

## HOW NATIONAL COMPETENCY EXAMS AFFECT INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL CULTURE

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This paper assesses the functions performed by the examination regimes in national educational systems worldwide. These functions influence a nation's political culture through socializing ideological values, holding schools accountable, and in many cases, reinforcing the existing class structure. The paper then suggests that true political reform is contingent upon meaningful educational reform, and that close scrutiny of a nation's examinations system is essential to both.

Standardized testing has been a “hot button” issue in the United States for the past decade. More and more states are electing to have level tests of student competencies at regular intervals, with some states actually opting for exit testing at the end of their students’ school careers. Though such decisions have been made at the state level until now, there is increasing discussion of devising a national competency exam that would test abilities in key areas such as math, English, science and social studies.

The issue is an extremely political one. Questions of fairness, elitism, test bias, and the potential use of exam results activate powerful political interest groups such as concerned parents, teachers unions, disadvantaged school districts and university admissions teams, among others. However, national competency exams (NCEs) have been a reality throughout the rest of the world for years. The exams are structured differently and serve different functions from country to country. This paper does not examine the standardized testing issue in the United States specifically, but obvious parallels can be drawn from the political ramifications studied in cases worldwide.

Since NCEs will tend to drive a nation’s entire curriculum, they can serve as agents of political socialization. That is, a state’s government can expect that teachers will deliver the curricular material that will be tested on an NCE, and therefore everyone in the nation will be subjected to that material. Thus, NCEs are perhaps one of the most effective ways to “indoctrinate” a populace with a certain set of knowledge and beliefs.

It is then worth examining national competency tests as a means of political socialization and investigating their effects on a nation’s political culture. A number of questions may be asked in such an investigation, including: What does a nation want its citizens to know, and how does that nation’s political culture manifest itself on the exam?

How does a nation select its future elites, and how do NCEs reinforce the existing class structure in that country? How do NCEs affect attempts at educational, political and economic reform in a country?

These questions may be overlooked in a comprehensive political analysis of a nation, as NCEs may seem to be a trivial aspect of the pedagogical process. However, this paper argues that NCEs have profound effects on political culture, often socializing the nation's citizenry into the existing political and/or economic systems.

NCEs also tend to reinforce a nation's existing class structure by serving as a means of selection to higher universities. In many countries, access to adequate preparation for the exams is limited to the elite class, and thus tends to perpetuate that class by preparing its children better than others for success on the exams. Such testing regimes are usually the gatekeepers for higher education, and thus serve as access to a nation's power structure. Therefore, NCEs often prevent disadvantaged populations from fully participating in the political process.

In addition, these exams often hinder educational reform in developing countries, which in the long run may impede effective economic or political reform. Finally, the examining institution often becomes a powerful political force in its own right, and is usually a reflection of that nation's political culture.

### **THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND EVALUATION OF SOURCES**

A significant link has been established between a state's educational policies and its political culture, especially concerning education's role in political socialization. In their seminal study on politics and development, Gabriel Almond and James Coleman (1960)

asserted that all political systems tend to perpetuate their cultures and structures mainly via the socializing influences of public education. James Bill and Robert Hardgrave noted, “Political socialization is normally homogeneous, and although there surely might be conflict among socializing agents, the school experiences most frequently reinforce the early socialization experiences within the family” (Bill and Hardgrave 1981, 106).

Further studies have found a strong link between educational practices and the reinforcement of class structure. A study by sociologist Edgar Litt (1963) examined the different texts used in upper, middle and working class communities, and found that students in the three communities were being trained to play different political roles, and to respond to political phenomena in different ways. Litt asserted that the societal elites were being groomed to inherit political decision making powers in their communities while the lower classes were being socialized to adapt to more “subject” roles. “Only in the affluent and politically vibrant community... are insights into political processes and functions of politics passed on to those who, judging from their socio-economic and political environment, will likely man those positions that involve them in influencing or making political decisions” (Litt 1963, 70). Though none of these studies specifically explored the role of national competency exams in political socialization, the fact that they tend to drive a nation’s curriculum makes them at least as valid a topic for study as analysis of textbooks.

The resources used in this paper were obtained by searching through available literature on national competency exams in educational and political literature. Actual test question documents were examined for some countries (often in translation), while in other cases secondary resources were analyzed. Although the majority of the resources

used in this study refer largely to the pedagogical effects of the use of NCEs, a political analysis was deemed possible based on the inherent implications of these exams on political culture and socialization. Some of the sources examined directly the political effects of the respective nations' national exams, while the political ramifications of other sources were referred to only obliquely.

