



STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES: FEMALE ENGLISH TEACHERS AND THE NATIONAL STANDARDIZED EXAM POLICY

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Abstract

It seems that testing sponsors and policy makers at national, provincial, and district levels still consider testing as an important, positive, and cost effective device in educational improvement. However, research findings show a broad range of resources are positively related to student outcomes (Greenwald et al., 1996; Nieto & Bode, 2008), a student achievement results from not only school quality but also health, motivational, family, and cultural conditions (Nieto & Bode, 2008; Rothstein, 1998), and teacher inputs, school resources, and family inputs are statistically important in explaining student achievement (Nieto & Bode, 2008; Levin, 1995). The purpose of this qualitative inquiry was to explore the perspectives of local female English teachers on the National Standardized Exam [NSE] policy as a high-stakes exam to gauge student performance nationally at four senior high schools in Jambi City, Indonesia. Data for this study were collected through a demographic background survey and in-depth interviews with eight local female English teachers. The demographic data were analysed descriptively. The interviews data were analyzed using within-case and cross-case displays and analyses (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Two salient themes with their sub-themes that emerged were (1) disheartening views on the use of the NSE policy and (2) major consequences the NSE policy (curriculum and instruction, teaching and learning, teacher motivation, student motivation, less attention to non-tested disciplines, and widespread cheating). This study provides information for policy makers, school leaders, researchers, and teacher educators to understand how the policy is implemented at the school level. Policy implications and suggestions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: National Standardized Exam (NSE) Policy, Indonesia, female English teachers, disheartening views, consequences

INTRODUCTION

There is a common view nowadays that the quality of public schools in Indonesia is not good enough and that something must be done to make the schools better. Various educational policy initiatives have been initiated in recognition of the significance of quality education, and the assessment and evaluation of student achievement have long been a focal point of educational policy. More importantly, setting higher academic standards is one of the ways to raise the educational achievement of students in Indonesia. The central government through the Ministry of National Education [hereinafter termed MoNE] is strong-minded to advance the quality of education by requiring all students in basic and secondary education in their concluding year to take the National Standardized Exam [hereinafter termed NSE] to gauge their performance nationally although previous research has indicated that high-stakes testing policies demonstrated few relationships with student's achievement (Marchant, Paulson, & Shunk, 2006) and in their 2002 study of 18 states with high-stakes tests in the USA, Amrein and Berliner (2002) concluded that there was no convincing evidence that the implementation of high-stakes testing improved student achievement. However, according to Herman and Golan (1991), the proponents of standardized testing argue that the test has a major function in recent efforts to enlarge the quality of education. Additionally, standardized testing is comparatively low-cost, and its implementation and reporting of results usually can be done quickly and easily (Linn, 2000). In Indonesia, it seems that testing sponsors and policymakers at national,

provincial, and district levels still consider testing as an important, positive, and cost effective device in educational improvement. As a result, students have to succeed in the exam to obtain regular school diplomas so that they can continue to the higher level of education.

On the contrary, the practice of the NSE policy has glossed over the Education Law 20/2003, stating that evaluation of students' learning is held by educators or teachers (schools) in order to monitor the process, progress, and improvement of learning continuously (MoNE, 2003). Moreover, the policy has been against the Local Government Law No.32/2004, particularly the article of 13, uttering that local governments have rights to administer, manage, and control their own education. These two laws indicate that the education policy including the assessment and evaluation of student achievement should be changed from centralization to decentralization (schools).

This practice has become a serious concern and has brought about negative impacts on students nationally and locally because the policy has ignored the gaps among schools in terms of socio economic status [SES] and school resources across the country. Research findings show a broad range of resources are positively related to student outcomes (Greenwald et al., 1996), a student achievement results from not only school quality but also health, motivational, family, and cultural conditions (Rothstein, 1998), and teacher inputs, school resources, and family inputs are statistically important in explaining student achievement (Levin, 1995). In the words of Nieto and Bode (2008), "Another practice that impedes equity in schools is the uncritical use of standardized testing, particularly when employed to sort students rather than to improve instruction" (p. 122). The uncritical practice of the NSE policy in Indonesia has caused a large number of students failed in the exam. For example, in 2010, of 1,522,162 senior high students who participated in the exam, 154,079 students failed in the exam (Kompas, 2010).

The NSE policy is a top-down policy, from MoNE to schools in order to improve the quality of education in Indonesia. So, teachers and schools are not responsible for making the policy. However, because of the widespread public opposition to the NSE as a single determiner for measuring student achievement, the central government through the Ministry of National Education changed their policy on the NSE. Since 2011, the central government has decided that the combination of 40 % of the school exam results and 60 % of the national exam results would be used to determine whether a student will graduate or not from his or her school. Although, the central government has included the results of school exam, a large number of students still failed in the exam throughout the country. For 2011, of 1,450,498 senior high students who participated in the exam, 16,098 students failed in the exam (Suara Pembaharuan, 2011) and 2013 data indicated that of 1.581.286 senior high students who participated in the exam, 8.250 students failed in the exam (Antaranews, 2013).

