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ASSESSMENT, ANXIETY, AND ACADEMIC IDENTITY: ANALYZING THE MOTIVATIONAL CLIMATE IN EXAM-ORIENTED ENVIRONMENTS

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QİYMƏTLƏNDİRMƏ, ANKSİYETE VƏ AKADEMİK İDENTİKLİK: İMTAHANYÖNÜMLÜ MÜHİTLƏRDƏ MOTİVASİYA İQLİMİNİN TƏHLİLİ

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ОЦЕНИВАНИЕ, ТРЕВОЖНОСТЬ И АКАДЕМИЧЕСКАЯ ИДЕНТИЧНОСТЬ: АНАЛИЗ МОТИВАЦИОННОГО КЛИМАТА В ЭКЗАМЕНО-ОРИЕНТИРОВАННОЙ СРЕДЕ

Abstract. This study delves into the impact of assessment methods implemented within exam-oriented educational systems on students' motivation, levels of psychological anxiety, and the development of academic identity. The findings reveal a concerning picture: persistent performance pressure, a highly competitive atmosphere, and outcome-based assessment models significantly undermine students' intrinsic motivation. Rather than pursuing knowledge for its own sake, students tend to focus solely on achieving high scores, reducing learning to an obligation rather than a source of personal growth or enjoyment.

Such an environment considerably increases students' test anxiety and general psychological distress. Fear of failure and constant evaluation lead to elevated stress levels, sleep disorders, concentration difficulties, and even depressive moods. As a result, academic identity is constrained within a narrow framework where students begin to define their self-worth solely through test outcomes. This restricts creativity and critical thinking abilities.

These negative effects severely damage students' self-assessment, attitudes toward learning, and overall psychological well-being. The study proposes practical recommendations to address these issues, including the implementation of formative assessment, student-centered motivation strategies, and the development of more balanced educational policies. These measures are expected to foster a healthier and development-focused educational system.

Keywords: Assessment, motivational climate, test anxiety, academic identity, educational psychology

Xülasə. Bu tədqiqat imtahanyönlü təhsil sistemlərində tətbiq edilən qiymətləndirmə metodlarının tələbələrin motivasiyasına, psixoloji narahatlıq səviyyəsinə və akademik identikliklərinin formalaşmasına təsirini araşdırır. Nəticələr göstərir ki, davamlı performans təzyiqi, yüksək rəqabət mühiti və nəticəyönümlü qiymətləndirmə modelləri tələbələrin daxili motivasiyasını əhəmiyyətli dərəcədə azaldır. Tələbələr bilik əldə etməyi məqsəd deyil, yalnız yüksək bal toplamaq üçün vasitə kimi görür, bu da öyrənməni şəxsi inkişaf və zövqdən daha çox öhdəliyə çevirir.

Belə mühit test narahatlığını və ümumi psixoloji gərginliyi artırır. Uğursuzluq qorxusu və davamlı qiymətləndirmə yuxu pozuntuları, diqqət çətinlikləri və hətta depressiv əhval-ruhiyyəyə gətirib çıxarır. Nəticədə tələbələrin akademik identikliyi dar çərçivəyə salınır və özlərini yalnız imtahan nəticələri ilə dəyərləndirməyə başlayırlar. Bu isə yaradıcılığı və tənqidi düşünmə qabiliyyətini məhdudlaşdırır.

Tədqiqat nəticələri göstərir ki, bu mənfi təsirlər tələbələrin özünüqiymətləndirməsinə, öyrənməyə münasibətinə və ümumi psixoloji rifahına ciddi ziyan vurur. Problemlərin həlli üçün formativ qiymətləndirmənin tətbiqi, tələbəyönlü motivasiya strategiyaları və daha balanslı təhsil siyasətinin işlənməsi təklif olunur. Bu tədbirlər daha sağlam və inkişafyönlü təhsil sisteminin formalaşmasına xidmət edə bilər.

Açar sözlər: *qiymətləndirmə, motivasiya mühiti, test narahatlığı, akademik identiklik, təhsil psixologiyası*

Аннотация. Данное исследование посвящено анализу влияния методов оценивания, применяемых в экзамено-ориентированных образовательных системах, на мотивацию учащихся, уровень их психологической тревожности и формирование академической идентичности. Результаты показывают, что постоянное давление на результаты, высокая конкуренция и модели оценивания, ориентированные исключительно на итог, существенно снижают внутреннюю мотивацию студентов. Учебный процесс воспринимается ими не как средство личностного роста и удовольствия, а лишь как обязанность для получения высоких баллов.