### **POLITICAL NATURE AND PURPOSE OF NATIONAL COMPETENCY EXAMS**

This study found that national competency exams are inherently political, and identified three major purposes that served to reinforce a nation's political culture:

1. The delivery of a national curriculum: The exams ensure that what a society wants its citizens to learn does indeed get taught.
2. Selection for the next level of education: NCEs tend to promote a society's future elites and supposedly aid in finding the best stratum for people in accordance with societal expectations and needs.
3. Accountability of schools: The exams can also serve as a "report card" on certain schools and districts, identifying which schools are doing best and worst at preparing students for success on the exams.

The first aim most directly serves to indoctrinate ideas, which help form a national political identity consistent with a nation's political and economic system. The last two aims usually serve to strengthen a nation's class system, albeit at times unintentionally. In most cases, the aims of selection and accountability will tend to perpetuate the socioeconomic elite class, but in centralized socialist governments they can also reinforce the dominant political party.

## **NCEs AND THE DELIVERY OF NATIONAL CURRICULUM**

The political effects of a nation's educational policies are clear. Kagia noted in her report on Kenyan educational assessment practices, "As a socializing agent, the school inculcates the values and attitudes that are of practical importance in society" (Kagia 1985, 255). National competency exams are perhaps the most effective way to ensure that what a society wants its citizens to learn does indeed get taught. Since the tests have such high stakes for students (their futures are often dependent on their performances on the exams), they study the material they either know or believe will be included on the exam.

The exams also have high stakes for teachers, since the results are used as accountability measures to ensure that teachers are properly preparing students. In Africa, "Public examinations undoubtedly exert enormous pressure on activities in schools. Teachers tend to gear teaching to the tests to be taken and to ignore material not featured in such tests, even if it is mandated in the official curriculum" (Kellaghan and Greaney 1992, 2). This seems to be the case across the globe. Levinson's (2001) study of eight Western post-industrialized nations notes "the test is often seen as a mechanism to promote the curriculum" (Levinson 2001, 59), while a study of the National College Entrance Exam (NCEE) in China asserts that it "has largely oriented the nation's education since its establishment. The content as well as the test forms have directed the academic efforts of the secondary schools" (Feng 1999, 47).

A nation's entire school curriculum cannot help but shape its political culture, and looking at a country's national competency test is a good way to determine what it wants

its citizens to know and think. In some cases, the topics and subjects selected for assessment clearly shape the political nature of the curriculum. This is particularly apparent in the exams of single party authoritarian states. In China, “the examination questions in politics are designed to measure applicants’ understandings of Marxism, Mao Zedong Thought, and Deng Xiaoping Theory” (Feng 1999, 43). The exams are seen as the most important method of ensuring that these subject areas are taught. Often, the students are expected to memorize “party line” responses to the exam questions. In a study of the Soviet Union conducted prior to its breakup the author noted,

...the students must defer to others’ interpretations which are non-controversial and based on prevailing ideology. Moreover, there is an incentive to reproduce the information from the textbook; it provides a ‘safe’ examination answer. Thus, the prescriptive provision of ready-made, textbook-based, knowledge tends to alienate the student’s learning experience from the practical demands of everyday life (Matyash 1991, 7).

But indoctrination of political culture is not limited to authoritarian states. In an article for *History Today* (quoted in *The Economist*), Martin Roberts, head teacher at the Cherwell School in Oxford, asserts that the current GCSE and A-level<sup>1</sup> history examinations in Britain distort history by their overemphasis on Nazi Germany, an effect that tends to predispose graduates of the British school system against Europe. He further asserts that the exams reflect a preference for “feelgood history”—a perspective that makes the British feel comfortable with their past (*The Economist* 2001, 61).

This is contrasted, however, with the expectations of the German curriculum, which clearly wants their students to learn the horrible lessons of their nation’s history. A scrutiny of a sample *Abitur* exam<sup>2</sup> reveals that two out of the five major history essay questions concern the rise of National Socialism (Cheney 1991, 29-59). This “airing of the laundry” is consistent with the German government’s political agenda of confronting its past and indoctrinating its citizens against a future rise in hypernationalist xenophobia.