The unintended consequences of standardized testing in schools from other countries have been documented in previous studies. For example, a study by Jones and Egley (2004) who surveyed 708 teachers in Florida on their perception of the high-stakes testing program found that most of the participants believed that the high-stakes test did not take schools in the right direction, the use of the one-time test scores were improper and inaccurate for assessing students' learning and development, and the test brought about negative effects on the curriculum, teaching and learning, and student and teacher motivation. Hoffman, Assaf, and Paris (2001) who conducted a study in Texas found that teachers spent between 8 and 10 hours a week on test preparation to help their students during the entire year, which reduced time for instruction. Jones, Jones, Hardin, Chapman, Yarbrough, and Davis (1999) who surveyed teachers in North Carolina found that teachers reported that the testing program would *not* improve the quality of education in their schools. Another important study was done by Shepard and Dougherty (1991) who investigated the effects the high-stakes testing on instruction by surveying 360 teachers in grades 3, 5 and 6. They found that participants received pressure from district administration and media to improve test scores as a result participants just focused on giving basic skill instruction and giving more time on test preparation. Also, Madaus (1988) argued that teachers taught to the test when they believed that important decisions, such as student promotion, would be based on test scores. The pressure to raise students' test scores might make teachers not to have real teaching and learning processes.

However, the current debates and controversy over the use of the NSE policy have been in the absence of considering and discussing unintended consequences for every subject teacher that his or her subject is included in the exam such as English subject. This lack of consideration and discussion of unintended consequences of the policy on every subject teacher may arise from a common lack of understanding educational policy implementation and the processes that interrelate during implementation. Additionally, since its inception, the unintended consequences of the NSE policy for every subject teacher, to our knowledge, have remained understudied, in particular how the policy affects English teacher's instruction, curriculum, and teacher motivation at school level in relation to student achievement in Jambi province. The purpose of this qualitative inquiry was to explore and describe the perspectives of local female English teachers on the National Standardized Exam [NSE] policy as a high-stakes exam to gauge student performance nationally at four senior high schools in Jambi City, Indonesia. One major research question guided this study: What are senior high school female English teachers' perspectives of the consequences of the NSE policy on the instruction, curriculum, teacher motivation, and student motivation?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

An analysis of the perspectives of local female English teachers on the National Standardized Exam [NSE] policy as a high-stakes exam to gauge student performance nationally at four senior high schools in Jambi City, Indonesia, particularly senior high school English teachers' perspectives on the unintended consequences of the NSE policy on teaching English in the classroom requires a theoretical framework that helps to better understand and describe their challenges, feelings, and thoughts as an educator. Starratt's (1991, 1994) well-known tripartite framing of the ethics of critique, justice, and care was used to guide this study. Starratt's (1991, 1994) conceptualization of the ethics of critique, justice, and care is one of the most familiar ethical framework used in educational field. The first frame is the ethic of critique whose principles are intended to question how social and institutional structures are organized. In education, the ethic wants to examine how schools, school system, and policies are made (Starratt, 1991, 1994). In a 1991 article, Starratt wrote,

The point of the critical stance is to uncover which group has the advantage over the others, how things got to be the way they are, and to expose how situations are structured and language is used so as to maintain the legitimacy of social arrangements" (p. 189).

The ethic of critique deals with barriers to fairness. Like Starratt, Furman (2003) stated that the ethic of critique dealt with the obstacles that impede fairness. In other words, in education, the ethic of critique asks educators and leaders to question the current situation or system by examining how policies, programs, practices, and structures are set up, such as: "Who makes the laws? Who benefits from the law, rule, or policy? Who has the power? Who are the silenced voices?" (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2005, p. 16). According to Starratt (1991), the critical ethic deals with the idea that there are no effectively and neutrally social arrangements. Thus, the ethic of critique can be used by educators and leaders, who are concerned about access, quality, and equity, as an outstanding way to begin analysing the impact of the unethical and uncritical practice of the NSE policy on students, teachers, families, schools, and society.

The second frame is the ethic of justice addressing the question of "How do we govern ourselves while carrying our education activities?" (Starratt, 1991, p. 191). How we treat individuals based on the standards of justice and how just and fair decisions or policies are made and applied to all individuals equally. Like Starratt, McCray and Beachum (2006) said that the ethic of justice was related to the governance and fairness. In addition, Shapiro and Stefkovich (2005) made a good point that using the ethic of justice, "one may ask questions related to the issues of equity and equality; the fairness of rules, laws, and policies" (p. 13). In addition, the definition of justice that Brück (2006) contributed is important that justice refers to the equality of living beings to participate in all parts of life personally and socially. Another interesting point is that the ethic of justice assumes "an ability to perceive injustice in the social order as well as some minimal level of caring about relationships in that

social order” (Starratt, 1991, p. 198). The fundamental point in the ethic of justice is an equal action for all students in education as its core value. This ethic may help educators and administrators to look at the current policies whether they are just and fair for all students.

