

## **THE WASHBACK EFFECT OF THE NATIONAL SENIOR CERTIFICATE EXAMINATIONS: PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHERS IN UMGUNGUNDLOVU DISTRICT, SOUTH AFRICA**

**Sybert Mutereko**

University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

E-mail: sybert@ukzn.ac.za

### **—Abstract—**

*The high-stake examinations are often claimed to have the positive washback effect of enhancing classroom practice and instruction. This notion proceeds from the position that tests contain what must be taught and learnt. While this view is logically consistent and theoretically defensible, it fails to fully acknowledge the negative washback of such tests. Using the National Senior Certificate (NSC) examination as a case study, this paper draws on Alderson and Wall's (1993) conceptualisation of the examination washback trichotomy and data elicited through 100 surveys with purposively selected teachers in uMgungundlovu District in South Africa. It challenges the assumption that these high-stake examinations result in positive washback only. Instead, the paper argues that beyond their obvious benefits, the examinations also result in the unintended consequences of negative washback. Following a detailed analysis, the paper shows that the NSC examination led to improved accountability and enhanced classroom instruction, as teachers attempted to improve the pass rates of their learners. However, they also resulted in the manipulation of test records; a narrow emphasis on teaching subject matter that would be covered in examinations; and an emphasis on addressing past examination papers to finish the syllabus. These findings have profound implications for education policy and practice.*

**Key Words:** *washback, high-stake examinations, accountability, unintended consequences*

**JEL Classification:** **I21**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

High-stake testing has been claimed to be one of the main pillars of education systems around the world. In most cases, they are used as a screening tool to select the best performers for the limited opportunities in the post-school system (Kennedy and Lui, 2013; Kılıçkaya, 2016). In some cases, these tests are used as accountability mechanism for teachers and schools. The tests have a profound influence on the processes and outcomes of the education system. It is this influence, which has been called washback (Kılıçkaya, 2016; Mogapi, 2016), that examination developers and planners seem to rely on to induce positive outcomes in the educational system. Washback effects are behaviours or outcomes that can be induced only by the administration of a test. Such behaviours or outcomes would not occur in the absence of a test. For instance, it is argued that the fixation of students and teachers on high-stake tests can be used positively to promote the desired learning. Proponents of this view advise that examinations must be aligned to the desired outcomes. In her seminal work on the washback effect, Bailey (1996) argues that there must be a strong relationship between educational goals and examinations for washback to be beneficial. Bailey asserts that such a relationship would ensure that teachers and students are compelled to focus on such goals as result in positive washback. The most regularly deployed argument in favour of high-stake examinations is that they would ensure that students would engage with material in such a way as to develop deeper understanding of it as well as background knowledge. Positive washback is often associated with out-of-programme tests and opposed to in-programme tests (Bailey, 1996). The case for high-stake tests and their positive washback effect has been well articulated, and it is apparent that its theoretical and practical arguments are well-grounded.

However, those who believe only in the positive washback of high-stake tests fail to fully acknowledge the negative washback of such tests. While the notions of positive washback are logically consistent and theoretically defensible, recent studies have revealed that beyond influencing pedagogical styles in Turkish schools, too much emphasis on examination led to the neglect of the teaching of several skills and values that were not assessed in the high-stake tests (Kılıçkaya, 2016). Comprehensively, Mogapi (2016) reveals that in Botswana the negative washback of high-stake tests impeded the successful implementation of education policy. Such negative views on the effects of examinations on teaching and learning processes are not a recent phenomenon. Drawing on Shohamy's (1992) work,

Bailey (1996) outlines the conditions which may result in negative washback from tests. Bailey believes that when tests are judgemental and there is an overreliance on them, the effect may be negative washback.

The contestations between scholars who hold opposing views of tests as generating positive or negative washback has given rise to a great deal of scholarly argumentation (cf. Bailey, 1996; Kennedy and Lui, 2013; Kilickaya, 2016). However, much of the work on washback has failed to deconstruct its nature and the mechanisms by which it affects educational processes and outcomes. Furthermore, there is a dearth of literature on the washback of tests on participants from different socio-economic background (Kılıçkaya, 2016). The South African education system, with its highly heterogeneous population, would benefit immensely from empirical studies on the effects of high-stake tests. Unfortunately, since the introduction of high-stake tests in the South African Education system in 2001 (Howie, 2012), there have not been any systematic studies on washback of tests. In the absence of such studies, it is hard to grasp how South African teachers can be informed about the washback of the tests they are administering. Although there have been a lot of media reports about the washback of the National Senior Certificate (NSC) examinations in South Africa (cf. *The Citizen*, 1 November 2016), what is understood on this subject is mainly based on speculation.