## **Exam Administration**

The means of administration of the exam itself is often a reflection of the respective nation's political culture and structure, particularly the extent to which a state is centralized. Some nations administer the exact same exam nationwide, while others offer more flexibility to various regions. The effectiveness of either method can be mixed.

Uniform examinations across the entire nation facilitate comparability and even-handedness of treatment between different groups. But uniformity exacts its price: regional and local interests may feel slighted, the centre's purposes are likely to be served at the expense of the peripheries', and opportunities to adjust the examination to recognize the different needs of regions or groups at different stages of school development are inevitably reduced (Noah and Eckstein 1989, 18).

The correlation between the level of uniformity of exams across the nation and the level of state centralization is often high, with authoritarian governments demanding complete standardization and more "federal" governments often devolving testing authority to their component states.

In Germany, "although the general form of the Abitur is the same throughout the country, the individual education ministries of each state determine the specific content of the test given in their areas" (Shafer 1992, 1), while the United States has demonstrated "the rejection of the slightest hint of a centralized system of examinations in the hands of the national government. Nor, indeed, do most of the 50 states offer a secondary school leaving examination or university selection/entrance examination" (Noah and Eckstein 1989, 19). In China, on the other hand, the "NCEE is a powerful device for spreading the central control and political centralism over a vast land," with complete uniformity of both the exam and curriculum nationwide (Feng 1999, 51). Until 1951, Japan "operated a very economical system of selection for higher education



entrance, on the basis of a single, nationwide, standardised examination” (Noah and Eckstein 1989, 19).

The French exam is also uniform nationwide (Cheney 1991, 9-10), and is even administered in some of the former French colonies (Kellaghan and Greaney 1992). China, Japan and France all have highly centralized governments. However, there have been exceptions: in the last decade of the Soviet Union, the central government devolved quite a bit of its authority to the republics when it came to examinations. “Though there is significant influence exerted from Moscow, each of the 15 republics is responsible for setting the content and standards of the secondary school examinations for the leaving certificate, the *attestat zrelosti*” (Noah and Eckstein 1989, 23).

Sometimes, exams are central to a nation’s educational and political culture. A national competency exam was a key component of Chinese culture since the sixth century, when the Imperial Examination system was instituted as a merit-based selection process. The Chinese National Collegiate Entrance Exam (NCEE), established under Mao, “has followed the structure and organization of the Imperial Examination, though the latter was not designed to promote education but to select officials for civil services for the emperors” (Feng 1999, 40). The hierarchical structure of their examination administrative institution was also based on pre-Communist precedents, and has become a politically powerful body in its own right within the Communist Chinese bureaucracy. Thus, the examination system in China is an ingrained part of Chinese culture, and lives on in Communist China despite its associations with its imperial past.

The same could be said of former colonial countries, such as in Africa and the Middle East, where the examinations systems often reflect those of the former colonizing

country. In fact, one can make generalizations on the relative format of the exams based on which country had previously colonized an area: “Countries in Francophone areas (of Africa) tend to require their students to take more formal examinations than those in Anglophone areas” (Kellaghan and Greaney 1992, 1), reflecting the strong influence of the French *baccalaureat* as a colonial precursor.<sup>3</sup>

### **Language of Examination**

Many African countries continue to include predominately Eurocentric questions on their national exams. In Gambia, the Gold Coast, Sierra Leone, and Liberia, “as well as studying Shakespeare, students had the option to study the poetry of Chaucer, John Donne, and George Herbert. The Senegalese baccalaureat offered examinations in ten languages, none of them African” (Kellaghan and Greaney 1992, 10). Some African nations continue to have their NCEs moderated by their former colonizing country!

A nation’s language policy is often an extremely political issue, and the effects are readily apparent in its national competency exam. This is particularly the case in developing countries, where the native language of the country is often discounted. Although the official language of instruction in all schools in Papua New Guinea is English, a large percentage of high school teachers do not speak the language well enough to effectively prepare students for examinations (McLaughlin 1991, 17).

In the Kellaghan and Greaney study noted above, the fact that no African languages were tested in the Senegalese baccalaureat is significant. In fact, they noted that in the majority of the African countries in their study, the language used on the examination was not the mother tongue of the students (48). “In most countries, the

present emphasis on French and English has probably contributed to low pass rates” (Kelleghan and Greaney 1992, 2). Thus, those who do not have access to quality second language instruction (most likely the more disadvantaged segment of the population) will probably not pass the exam. This supports the second point illustrated in this paper, that national exams serve to select future elites.

