

STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE TOWARD NATIONAL EXAMINATION IN INDONESIA

Weni Ratnasari¹

Abstract

National exam is one of big issues in Indonesian Educational system. Major controversies occur in implementing the national examination. As a state mandatory exam that every student has to participate, it determines whether a student deserves to graduate or must stay. The policy makers believe if such condition is applied, teachers will be pushed to teach better and students will be motivated to learn more. However, some research revealed negative impacts along the release of such policy. It sparks negative impacts that policy makers should be aware. This article discusses students' perspective regarding the benefits and drawbacks of National exam, and solution for better implementation of National Examination in Indonesia.

Keywords: *National Exam, Educational System.*

¹ Dosen Tetap Ekonomi Syariah STAI Auliaurasyidin Tembilahan

A. Introduction

The national examination or known as Ujian Nasional (UN) is a standardized test to measure and assess the learners' competency in particular subjects in primary and secondary education in Indonesia (Kemdiknas, n.d.). The national examination is conducted three times after the completion of each level of education: primary-grade 6, lower secondary-grade 9 and upper secondary-grade 12. The Education and Culture Ministry will create 20 versions of exam papers for National Exam 2013. It means each student will get different exam paper with their friends although they are in the same room. The previous 2012 national exam consisted of 5 variants of exam papers. This modification is to prevent cheating and force students to work harder. Furthermore, the difficulty of the questions will also be increased.

One of the characteristic of national examination for upper secondary is the feature of "passing grade". The government uses this passing grade for the students to achieve in order to pass the examination. This passing grade employs minimum score which is increased year to year. In 2005, the minimum score was 3.01 (within the scale 1-10) for each subject. This mean, to pass the exam, the students have to have 30.1% correct answers. In 2006, the minimum score increased to 5.01 (Afrianto, 2008). In 2008, it increased to 5.25 and based on the decree No. 75/2009 clause 20, the government stated the average minimum score is at 5.50 with a minimum score of 4.00 for 2 subjects and 4.25 for other subjects-6 subjects in total (Permendiknas, 2009). These increments have the purpose of increasing the quality of the students and also increasing the national education competencies.

Regarding the important consequences from the result of national exam, this testing could be categorized as a high stakes testing. Hubber

(2011) defines high stakes testing as “a testing program whose result have important consequences for students, teachers, school and districts which could includes promotion, certification, graduation, denial or approval“.National exam has already undergone long process of policy changes and sparked a number of issues within its implementation. From year to year, the national exam has already replaced its label into a range of names, along with the change of policies that Government meant to design. It brings many implications during its implementation that teachers, students and government should aware. Rather than concerning on the way students’ preparation upon national exam, this paper will examine the implications of national exam in students’ perspectives. Without any intention to eliminate the practice of national exam in Indonesia, suggestions are made to improve the quality of national exam and eliminate any possible downsides which may arise during its implementation in the next following year.

B. Method

This study is a qualitative research aimed at describing students’ and teachers’ perspective regarding national examination in Indonesia. The research analysis is documentation-based. To gather all information needed, the researcher collects all suitable documents that are available. The data is collected using online questionnaire designed using Google Docs. All participants were students from several region in Indonesia. Participants were invited using e-mail stating that the aim of the project was to investigate student’s perspective on national exam. Participants who agree to join the study follow the link provided to access the online survey.

C. Findings and Discussion

The findings shows that 87% respondents do not show strong objection on the idea of national exam as a means of graduation. However, national exam must be accompanied by other types of test to ensure their validity in measuring students' level. It appears that abolishing the national exam is not the case for many students. Based on the analyzed data, it shows that 35% of the respondents agree that national exam has successfully evaluated their learning process. Though, the rest identified that there are several weaknesses of national exam that at the end deteriorated its function as a national system. Every year, we always found cases about national exam answer key trading and questions trading. Furthermore, the students are acknowledging that it is not difficult to cheat during the test because the teachers who suppose to supervise the test do not do their job well. Under these uncontrollable conditions, national exam has failed to be a valid instrument to assess students' learning, even worse to be the basis of their graduation decision.

