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## Students' Understandings Related to Their Upcoming High-Stakes Tests: A Phenomenographic Study

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### ABSTRACT

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The present study aims to explore the different ways in which a group of students, diversified across school levels, understand the high-stakes tests that they are going to take. High-stakes tests are defined as tests whose results have implications for school system and educational policy, and where important decisions about students, teachers and administrators are made. Phenomenography was chosen as the research method for this purpose. Phenomenography is a research method which describes differences in the way we experience and understand the phenomena around us. The study involved 18 students who prepared for three different high-stakes tests (LGS, YKS, and KPSS) during the 2021-2022 school year. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The researchers studied what participants experienced during the exam preparation and how they view their high-stakes test. The phenomenographic analysis revealed six different ways of understanding related high-stakes tests. These are “a life and death matter,” “a frightening experience,” “a time of strain,” “a struggle at an inconvenient time,” “an improving experience,” and “an opportunity to change the direction of life.” Age, experience, and number of retakes of the test are critical in forming these understandings. The results of this study will provide data for educational researchers to develop new perspectives and strategies for educational practice.

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## INTRODUCTION

The exam situations that students experience starting in the early years of their education affect their daily lives in different ways, depending on the scope and importance of the exams. These exams may be a written assessment by their teachers, a school-wide mock exam, a district-wide performance assessment test, or a centralized statewide exam that may impact students' educational process. Education is a complex and multi-layered system, like any other system, it has inputs, processing, and outputs. An assessment conducted to show the interaction between these processes and the difference between expected and actual performance is necessary and important to determine the degree of achievement of educational goals in terms of creating desired behaviors in students (Ertürk, 2017). Examinations, due to their components like measurement, control, and feedback functions, are considered an important element of educational systems and have been discussed in many studies (Büyüköztürk, 2016). The type of test that is the subject of our study is the large-scale centralized exams that students take at certain stages of the educational process.

High-stakes tests, which are on the agenda in the educational systems of many countries, are not a new phenomenon in educational literature. Large-scale tests have been used for more than a century to hold teachers accountable for their students' learning, to ensure that students have acquired certain desired skills, or to better set performance standards. Since that time, education policymakers have used various tests to hold students and schools accountable for the functioning of the learning process through state-administered tests, knowing that their direct intervention in the classroom would be limited (Madaus & Russel, 2010). High-stakes tests, the subject of this study, are defined as tests whose results have implications for school systems and educational policy, and where important decisions about students, teachers, and administrators are made (Amrein & Berliner, 2002).

Centrally administered high-stakes tests are mostly designed to assess student, teacher, and school performance (Minarechova, 2012). These tests, administered with the participation of large student populations, provide the institutions that develop and monitor educational policy with evidence of school performance against a set of criteria, allowing for the monitoring of instruction over a long period (Dulfer, Polesel & Rice, 2012). In this regard, high-stakes tests serve as an accountability mechanism for teachers and schools. This is because, in some countries where these tests are administered, students performing well can bring fame and some financial benefits to schools, while the opposite can lead to sanctions against schools and teachers (Amrein & Berliner, 2002). Data from tests can be used to plan interventions to improve the performance of low-performing student groups. They are also a way to increase the credibility of schools in the eyes of the public by raising academic standards and holding students and teachers accountable for meeting those standards (Marchant, 2004). Test scores also play an important role in parents' decisions about their children's schools. According to Minarechova (2012), for the majority of parents, school test performance has been the deciding factor in recent years, while features such as school facilities and location have less influence on their decision.

In Turkey, the results of almost all high-stakes tests administered at the national level are used for placement (Büyüköztürk, 2016). These tests, which rank students according to their scores, are used for transition to higher education or personnel selection in public institutions. High-stakes tests, which have a significant impact on candidates' academic development and careers, affect all education stakeholders (Dulfer et al., 2012). In Turkey, other tests are considered high-stakes tests. However, since LGS (High School Graduation System), YKS (Higher Education Institutions Examination), and KPSS (Public Personnel Selection Examination) are the exams with the highest participation rates, although they are not mandatory, it was considered appropriate to include these exams in the study.

In Turkey, the LGS, which students take in 8th grade, is not only a test of students' academic ability but also a determining factor for the high school they will attend. In 2018, several types of high schools, such as science, Anatolian, Anatolian technical, project, and social science, were designated as "Qualified

High Schools" (Demir & Yılmaz, 2019). Admission to these schools requires students to take the LGS exam and earn enough points in accordance with the schools' quotas. If a student did not take the exam she or he can choose among the 5 schools closest to their address and be admitted to one of these schools (MEB, 2018). The qualitative differences between schools lead to the expectation that attending a school that admits students with high scores will pave the way to a good university education. This notion intensifies competition among applicants and sets students on a demanding and sometimes exhausting pace (Özkan & Turan, 2021).