### **EXAMS AS SELECTION TOOLS**

One of the primary functions of national competency exams is to serve as selection tools, promoting future elites to higher education and finding the best stratum for individuals in a society, according to the determination of the established elites.<sup>4</sup> In most cases, NCEs are used as the major component of entrance criteria to a country’s universities (much as the Scholastic Aptitude Tests in the United States were some years ago). Since the university is a probable breeding ground for future elites, NCEs can often preserve the social status quo and class power structure.

In certain nations, the selective purpose of the exams is blatant. In China, political discrimination is characteristic of the National College Entrance Exam (NCEE). Not only is the pass rate extremely low (in some years fewer than 20% pass the exam), but there is even a screening process to take the exam. The major purpose of the Chinese NCEE

...is to select youths for higher education who are politically trustworthy, academically well-prepared, and physically healthy so that they can be trained as ‘red experts’ for socialist construction and the modernization of China . . . All applicants must have their political and religious backgrounds checked and pass health examinations before they obtain NCEE authorizations. These investigations screen out those with criminal records or records of ‘political mistakes or problems’ and those with physical disabilities or health problems (Feng 1999, 43).

But in other countries the selective elitism is made more subtle through the use of examination scores. Success on these tests is an all or nothing proposition in many of these places, with some countries terminating a student's educational career at each of the different levels if they do not perform at a certain standard. This can have profound consequences on a person's life. In Kenya, "out of 120,000 candidates who sat for the terminal examination, Kenya Certificate of Education (KCE), only about 15,000 continued to advanced level work. The job opportunities in any one year do not exceed 50,000 and when they are available, salaries are based on the strength of the pass at either CPE (Certificate of Primary Education) or KCE" (Kagia 1985, 258-259). In general,

Africa has the lowest primary, secondary, and university enrollment rates of any world region . . . The success or failure of a student at any of the important selection points in the system can have very serious consequences for his or her educational and occupational future. It is precisely because of their role as gatekeepers in educational systems, in that the number of places diminishes as one ascends the educational hierarchy, that examinations have acquired the importance they possess in African countries (Kellaghan and Greaney 1992, 5).

Similar pressures and "weeding out" occur in more developed countries such as France and Japan. In those countries as well, exams have historically determined a student's educational career, with success allowing students to access the upper echelons of the power structure and failure relegating the student to the "vocational track." Though reforms are being made in these countries, the "exam culture" still permeates society.

In many countries, the more economically privileged classes have the advantage in the selection process (as will be discussed later), but in some countries the exams are tools that work to exclude the socio-economic elites, as consistent with that nation's ideology. For the first two decades of its existence, the Chinese NCEE excluded youths of "black birth," or those youths from the disfavored classes of capitalists, landlords and

the intelligentsia. “Guided by the Marxist belief, ‘deprive the deprivers,’ youths of ‘black birth’ were deprived of the right, to education and employment. Such discrimination caused immeasurable, irremediable damage to the social development of the country” (Feng 1999, 45-46). However, when the exam was reinstated in 1977, it was designed to “unite whomever possible to build our socialist motherland” after the Cultural Revolution. In other words, the party realized it needed the knowledge and skills of that class to help rebuild the country’s economic foundation (Feng 1999, 43). In this case, the process of selecting students consistent with that nation’s political ideology was clearly intentional.

### **Teaching What They Intend?**

Are NCEs always intended as such selection tools? Intended or otherwise, the effects of these exams are to reinforce the existing class structure. This is due to the very nature of the exams themselves, which, as in the case of exams in Ghana, “support and encourage rote-memorization, routine drilling, [and] bookishness” (Brooke and Oxenham, quoted in Kellaghan and Greaney 1992, 9).<sup>5</sup> These skills are most easily obtained by a nation’s elite students, who are in better funded and staffed schools, who have access to better educational materials both at home and in school, and who often can afford special tutoring geared specifically for higher performance on these exams. Since these exams usually serve as gatekeepers to the highest levels of education, from which a country recruits its powerful elite, they tend to perpetuate the class divide in an endless cycle: the elites who can afford better educational access do better on the exams and thus can remain in the elite class.

