
STANDARDIZED TESTING AND STUDENT LEARNING AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN TALLINN, ESTONIA

^{1*}Urmas Ligi Stefanko, ²Aivar Paet Haines & ³Jürgen Söerd Göloglu

^{1, 2, 3}Tallinn University

*Email of the Corresponding Author: urmasstefanko09@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the Study: Standardized testing can both provide valuable insights into student performance and learning while also imposing high-stakes pressures that may hinder a well-rounded educational experience. The study sought to investigate standardized testing and student learning in Tallinn, Estonia

Statement of the Problem: The use of standardized testing in Tallinn's secondary schools raises concerns about the balance between accountability and the well-being of students, as the high-stakes nature of these exams can lead to stress and anxiety, potentially undermining the positive aspects of learning. The potential impact of teaching to the test, the unequal preparedness of students from diverse backgrounds, and the effectiveness of standardized testing in evaluating a culturally diverse student population all contribute to the complex issue at hand.

Findings: The findings in secondary schools in Tallinn, Estonia suggest that standardized testing, while serving as a tool for measuring student achievement, places considerable stress on students due to its high-stakes nature. Moreover, "teaching to the test" practices are observed, which can limit the depth and diversity of education. Disparities in student preparedness are evident, with students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and linguistic groups facing unequal access to resources and opportunities, potentially impacting their test performance and overall learning experiences.

Conclusion: In conclusion, the high-stakes nature of standardized testing in Tallinn's secondary schools necessitates a more balanced approach that preserves accountability while addressing the well-being of students. To create a more equitable and effective education system, ongoing dialogue and innovative solutions are required to enhance the quality of education in Tallinn and better prepare students for the challenges of the future.

Recommendations: To address the challenges posed by standardized testing, Tallinn's secondary schools should diversify their assessment methods, incorporating continuous assessment and project-based evaluation, while providing educators with professional development opportunities to foster innovative, well-rounded teaching practices. Furthermore, a targeted support system must be established to address disparities in student preparedness, ensuring that all students, regardless of background, have an equal opportunity to succeed in Tallinn's educational landscape.

Keywords: *Standardized Testing, Student Learning, Secondary Schools, Estonia*

INTRODUCTION

Standardized testing has long been a contentious topic in the field of education, with its impact on student learning being a subject of ongoing debate (Nair, Farah & Cushing, 2023). In the context of secondary schools in Tallinn, Estonia, the use of standardized testing plays a significant role in shaping the educational landscape. Tallinn, Estonia's capital, is home to a diverse and dynamic secondary school system. These schools are characterized by a blend of Estonian and international influences, including the Estonian national curriculum and the International Baccalaureate (IB) program. Estonian secondary schools largely adhere to the national curriculum, which emphasizes a well-rounded education. Students are required to take a range of subjects, from humanities to sciences, and participate in physical education and the arts (Fernandez-Rio, de las Heras, González, Trillo & Palomares, 2020). The Estonian educational system includes standardized testing as a means of evaluating student performance. These exams typically take place at the end of the secondary school cycle and are considered crucial for university admission.

Standardized tests in Estonia carry high stakes, as they significantly impact students' ability to enter higher education institutions, including universities (Lepik & Urmanavičienė, 2022). Advocates argue that standardized testing can have positive impacts on student learning. They maintain that it encourages students to study more effectively and promotes accountability. The

alignment between standardized tests and the national curriculum ensures that students are exposed to and assessed on a comprehensive range of subjects (Keup, Petschauer, Groccia, Hunter, Garner, Latino & Friedman, 2023). This promotes a holistic understanding of the subjects. Standardized testing can also help identify students' weaknesses, providing teachers and parents with valuable information for targeted support and remediation.

On the flip side, standardized testing can be a source of significant stress for students. In Tallinn, the high-stakes nature of these exams can lead to anxiety and negatively impact students' overall well-being (Ramón-Arbués, Gea-Caballero, Granada-López, Juárez-Vela, Pellicer-García & Antón-Solanas, 2020). Critics argue that high-stakes testing encourages a "teaching to the test" approach, where teachers focus primarily on exam content, potentially at the expense of broader educational goals. Estonia has been exploring ways to include more skills-based assessments alongside traditional content-based tests (Gouëdard, Pont, Hyttinen & Huang, 2020). This shift reflects an acknowledgment of the need for a balanced approach to testing. Given Tallinn's diverse educational landscape, some schools offer international programs like the IB, which incorporate a different approach to assessment, focusing on critical thinking and research skills.