This study sought to uncover the perceptions of teachers working in schools serving students from different socio-economic classes regarding the effect of the washback from the National Senior Certificate (NSC) examinations in South Africa on educational programmes and outcomes. Following a presentation of the findings of a case study in uMgungundlovu District, this paper challenges the assertion that the washback from high-stake examinations in South Africa is mainly positive. Instead, while acknowledging the positive washback effect, the paper argues there are also unintended negative consequences of such examinations.

Following this introduction, the next section reviews the literature on washback to establish the theoretical context of the study. Building on this discussion, the second section discusses the approaches that were taken to elicit the views of teachers on the washback effect. The third section presents the results that emerged from the field study. Finally, the last two sections consider the results of the study in the light of the theoretical and practical discourse on washback and argue that the NSC examinations do have beneficial effects on teachers and students but also result in negative washback effects. With that, the paper considers the implications

that this conclusion might have for the school system and policy-making.

## **2. THE WASHBACK EFFECT: THE CONCEPT**

The concept of washback is not new. After a comprehensive review of the literature, Alderson and Wall (1993) characterise washback as the influence of high-stake tests on teachers and students to do what they would not do in the absence of such tests. Bailey (1996:259) embraces this definition by saying that washback is the extent to which students or teachers “do things that they would not otherwise necessarily do”. In the current discourse of washback, these claims are thought to be problematic. The main area of contention lies in the need for the outcomes that are claimed to be the result of washback to be verifiably linked to the tests, to the exclusion of all the confounding factors. To do that with some level of certainty, robust studies based on experimental design such as those which consider pre-test and post-test behaviour are needed. Most studies on washback rarely explain the washback through the use of empirical data. Another limitation to Alderson and Dianne’s (1993) definition of washback is that it focuses on the behaviour and attitude of teachers and students only. The narrow focus of the effect of test on micro-aspects of teaching and learning does not allow room for theorising washback beyond the classroom.

Driven by dissatisfaction with Hughes’ (1993) characterisation of washback as a dichotomy, some studies on washback have opted for a trichotomous approach and asserted that washback can affect subjects such as learners and parents, or other participants in the programme such as teachers, administrators, curriculum developers and counsellors (Bailey, 1996). The characterisation of washback as a trichotomy adapts and extends the fundamental views of the washback from examinations. This adaptation is useful for theorising the effect of the washback on the whole education system, not just on teachers and students. The trichotomous approach focuses on the effects of the performance of high-stakes tests on participants, processes, and products. Bailey (1996) suggests that the participants include teachers, learners, administrators, materials writers, and curriculum designers. This view clearly broadens the scope of washback beyond the micro-aspects of teaching and learning suggested by the dichotomous approach. Proponents of the trichotomous approach argue that tests influence the attitudes and perceptions of participants, which in turn affect the processes they are involved in (the work they do) (Kennedy and Lui, 2013). On the one hand, the processes referred to include the manner in which teachers alter their pedagogy to meet their

learners' needs to take tests, in some cases by giving extra classes and teaching to the test. Tests also have an influence on how learners practise for examinations, select what they presume is likely to be examined, cram, look for shortcuts and, in the worst scenario, cheat (Alderson and Wall, 1993; Onaiba, 2015). In a washback study in Libya, Onaiba (2015) reports that cheating was sometimes reported among test administrators. Regarding the last aspect of the trichotomous approach, studies have shown that tests have an impact on the final outputs of the educational system (Kennedy and Lui, 2013; Bailey, 1996). These are better learning and the development of new curricula, new timetables, and new materials. Hughes' (1993) trichotomous washback model is useful for investigating washback, as it allows one to focus attention on the participants, the processes or the products at will. This permits a deeper insight into the aspect under investigation. Hughes' identification of the three aspects of washback is useful to the analysis in this study, as it allows one to think through how tests affect the participants, processes, and outcomes. However, using Hughes' (1993) delineation of washback, this paper focuses on the participants and processes to argue that the NSC examinations in South Africa does have an effect on learners and teachers.