It works to the economically privileged class's advantage to focus on academic areas, even if these may not be the practical skills a nation would want the majority of its students to master. "Areas such as aural and oral skills, vocational skills, use of reference materials, practical work in science, and writing skills are not sampled in the national examinations in Ethiopia. Thus, many of the desired outcomes are given little or no attention in the national examinations" (Afrassa 1995, 293). Although the exam format used by Ethiopia and other countries favors the elites, it does not necessarily foster the best training for a nation's elites, who should be adept at the skills mentioned above. Thus, a nation may have elites in power who are not adequately trained to make the difficult political decisions necessary to effect reform.

In addition, the academic focus of the exams, and thus a nation's curriculum, often does not adequately prepare those students in the "vocational track" for life in the real world. In China, "the majority of [exam candidates] are doomed to fail because the enrollment capacity of the institutions of higher learning has been limited. Their education means little once they lose the NCEE battle since they haven't any job skills upon leaving school" (Feng 1999, 48). In Africa it was also noted that "life outside of school seldom features in examination questions" (Kellaghan and Greaney 1992, 2). In developing countries, key issues of public health and safety, issues that a government desperately wants its citizens to know, are generally not tested at all.

## RESOURCE ISSUES IN THE EXAMINATION PROCESS

How exactly do such academically oriented examination systems favor the elite class?

NCEs do so by providing adequate preparatory resources for that class, and denying them to the underclasses. In Latin America,

Public primary and secondary education is utilized almost entirely by the poor, while middle and upper class parents send their children to private schools. A 1992 study of mathematics and science achievement of thirteen-year-old students in various types of schools in Latin America clearly demonstrated the inequalities of education in the region. The average mathematics score for students in elite private schools in Argentina was 50, while the figure in rural public schools was only 29. Similarly, in the Dominican Republic, the average score for students in elite private schools was 60, while their poorer rural counterparts only averaged 31 (Cerreno and Pyle 1996, 5).

Jaradat (1985) noted indications of a form of test bias in Jordan, which he attributed to “variations in teacher competencies and variations in student socioeconomic status from a school district to another. Better qualified and experienced teachers are usually assigned for city secondary schools where those with less qualifications and experience are sent to remote areas and villages.” He goes on to acknowledge the role the national exams play in reinforcing the class system by suggesting that “university admission practices help sustain the inherited bias built in the system of secondary education and consequently in GSECE (General Secondary Education Certificate Examination) scores” (Jaradat 1985, 14).

Thus, a student may not have much control over his academic, and often his occupational career, as it is often determined by his access to education and the game of selectivity in the examination process. In China, “applicants have few choices of institutions and academic programs. The worse part is that applicants must sign agreements in their applications that they will accept any admission decisions made by the admission bureaus based on the Party’s needs, even if the decisions do not match their preferences” (Feng 1999, 50).

Even in France, the very selective nature of the baccalaureat makes access to higher education available to only an elite few. “According to 1990 figures, 67 percent of all students in the relevant age group enrolled in *lycees*,<sup>6</sup> 50 percent took the baccalaureat examination and 38.5 percent passed, thus qualifying for university admission” (Cheney 1991, 9-10).

Another way that elite students gain the upper hand in the examinations game is that, in addition to access to better schools, they can often afford to get outside tutoring. In Africa, “students in examination classes frequently seek additional academic help outside of school or in tuition offered in schools outside of regular school hours” (Kellaghan and Greaney 1992, 38). In Jordan, “parents of high socioeconomic status who can afford hiring a private tutor for their son or daughter do not hesitate to do so” (Jaradat 1985, 15). “Sample tests created by both teachers and commercial businesses have flooded secondary school campuses” in China (Feng 1999, 47), and in Japan, “a large share of these [exam preparation] costs is borne by candidates and their families, who invest time and funds in one-on-one coaching, after-school schools (the famous *juku*), and the expenses of travel to distant cities to sit for the second-level examinations. Nor is the total of these costs negligible: they can run to the equivalent of many thousands of U.S. dollars for one family” (Noah and Eckstein 1989, 19).

In addition, in many of these countries students have to pay a fee just to take the exam. In some cases, cost can be prohibitive to the lower classes. “Candidates for examinations offered by overseas examination boards or syndicates are required to pay high fees. The fee for the senior-cycle terminal examination in Lesotho (\$124.19)



represents considerably more than the mean monthly income per capita in the country” (Kellaghan and Greaney 1992, 34).

