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The Implementation of the National Examination in Indonesian: Evaluating its Usefulness and Drawbacks

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The Implementation of the National Examination in Indonesia: Evaluating its Usefulness and Drawbacks

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Abstract

National Examination (NE) in education system always becomes a debatable issue particularly in Indonesia. One of the never-ending discussions is that the disadvantages of the NE is assumed to outweigh its advantages that leads the government to plan the withdrawal of the NE in the future. Before the withdrawal of the NE is undertaken, the government needs to further consider some aspects in regard to the usefulness and drawbacks of the NE from different aspects. Hence, this paper will address three aspects of the NE implementation in Indonesia namely its social impacts on students and other parties, lack of usefulness of the NE results and potential misleading and inaccurate information of the NE results. Expectedly, the decision, whether it is to withdraw or maintain the NE, can be beneficial for the improvement of the national education quality.

Keywords: National Examination, Usefulness, Drawback, Indonesia

Introduction

Indonesia belongs to a regime that has implemented a national examination (NE) as a pre-requisite to school completion particularly for secondary levels (Regulation of the Ministry of Education and Culture [MoEC], 2017). In the past, the implementation of this high-stake testing has produced more fears particularly from students (See Furaidah et al., 2015) who were required to reach minimum standard scores in order to graduate; otherwise, they had to retake the exam until the minimum score was achieved (Regulation of MoEC, 2006). Recently, the NE is still a requirement, but the students are not obliged to reach specific scores in order to graduate (Regulation of MoEC, 2017). Despite that, the implementation of the NE remains an important concern not only for the success of students, but also for the reputation of the teachers and schools (Ashadi and Rice, 2016). Besides, its implementation requires huge financial investment and large stakeholder involvement (POS NE, 2007). Accordingly, this centralized testing policy should not only be undertaken for the purposes of measuring the students' learning program, but also for the purpose of improving the quality of the national education in general. Therefore, this costly assessment should be based on a strong commitment from the government which is to make the NE as the basis to support the improvement of educational standards and policies.

In this regard, Newton (2007) maintained that the purposes of assessment should not only be aimed at measuring students' learning progress, but also provide beneficial influences to the teaching and learning process, as well as contributing to the educational policy-making process. Indeed, the assessment plays an important role in reaching a strategic decision or action on the basis of its results (Newton, 2007) where one of the many potential attempts to reach the innovation in education can be obtained through the innovation in assessment (Alderson, 1986 cited from Alderson and Wall, 1993). As a matter of fact, the purpose of this assessment has become the basis for the Indonesian government to continue setting the NE. It is noted that the exam will enable the government to measure the national educational quality and identify the areas that need reform (See Rosa et al., 2015; Law of education, 2003). However, as long as it is concerned, the research that examines the Indonesian government's commitment in utilizing the assessment results for improving educational standards and quality is still rare, to date.

Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to critically evaluate the usefulness of the national examination (NE) results as the foreground of the Indonesian government's attempts to improve the national educational standard and policies. This paper contains three main parts of discussion. At first, this paper addresses the social impact that this high-stakes testing has on students and other parties. Next, it discusses the lack of usefulness of the NE results

in a number of educational policies. Finally, the paper explicates the fairness issue of the test that can provide misleading and inaccurate information about the learning and teaching results of the students.

National Exam Policy in Indonesia

The national examination has been an integral part of the Indonesian educational system. It was implemented since 1950, and since then has experienced some changes and revisions in order to adjust with the development of global education and challenges (Curriculum document, 2012; Firman and Tola, 2008; Suryadi, 2013). Although the central government ever suspended the NE and gave authority to every school to run the assessment during the 1972 – 1979 periods, it has now become the annual event in Indonesian. Before 2002, the NE was only compulsory, but there was no requirement regarding the minimum scores that the students had to reach in order to finish the schools. The significant change has happened since 2002 where the NE has employed minimum passing-grade criteria that the students have to achieve in order to graduate. The criteria has been regularly amended as the attempts of the government to increase the national educational standard.

Since it has huge consequences for student success, teacher reputation and school status, the NE is, thus, considered as high-stakes testing (Au, 2008; Ashadi and Rice, 2016; Polesel et al., 2014). The employment of the passing-grade criteria not only requires the students to take the exam, but also to reach the stipulated minimum standard scores (Regulation of MoEC, 2006). It is not surprising that the NE is deemed to be the most challenging stage particularly for the students, throughout their school life. They have to reach the minimum standard scores in the test or they have to retake a remedial exam until the required scores are reached (Silverius, 2010). Apart from that, the reputation of teachers and schools is also at stake when the students fail to attain their satisfactory results (Ashadi and Rice, 2016; Furaidah et al., 2015).