The demanding high-stakes testing process that begins in secondary school continues throughout the four years of high school education. The YKS exam, which candidates take at the end of 12th grade, consists of the Basic Proficiency Test (TYT), which measures basic proficiency in the major subjects, and the Field Proficiency Test (AYT). The scores obtained on these exams determine which university and field of study the candidate is allowed to enroll in. The notion that a high score on the exams gives candidates academic advantages, such as access to a more qualified education and a more prestigious school diploma, and the fact that all of this is crucial to the opportunities and possibilities that students face for the rest of their lives, can make the exams a struggle for existence in the eyes of students and their families (Büyüköztürk, 2016).

If university students intend to work in public institutions and organizations after graduation, they must take the KPSS exam. Administered by the Center for Student Selection and Placement (ÖSYM), this exam is mandatory for those being appointed to public office for the first time. If they perform well on the exam and secure a position commensurate with their education, they will have benefits such as regular overtime, a stable income, job security, and health insurance make public employee appointment attractive. The KPSS exam, which has a validity period of 2 years, is an exam that undergraduate students can take before receiving their diplomas. The fact that it is time for individuals who have completed their education to earn an income increases the social and economic pressure of the KPSS exam on candidates (Sezgin & Duran, 2011).

The structure of entrance exams for high schools, universities, and civil service in Turkey was not always as it is today. Although the name of the exams, the number of sessions, or the assessment procedures have changed over time, Turkey has been conducting high-stakes tests at the national level for secondary education since 1997, for transition to higher education since the mid-1950s, and for public service selection since 1999 (Atılğan, 2018; ÖSYM, 2022). One of the basic assumptions of high-stakes testing is that decisions about students are inevitable and that the information gathered to make those decisions must be collected and combined in a deliberate, considerable, and defensible manner (Cizek, 2001).

High-stakes tests that use standardized, norm-referenced tests for ranking and selecting are based on comparing a candidate's correct answers to questions with a large group of test-takers. Therefore, such tests are less likely to include items that measure basic skills that everyone should be able to master to produce more sophisticated results (Marchant, 2004). These tests, which give an advantage to those who can solve more complex questions in a short time, are defined by students as "difficult." Educational researchers, however, view exam questions from a different perspective. The multiple-choice questions used in these exams are criticized because they are difficult to test candidates' high-level thinking skills (Eşme, 2014), that they are not suitable to measure their interests, abilities, and creativity (Dinç, Dere, & Koluman, 2014), that they are not capable of deep and multi-layered assessment, and that they cause superficial learning (Pampllett & Farnill, 1995). However, the fact that it can test large numbers of candidates in a variety of domains in a short period, that it can be scored quickly and inexpensively with computer-based readers, and that it allows individuals or groups to be compared on a variety of variables and with test takers' performance in previous years is presented as an important advantage (Dufresne, Leonard, & Gerace, 2002; Hammond, McIndoe, Sansome, & Spargo, 1998). In addition, the reasons given

for preferring multiple-choice questions in high-stakes tests are that, compared to exams with interviews or open-ended questions, a greater variety of curriculum topics can be included in the exam and that it is objective to eliminate biases that can occur in scoring such exams (Brady, 2005).

In addition to the purpose, implementation modalities, and structural features of high-stakes tests, issues such as the design of the instructional process and the functioning of the system, the impact of these tests on everyday life, and the psychological conditions of candidates are also the subject of educational research. It is necessary to mention the research on high-stakes tests to paint a general picture of the environment in which high-stakes tests are administered.

Candidates associate high scores with a better future, which creates an environment of fierce competition. This situation reinforces the tendency toward extracurricular resources (Kumandaş & Kutlu, 2010). Expenditures on courses, study centers, private tutoring, and publications purchased to prepare for exams put a strain on the family budget (Can, 2017). In addition to their impact on the family budget, these institutions, which are thought to better prepare students for the exam, may weaken student retention with their entirely exam-oriented course content. According to a 2010 report by the Education Reform Initiative (ERG), students who prepare for tests tend to view the time they spend in school as a waste of time and stay away from school.

Tests, which have a lot at stake, also have implications for the teaching process and learning practices, as they can affect candidates' futures. Since the priority is to achieve high scores on the tests, teaching methods are designed accordingly (Abrams, Pedulla, & Madaus, 2003), teachers teach according to the test technique by emphasizing the test topics (Çetin & Ünsal, 2019), and they tend to use lecture-based methods instead of time-consuming practices that they consider worthless in their efforts to prepare for the test (Büyüköztürk, 2016). This situation negatively affects students' affective gains and prevents them from developing in areas such as arts and sports, which they are not responsible for in exams (Amrein & Berliner, 2002).