Такая среда значительно повышает уровень экзаменационной тревожности и общей психологической напряженности. Страх неудачи и постоянное оценивание приводят к стрессу, нарушениям сна, трудностям с концентрацией и даже депрессивным состояниям. В результате академическая идентичность студентов формируется в узких рамках, где самооценка полностью зависит от экзаменационных результатов, что ограничивает креативность и критическое мышление.

Негативные последствия существенно подрывают самооценку, отношение к обучению и общее психологическое благополучие студентов. В качестве решения предлагается внедрение формирующего оценивания, использование студентоцентрированных мотивационных стратегий и разработка более сбалансированной образовательной политики. Эти меры способны способствовать формированию более здоровой и ориентированной на развитие образовательной системы.

Ключевые слова: *оценивание, мотивационный климат, экзаменационная тревожность, академическая идентичность, психология образования*

1. Introduction

Relevance and problem statement

The role of assessment in modern education has undergone a fundamental transformation over time. Once primarily used to measure students' academic mastery, assessment today functions as a structural component that directly influences psychological, social, and personal development – and even determines future life opportunities (11). This transformation is especially evident in systems dominated by high-stakes exams, where assessment often overshadows the curriculum itself by dictating students' educational paths and career choices (12), leading to an outcome-driven system that deviates from the core aim of learning.

In post-Soviet regions, including Azerbaijan, this trend is particularly pronounced. A culture of achievement dominates societal perceptions of education, and assessment becomes not just a tool but an end in itself. Pedagogical theory emphasizes assessment as a means – to enhance learning and provide feedback (3) – yet this distinction is often lost, which negatively impacts students' intrinsic motivation and their attitudes toward learning.

Despite this, the long-term psychological impacts of exam-oriented systems on motivation dynamics and identity development remain underexplored (9). While many researchers focus on academic outcomes, the indirect emotional and psychological consequences of assessment often remain overlooked. This study addresses this research gap by highlighting how assessment affects not just knowledge acquisition but also emotional and identity development.

Scientific innovation of the study

This study is distinctive in that it does not examine assessment solely through the lens of academic performance but also focuses on three interrelated psychological dimensions: motivational climate, exam anxiety, and academic identity. Unlike traditional studies that analyze these variables separately or in pairs, this research explores their interactions and combined impact on students' educational experiences.

Moreover, it provides the first empirical examination of the relationships between these three psychological constructs in the context of Azerbaijan's education system. This local specificity allows for deeper insights into the unique challenges of the national system while

offering broader implications for similar educational structures. Hence, the study contributes to both local educational reforms and global efforts to base educational policy on psychological insights.

Theoretical framework: Three Central Concepts

1. Motivational climate and Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Self-Determination Theory (6) posits that sustained and high-quality motivation depends on the fulfillment of three innate psychological needs:

Autonomy: Feeling in control of one's own actions and choices.

Competence: Experiencing efficacy and the ability to overcome challenges.

Relatedness: Feeling connected, supported, and a part of a group.

Exam-driven environments often undermine these needs. Restrictions on autonomy prevent students from having a sense of ownership over their learning, limiting their ability to set goals and choose learning methods (5). Competence becomes conditional and unstable – linked solely to grades – causing students to equate low scores with personal failure (18). Relatedness is compromised as competition and social comparison intensify; rather than allies, classmates become rivals (1), diminishing collaboration and emotional well-being.

2. Psychophysiological effects of test anxiety

Test anxiety, a common issue in academic settings, negatively impacts both mental and physical health. Spielberger's Test Anxiety Inventory (1980) categorizes it into two components:

Emotional: Stress responses such as rapid heartbeat, sweating, and stomach pain.

Cognitive: Disruptions in attention, memory, and the rise of negative self-thoughts.

High-stakes testing elevates cortisol levels – the stress hormone – which impairs the prefrontal cortex's functions responsible for decision-making and working memory (21). This undermines students' ability to recall and apply knowledge effectively. Under anxiety, students also exhibit procrastination behaviors (19), avoiding study to reduce stress. This leads to poor academic performance and a reinforcing cycle of perceived incompetence and heightened anxiety.

3. Formation of academic identity: Erikson and Marcia's model

Erik Erikson (1968) defined identity as the perception of oneself as a socially accepted and internally consistent individual. James Marcia (1980) extended this model into four identity statuses:

Diffusion: No commitment, no exploration.