Alderson and Wall (1993) extend the notion of the trichotomy by proposing fifteen hypotheses to explain how washback works (cf. Bailey, 1996; Onaiba, 2015). These hypotheses relate to the influence of the test on the participants, processes, and products. They try to show how the importance, content, methods, and attitudes of participants may have an influence on the intensity of the washback. They, however, made critical recommendations for further research on washback. One recommendation was to investigate how washback affects people from different cultural and economic backgrounds (Alderson and Wall, 1993). Their attention to heterogeneous racial, cultural, and economic status is of value for informing the current study in eliciting the understandings of teachers who teach in schools with different financial statuses.

What can be gleaned from this discussion is that the imposition of a high-stake test regime influences the participants, processes, and products. It is reasonable for teachers and learners to respond to tests by focusing on what is in the tests where they contain what they must teach or learn. There are debates about what constitutes positive or negative washback, but such debates are beyond the scope of this paper.

### 3. CONTEXT: THE NATIONAL SENIOR CERTIFICATE EXAMINATION

Arguably, the National Senior Certificate examinations, often called ‘matric’, carry high stakes for learners, schools, provincial and the national department of education. The Department of Basic Education (2016) notes that the writing of the examinations and the publication of the examination results has become an annual event of major public significance. This examination, which is considered a high-stake examination in this study, signals the culmination of twelve years of formal schooling, although it is based on a three-year curriculum, which starts in Grade 10 and runs through to Grade 12. The NSC examinations, which are written by over half a million students each year, are significant for several reasons. According to the Department of Basic Education (2014), the NSC examination is a barometer of the effectiveness of the education system. To that end, the results of the NSC examination have significant implications for learners, teachers, school principals and education managers at district and provincial level. The results have far-reaching consequences for learners’ career development opportunities in the post-school education system (Howie, 2012). The publication of league tables of the best to worst-performing schools in the print and electronic media exacerbates the pressure on participants to do well. Cases of examination cheating are also reported in the media. The Citizen (1 November 2016) reported the “leaking” of examination papers in Limpopo Province and group copying in KwaZulu-Natal and Eastern Cape Provinces. The point is not to portray the NSC examinations as the primary motivator of such behaviour, nor to ignore their positive washback. Important as such issues may be, they are only indicative of the profound stakes attached to the NSC examination, which may elevate the intensity of the washback.

A closer analysis of the achievement in the NSC examination results reveals that provinces which are more urban in character and are economically more prosperous than others tend to perform better than provinces that are rural and are less wealthy. For instance, only 4.8% of the schools in the Eastern Cape Province, which is predominantly rural, had 100% pass rate (Department of Basic Education, 2017). This is in sharp contrast with the Western Cape Province, which had the highest percentage (20.2%) of schools with 100% pass rate. The Western Cape also has a

greater number of schools in quintile 5<sup>1</sup>. Also called former Model C schools, or Section 21<sup>2</sup> schools, these schools are often found in suburbs that were reserved for the White people during apartheid. As Bailey (1996) points out, these variables are very important in washback studies. To that end, this study took the type of schools into account as a critical variable that could influence teachers' perceptions of the nature and extent of NSC examination washback.

#### **4. METHODOLOGY**

##### **4.1. Approach**

This study used a mixed method approach. Interviews and survey methods were employed to understand the effect of the washback of the NCS examinations on participants and processes in uMgungundlovu District. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with the six principals of the purposefully selected schools. The interviews, each of which lasted between forty-five minutes and one hour, served two main purposes. Firstly, the interviews sought to understand the effects of the NSC examinations on teachers, learners, and processes. Secondly, the interviews also elicited the views of school principals on the extent to which the examinations induced positive washback among the teachers who are at the coalface of delivering the educational policy of the country. The interview protocol, which was based on themes used in previous washback studies (Tayeb et al., 2014) consisted of eight questions that elicited the views of school principals on the effects of the NSC examinations on participants and processes in uMgungundlovu District schools. However, extemporaneous questions were posed at times when the researcher saw the need for to elicit a deeper understanding of what had been said by the respondent. The researcher took notes and recorded the interviews when permission was granted. Because of their lengthy experience in the education sector, the school principals gave detailed descriptions of the washback from the NSC examinations in their schools and the country. The interview data were transcribed verbatim and produced 25 A4 printed pages.