Another situation caused by the competition that naturally accompanies the educational process, in which exams are an important agenda item, is that students relate their competencies to the results they obtain in tests. Tests that result in students being constantly compared to each other in test preparation in class and school, and teachers' interest in students who do well on these tests, damage the self-esteem of students who do not receive this attention. This situation can affect student achievement by weakening their academic confidence (Dulfer et.al., 2012).

Another conclusion reached by these studies on the effects of high-stakes testing on students is that intense preparation negatively affects individuals' social lives and causes great anxiety. Due to the high pace of learning, students move away from social life and do not have time to participate in cultural, artistic, and sports activities (Gündoğdu, Kızıldaş, & Çimen, 2010). The fact that one or more exams are coming up and that the results of these exams will determine their lives puts pressure on students as well as their families and even their teachers (Atılğan, 2018; Demir & Yılmaz, 2019). Apart from the hours they spend in school, long study hours, anxiety about the future, and constant focus on the exam prevent candidates from participating in artistic, social, and sports activities (Güngör, 2021), and the economic burden of exam preparation makes it even more difficult for them to participate in such activities (Sezgin & Duran, 2011).

The literature also indicates that students experience some psychological difficulties when preparing for an exam where the stakes are high. Concerning the NAPLAN exam (The National Assessment Program-Literacy and Numeracy) in Australia, Dulfer et al. (2012) found that 90% of students who take the exam are under severe stress. The same study found that students are very worried about being thought "stupid" in the face of poor exam performance, and nearly 70% of them are afraid of their families'

reaction. Fear of failure, fear of not achieving their goals, lack of zest for life, and extreme reactions accompanied by sudden anger are also common emotional states among exam candidates (Kumandaş & Kutlu, 2010). These emotional outbursts can damage the parent-child relationship due to the stressful environment created by exam preparation in the family (Güngör, 2021). Furthermore, it has been shown that concentration disorders due to tension and excessive stress can also affect students' performance (Dulfer et al., 2012).

It is also known that high-stakes tests cause several physical ailments as well as psychological problems caused by stress and its effects on the candidates' daily lives. According to Dulfer et al. (2012), Kumandaş and Kutlu (2010), and Minarechova (2012), the most common physical problems are breathing difficulties, muscle tension, digestive problems, loss of appetite, increased blood pressure, headaches, sleep disturbances, muscle cramps, crying spells, nausea before the test, feeling cold during the exam and vomiting before, during, or after the test.

The observations and experiences of the researchers who designed and conducted the present study are that the high demand for the limited number of quotas intensifies competition and causes constant stress in students and that this intense period of stress significantly affects their lives. Therefore, it was necessary to reveal their understandings related to high-stakes tests, because it is not only the test or the form of the test that determines students' learning behavior. Their perception of the assessment method also plays an important role in this regard (Struyven, Dochy, & Janssens, 2005). The two researchers of the study believe that a deep understanding of how students perceive and make sense of the assessment process that affects their learning practices will provide important data for educational researchers in developing new approaches and guiding candidates. The purpose of this study is to uncover the different ways in which a group of students diversified across the school level understand the high-stakes tests that they are going to take. In other words, it was intended to show how many different ways high-stakes tests were understood by students.

## **METHOD**

### **Research Design**

In this study, phenomenography was used as a research design to uncover differences in the understanding of a group of students preparing for three different high-stakes tests. Phenomenography, which describes differences in the way we experience and understand the phenomena around us, was developed in the early 1970s by a group of Swedish researchers who were studying student learning. According to one of these researchers, Marton (1988), there is not an infinite number of perceptions of a phenomenon; existing understandings are limited in number and can be described in different qualitative ways. Traditional phenomenography is defined as "a research design that aims to investigate the qualitatively different ways in which people understand a particular phenomenon or aspect of the world around them" (Marton & Pong, 2005, p.335).

Phenomenography has a non-dualistic ontological property. That is, there are not two separate worlds that we can define as objective and subjective. We live in a single-understood world (Barnard, McCosker, & Gerber, 1999). In such a world, knowledge is assumed to be created by human thought and action. In this respect, knowledge and concepts have a relational character. Concepts depend on both human activities and reality outside the individual (Svensson, 1994). There are always differences in the way people understand the world, and these differences arise from our experiences. Phenomenography was developed to understand how individuals understand a particular aspect of reality, what it means to them, and how this approach underpins their actions (Marton, 1981).

Phenomenographic research contributes to our understanding not only by illuminating the fundamental meaning of phenomena but also by revealing how people respond to the world. There are several principles to keep in mind. Phenomenographic research is concerned with the content of thought



rather than the process of thought and perception. Rather than looking for overarching laws, thinking is defined by what is both experienced and thought. This approach is not interested in formulating general principles about how things come about. Its goal is to describe the qualitatively different ways in which a group of people experiences the world around them to understand and experience a phenomenon under study (Barnard et.al.,1999).