With regard to this, this state-run assessment policy is prone to strident criticism from the public (See Silverius, 2010). The centralized-designed testing is considered inappropriate for current Indonesian circumstances where school inequalities are evident in terms of learning facilities, teacher distribution, and infrastructures. Apart from that, the NE also requires huge amounts of money which would be better invested in reducing these school discrepancies (Suryadi, 2013; Law of national education, 2003). Despite these criticisms, the government insists that the NE is still required in order to measure and standardize the national educational system. One of the claimed benefits is that the NE is used to map the quality of the education system nationally in order that the government can identify the areas that need attention for reform (See Rosa et al., 2015). It is also stated that the NE is used as the basis for policy improvement, especially in reaching the minimum standards in providing educational services for the public (Law of national education, 2003).

The Impacts of Assessment

Assessment has long been considered as a high-profile means of giving different information in the context of education. These range from students' learning progress, teacher and school performance, to the quality of the teaching and the curriculum (Gipps, 1994; Phelps, 2006 cited in Polosel et al., 2014). These are the ideal uses of the assessment which are utilized to support the implementation of the assessment/ examination in education, particularly the high-stakes testing such as in Indonesia (Law of national education, 2003). However, as the first and foremost emphasis, every assessment program –either formative or summative– should serve the purpose of supporting learning for the learners (Black and William, 2006; Harlen, 2007). Although there are some suppositions that 'formative assessment' is distinguished from 'summative assessment' with the former linked to *assessment for learning* compared to *assessment of learning* for the latter. It is suggested there is an interrelated relationship between the two (Harlen, 2007) where there are ways of making use of summative assessment for formative purposes (Black et al., 2003 cited in Harlen, 2007). Subsequently, the assessment is expected not just to provide a direct impact on students, but also to give indirect influences through the improvement of the teachers' performance and the pedagogical quality (Black and William, 2006). The test is also expected to trigger a transformation in the teaching and learning process at classroom and school levels (James and Pedder, (2006). At the end, the assessment should influence the educational system as a whole, particularly with regard to curriculum reform. In this case, the uses of the assessment information particularly that of the high-stakes testing, have become current trends to control and drive curriculum and teaching reform (Gipps, 1999).

Despite that, many studies have claimed some distortion of the purposes of the high-stakes testing implementation in practice. It is suggested that the negative impacts of the centralized testing are evident in the learners, the pedagogy, and the curriculum (Polesel et al., 2014; Vernom, 1956 cited in Alderson and Wall, 1993). Johnson et

al. (2008), for example, noted how assessment in the USA has produced negative impacts on students' success, teacher accountability and the reputation of the school. The negative impacts of high-stake testing are also the case in Australia. Where in actuality, instead of promoting the quality and equity of students' learning through assessment, the reverse occurs. (Polesel et al. 2014). The same happens in the UK as shown from the systematic review of the impacts of the national examination conducted by Harlen and Crick (2002), who found a number of negative impacts on the students and the teachers, from the assessment. They exemplified its negative impacts on the lower-achieving students where 'being labelled as failures has an impact not just on current feelings about their ability to learn, but lowers further their already low self-esteem and reduces the chance of future effort and success. The study also revealed the negative influence of assessments on the way the teachers perform in the class, where a great deal of time being spent on practice tests, the valuing of test performance and undervaluing of other student achievements, with teachers' own assessment becoming summative in function rather than formative. Unfortunately, these harmful influences are also said to be prevalent in the implementation of the NE in Indonesia (Suryadi, 2013). As its main concern, this next section deals with negative influences of the NE on the students, teachers, and schools.

As the main concern in every assessment event is to support the progression of students' learning, the beneficial influences are thus expected to outweigh the negative ones. In this regard, Alderson and Wall (1993) raised a number of hypotheses about the testing impact (washback) for the learners where it is expected to influence what the learners learn and how the learners learn. Wall (2005) also maintained that the test should affect the students' attitudes and activities, as indicated by the amount and quality of their learning. However, in some circumstances where the test relates to the learners' future success, but where relying on their ability for normal learning is less possible, these potential impacts might be difficult. In some cases, the results of the assessment show some improvements in students' learning quantity and quality, but this improvement is only related to study for a particular test (Wall, 2005). The NE in the Indonesian context is also reported to show a similar pattern where the NE is, on the one hand, effective in improving the lengths and the intensity of the students' learning (Sulistyaningsih and Sugiman, 2016; Furaidah et al. 2015), but this improvement occurs only during an intensive preparation coming up to the examination and the focus of learning is also limited in certain subjects included in the examination (Ashadi and Rice, 2016). Thus, it can be said that such progression in learning is simply temporary, in order to achieve the required results in the assessment and unlikely to bear any relation to the progression of the students' learning attitudes in general. This practice has led to a narrowing of the scope and contents of the curriculum (Furaidah et al. 2015). In this regard, Rosa, Gunawan, and Dwiatmoko (2015) conducted a comparison between the students' achievement in the NE and their achievement in a school-based examination where the results showed some inconsistencies. For example, the students who performed better in the school examination were not necessarily better in the NE and only less than 20% of the students showed consistency in their achievements in both the test results. This fact might be understandable, as the time allocation to prepare the subjects included in the NE is done at the expense of the other subjects not tested nationally (Furaidah et al. 2015).