Drawing on the rich descriptions of the washback gleaned through the interviews

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<sup>1</sup> Quintile 5 schools are those schools that cater for the least poor 20% of learners.

<sup>2</sup> Section 21 schools are those schools that manage their own finances.

with school principals, the researcher constructed a questionnaire and administered it to ninety-five high-school teachers who were involved in teaching and the preparation of learners for the NSC examinations. The questionnaire sought to elicit information on five broad areas of NCS examination washback: (1) encouraging accountability in schools; (2) improving instruction and classroom practices; (3) causing teachers to manipulate test scores; (4) causing teachers to focus on examined areas; and (5) causing the “finish syllabus” syndrome. These areas are loosely connected to Alderson and Wall’s (1993) first two elements of the trichotomy of washback - participants, and processes. The questions were designed to the level of agreement in a Likert-like five-point scale of measurement where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = somewhat agree, 4 = agree and 5 = strongly agree. After a pilot test, these questionnaires were hand-delivered to the respondents, to be collected later.

#### **4.2 Participants**

Following Bailey’s (1996) recommendation that the effect of the washback from the tests on participants from different socio-economic environments should be considered, respondents for this study were drawn from three of the four types schools that are typical to the South African education system. The first group consisted of public schools found in the townships. These schools have a very weak financial base. Most of them do not charge schools fees, which is why they are described as non-fee paying schools. The second group consisted of former Model C schools, which are found in the suburbs. These schools have a very strong financial base. Most of the learners are from middle class families that can afford the fees charged. The third group consisted of independent schools. This group serves learners from the middle and upper classes. They depend on fees from learners to run school operations. Due to logistical constraints, rural schools were not included in this study. Although this classification reflects the economic status of the schools, it also largely reflects the racial composition of the participants, which is a legacy of apartheid. A total of 15 schools were selected, for convenience’s sake. Three were former Model C schools, 3 were independent schools, and 9 were public township schools. Also for convenience’s sake, 95 respondents were selected from these schools, with 24.2% being from independent schools, 27.4% from public township schools, and 48.4% from the former model C schools. The need to select respondents from these various groups was informed by Tayeb *et al.*’s (2014) suggestion that because washback is information-rich, various groups of respondents are needed, rather than respondents from only one group.

### **4.3 Analysis**

The data recorded during the interviews were transcribed verbatim before analysis. Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the responses to the open-ended questions in the interview schedule. The analysis of the data transcribed was based on pattern-matching logic, which compares an empirically-based pattern with a predicted one. The “predicted pattern” was derived from the findings of previous studies on washback, together with the models of washback described earlier. Put another way, the findings from other studies were used at times to compare results. The responses to the questionnaires were analysed quantitatively, using SPSS for Windows. The descriptive and inferential statistics used frequency tables, and bar graphs were used to present summary statistics. Cross tabulation was used to explore relationships in the data. Specifically, using the Chi-Square test, the analyses compared the perceptions of teachers from the three types of schools found in uMgungundlovu District.

## **5. UMGUNGUNDLOVU DISTRICT: THE WASHBACK FROM THE NATIONAL SENIOR CERTIFICATE EXAMINATION**

As discussed earlier, the washback from examinations may produce both intended and unintended consequences. This proved to be true for the NSC examinations in uMgungundlovu District. This section will focus on the washback from the NSC on the participants in uMgungundlovu District. To that end, the examination will be discussed in relation to inducing positive change (accountability) among teachers; improving instruction and classroom practices; manipulating test records and results; emphasising subject areas that are covered in examination; encouraging a “finish the syllabus” syndrome, and promoting an emphasis on past examination questions. The perceptions of respondents from different schools are compared using the Chi-square test, but no significant differences were found ( $p > 0.05$ ).