The different ways of understanding included in the definition of phenomenography are the basic unit of description in phenomenographic research and are represented in the form of categories of description that are to be analyzed to create an outcome space that reveals logical relationships (Marton & Pong, 2005). The focus of a phenomenographic study is on description. In description, the first-order perspective describes the aspect of the world that is the subject of the research as it is. Phenomenographic research, on the other hand, is concerned with the second-order perspective. That is, it attempts to describe how the phenomenon is seen by people (Marton, 1988). Participants who describe their experiences in interviews may express more than one meaning (Barnard et al., 1999). This is not uncommon. Researchers emphasize differences rather than similarities in expressions of meaning when reporting their findings (Orgill, 2012).

The two researchers in the present study assumed that students will develop different perceptions based on their experiences preparing for a high-stakes exam and that uncovering these perceptions will provide important data for the literature. According to Marton (1988), uncovering the perceptions of a phenomenon is particularly important in developing the instructional techniques necessary for students to develop a new understanding of a particular phenomenon. In this regard, understanding how differently students perceive high-stakes tests would help educational programmers develop new perspectives and strategies to guide instructional practice. It would also provide a perspective for studies to improve the quality of counseling services. Therefore, phenomenography was chosen as the research design that would perfectly fit the purpose of the research question.

### **Study Participants**

The study group, formed according to the principle of maximum variation, consisted of 6 LGS candidates from three different secondary schools, 6 YKS candidates from three different high schools, and 6 KPSS candidates from 3 different undergraduate programs. A gender balance was observed in each group of examination candidates. The candidates preparing for the YSK and KPSS were in their final year of school at the time of the survey and were taking the exam for the first time. The differences in the study group were the type of exam they were preparing for and their gender.

### **Research Instruments and Processes**

The phenomenographic research tradition calls for a small number of open-ended questions to allow participants to address aspects of the research topic they consider important during the interviews. During the interviews, participants should be encouraged to describe the context they mention in as much detail as possible. This will help to understand what the participants experienced and how they conceptualize the phenomenon that is the subject of the research (Marton, 1988). Participants were asked 3 questions to determine their understanding of high-stakes testing.

- 1) First, what experiences would you like to talk about this test? How do you feel during this time?
- 2) Did you experience other things during the exam preparation that made you think or touched you emotionally? Can you give any other examples?
- 3) Thinking of all these examples, how would you describe or imagine your upcoming exam in general?

During the interviews, some probing questions such as “Can you elaborate a little?” and “Can you give an

example?" were asked when deemed necessary to achieve clarity and detail. This ensured that participants expressed their understanding with rich and nuanced explanations. Interviews were conducted in April and May 2022. Interviews were recorded with the participants' permission. After each interview, it was transcribed using MacOs dictation software.

### **Data Analysis**

The analysis approach of Lamb, Jörgen, and Liesch (2011) was used in the analysis of this study. Accordingly, each interview transcript was first read twice independently by the researchers to be familiar with the participants' understanding. The researchers did not focus on specific statements but rather examined each participant's overall understanding of the phenomenon. At the end of these readings, participants were grouped according to the similarities and differences in their general understanding. The second phase looked for the answer to the question "What" the participants experienced during the exam preparation and focused on their specific experiences. The most important statements of the participants about their experiences were identified. New groups were formed, which allowed the researchers to compare the answers to the question "What do they experience?" with the participants' lived experiences. Third, the issue of how participants viewed high-stakes testing was focused on. Here, the interview scripts were read several times in an attempt to capture both the meaning of salient statements and the understanding of the interview as a whole.

The two researchers conducted each phase of the analysis simultaneously but independently and compared the conclusions they reached. No inconsistencies were found between the conclusions and inferences. As a member check, participants who had expressed a new understanding were contacted again and asked for confirmation. They were also reminded that they could retract their statements if they felt they had been misunderstood or if there were clues to their identity. None of the participants made such a request. Participants confirmed that the conclusions and emerging understanding were consistent with their statements.