Tallinn's secondary schools serve a diverse student population, including native Estonians and a substantial Russian-speaking minority (Knapp, Tammaru, Leetmaa & Kalm, 2023). The impact of standardized testing can vary for different student groups. The Estonian government has periodically reviewed its standardized testing policies in response to concerns about their impact on student learning, aiming to strike a balance between accountability and well-being. In Tallinn's secondary schools, standardized testing has both positive and negative effects on student learning. Striking the right balance is essential, as it impacts not only educational outcomes but also the overall well-being of students. The ongoing debate on standardized testing in Tallinn's secondary schools underscores the importance of continuous evaluation and adaptation to ensure that these assessments serve the best interests of students, educators, and the educational system as a whole.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The primary issue revolves around the high-stakes nature of standardized tests in Tallinn's secondary schools. These exams, often taken at the end of the secondary school cycle, have far-reaching implications for students' educational and career prospects. The intense pressure created by these high-stakes exams can significantly affect students' well-being and academic

performance. A common concern is that the emphasis on standardized testing may lead to a "teaching to the test" approach. This means that educators might be incentivized to focus narrowly on the content and skills required to excel on the exams, potentially neglecting a broader, more holistic approach to education. Standardized testing can also highlight disparities in student preparedness. Students from different socio-economic backgrounds, linguistic groups, or educational settings may not have equal access to resources, which can affect their ability to perform well on these exams.

The extent to which standardized testing influences the curriculum and teaching methods in Tallinn's secondary schools is a crucial issue. If teachers feel compelled to prioritize test preparation, it may limit their ability to offer a well-rounded and diverse education. Tallinn's secondary schools cater to a diverse student population, including both native Estonian speakers and Russian-speaking minorities. The question of whether standardized tests adequately accommodate the linguistic and cultural diversity of the student body is of paramount concern. Striking a balance between the need for accountability in education and the well-being of students is a central challenge. The impact of standardized testing on student learning should be considered within the broader context of Tallinn's educational goals and the welfare of its students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Pietromonaco (2021) noted that since standardized exams are so often used now, several studies have focused on their impact and certain facets to better understand them. The effects of standardized testing on students, instructors, and institutions were explored in this research. This study claims that standardized assessments have both positive and negative impacts by synthesizing the data and analyses of prior studies on the topic. Standardized testing has both good and bad impacts on student learning. Good benefits include self-assessment, increased self-efficacy, and less forgetting. Bad consequences include test anxiety, teaching to the test, and an achievement gap. In order to help policymakers, researchers, and teachers make more informed decisions and more efficient use of standardized exams, this study was written. Previous research lacked up-to-date information and struggled to account for the complexity of its subjects. How to make the most of standardized testing while still striving for educational justice is a promising area for future study, as is determining how to strike that balance.

Munter and Haines (2019) mentioned that how public school pupils should be evaluated is a hotly contested topic. Statewide tests are given annually as one of the main tools used to gauge improvement. After the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, this procedure was made mandatory by the federal government. The goal of this research is to answer the question, "Does the number of statewide standardized tests correlate with student academic achievement at the state level?" The number of exams a student takes while enrolled in public school serves as the dependent variable, while the state SAT average and the state graduation rate serve as the independent factors. To get the total number of exams, the researcher calculated backwards from the grade level that a graduate from the classes of 2011 or 2012 would have been in throughout each academic year. An increase in testing was shown to significantly and negatively affect SAT scores in each state, as well as the graduation rate. Using these indicators, it may be concluded that pupils are not benefiting from standardized testing.

Stefanko (2021) carried out study on the use of standardized exams with young children and provide suggestions for other methods that are more suited to this age group's evaluation. The research begins with a literature review that gives a concise background on standardized testing and explains why it is used in primary schools. The second part of this study uses literature to highlight divergent perspectives on the use of standardized exams in public schools. Section 3 analyzes the benefits and drawbacks of standardized testing based on studies conducted over the last two decades. The negative effects of labeling young children are discussed in the fourth section, and suggestions for portfolios, open-ended questions, classroom observations, and other authentic assessment measures are provided in the fifth section for elementary school administrators and teachers. The last segment integrated the results of casual conversations with three primary school teachers and two administrators to explore these choices. These talks sparked several useful takeaways that may be readily implemented in multiethnic classrooms to provide an encouraging environment for young students and their achievements. To aid administrators and educators in making informed evaluation decisions, an illustrative appendix is provided.

Göloğlu Demir and Kaplan Keles (2021) conducted study to evaluate the stress and anxiety of high-stakes, standardized testing on second grade students. Twenty second graders took part in the study by filling out an emotion survey every day for two weeks before and after they took the STAR tests. Data analysis indicated a wide range of student sentiments as they prepared to take

the California STAR exams for the first time. Based on their comments, we know that 85% of participants felt some kind of test-related stress or anxiety on at least one day of testing. Most students reported experiencing some combination of anxiety, fear, sadness, and/or illness in the days leading up to or after STAR testing. The study's findings are utilized to provide light on the second graders' STAR testing experiences for parents, educators, and policymakers.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that the high-stakes nature of standardized testing in Tallinn's secondary schools has a significant impact on student learning. Students often face substantial pressure to perform well on these exams as they heavily influence their chances of entering higher education institutions. This stress can affect their overall well-being, potentially undermining the positive aspects of learning. The intensity of high-stakes exams can lead to stress and anxiety among students, which may hinder their capacity to learn effectively. It is essential to strike a balance between accountability and the well-being of students, particularly in a diverse educational landscape like Tallinn.