Foreclosure: Commitment without exploration – adopting others' values.

Moratorium: Exploration without final commitment.

Achievement: Exploration followed by personal commitment.

In exam-centric systems, most students remain stuck in the foreclosure stage, forming academic and career goals based on external expectations rather than self-discovery (13). Students with continuous low performance often develop learned helplessness – the belief that their efforts are futile (7). This paralyzes initiative and stunts personal and academic growth, deeply affecting their sense of self.

2. Methodology

This research employs a mixed-method design, one of the most effective approaches for comprehensively understanding complex socio-psychological phenomena. By strategically combining both qualitative and quantitative methods, the study aims to measure the statistical effects of assessment practices in exam-oriented educational settings on students' motivation, anxiety levels, and academic identity development, while also providing deeper insights through students' personal experiences. This approach allows for addressing not only the question of "how much," but also "why" and "how."

Participants

The participant group was selected from six different general secondary schools in two major cities of Azerbaijan – Baku and Ganja. In total, 300 students were involved in the study, representing diverse academic environments and social contexts. The participants were from grades 9 through 11, an age group (14–17) considered critical in shaping academic achievement and future career decisions, as well as being highly susceptible to exam-related pressure.

To ensure objectivity, participants were selected using a random sampling method. In terms of gender distribution, 52% of the participants were female and 48% male, indicating a nearly balanced representation and enhancing the relevance of the findings for both genders.

Research instruments

The study employed internationally recognized and psychometrically validated standardized questionnaires to ensure the reliability and comparability of results:

• Academic Motivation Scale (AMS): Developed by Deci and Ryan (1985), this scale measures intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, as well as amotivation. It accurately identifies different types of motivation driving student learning.

• Test Anxiety Inventory (TAI): Created by Spielberger (1980), this inventory evaluates test anxiety in both emotional (physical symptoms) and cognitive (worry, concentration difficulties) domains, allowing for a multidimensional understanding of exam-related stress.

• Ego Identity Process Questionnaire (EIPQ): Designed by Balistreri et al. (1995), based on Erikson's theory of identity development and Marcia's four identity statuses (diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, achievement), this tool assesses students' academic identity formation and decision-making stages.

• Qualitative data: To complement the quantitative findings and explore students' personal experiences, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 participants. These interviews provided rich insights into students' experiences with exam pressure, motivational challenges, and self-perception as learners.

Data analysis

The collected data were analyzed in two main directions:

• Quantitative Data Analysis: Survey data were analyzed using SPSS 26. Pearson correlation was applied to examine the relationships between the variables. Additionally, regression analysis was conducted to assess the predictive effects of one variable on another – e.g., the impact of exam pressure on test anxiety and intrinsic motivation.

• Qualitative Data Analysis: The semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (4). This method helped identify recurring themes, concepts, and patterns in participants' verbal expressions. Students' thoughts and emotions were categorized and examined, offering deeper insights that enriched the statistical findings and provided contextual interpretation.

3. Results

The results of the study clearly demonstrate how assessment practices in exam-oriented educational systems impact students' motivation, psychological anxiety, and academic identity development. The statistical data are in alignment with the personal experiences derived from qualitative interviews, reinforcing the significance and urgency of the issue.

1. Assessment and motivation

One of the key findings is the notable shift in student motivation dynamics. A significant portion of respondents (approximately 68%) indicated that grades were their primary source of motivation. Notably, 72% of students stated that the main purpose of learning was solely to achieve high scores. This indicates the dominance of an "outcome-based motivation" model where the learning process is devalued in favor of performance results.

Statistical analysis supports this observation: even among high-achieving students, intrinsic motivation was significantly lower ($r = -0.48$, $p < 0.01$). This negative correlation suggests that excelling in exams is often associated with a diminished interest in the subject matter and learning itself. As a result, learning becomes a burden rather than a meaningful pursuit, potentially leading to passivity in future education and career paths and undermining lifelong learning habits.

2. Test anxiety

Measurements obtained via the TAI revealed that the existing pressure in the educational system has a profound effect on students' psychological well-being. A majority (64%) reported experiencing high levels of test anxiety, which manifested not only as stress but also through psychophysiological symptoms (e.g., sleep disturbances, accelerated heartbeat, and concentration difficulties). These symptoms prevent students from realizing their full academic potential.