### **Ethic**

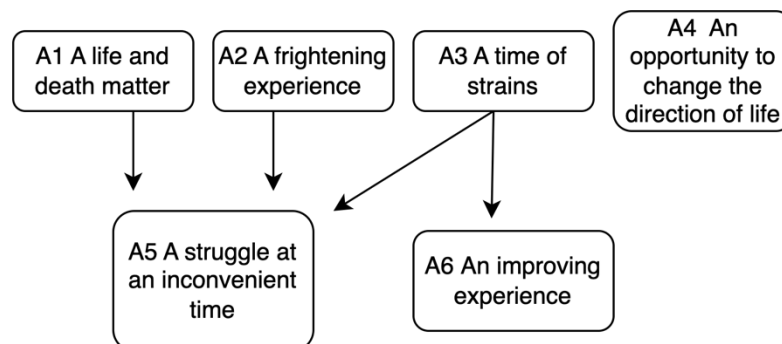
The research data were collected after obtaining the approval of the Provincial Directorate of National Education under the decision of the Research Ethics Committee of Necmettin Erbakan University. At the first contact with the participants, they were given the research permit obtained from the Provincial Directorate of National Education and the consent form of participants. This document was signed by the parents of the participants under 18 years. Participants and parents of underage participants were also given a consent form explaining their rights during the research process (voluntariness, confidentiality principles, anonymity, withdrawal from the research, etc.). Their rights were verbally reiterated at the beginning of each interview.

### **FINDINGS**

At the end of phenomenographic studies, an outcome space emerges in which the findings are presented in the form of categories of description. These conceptions can be presented individually or in a hierarchical order of equal importance (Barnard et al., 1999). In this study, the presentation of interrelated perceptions in a hierarchical order was preferred.

At the end of the analysis, there were 6 different understandings that participants held about the exams they were preparing for. These understandings are shown in the diagram below, considering the hierarchical structuring between them. It was found that the type of exam, which is one of the areas of difference, and accordingly age, had an impact on the formation of understandings. However, gender had no effect.



**Figure 1.** Participants' understandings of high-stakes testing

As can be seen in this diagram, participants with an understanding of A5 also have understanding of A1, A2, and A3. Participants with understanding of A6 also have understanding of A3. However, these participants did not have A1 and A2 conceptions. Participants with understanding A4 were not connected to other understandings.

#### *A1 A life and death matter*

Participants with this understanding believe that the results of the exam they are preparing for will shape the rest of their lives, just as a train traveling fast on the tracks changes direction at the switch. LGS3, one of the participants with this understanding, expressed his belief in the determinism of the exam for his life by saying, "There is no going back once you take the test, you have to go forward, it is a path of no return." Many of the participants who expressed their understanding were candidates preparing for the LGS exam and expressed the following about the determinant role of the exam:

*"This exam stresses me out a lot because it determines our whole future." LGS3*

*"This is an exam that will determine our lives. It will categorize us; it will determine our future according to our intelligence." LGS5*

*"It should not be so decisive. If we go to a bad high school, our lives will be very bad...I think this exam is bad because it is too decisive." LGS1*

*"This exam will determine my life...I live for this exam, I stand up for it, I study for it, I fight for it. Even the breath I take is almost for it." YKS4*

#### *A2 A frightening experience*

Participants with A2 understanding are afraid to fail and view the exam as an experience to be afraid of. All these candidates indicated that they were under a great deal of stress. The fears they expressed when describing stress were as follows: not having enough time in the exam, difficult questions, something going wrong on the day of the exam, and being left behind in competition with peers. The prominent statements participants made about finding the exam scary were as follows:

*"This exam feels like saying "climb Everest" before you have even set up any real obstacles in front of you. If you fall, you pay the penalty with your future, so I find it very scary." LGS6*

*"This exam is like a big, dark shadow in my life. It is very scary because it causes me nothing but stress. Suppose I pass, what will happen after university? Will I be able to find a job?" YKS1*

*"I cannot feel any emotion other than stress, anxiety, and sadness...Not only the exam, but even the most basic things about university scare me, I am afraid that I might be alone, and after university it is scary anyway young people cannot find jobs." YKS3*

*"This exam scares me a lot. There are rumors that there will be many appointments this year because of the elections. If I do not get appointed this year, they will not appoint many people next year.... I cannot get married if I do not get appointed." KPSS3*

#### *A3 A time of strains*

Participants with this understanding agree that the questions of the exams they are preparing for are

difficult. Preparing for such difficult exams entails a demanding process that requires individuals to organize their lives, accordingly, limit their social lives, and deal with stress. The following excerpts summarize the experiences of participants who have busy schedules, spend most of their time at school and courses, and continue studying when they get home:

*"I think this exam is difficult because the questions are not appropriate for our age." LGS4*

*"All I do is study, it takes up my whole life, I do not have time to do anything else, I have problems with my conscience when I want to do something, it is very tiring, very difficult." KPSS4*

*"At my age, I should go to concerts, I should go to the movies, but it's not like that, I have zero social life. We have such a busy schedule that I have become KPSS to the bone." KPSS6*

Participants with A3 understanding were LGS and KPSS candidates. There were no candidates with this understanding among YKS candidates. LGS candidates with A3 understanding also had A5 understanding. KPSS candidates in this group also had A6 understanding. School life in 8th grade and LGS candidates' exam preparation are intertwined. The exam questions consisted only of the subject content of the 8<sup>th</sup>-grade curriculum, and the content of school lessons and homework were organized accordingly to better prepare candidates for the exam. LGS candidates, in describing their experiences that caused them to find the exam challenging, indicated that they found the questions labeled as "skill-based questions" difficult and that they had difficulty solving these questions in sufficient time. KPSS candidates, on the other hand, were more intense about the difficulties they experienced during the process. They complain that the things they need to do to succeed in school and prepare for the exam often have nothing to do with each other and that this duality wears them down; that they cannot spare time for anything other than school, internship, KPSS course, and studying for the exam because they have to complete an internship in their senior year; and that some of their teachers at school do not understand the importance of the exam to them and behave incomprehensibly.

