High-Stakes Testing in Indonesia and Its Impact on Motivation

I had been a teacher in a secondary public school in Indonesia from 2006-2010. During the time, nothing I concerned myself more than about National Exam, a high-stakes testing for students in elementary and secondary schools. As the result of national reform in the late 1990s, Indonesia has moved to the decentralized and autonomous system of local government. In parallel with the local government autonomy, the central education authority has issued a policy that give schools and teachers autonomy to develop their own curricula that represent different contextual needs. Every school develops their own curriculum based on national core standards that are general enough. This is very ideal, since autonomy is indispensable element of motivation. Daniel H. Pink, in his book *Drive*, argues that autonomy altogether with mastery and purpose are the element of motivation. It means, the more teachers have their autonomy the stronger their motivation.

Unfortunately, this policy is in contrast with the fact that the central government continues to preserve their control of teacher works. Since 2005, the Indonesian education central authority has been administering the National Exam (UN)—high-stakes and standardized testing—each year to assure the accountability and the improvement of education performance.

Regarding the National Examination score results, the Regulation of the Indonesian Minister of Education and Culture No. 66/2013 explains that:

1. Students are required to achieve certain scores in particular tested-subjects to pass the National Examination and to graduate from schools;
2. The National Examination results are used by the next education levels to select students;
3. The National Examination results are used to map the performance of students, teachers, and schools which is reported publicly as the accountability of educational practices;
4. The National Examination results are used to determine the educational development programs by the Ministry of Education and Culture.

The results of standardized testing are intended to be used in several ways such as depicting a big picture of student performance, identifying low-achieving and high-achieving schools for national educational development programs, evaluating the effectiveness and efficiency of existing programs, providing information for further rewards and punishments, allocating human and financial resources, and giving information to teachers and schools in regards to areas they should improve in classroom instructions and school management. However, most teachers I have met said that information about student scores have raised public awareness of schools which do not perform well. This eventually puts pressure on those schools. The test results that are publicly accessible also bring pressure to schools and teachers to improve.

As a proponent of high-stakes standardized testing, the central authority of Indonesian education in many opportunities often argues that standardized testing motivates students to study harder, teachers to teach better, principals to improve schools performance, and parents to involve themselves in their children’s education. Further, the government uses the results—which are believed as objective, reliable, and accountable in assessing student achievement—to compare performance of students, teachers, and schools.

Nevertheless, evidence that I has found throughout years of teaching experience in public schools in Indonesia showed contradicting facts in relation to effects that the National Examination have brought to teacher and student motivation. First, undoubtedly, different interests, learning styles, learning speed, capacity, and a large variety of factors affecting their learning have made every child unique. Thus, most teachers believe that assessing only the cognitive aspect of student achievement has reduced the goals of education to only attaining high scores on tests. Moreover, the National Exam in Indonesia only assesses particular subjects for every school level. This policy inevitably has created a system that ignores students’ uniqueness that eventually demotivates them. Learning is more about striving to get high score in exam. Learning is no more engaging activities that help students to better understand their social lives and experiences. The National Exam has destroyed the very basic of student motivation to go to school.

Second, as a consequence of the first point, student low test-scores are influenced by many factors. Therefore, it makes no sense when student achievement in the National Exam is used to measure teacher performance. After being measured through students’ scores in the National Exam, teachers have tended to narrow their curriculum. They do teach what students will do in the exam.

Third, through years of experience in Indonesian education, the author believes that the National Exam is better to compare students who come from poor families and wealthy ones rather than to compare achievement of students, teachers, and schools. In addition, as mentioned before, the National Exam results also determine student competitiveness for entering the next schools or universities. If the test scores are high they can attend better schools or universities. Therefore, it is not exaggerating to say that the National Exam better serves students from a more stable socio-economic background.

Forth, to help students achieving high scores in the National Exam, schools primarily focus on subjects that are tested in the examination. Most schools schedule additional classes for the test preparation. It requires some teachers to teach more which means getting more incentives. This situation has made tested subjects and teachers who teach the subjects are considered more important and supposed to be prioritized. School days become very tiring for students—particularly three months before the National Examination. They attend regular classes mostly from 7:30AM until 1:30PM, then they join test preparation class mostly from 2:00PM to 3:00PM. Still, many parents ‘encourage’ their children to take extra National Examination preparation in commercial educational institutions that specifically teach how to attain high scores on the National Examination. Indeed, the policy of National Examination as a high-stakes and standardized testing has created ‘demands’ and ‘supplies’ in this special ‘market’. This situation has narrowed the curriculum. Teachers only teach what is to be tested. In this regard, the only motivation students have is to achieve high scores. Once the test is completed, it easy for them to forget what they have learned.

Cheating during the National Examination is another bad consequence that has happened massively during the exam. The Ministry of Education and Culture as the central authority for education in Indonesia always rebuffs this fact. Gordon LaForge, a fellow in a bilateral educational exchange program, who had a chance to help proctor in the National Examination in Indonesia wrote:

It is paradoxical that dishonesty could flourish in Indonesia, where religion is pervasive, social rules governing manners and ethics are deeply ingrained and the education curriculum emphasizes behavior and morality as much as it does knowledge acquisition.

…

But for cheating, teachers and administrators don’t deserve the brunt of the blame. The pernicious national exam does. In a nation as diverse as Indonesia, it is brutally unfair to predicate graduation on a uniform, standardized test

However, as the concept of educational evaluation has evolved, it is important to keep advocating a better way to evaluate that focus more on the student—not the subject-matter or content standards.

# Conclusion

As a high-stakes and standardized testing, the National Exam has driven many situations that reduce teacher autonomy to design, implement, and evaluate their instructions. Also, it has digressed students’ motivation from learning for their self-actualization to learning for high scores.

Central education authority should find better ways to evaluate teachers and schools; ways that will not degrade teachers’ motivation. Evaluation is a means to improve performance. When teachers are evaluated fairly, they will be more motivated because it is the human nature to always improve their mastery.