Similarly, this centralized high-stakes testing also brings some harmful impacts on the way Indonesian teachers work in the classroom. Instead of reflecting on their teaching quality, the teachers often take some short-cuts so that their students can reach the required results from the assessment. The teachers lack creativity and the teaching process is very technical, in order to provide more drills and exercises to achieve satisfactory results in the exam (See Furaidah et al. 2015). The content of the instruction is similar to what Vermon (Alderson and Wall, 1993) stated where 'the teacher tended to ignore subjects and activities which did not contribute directly to passing the exam, and lamented what they considered to be excessive coaching for exam'. Indeed, when the NE is approaching, it can be very challenging for many Indonesian teachers who are responsible for preparing their students for the exam. They are often under pressure to fulfill the expectations of parents and particularly the school principals (Ashadi and Rice, 2016). Ashadi and Rice (2016) noted that the teachers taking responsible to prepare the students for the NE commonly face pressure from the parents expecting the teachers to bring success to their children. The authors also identified a case of a school principal who was very concerned with the results of the exam; despite many possible responsibilities, the achievement in the NE was his main priority due to its possibly being the focus of public attention as well as a determiner of the reputation of the school.

Indeed, the achievement in the NE becomes a huge benefit for the schools. The schools with good profiles in terms of students' achievements in the NE are likely to attract more interest from prospective students (Ashadi and Rice, 2016). The test results are also used as the essential criteria in clustering schools into potential schools (schools with poor standards) or National standards (schools which already meet required standards) (Ministerial Regulation on national examination, 2006). For these reasons, the schools are very concerned to help the students succeed in the NE, but they possibly lack the intention to improve the quality of learning in general. In this case, the NE does not fully encourage the schools to improve their pedagogical quality. It has distracted the schools

from the intention of enhancing the whole teaching and learning process to simply preparing the students for the achievement of satisfactory results (Ashadi and Rice, 2016). For example, Adlim et al. (2014) found out that although the NE is of paramount importance for the schools, a number of school principals in suburban areas were reluctant to support the progression of their teachers' work and professionalism in order to hinder these teachers from moving into better schools in urban areas.

Assessment Purposes and Functions

There is no doubt that the data from the assessment has an essential role in the educational system. The importance of the assessment lies in the usefulness of its results to support the changes in educational practices and policies (Newton, 2007). Therefore, it is always linked with pedagogy and the curriculum, where the implementation of the assessment is expected to be capable of bringing positive influences both on the pedagogy and the curriculum (Harlen, 2007). In regard to the usefulness of the assessment, Newton (2007) noted three areas that the results of the assessment can be used for: judgement level, decision level, and impact level. At the judgement level, the assessment is expected to provide information about the students' performance as a result of the learning process. The assessment is also expected to provide information which is useful for the progression of educational policies as whole. Furthermore, the test should also exert a positive influence on the attitudes and activities of the learners, the teachers and other school stakeholders (Wall, 2000).

The NE is, among other things, expected to measure the quality of education and to provide support for schools in their efforts to reach required standards (Governmental regulation, 2005). In the Indonesian educational system, school management is based on eight educational standards including standard of outcomes (graduates), standard of contents, standard of processes (teaching and learning), standard of human resources (teachers and staff), standards of facilities and infrastructures, standard of (school) management, standard of financial expenses and standard of assessment (Government regulation on educational standards, 2005). In this case, each school management is required to fulfil the minimum standard of these eight aspects in providing educational services for the public (National Educational Law, 2003). In practice, however, the test results are seemingly not much used as the references for designing educational policies that can be useful in achieving these standards.