*"This is an exam that requires a lot of effort, you have to compromise on a lot of things, I have already compromised on my social life, I have compromised on school. Normally I do not like to put things off until the last day, I always put off homework, exams in school, etc. until the last day, I focus more on KPSS." KPSS2*

*"If you took the exam, you were guaranteed a job, you could be appointed. So did the teachers we met in the internship, but not us. Our professors do not understand either, they respond to us by saying we should not be so KPSS oriented...We are very stuck." KPSS6*

#### *A5 A struggle at an inconvenient time*

All participants with this understanding are LGS candidates and also have A1, A2, and A3 understanding. These participants feel that the difficulty they experience, and the stress of the exam are not appropriate for their age. Rather, they see it as a cruelty of the system that they must take an exam at a young age that they believe is crucial for the rest of their lives.

*"We are too young now; I know how important it is (in terms of the exam) but there are others who do not know that. Their lives will be ruined, it's very bad. For example, such exams can take place at a later age.... And it is very cruel to be exposed to such stress at such a young age." LGS1*

*"I think this exam comes at the wrong time because, at our age, our thoughts are not really on the exam. Our thoughts are usually occupied with things like games and entertainment. It is very bad and ridiculous to force 13, 14-year-olds to take such an exam that they will pay for with their whole future." LGS6*

#### *A6 An improving experience*

Participants with A6 understanding also have A3 understanding and all of them are KPSS candidates. These participants believe that exam preparation has made their lives more orderly and that this orderliness and what they have learned while studying for the exam have had a positive impact on their personal development, even if they have had a difficult experience.

*"It has brought order to my life." KPSS4*

*"I studied very well in grade 12. I wanted to have something again, a life where I knew what I was going to do when I woke up in the morning. That was one of the good things about studying for the exam this year." KPSS2*

*"I refrain from idle activities, like playing computer games, which I used to play a lot, or watching TV. Now I read books or watch history videos to relax. My preferences have changed. Can we call that maturity? I think this exam year makes me more mature. I am not complaining about it, it is helping me become a more intellectual person."*

#### KPSS5

The second candidate, KPSS5, said that he would not be able to get married if he could not be appointed, *"Now that we have something big to fight for, I feel full and more satisfied with my life...We can compare it to adrenaline sports, where you risk a lot, but it is fun. It's the same here. There are a lot of risks. You cannot commit, everything can go wrong, but I still enjoy it. Because I like dealing with something difficult."* KPSS5

*"I have a better command of educational terminology now, and what I learned was useful to me during my internship. Therefore, I can say that I am glad that I am studying for the exam. Even though I cannot be appointed now, it will be useful to me in the years to come."* KPSS2

#### A4 An opportunity to change the direction of life

Participants with this understanding see the exam as an opportunity to improve their lives. A4 understanding was not related to other understandings. YDS2 who have their own business and family waiting for him to take over the business,

*"I have been going to my father's workplace since I was 7 years old. I am always in the industry. This exam is an opportunity to escape to my own life, I want to live my own life, not the one that is imposed on me".*

*"My parents are workers, if I had not studied, I would probably be a worker too. Factories are common here. But I decided to study, I will become a civil servant, and I will move up to a higher class. This will make my family very happy, and I will be happier. This is my view of KPSS, it should be seen as an opportunity, a chance to move up to a higher class."* KPSS1

Understanding A4 could have been included in A1 because it plays a crucial role in shaping participants' lives. However, the participants who expressed understanding of A1 believe that variables other than their own efforts (such as a mishap or health problem that may occur on the day of the exam, attention lapses because they cannot concentrate enough due to excitement, the questions are more difficult than expected, questions are asked outside of curricula, there is not enough time) have a greater impact on the outcome of the exam they will take. This leads them to tend to view the exam as an external factor that is more crucial to their lives than their own efforts. Participants with this understanding, who believe that they will succeed if they put in the effort, do not view factors outside their control as a threat.

*"I do not care about the 3,500,000 people because if you work, you work and if you do not work, you do not work. What I want is to learn more, to get better. I do not care if 5 million people take the test, I care about my own work."* YKS2

Participants with an A6 understanding see the exam as a means by which they can determine the rest of their lives and think they are in charge.

### DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although the participants' experiences that shaped their understanding of high-stakes testing vary, what they have in common is that they present an intense pace of learning and organize their lives accordingly to succeed in the exams they will take. Participants indicate that they spend most of their time studying to succeed on the exam and that they do not have time to do things like play games, exercise, meet with friends, read a book by a favorite author, attend cultural events, watch TV, and spend time with their family, and that they miss these things. This is also found in the studies of Kumandaş and Kutlu (2010), Güngör (2021), Gündoğdu et al. In addition, it is also found that students who do not participate in social activities in addition to attending school or courses and do not make sufficient use of counseling services have higher test anxiety (Ünalın, Çifçili, Dinç, Akman, & Topçuoğlu, 2017). The descriptions of the participants in the present study confirm this. Scheduling time for activities that students enjoy and that are compatible with their learning routines would have a positive impact on their stress levels. In addition, it would be beneficial for school counselors to include activity suggestions that support students' holistic development when planning study with students preparing for the exam and to involve students' parents in this planning.

Grouping the prominent statements related to the question "What does he/she experience?" under the

categories of understanding in the analysis of the study, it was found that all these experiences related to understanding confirmed the findings of the following researchers. The findings of the present study, which confirm other researchers about the lives of students preparing for the exam, are as follows: Stress and physical discomfort associated with stress, insomnia, crying spells, feeling tired and sick most of the time (Dulfer et al., 2012; Marchant, 2004); tension and angry outbursts (Güngör, 2021; Kumandaş & Kutlu, 2010; Minarechova, 2012); intrusive behavior or pressure from family (Gündoğdu vd., 2010; Güngör, 2021); difficulty in concentrating due to severe stress (Abrams vd., 2003). In addition, "worrying about falling behind in competition with peers", "fear of being judged as stupid and unsuccessful", and "difficult questions", which can be found among the findings of these studies, are the fears expressed by the participants of this study. In addition to these negative situations caused by the exam, the strain on the family economy caused by exam preparation (Can, 2017) is a factor that increases participants' concern about not meeting their families' expectations. Based on this, it is suggested that informative counseling activities should be provided for parents whose children are preparing for the exam and for teachers who teach in these students' classes and that teachers and parents should be taught appropriate communication language to reduce students' anxiety levels.

Aside from the challenging situations that the participants in the present study experienced in the process they underwent, the focus of the research is to uncover the understandings that emerged from these experiences. When the 6 understandings obtained are analyzed in terms of exam type, the understanding of A1 (A life and death matter) does not occur in the KPSS candidates, while it occurs in almost all of the LGS candidates and less than half of the YKS candidates. This may be because the LGS exam, which unlike YKS and KPSS can only be taken once, effectively promotes this understanding. The exam they will take cannot be made up. Güngör (2021) also cites this as one of the negative features of the exam. The high level of anxiety caused by a single exam and an intensive preparation process can have a negative impact on the candidates' living conditions (Dinç vd., 2014). Candidates are aware that no matter how well prepared they are, a mishap on the day of the exam can undo their efforts. Another reason could be the maturation factor. KPSS candidates are aware that there are other options if they do not score high enough for an appointment or fail the interview, and they are old enough to make decisions that will shape their lives. In fact, during the interviews, the KPSS candidates talked about contingency plans in case they did not pass the exam. The LGS age group, which has limited say in major decisions about their own lives, is not able to express alternative orientations. They tend to believe that this exam will lead them down an irreversible path. This understanding of the participants is consistent with the category of "exams as selective and determining our lives" in Baş and Kuvılcım's study (2019, p.658).

Participants with A1(A life and death matter) and A2 (A frightening experience) understandings indicated that their stress levels were high, they felt under pressure, and they worried that they would not be able to meet their families' expectations. Some of the participants even cried during the interviews. A1 and A2 understandings are most prevalent among LGS and YKS candidates. It is conceivable that this is due to family intervention. As Büyüköztürk (2016) points out, these exams become a struggle for existence in the eyes of both students and their families. Some of the participants said that their families even intervened in their friendships at school and that they removed their friends who they believed negatively influenced their studies by cooperating with the teachers. In addition, in the LGS and YKS groups, it was observed that parents controlled the number of questions solved each day and monitored the results of mock exams on a course and subject basis. Participants complained that family conversations revolved mainly around exam-related topics. Parents' interventions, which were intensified since it was an exam year, their pressure to work harder, and their inability to use the right methods to motivate their children may cause the candidates, who are inexperienced in stress management due to their age, to approach the exam with negative emotions.