In developing countries where examiners and invigilators have low salaries, they are susceptible to corruption, just like any other public servant. Richer students would obviously be in a better position to offer bribes. Malpractice is widespread in African countries. “In Togo and Madagascar, concern has been expressed that security is not well maintained. In Zambia in 1980, it was reported that candidates in three regions received help from invigilators during the General Certificate of Education” (Kellaghan and Greaney 1992, 36). Similar problems have been noted in Ethiopia, Swaziland, Rwanda, and Uganda.

China’s NCEE relies on a “marginal number candidate policy,” which requires that the number of candidates for admission to higher education be greater than the number of spaces. In theory, this should guarantee that admissions officers have sufficient opportunities to select the best candidates. However, this also allows for corruption on the admissions officials part, as they could potentially pick and choose whomever they wish from this pool. “This is where legal ‘smuggling’ could happen in the admission process” (Feng 1999, 45). Noah and Eckstein (1989) noted the “persistent reports of discrimination against certain ethnic and religious groups, influence peddling and corruption” inherent in the Soviet examination system (23). As in other areas of political life, the elite have an inherent advantage in educational access, both legally and illegally.

## HOLDING SCHOOLS ACCOUNTABLE

Finally, national competency exams can often serve to hold a nation's schools accountable for what is taught. In Africa, the successful performance of a school is usually equated with the percentage of candidates who advance to the next highest level of the educational system. Teachers and schools often suffer negative consequences for poor performance on exams in Kenya, Zambia, Cape Verde and Lesotho. "In Uganda, where most of the school fees are paid by parents, examination results can have a fairly rapid impact; 'good' results tend to increase the pressure for school places" (Kellaghan and Greaney 1992, 47).

Many schools are ranked based on the performance of their students on the national exams. In China, "the quality of a high school has been judged by the number of its graduates who survived NCEE and entered colleges," Feng notes, going on to distinguish between "key schools" (with high numbers of passing marks) and "common schools" (with average or low numbers of passing marks), each of which "are given differentiated financial support by the government based on the ratio of their NCEE winners . . . This, of course, has served to make the rich richer while the poor become poorer" putting great pressure on the schools to perform (Feng 1999, 48). Parents try various means to enroll their children in key schools, with the political elite having the advantage once again. As Kellaghan and Greaney (1992) state about ranking African schools,

Comparisons between schools on the basis of examination results generally fail to take into consideration the social or even physical conditions under which schools operate . . . in cases in that parents or students have a choice of school, the publication of results may lead to schools that are perceived to be doing well to attract students of high levels of scholastic ability, aspiration, motivation, and parental support, while those that are perceived to be doing badly, even though they may be more 'effective' than schools with better results, will be avoided by such students (Kellaghan and Greaney 1992, 47).

One of the problems with NCEs is that the same exam is often used for multiple purposes, which can be damaging. In Kenya, “the same examination is used to rank candidates and schools, to predict future performance, to select for placement to jobs or to higher institutions of learning, to measure the quality of the schools, to determine the worth of an individual. This is in spite of the fact that technically, assessment should do no more than rank candidates on a given criteria” (Kagia 1985, 258).

The fact that the same exam is used for so many purposes can lead to its invalidity as a predictor of future success in higher education. In Jordan, “GSECE scores did not provide better predictors for students’ university grades than scores on teacher made tests. [Several studies] questioned the two presumed objectives for GSECE as a summative evaluation tool and as an admission criterion for higher education” (Jeradat 1985, 13). In Ethiopia, “students’ performance on the ESLCE<sup>7</sup> mathematics examination did not predict success in first-year mathematics in the university,” and in Zambia, “the low predictive validity of examinations rendered their use for selection at all levels problematic” (Kellaghan and Greaney 1992, 46). So it seems that the tool that is meant to select those who will be a nation’s “best and brightest” is not doing what it is designed to do. This failure often hinders educational and political reform.

### **HINDRANCE OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM**

Members of the elite classes usually have little incentive to reform an educational system that favors them. Since this educational system also shapes elite thinking about political, social and economic issues, it also affects the way future elites will make decisions in these realms. An inauthentic exam will drive an inauthentic curriculum, creating a

distorted world view among a nation's future decision-makers. Indeed, most national examination systems in developing countries seem to hinder education reform at all levels. Kellaghan and Greaney (1992) assert that in Africa "the effect of examinations can be inhibiting, serving to distort or prevent learning rather than to promote or facilitate it" (10).

