interviews)
RESEARCH PURPOSE

• Analyzing news articles to examine the impact of Gaokao on education, for a more comprehensive understanding of the broader context
METHOD

• Scope:
  • Two national newspapers, Xinhua & China Daily

• Search criteria:
  • Influence of Gaokao on aspects related to education (test-takers, parents, teachers, schools, education policies and practices, education system)

• Time range:
  • Gaokao season over a 5 year period (2011-2015)

• Results: 131 articles (out of 598)
KEY FINDINGS

Impact on test itself, individuals, schools and education practices, and education policies

• **Test itself (57/131)**
  - Test content (e.g., Chinese essay test prompts, using internet language; \( n=16 \))
  - Cheating & ghost writers (\( n=23 \))
  - Testing conditions and test accommodation (e.g., earthquake, injured and handicapped students; \( n=12 \))
  - Discrimination against rural students (\( n=6 \))
KEY FINDINGS (CONT’D)

• **Students, parents, teachers (51/131)**
  
  • Top scorer infatuation \( (n=15) \)
  
  • Test importance (e.g., life-changing opportunity, studying abroad; \( n=15 \) )
  
  • High stress (e.g., high importance to test preparation, mental disturbance, prayers, suicide, teachers quitting jobs; \( n=21 \) )
KEY FINDINGS (CONT’D)

• **Schools and education practices (11/131)**
  - Narrowed scope of education \((n=5)\)
  - Test preparation support (e.g., test prep materials, online tutoring system) \((n=2)\)
  - Test cram schools, or Gaokao factories \((n=4)\)

• **Education policies (12/131)**
  - Gaokao testing system reform
DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

• Gaokao is all-important, with high impact on education in China

• Negative impacts (e.g., infatuation for Gaokao top scorers, high stress on students, parents, teachers, and teaching-to-test practices)

• In need of improvement; however, the upcoming Gaokao reform still faces tremendous challenge of overcoming test-centred teaching and learning
Our initial attempt to investigate educational impact of Gaokao, highlighting

- Importance of examining a wider context in test impact studies
- Value of including archival information (i.e., news articles)
SUGGESTIONS?

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