Of note, some of the statements made by participants with understanding A1 (A life and death

matter), A2 (A frightening experience), and A5 (A struggle at an inconvenient time) were that they felt constantly sad, tired, and unhappy. In fact, it was recorded in the interviews that they often had angry outbursts, were in a tense and intolerant mood, and that their relationships with their families were damaged as a result. According to Minarechova (2012), this is a natural stress response of children working under constant pressure and a common negative effect of high-stakes tests on students.

Participants with A3 (A time of strains), in contrast to participants with A1 (A life and death matter) and A2 (A frightening experience), did not express concerns about not meeting family expectations. In addition, these participants, who were predominantly KPSS candidates, were also sympathetic to A6 (An improving experience). Analyzing the interview transcripts of the participants who had expressed A1 (A life and death matter), A2 (A frightening experience) A5 (A struggle at an inconvenient time), as well as A3 (A time of strains), and A6 (An improving experience), it was found that the first group was more pessimistic and focused more on the negative effects of the examination process on their experiences and emotional state. On the other hand, it was observed that the participants who held the A3 and A6 understandings were able to evaluate the exam and its impact on their lives in a multidimensional way and make different plans considering the possibility of failure. Some of these candidates won the program in which they were studying on their second attempt at the exam. The fact that they had taken a high-stakes test at least twice before the KPSS was an important experience for them, and this experience may have differentiated their understanding from that of younger candidates, who were more likely to view the exam as a matter of life or death.

Although sleep disturbance did not show significant consistency among participants who had the same understanding or among candidates preparing for the same exam, it is a problem that affects candidates' quality of life and work efficiency.

Most studies dealing with the various aspects of high-stakes tests highlight the negative effects of these tests. Based on the participants' experiences and their perceptions shaped by these experiences, LGS and YKS candidates need the kind of guidance and support that will help them perceive the exam as such, deal with their stress and anxiety levels, and acquire the skills to develop and maintain a systematic learning discipline. Büyüköztürk (2016) states that the exam atmosphere can change the priority of school counseling services and increasing academic success by improving students' exam performance can become a higher priority. The accounts of participants who reported their experiences with their school's counseling services in the interviews confirm Büyüköztürk's view. The LGS and YKS candidates talk about the weekly study plans given to them by the guidance services and most of them complain that they are not able to implement the given program. Candidates state that these study plans do not meet their needs and are often too hard to follow. Students' lives are intensified by exam preparation, increasing pressure (candidates mentioned this in three groups: pressure from self, pressure from family, and pressure from school), and stress prevents them from perceiving the exam as one that can be achieved with systematic effort. In fact, during the interviews, participants who indicated A1 (A life and death matter), A2 (A frightening experience), and A5 (A struggle at an inconvenient time) understandings used the metaphors "impending disaster," "a terrible shadow," "path of no return," "like death," "dark shadow," "bridge over the abyss" to describe the exam. In the present study, the participants who revealed the A3 (A time of strains) understanding did not use exaggerated metaphors or expressions with bad connotations despite the difficulties they experienced. The same participants also demonstrated an understanding of A6 (An improving experience). Participants with an understanding of A4 (An opportunity to change the direction of life) also had no negative thoughts about the exam. The positive perceptions of high-stakes tests are A6 (An improving experience) and A4 (An opportunity to change the direction of life). All but one of the candidates who expressed these perceptions were KPSS candidates. Examining the experiences of YKS2, the only participant in this group who is not a KPSS candidate, reveals that his learning behaviors and discipline are motivated entirely by the motivation to succeed and have control of his own life. He describes a situation that contrasts with the family pressure to "study harder" that his peers



complain about. It may be utopian for now to propose the abolition of exams or the development of alternative assessment and evaluation methods for placement exams, but it may be possible to support the holistic development of candidates by increasing their well-being and life satisfaction under current exam conditions. Based on the findings, it is believed that improving the self-regulation skills of students preparing for the LGS and YKS exams and teaching them stress management skills, coupled with proper motivation, will make the exam preparation process less stressful for them. Changing one's way of understanding is a big step in learning (Larsson & Holmström, 2007). The understanding of participants who expressed that the exam they were preparing for had a positive impact on their personal development and experience can inspire educational professionals to change the understanding of students who often attribute pessimistic meanings to exams to a more optimistic and constructive approach. It can ensure that students do not view exam preparation as a tedious and agonizing time, but rather as a period in which they develop appropriate learning methods, gain experience in preparing for an important exam, and come to know themselves better as students. The findings of the present study will provide data for studies aimed at helping students acquire self-regulation skills and for studies aimed at promoting motivation in preparing for high-risk exams. In conclusion, it would be beneficial to transform high-stakes tests, which affect millions of students each year, into a developmental experience for students to develop systematic and disciplined study habits to achieve their goals and increase their life satisfaction by reducing their anxiety.

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