This phenomenon was more prevalent in classrooms where summative assessments and

outcome-based evaluations were dominant (p < 0.05), indicating a statistically significant relationship. In short, the more the learning environment emphasizes results, the higher the students' anxiety levels rise. This confirms that exams not only assess knowledge but also impose a psychological burden that hinders learning.

3. Academic identity and self-perception

Findings related to academic identity underscore how exam-oriented systems influence students' self-perception and future choices. A total of 59% of students were in the "foreclosure" status – accepting academic goals and career paths without personal exploration or reflection. In other words, most students conform to expectations from parents, teachers, or society rather than discovering their own potential and preferences.

In qualitative interviews, students expressed the psychological consequences of this dynamic. They reported that students who do not receive high grades are often labeled as "lazy" or "stupid," which severely impacts their self-esteem and belief in their own abilities. Such stigmatization fosters a sense of "learned helplessness" and discourages students from taking initiative in academic and life pursuits. This represents a significant barrier to students' psychological well-being and holistic development.

3. Discussion

This study provides an in-depth exploration of the impact of assessment practices within exam-oriented education systems, clearly demonstrating that such systems significantly affect not only students' academic achievement but also their psychological well-being and identity development. The findings confirm that an environment shaped by constant performance pressure, intense competition, and outcome-based assessment models weakens students' intrinsic motivation, increases their psychological distress, and constrains the development of their academic identity.

The core findings of this study can be interpreted through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (SDT). The unmet basic psychological needs of students – autonomy, competence, and relatedness – reduce their sense of ownership in the learning process and redirect their motivation from intrinsic interest to extrinsic rewards such as grades. As a result, students focus on outcomes rather than enjoying the process of learning itself. This shift not only diminishes deep learning but also hinders the development of long-term learning habits essential for lifelong education.

Exam-oriented systems also significantly contribute to increased test anxiety among students. This anxiety is not only emotional but also has cognitive consequences, including memory disruptions and concentration problems, directly undermining performance. Psychophysiological responses such as elevated cortisol levels and reduced activity in the prefrontal cortex impair students' decision-making and attention regulation, limiting their ability to realize their full academic potential. Consequently, this environment deepens the sense of learned helplessness, especially among low-performing students, and exacerbates existing educational inequalities.

Regarding academic identity development, exam results exert a disproportionate influence on students' self-perception. As demonstrated by the findings, the majority of students remain in the "foreclosure" stage, determining their academic goals based on external expectations (e.g., parents, teachers) rather than personal exploration. This suppresses their individual interests and abilities, leading them to measure their self-worth exclusively through exam scores. Exposure to negative labeling severely damages self-esteem and reduces students' initiative in both academic and personal domains.

In sum, the research highlights that the impact of exam-oriented education systems on students is not limited to academic outcomes but extends deeply into psychological and social dimensions, forming a complex and often detrimental influence. These findings serve as a crucial warning for educational policymakers and practitioners, emphasizing the urgent need for reform in assessment practices.

4. Recommendations

Based on the findings, exam-oriented assessment systems:

- Undermine intrinsic motivation;
- Heighten test-related anxiety;
- Narrow students' academic identity.

Accordingly, the following recommendations are proposed:

Strengthen formative assessment practices: Encourage feedback-based evaluation and process-oriented monitoring instead of solely relying on results.

Implement autonomy-supportive teaching strategies: Provide students with opportunities to define their own learning goals and engage in self-regulated learning.

Introduce psychological support programs: Offer training in anxiety management techniques (e.g., breathing exercises, mindfulness) within school settings.

Redefine academic success: Transition from a grade-centric model to a skills-based, competency-focused approach to better reflect diverse student capabilities.

Relevance: This study addresses a highly relevant issue in modern education – the dominance of exam-oriented systems that prioritize performance over learning. It highlights how continuous assessment pressure affects students' motivation, psychological well-being, and identity formation, which is a growing concern in many educational contexts, including Azerbaijan.

Scientific innovation: The research is innovative in exploring the interconnection between assessment practices, test anxiety, and academic identity within a single framework. It provides the first empirical analysis of these relationships in the Azerbaijani education system, offering new insights into how motivational climate and evaluation methods jointly shape students' psychological development.

Practical significance: The findings have strong practical implications for educational policy and school psychology. They suggest adopting formative assessment, student-centered motivation strategies, and psychological support programs to reduce anxiety and enhance intrinsic motivation, thereby contributing to a healthier, development-oriented learning environment.

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