### **5.1 NCS Examination Washback: Inducing Positive Change among Teachers**

Most respondents acknowledged the use of the NSC examination as an accountability mechanism for teachers and schools. To investigate the effectiveness of this mechanism, the perceptions of teachers were cross-tabulated with the types of schools in which they taught. The results are illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1 The perceptions of teachers regarding the washback from the NSC examinations**

Washback element	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree	No opinion	
Encourages positive behaviour in teachers	1	7	14	51	21	1	95
	1.1%	7.4%	14.7%	53.7%	22.1%	1.1%	100.0%
Improves instruction and classroom practice	1	6	24	35	27	1	94
	1.1%	6.4%	25.5%	37.2%	28.7%	1.1%	100.0%
Leads to the manipulation of test records and result	9	22	30	26	6	1	94
	9.6%	23.4%	31.9%	27.7%	6.4%	1.1%	100.0%
The teacher emphasises subject areas that are covered in exams	4	9	24	40	17	1	95
	4.2%	9.5%	25.3%	42.1%	17.9%	1.1%	100.0%
Promotes the “finish the syllabus” syndrome	3	14	25	31	22	0	95
	3.2%	14.7%	26.3%	32.6%	23.2%	0%	100.0%

The majority (53.7%) of the respondents “agreed” that assessments were effective in making teachers accountable, while 22.1% “strongly agreed”. A very small proportion (7.4%) of all respondents “disagreed” and another 1.1% “strongly disagreed”. Most of the respondents in the study confirmed that there is a washback from the NSC examinations. An analysis of the data according to the type of school showed that although the majority (60.9%) of the respondents from independent schools “agreed”, they comprised 27.5% of all respondents who ‘agreed’ that assessments were effective in altering the behaviour of teachers positively. About 17.4% of all respondents from these schools “strongly agreed” with this assertion. The 4.3% of the respondents from independent schools who “strongly disagreed” comprised 100% of all the respondents who took such a view. The respondents from former Model C schools were the highest proportion (57.1%) of all those who “strongly agreed” that assessments were an effective tool of bureaucratic accountability. A majority (52.2%) of the respondents from these schools “agreed”. The 6.5% of respondents from former Model C schools who “disagreed” constituted the largest percentage (42.9%) of all those who took a similar position. In general, the respondents from these schools responded positively to the assertion that assessments are effective in making teachers accountable. A closer analysis of the data reveals that most respondents in the township schools confirmed the

washback of examinations in inducing positive behaviour. Overall, respondents from all types of schools affirmed the existence of a positive washback from the NSC examination in making educators accountable. The Chi-square analysis showed that the variations between them were not statistically significant ( $p = 0.3$ ).

### **5.2 The NCS Examination Washback: Improvement in Classroom Instruction and Practices**

It would be expected that the improvement in teacher accountability that was reported earlier, as an outcome of the NSC examination washback would be accompanied by improvements in classroom instruction and practice. The respondents were asked if this is so. Their perceptions are shown in Table 1. The results obtained showed that a small majority (37.2%) of all the respondents “agreed” that assessments lead to an improvement in classroom instruction and practice whilst 28.7% “strongly agreed”. Put together, this means that most of the respondents responded positively. Only 6.4% of the respondents did not agree while 6.4% “strongly disagreed” that assessments result in improved classroom instruction. Although most respondents affirmed the positive effect of the washback from the NSC examination on classroom instruction, respondents from public township schools had a significant but lower proportion (57.7%) of respondents who held that view. Respondents from these schools constituted 70.8% of all those who either “disagreed” or “somewhat agreed”. This observation may suggest the ineffectiveness of assessments as an accountability mechanism among the township educators.

### **5.3 NCS Examinations Washback: Manipulation of Assessment Scores**

Because the NSC assessment framework includes continuous assessment, which component constitutes from 25% to 50% of the final score, the perceptions of teachers were sought regarding the negative washback of the NSC examinations. The respondents were asked if the NSC examinations caused teachers to manipulate school-based assessment scores. Table 1 shows the outcome. The biggest percentage (31.7%) of those surveyed “somewhat agreed” when asked if the use of assessments as an accountability device caused teachers to manipulate test scores. A small but significant proportion (27.7%) of all the respondents “agreed” that the use of NSC examination as an accountability device causes teachers to manipulate test scores, while 6.5% strongly “agreed”. Only 9.6% of all the respondents “strongly disagreed”, while 23.4% “disagreed”. The data show that the proportion of the respondents who did or did not support the assertion that the NSC examination may

cause teachers to manipulate test scores is almost equal. Only 8.7% of the respondents from former Model C schools comprised 22.2% of all the respondents who “strongly disagreed” with the assertion. Another 21.7% of the respondents from independent schools “disagreed”. In all types of schools, there was a large proportion of respondents who “somewhat agreed” about the effect of the use of assessments as a bureaucratic accountability mechanism. The reason for this is not clear, but it may have something to do with the cautiousness of some respondents and the sensitivity of the subject. As one respondent commented:

*Under some circumstances, I think it can be fair to “adjust marks” (manipulation - sounds dishonest) but I see no problem with that (Tr19).*

However, it is apparent that most respondents acknowledged that the use of assessments for the purposes of accountability might have caused them to manipulate test scores.

#### **5.4 The NCS Examination Washback: a Narrow Focus on the Areas Covered in the Examination**

It has been argued that one effect of the washback from examinations is that it causes teachers to focus on areas that are often covered in an examination - that is, to “teach to the test”. The respondents were asked the degree to which they agreed with this assertion concerning the NSC examinations. Table 1 displays their responses. Preliminary analysis showed that only 17.9% of all the respondents indicated that they “strongly agreed” while 42.1% “agreed”. A small but significant percentage “somewhat agreed”. Very few of the respondents did not confirm the effect of the assessments in causing teachers to focus on content that they believed would be covered in examinations. About 9.5% “disagreed”, while 4.2% “strongly disagreed” that the NSC examinations caused teachers to focus on areas that were likely to be examined, at the expense of those that they believed would not be covered. Generally, most respondents acknowledged the effect of assessments in directing the attention of teachers to subject matter that they believe will be examined. What stood out most in this data set is that the respondents from the township public schools, who comprised 27.4% of all the respondents, were the largest proportion (44.4%) of all those who “disagreed” that the use of assessments may prompt teachers to teach in anticipation of what is often examined. Two respondents offered comments, as follows:

*It [using assessments as accountability mechanisms] stifles creativity and*

*spontaneity. Learners can't learn at their own pace. We teach to assess. General skills and knowledge can't be taught. There is not enough time to fulfil all the other roles of an educator (Tr39).*

*A good example is in Geography, where learners are expected to go on some field trips to reinforce concepts learned in class and to write research projects, but most teachers tend to ignore these aspects since they do not feature in the National Senior Certificate examinations. To some teachers, these activities are viewed as a waste of valuable "learning" time. (Tr66).*

This syndrome is often connected to the need to finish the syllabus in time without paying attention to learners' needs. This syndrome is explored in the next section.

### **5.5 The NCS Examination Washback: the "Finish the Syllabus" Syndrome**

The respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they agree that the NSC examinations entrenched in them above everything else the need to finish teaching the syllabus on time. The responses, which are displayed according to school type, are shown in Table 1. A general overview of the data shows that a significant proportion (23.2%) of the respondents "strongly agreed" while 32.6% "agreed" that the use of assessments as a bureaucratic accountability mechanism forces them to focus on finishing the syllabus on time for examinations. This means that a small majority of the respondents (55.8%) confirmed that the NSC examination do cause teachers to focus on finishing the syllabus in time. Another significant percentage (26.3%) "somewhat agreed" while 14.7% "disagreed". Analysing these perceptions of the respondents according to the type of school indicates that a small proportion (43.5%) of the respondents from the independent schools "agreed" that the use of assessments as a bureaucratic accountability device forces them to focus on finishing the syllabus in time. About 26.1% of the respondents from independent schools comprised 27.3% of those who "strongly agreed". A significant proportion (24%) of all those who "somewhat agreed" were from independent schools. It is apparent that most of the respondents from independent schools attested that the NSC examination could force teachers to focus mainly on finishing the syllabus in time.

Although most of the respondents from all the schools acknowledged that the washback of the NSC examination is an accountability mechanism that compels teachers to organise their work schedules to finish the syllabus on time, fewer in township public schools took such a view. The general syndrome, though, seems to

be very evident. As one educator commented:

*The need to finish the syllabus for the exam leads to “pushed” and rushed lessons to make time for revision (Tr69).*

Taken together, all respondents from the different types of schools studied acknowledge the effect of the washback from NSC examination, and the Chi-square test has shown that there are no significant variations between them.