The exam systems of authoritarian states can be even more damaging, as it discourages students (and thus future elites) from creating innovative and original solutions to problems. In the former Soviet Union, "a great deal of 'humanities' knowledge the students gained [did] not contribute to their professional thinking and doing. Most often it [was] used as a benefit to get a good mark on the exams, and even if students [did] not share the official interpretation, in most cases they would not dare to express their own point of view because of the risk of getting a bad mark" (Matyash 1991, 7-8). This is hardly an environment for fostering educational reform.

Another factor is that in most countries the examination board that administers the exams has set itself up as a powerful bureaucratic institution, which may thus be hesitant to undergo the painful changes of significant reform. This is especially true of centralized countries such as France, where the baccalaureat is a national institution, and China, where the NCEE ministry is a four-tiered system with agencies at the national, state, provincial and city/prefecture levels, employing several thousand people and wielding considerable power (Feng 1999, 42).

In some cases, examination reform is hindered by a shortage of economic or human resources. In Jordan, "the human infrastructure needed to introduce a technological shift to handle Jordanian public exams is not yet available" (Jeradat 1985,

6). In Africa “frequently [examination authorities] are understaffed. With a few notable exceptions, relatively little or no time is given to systematic analyses to improve examination quality. Indeed, most authorities do not have the research capability to undertake this task. Frequently, skilled personnel are not available within the country” (Kellaghan and Greaney 1992, 40). There are often financial barriers to examination reform, as developing new formats and grading and printing technologies require significant investment.

Joanne Capper (1996) found that in most developing countries the exams themselves hindered educational reform, as teachers would adopt pedagogical methods consistent with exam procedures. She found that the exams had instructions that were often not clear, covered too many topics, encouraged the learning of facts rather than concepts, did not encourage the students to draw relationships among the parts of a concept or between different concepts, did not provide many opportunities to use real-life knowledge and skills, and did not provide time for students to reflect or write about content. It is no surprise, then, that developing countries had the kind of educational systems that kept them in the “developing” stages. The teachers were teaching to inferior tests, and the schools were getting inferior results (Capper 1996, 33-34).

## **CONCLUSION**

The effects of national competency exams in many nations have profound impacts on political culture. A nation’s education ministry must inspect its examination content and procedures in this light, continually reevaluating it and asking, “Is this, indeed, what we want our citizens to know?”

The other effects of NCEs mentioned in this paper can clearly be detrimental to a society. An examination system that limits test preparation to only the economically or politically privileged robs its nation of potentially valuable human resources. While it may be possible to design an examination system that more accurately assesses a national curriculum and is more fairly administered, most countries are severely lacking in these areas. Examination reform of this kind would require a considerable investment of both finances and human resources to implement effectively.

Yet such an investment would be worthwhile in developing nations to ensure true educational reform. If educational reform is hindered, then political and economic reform will be hindered, particularly if those who would benefit from this reform are denied access to the decision making process via opportunities afforded only by higher education. It behooves developing countries to examine closely how their national competency exams are influencing the education of their future work force and citizenry. International aid agencies seeking effective reforms in developing countries should pay closer attention to those countries' educational systems, and in particular the assessments that drive curriculum and serve as selection tools.

In contemplating any future state-wide, or even national, competency exams, the United States itself should consider carefully what it wants its citizens to learn and how that will best be reflected on its tests. The nation should also look closely at whether state or federal governments want to use the same examination system as both measures of student competence and school accountability. Finally, it should ensure that any resulting exam system does not solidify existing class boundaries.

Any attempt at promoting democracy within a nation will be seriously impeded without a progressive educational testing system. Political reform will be short-lived and hollow without educational reform, and a serious assessment of the aims and outcomes of a nation's testing regime is a good place to start. It is past time nations begin examining their own examination systems.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) exams are administered to all tenth grade students in the United Kingdom. A-level exams are administered to the equivalent of U.S. twelfth grade students. In general students must perform satisfactorily on GCSEs to continue on to A-levels, and must achieve good marks on the latter to be admitted to British universities.

<sup>2</sup> The *Abitur* is the national leaving exam for all German high school students.

<sup>3</sup> The *baccalaureat* is still in use as the national leaving exam for French high school students.

<sup>4</sup> In many cases, students will either go on to the next level of college preparation or will go into a particular vocational track based on their performance on an exam.

<sup>5</sup> Brooke and Oxenham's study focused on the effects of NCEs in Ghana.

<sup>6</sup> French high school system.

<sup>7</sup> Ethiopian School Leaving Certificate Examination.

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