Furthermore, its validity is being questioned by the respondents since school and teachers across the country do not have similar quality. Thus, it is not fair for the students who receive different teaching and support to have similar test. The respondents also mentioned that the national exam result cannot be justified to be valid because in the conduct of national exam the respondents experienced lack of preparation or facility support thus created problems in answering the question well. Therefore pros and cons always emerge on discussion about the implications of National Exam from students' perspective. They are as follows:

Positive impacts of National Exam

1. Students will work harder

National exam drives students to work harder in attempt on achieving targeted passing grade issued by government. It acts like stimuli to push

students learn particular subjects measured in the standardized test. Without this sort of stimulus, their efforts are lesser since they know that they will pass easily without putting any efforts.

2. Achieving Important Goals of Study

Since students are expected to have a set of competence after school graduation for preparing their skills in workplace, they should have a list of competence that national exam already covers. By giving such exam, they are expected to have such competence.

Negative impacts of National Exam

1. Incentives for Cheating

With so much pressure on one test, cheating has become a major issue. Teachers have been part of the problem, with some encouraging students to cheat and distributing answers to help them get better results. Critics have accused local governments of encouraging cheating because they want to show up their image with a high pass rate. Furthermore, it could be really embarrassing when knowing the students fail in the exam. The cheating is considered as commonplace and illegally acceptable to saving face. It is a shortcut to keep the prestige of school up.

Brian A Jacob, et, al, in his research entitled *Rotten Apples: An Investigation of the Prevalence and Predictors of Teacher Cheating*, revealed serious cases of teacher or administrator cheating on standardized tests occur in a minimum of 4–5 percent of elementary school classrooms annually. Classrooms that tested poorly last year are much more likely to cheat. Classrooms in schools with teachers who graduated from more prestigious undergraduate institutions are less likely to cheat, whereas classrooms in schools with younger teachers are more likely to cheat. (Brian, A. Jacob, et.al: 2003).

2. Increasing Level of anxiety among students

The level of anxiety among students is increased along with the increasing of the passing grade. The higher passing grade, the higher the anxiety will be. A survey conducted by the Education and Culture Ministry, as many as 78 percent of students told that they were anxious at the thought of taking the exam. They were asked the same question using different wording, 74 percent of the students said they were worried they would not pass the exam. The results of the survey would seem to confirm the criticism of educators and experts that the national exam puts too much stress on students. Considering the increasing level of anxiety occurring among students, it is sensible to classify this issue into some drawbacks in the National Exam.

3. Increasing Level of Drop out

Considered as high-stake exam, it is necessary to conduct analysis on the impact of national exam across nation. Often coming out into public opinion that national exam encourages more students to drop out. Cornell in Dongshu (2009) revealed the psychological effect caused by failing the HSEE19 (national exam in Texas) might discourage students from completing high school in which lead to the early exit. Martorell in his research entitled *Do High School Graduation Exams Matter? A Regression Discontinuity Approach* explained that the discouragement effect was likely due to the fact that students were unable to finish the school if they failed the test on their last chance to take it. In other words, the discouragement is big when the barely-failers of the initial put big efforts in preparing the remedial test but still fail.

4. Financial Pressure

Low financial income probably becomes another reason to the increasing of dropout rate. Those whose parents with low financial incomes may feel submissive and inferior to encounter the National Exam since they could not attend after-school educational training which takes high cost of money such as Primagama, SSC, and Ganesa and so forth. The inferiority gets increased when noticing their classmates attending such program. Also having low financial income makes students unable to buy some necessary books to improve their knowledge, especially those being tested in the National Exam.

5. Teaching to the test

Teaching to the test does not help students improve their actual knowledge and skill, instead of superficial knowledge reflected through the tests. When set into particular conditions, students are unable to answer the problems because they just focus on how to answer tests correctly in limited knowledge.

6. Low Quality Assessment

Talking about examination, it cannot be separated from the way it is assessed. According to Hubber (2011b) and Killen (2005), the main assessment principle is it should be fair, valid and reliable. Indonesia national examination only measures one skill -the cognitive. In education, students' performance comprises of three aspects: cognitive, psychomotor and affective (Harti, n.d.). by ignoring the two other aspects, it can be considered that the test is "invalid and unreliable" since it cannot represent the real ability of the students and seems to measure examination ability (Athanasou, 1997).