Similarly, the commitment of the government to use the assessment results as the basis to develop better educational policies is not much proven in practice (Oey-Gardiner, 2000). It is likely that the NE is only evident at the judgment level, where the results are used merely as a window display to determine successful and unsuccessful students and schools. The results simply end up as information for schools, parents, relevant stakeholders, and the public, without any contribution to the educational policy-making process (Ashadi and Rice, 2016). The next task is for every school to take a further responsibility to use the test results in developing the quality of their teaching and learning process and to make some improvement for the coming NE. Likewise, the efficacy of the test at the *impact level* whereby the attitudes and activities in the learning and teaching processes are changed, is also not significant, as previously noted (See also Oey-Gardiner, 2000). At the decision level, there is even not much discussion of how the results of the examination play a significant role in the educational policy-making process. The education-related policies such as curriculum design, teacher training, and school management are commonly driven by other external considerations rather than by the test results (Curriculum document, 2013). The use of test results as the basis of a nationwide policy change is almost unheard of and absent from the interest of researchers. The following section is thus to elaborate the lack of political will from the government to take the test results as the basis of their educational policies, particularly in curriculum design, teacher management, and school management.

The reluctance of the government to utilize the assessment data is, for example, obvious in curriculum design such as in the case of the curriculum launched in 2013 (called Curriculum – 2013). This curriculum is probably very ambitious in expectations but less realistic in practice. The curriculum is intended to deal with the drawbacks of the national education as well as to meet international challenges, but the government does not consider the inequalities existing in schools, especially those located in rural and remote areas which are very left behind compared to the urban schools (Lie, 2007; Adlim et al. 2014). The inequalities between urban and rural schools are evident from the results of the national tests where the students studying in rural schools tend to have a low performance compared to their counterparts attending urban schools (Adlim et al. 2014; Furaidah et al. 2015). However, these inequalities and the NE results are not considered in developing the curriculum. The curriculum is developed on the basis of four aspects: legal, philosophical, theoretical, and empirical components (Curriculum document, 2013), but none of these considerations refers to the results of the NE, rather it considers the external (international) data particularly PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) or TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) which places Indonesia at the bottom of the table. In addition,

curriculum development lacks empirical facts, but relies on a number of unverified experts' assumptions and opinions (Curriculum document, 2013).

Similarly, the use of the NE results as a support for teacher empowerment is also not much explored to date. For example, its results are not useful in two aspects of teacher-related programs: teacher training opportunities and teacher distribution among the schools especially between urban and rural schools. In this regard, although it is still related to the implementation of the NE, Ashadi and Rice (2016) maintained that the opportunity to participate in teachers' professional training is not based on the results of the exam, but more on the roles of teachers; those who are responsible in preparing the students facing the exam (usually the teachers who teach in grade IX for junior high school or grade XI for senior high school) are likely to be a priority compared to their counterparts. Similarly, the distribution of the teachers among the schools (Yani, 2010) is also not based on the NE. It is common that the schools in rural areas often lack teaching personnel compared with urban schools which often possess supernumerary staff. It is also reported that most urban schools (68%) have excessive teaching personnel, while the rural schools (37%) and the remote schools experience huge personnel shortages with 37% and 66% respectively (Kompas, 2010). To solve this, the teacher distribution is intended to reduce these inequalities more quantitatively rather than qualitatively (Collective Regulation, 2011). Accordingly, the usefulness of the NE is not yet relevant for the running of this program.

While the relevance of the test results is not so obvious in the preceding cases, the NE is utilized as an important criteria for school league tables (Law of education, 2003; Regulation of national educational standard, 2005). Despite that, achievement in the NE is often misleadingly considered as representing the quality of the teaching and learning process as well as school management (See Ashadi and Rice, 2016), although the facts show that it does not always lead to significant improvement in the school atmosphere and culture as a whole (Oey-Gardiner, 2000). In practice, the importance of the NE for school ranking and benchmarking has often distracted the focus of the schools, so that reaching satisfactory results in the national examination is the major priority of many schools (Ashadi and Rice, 2016).

Fairness Issue in NE Administration

As previously noted, the assessment is of significant importance in education, but it often ends with distorted impacts. One of the sources of the assessment distortions can possibly stem from its quality. Unfortunately, in many cases, the attempts to improve assessment quality often lack attention in many educational policy reforms (Christopher, 2008). The aforementioned author (2008), for example, evaluated the poor quality of English language assessment in Nigeria, emphasizing more the linguistic aspects which cannot depict a true description of the students' competence in the language use. The importance of the testing quality is vital in order that the results can provide positive consequences to education (Kunnan, 2004; Darling-Hammond et al. 2013). Among the essential criteria of a good assessment are validity, reliability, and fairness (Kunnan, 2004; Darling-Hammond et al. 2013). For the purpose of this section, the discussion only focuses on the assessment fairness namely relating to the utilization of computer-based testing (CBT) in the implementation of the NE in Indonesia.