## 6. DISCUSSION

Following Alderson and Wall's (1993) and Bailey's (1996) recommendations that the socio-economic characteristics of respondents should be taken into account in considering washback, this study did not find compelling evidence to support or refute the notion that there are significant variations in the perceptions of teachers from different types of schools. Such differences did emerge but they were inconsequential. The study established that the NSC examinations could be applauded for improving the sense of accountability among teachers, as well as for enhancing classroom practice and instruction. However, it should be noted that the respondents did claim that the NSC examination might also lead educators into manipulating test scores, as well as narrowing the focus of lessons to what teachers thought examiners would include in the final examinations. Furthermore, in the view of some respondents, the NSC examination was responsible for forcing educators to teach at an inconvenient pace to finish the syllabus in time. The positive effect uncovered of the washback from examinations is barely distinguishable from Kennedy and Lui's (2013) findings in their Chinese study. They reveal that examinations resulted in pedagogical improvement. In a similar study on the washback from examinations, Kilickaya (2016) demonstrates that Turkish language teachers were positively influenced by the introduction of a language test. The findings of this study, together with the findings from previous studies seem to strengthen the hypothesis that the effects of the washback from examinations may be positive. The argument for the use of assessments may be based on shifting the focus of educational accountability from compliance with rules to paying more attention to student learning which is assessed through examinations.

However, this study has also revealed that the use of examinations as an accountability mechanism may lead to unintended consequences, such as the manipulation of test records and results (Table 1), the “finish syllabus” syndrome

(Table 1) and the placing of emphasis on subject areas that are covered in examinations to the detriment of other areas. Consistent with Onaiba's (2015) findings, this study has illustrated that negative washback caused some teachers to rely on the "hidden syllabus", while others narrowed the syllabus to meet the content of the examination. This view is supported by Lipsky (2010:166) assertion that "if teachers are assessed or even remotely evaluated on the proportion of their charges who pass end-of-year examinations, more will pass as teachers who 'teach to the test'". This happens when teachers put the emphasis more on past examination papers than on the curriculum. This observation is also consistent with those of Kilickaya (2016), who found that the teachers in Turkey focused on the materials and the skills that matched the goals of the English tests. Although Kilickaya's findings referred only to the limited case of English examinations, the results seem to correspond with the findings of the current study. Concerning the manipulation of test records and examination marks, Lipsky calls this the intrusion of fraud and deception into the processes of examinations (2010:167). As Bailey (1996) rightly points out, the negative washback from the NSC examination may be exaggerated by the judgemental attitudes towards learners' examination results expressed by education managers and parents. While this study has established the nuances in the effects of washback from high-stake tests in the South African context, it may have two limitations. Although the study agrees with Hughes's (Hughes, 1993) trichotomy in the classification of washback – its effect on participants, processes, and outcomes – the main focus of this study has been on the participants, particularly the teachers. Unfortunately, the effect of the washback from the examinations on processes and outcomes was not given detailed attention. The study, therefore, does not illuminate the complexities of the effect of the washback on learners, who are key players in the NSC examinations. These limitations may be a focus of future enquiry.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article has not been to emphasise the importance of tests or demonstrate the negative aspects of such tests. Important as those issues may be, this study has instead sought to explore the effects of the washback from the NSC examinations by drawing on data generated by a case study conducted in uMgungundlovu District. Despite its limitations, this paper makes explicit that the NSC examinations do have washback, both positive and negative. In general, the NCS examination lead to improved accountability and enhanced classroom instruction as teachers attempt to improve the pass rates of their learners. However,

the NSC examinations washback also result in unintended consequences such as the manipulation of test records; a narrow emphasis on teaching subject matter that is regularly covered in examinations; and the placing of emphasis on past examination papers to finish the syllabus. The improvement of classroom instruction and accountability are important educational virtues that cannot be ignored. On the other hand, the downside of using the NSC examination as an accountability mechanism is too substantial to ignore. Beyond this analysis, an important policy and practice question is: what can be done to harness the positive aspects of using assessments as accountability mechanisms while minimising their negative effects in South Africa and beyond? This paper does not offer answers to these questions but provides tools for asking questions that are more precise on the issue of washback in South Africa and beyond.

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