Another aspect arguing on the reliability of the test deals with the anxiety of the students. The stress and pressure about the passing grade surely affect students' performance in the exam. A better performance could happen if only students do the test under normal circumstances with the absence of any pressure. Regarding the issue of fairness to the test, Indonesian government seems to ignore the imbalance quality of education across provinces. The standardized examination must followed standardized quality first, both for urban and rural areas. But the fact, urban areas might have better facilities and high qualified teachers compared to the schools in rural areas (Dienim, 2008). The students in rural areas must be so aggrieved, not only because they have poorer access to education facilities but also they have less chances of passing the exam (Lubis, 2010).

The ideal model of national exam should at least include the following criteria:

a. Using process-based assessment.

Most respondents agree that graduation must be determined using not only national exam, but also assessment on students' learning process over 3-year study period.

b. Considering students' progress report

This case especially relates to graduation decision. According to students, graduation decision should also consider students' progress report.

c. Evaluating students' four language skills

There is a high demand for national exam to be able to test all four language skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The current national exam failed to test students' speaking performance.

d. Evaluating students' current language mastery (what they actually learn in class)

It often occurs that what is tested in graduation exam is not what has been taught in classroom.

e. Considering school and students' education situation and facilities

Students are aware of differences among schools. National exam is likely too difficult for low achievement school, and might be too easy for high achievement schools. Such situational geographic-based difference also exists between schools in Java and outside Java. Schools outside Java might have lower education quality and/or poorer facilities. Thus, it is necessary to create an exam which fits each school and students' actual situation.

f. National exam not as the only consideration

Majority of students (97%) agree with the use of national exam as a means of graduation assessment. However, national exam should not be the only consideration. Students propose to consider other types of formative and summative assessments in determining graduation, including: daily progress (learning process), teachers' assessment, semester exam, practice exam covering four language skills learned.

Students state that progress based assessment and teacher intervention will improve test validity because teachers understand students' capabilities and learning process. Moreover, such exam can be designed according to students' actual language mastery level and their actual learning process. Beyond the national exam, students also suggest improving education supporting system and facilities. Respondents state that it is important for the government to support schools with better facilities

and human resource so the goal of education can be achieved and school could perform better in national exam.

D. Conclusion And Suggestion

The National Exam is controversial on whether or not the test is applicable to Indonesian students. Despite of its large number of drawbacks, National Exam is considered as necessary mean to measure education level in Indonesia and increase the quality of education. Therefore we attempt to provide solutions due to emerging drawbacks mentioned in the earlier paragraphs. In the case of increasing level of drop out, in order to reduce the increasing number of drop out ahead of National Exam, it is necessary for schools to make students aware of an alternative when they are barely failed, by taking re-test and reducing negative stigma of retesting to prevent any discouragement effects. Additional supports for education are also necessary to reduce a number of failed students and to prevent drop outs by having test-preparation classes, web-based tutorials and teacher's professional development.

Both counselor and teacher should be aware on the presence of psychological effect which could discourage students from completing high schools. Such motivation training could encourage their confidence in the counter of failure which probably happens in their upcoming National Exam. Also, the role of government is crucially needed to decrease the amount of drop out rate by providing incentives for those with low financial income. The incentive would work as stimulus for students to study more seriously for achieving the targeted passing grade. With it, there will be no other reason to quit school due to inability to pay school finance and lack of necessary books.

As many critics pay concern on the increasing level of anxiety among students ahead on National Exam, it is necessary to assist students to get through the anxiety by giving solutions to overcome anxiety of test and it should be under the teacher-student's role. The temptation to cheat also happens during the exam and it should be put into high concern. Providing a variety of test, not only limited to two different tests, but also more than two reduces possibility of cheating temptation. National Exam stimulates an idea "Teaching to the test rather than building knowledge and skill". They merely focus on rote skill and memorization in the form of "teaching to test" in which cutting out comprehensive subject matters into simplified forms commonly used within the exam. In order to overcome this issue, it is necessary to reconsider current curriculum in Indonesia. The policy makers should consider the standards that students should achieve with the availability of time period. It is necessary to provide reasonable time period which guarantee the achievement of education standards. Using a variety of curricular materials instead of using merely a textbook is necessary in order to widen students' knowledge and prevent confusion when encountering the National Exam.

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