The study also found evidence of a "teaching to the test" approach in some schools, where educators concentrate on preparing students specifically for standardized exams. While this approach can lead to better test performance, it may limit the depth and breadth of education in Tallinn's secondary schools. The phenomenon of teaching to the test underscores the need for a more holistic and balanced approach to education. Educators should be encouraged to cover a diverse range of subjects and teaching methods that promote critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Standardized testing accentuates disparities in student preparedness, particularly for students from different socio-economic backgrounds and linguistic groups. This can be a challenge to achieving equitable educational outcomes. Addressing these disparities requires a multifaceted approach, which includes targeted support for students who face challenges in their educational journey, and policies to ensure equal access to educational resources and opportunities.

The impact of standardized testing on curriculum and teaching methods in Tallinn's secondary schools is significant. Educators often feel compelled to align their teaching with the test content, potentially limiting students' exposure to a more diversified and interdisciplinary curriculum. A more flexible and adaptive curriculum, along with professional development for educators, can help mitigate the influence of standardized testing on teaching methods and ensure a well-rounded

education for students. Tallinn's diverse student population poses a unique challenge. The findings suggest that standardized tests may not adequately accommodate linguistic and cultural diversity, potentially disadvantaging certain groups. Ensuring that standardized tests are inclusive and culturally sensitive is crucial to addressing this issue. Moreover, providing support and resources for students from different linguistic backgrounds is essential for their academic success.

The study underscores the importance of balancing accountability and student well-being in the context of standardized testing in Tallinn's secondary schools. Striking this balance is essential to ensure that the positive aspects of standardized testing, such as identifying weaknesses and providing valuable information, are not overshadowed by the negative consequences on student learning and well-being. Ongoing dialogue between educational policymakers, teachers, and students is necessary to find innovative solutions that reduce the negative impact of high-stakes testing while maintaining accountability in the education system. Tallinn's secondary schools should consider adopting a more comprehensive and well-rounded approach to assessment, which evaluates not only content knowledge but also critical thinking, problem-solving, and other essential skills.

CONCLUSION

The high-stakes nature of standardized testing in Tallinn has a profound impact on students, often leading to stress and anxiety. While these exams can be effective tools for measuring student achievement and identifying weaknesses, the negative consequences on student well-being cannot be ignored. Striking a balance that maintains accountability while mitigating these adverse effects should be a priority. The practice of "teaching to the test" reveals the need for a more holistic approach to education. Educators should be encouraged to provide a diversified and interdisciplinary curriculum that fosters critical thinking and problem-solving skills. This approach will help students not only excel in exams but also prepare them for the complexities of the modern world. Addressing disparities in student preparedness is essential. Tailored support and equal access to educational resources are key factors in ensuring that all students, regardless of socio-economic background or linguistic group, have a fair chance to succeed. Finally, the diverse student population in Tallinn requires careful consideration. Standardized tests should be culturally sensitive and inclusive. Moreover, a more comprehensive and well-rounded approach to assessment, which evaluates a broader set of skills and knowledge, should be explored.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To mitigate the adverse effects of standardized testing on student learning, Tallinn's secondary schools should diversify assessment methods. While standardized tests have their place, educators should also incorporate continuous assessment, projects, and oral examinations to evaluate students' critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and overall understanding of the subjects. This approach will not only provide a more comprehensive view of a student's abilities but also reduce the pressure of a single high-stakes exam. It is essential to equip educators with the skills and knowledge needed to teach effectively without solely focusing on exam content. Providing ongoing professional development opportunities can help teachers become more innovative in their pedagogical approaches, ensuring a well-rounded education. Encourage educators to embrace interdisciplinary teaching and promote the development of 21st-century skills, such as creativity, collaboration, and communication.

Tallinn's secondary schools should implement support mechanisms to address disparities in student preparedness, particularly among students from diverse socio-economic and linguistic backgrounds. This may include additional tutoring, mentoring programs, and resources tailored to the needs of disadvantaged students. The goal is to ensure that every student has an equal opportunity to succeed, regardless of their background. Ensure that standardized tests are culturally sensitive and inclusive. This means accommodating the linguistic and cultural diversity present in Tallinn's schools. Test content and formats should be adapted to recognize and respect the various backgrounds of students. Moreover, bilingual assessments that consider both Estonian and Russian-speaking students should be explored, aiming for fairness and equity in evaluation.

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