The test fairness is an essential element for the dependability of the test results (Linn, 2000). Accordingly, the test should be developed thoughtfully in order that it will be reasonable and equitable for all the test-takers in any conditions (Camilli, 2006; Kunnan, 2004). The test fairness is considered 'a multi-faceted issue which is not only related to the content and construction of the test, but also covers other aspects of testing' (Baharloo, 2013). In this case, Kunnan (2004) maintained that the test fairness involves the whole system of a testing practice, not just the test itself. This is meant to provide all test takers with equal and comparable opportunities to demonstrate what they know and can do (Song and He, 2015) so that the assessment administration and its results can fit with the two general principles of *justice* and *beneficence* (Frankena, 1973 cited in Kunnan, 2004). Taking these principles into consideration, Kunnan (2004) proposed a test fairness framework which involves five aspects such as validity, absence of bias, access, administration and social consequences.

One of important aspects from Kunnan's framework which should be of paramount importance for the implementation of the NE in Indonesia relates to the access issues especially with the recent utilization of computers (computer-based examination - CBE) to replace the traditional examination (paper-based examination - PBE). Kunnan (2004) mentioned a number of circumstances which are important to achieve fairness of access in the assessment, namely educational access, financial access, geographical access, personal access, and conditions or equipment access. Indeed, the utilization of CBE is full of potential problems from these fairness aspects, especially with regard to the equipment (the computers) access, where not all students have equal opportunities to have access to the computer facilities. It is acknowledged that some schools (mostly in urban

areas) are often much better off in many respects, such as the availability of learning (computer) facilities, better qualified teachers and other accesses to educational resources compared to other schools, particularly in suburban and remote areas (Yani, 2010; Adlin et al. 2014).

As stipulated in the ministerial circular for the NE implementation (2017), the students from the schools with no computer facilities are still encouraged to conduct the CBE at the nearest schools conducting CBE with approximate distance of around 5 kilometers. This provision is likely to disadvantage the students as they should be able to prepare not only the materials of the test but also the tools used for the test. Unlike these students, those learning at the computer-equipped schools might already be accustomed to the device on a daily basis so that they are likely to have more advantages with the implementation of the CBE compared to other student counterparts. They have more time to focus on learning the test materials and might not need to waste time learning the technical usage of the assessment tool. On the other hand, the students from the schools lacking computer equipment need to manage to learn both the test contents and the technical use of the computer in order to effectively take the CBE. In this case, the CBE will provide accumulated burdens for the students attending the less fortunate schools, in addition to other problems such as the low competence of teachers, the students' economic problems, the low enrollment issue, as well as the lack of eagerness of students to progress (Adlim et al. 2014). Accordingly, the inequalities in the administration of the CBE can have a crucial issue on assessment fairness which can possibly lead to misleading results in the assessment.

Despite that, the utilization of the computer-based examination (CBE) could effectively overcome some malfunctions evident in the use of paper-based examination (PBE) which can possibly influence the accountability of the NE results. Some problems from the PBE have been addressed such as the breach and leakage of test documents, the collusion between the school administration and the examination board, as well as the leakage of answers (Rohma, 2013). Although the current provision of the NE does not require the test takers to reach certain scores, the problems might still possibly happen due to the importance of the NE results in maintaining the credibility and reputation of the schools, principals, and teachers (Rohma, 2013).

Conclusion

Assessment and learning are possibly inextricable in educational practices. The assessment is a means of measuring the progress of learning (Christopher, 2008) and the innovations in (learning) and curriculum can presumably be reached through innovations in assessment (Alderson, 1986 cited Alderson and Wall, 1993). However, the assessment might provide more negative than positive influences for education when the government lacks the commitment to utilize the results as the basis for any educational reforms.

The obvious example is a case of implementing the NE in Indonesia. Although the NE is still relevant and effective to measure the standard and quality of nationwide education, its usefulness to the quality of national education is not evident because the government is still reluctant to utilize the NE results as an important element in the educational policy-making process. As previously noted, the negative impacts of NE are still prevalent and this situation might still continue if the government's paradigm to treat the NE results remains unchanged. Accordingly, it is important that the government has the political will to consistently apply the provisions of using the NE results in conducting the mapping and reforms of the educational system, as stipulated in the law and regulations (Law of national education, 2003; Regulation on educational standard, 2005). In addition, the government needs to develop the accountability of the test, in particular of its fairness – as a result of the CBE implementation, so that the NE can minimize the bias of information and can provide accurate data in developing future educational decisions and policies.

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