The third frame, the ethic of care, is much more associated with caring for individuals as unique ones. The principles of the ethic of care involve absolute respect for the dignity and intrinsic values of each individual in relationships (Starratt, 1991, 1994). Additionally, the ethic of care highlights the interdependence of all individuals. It focuses on how certain young people or students in schools are more vulnerable than others, and that the non-vulnerable people (teacher, educators, and government) should pay extra attention to the vulnerable students while making decisions that might affect them. Noddings (1992) wrote, “The first job of the schools is to care for our education” (p. xiv). In education, this frame is related to how educators, teachers, and school leaders or even government may help young people in meeting their educational needs and every individual’s learning.

In summary, Starratt’s (1991, 1994) well-known tripartite framing of the ethics of critique, justice, and care- guided this study to understand and explore teachers’ perceptions on the practices of the NSE policy in schools in relation to the unintended consequences of the policy on the instruction, curriculum, teacher motivation, and student motivation. Through this frame of thought, we were trying to explore the unintended consequences of the policy on the instruction, curriculum, teacher motivation, and student motivation from teachers’ side who are in the frontlines and what should be addressed by educational leaders and policymakers at national and local levels.

METHOD

Design

The purpose of this qualitative inquiry was to explore and describe the perspectives of local female English teachers on the National Standardized Exam [NSE] policy as a high-stakes exam to gauge student performance nationally at four senior high schools in Jambi City, Indonesia. The goal of conducting a qualitative study has historically been “to explore, explain, or describe the phenomenon of interest” (Marshall and Rossman, 1999, p. 33) and a case study is one of the qualitative traditions (Cresswell, 1998, 2007). According to Merriam (1998), a qualitative case study is an intensive and holistic description, explanation, and analysis of “a bounded system” (p. 27) or phenomenon such as a person, a program, an institution, a process, a social unit, a group, and a policy. Cresswell (1998) wrote that the bounded system can be bounded by time and place and the case can be a program, an activity, or individuals. Additionally, exploratory case study is appropriate when the topic of interest has not been the subject of exhaustive research (Merriam, 1998) as is the case with senior high school female English teachers’ perceptions on the unintended consequences of the NSE policy on teaching English in the classroom. According to Merriam (1998), through examining a previously understudied issue, there has been an opportunity for researchers to search for relevant factors and to provide a descriptive foundation for future research. For these reasons, case study design was selected as the appropriate research strategy to use in developing a descriptive account and an interpretation of the events.

Research Site, Sampling Procedures and Participants

The sites for this study were four public senior high schools outside Jambi city. These four schools were categorized as non-elite schools in terms of socioeconomic students, achievement, and facilities. For sampling, Cresswell (2007) wrote, “The concept of purposeful sampling is used in qualitative research. This means that the inquirer selects individuals and sites for the study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problems...” (p. 125). In this study, we used a purposeful sampling with a convenience case strategy. Cresswell (2007) wrote, “convenience cases, which represent sites or individuals from which researcher can access and easily collect data” (p. 126). We used this strategy in choosing the research sites and participants because we had access to do research and collect data at the sites as Johnson and Christensen (2008), Cresswell (1998, 2007), Bogdan & Biklen (1998), and Merriam (1999) said that getting access is very essential in doing and

collecting qualitative data. In this study, all the names of the schools and participants were (pseudonyms).

Data Collection Procedures and Analysis

For this study, data collection consisted of a demographic background survey and in-depth interviews over a six-month period (late 2012 – early 2013) with all participants. All 8 participants completed a demographic survey. Employing a semi-structured interview technique, each participant was interviewed one time between 30 and 60 minutes to discuss their perceptions on the unintended and intended consequences of the NSE policy on teaching English in the classroom. Because English is not the first language for all participants, the participants were given the option to respond to interview questions in either Indonesian or English. All elected to use English. As a result, any grammatical errors will appear in the interview excerpts provided in the findings section.

The demographic data were analysed descriptively. The interviews data are analysed using within-case and cross-case displays and analyses (Miles & Huberman, 1994). All interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants and transcribed by the researchers. Interview data obtained were organized and analysed for regularities, patterns, and emerging topics. Merriam (1998) wrote that in qualitative studies, data analysis “has been something like a mysterious metamorphosis” (p. 155). Qualitative research is an inductive process (Merriam, 1998; Creswell, 1998, Bogdan and Biklen, 1998). During the process, interview data were read and reread. Merriam (1998) wrote the process was called coding. She explained that coding was related to assign “some sort of shorthand designation to various aspects of your data” (p. 164) which would help the researcher to get back or retrieve to specific data. In this study, all the descriptions were captured from the interviews and the transcripts were reread with the interim lists of codes that had been created to list every important statement relevant to the topic and to deepen understanding of our data among the cases (participants) and among the emergent themes. The quotations are verbatim. The names of the participants are pseudonyms.

Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness

This qualitative case study relied on human subjects to provide the primary source of data. Since human subjects were involved in the study, we complied with ethical research that include informed consent and the protection of participants from harm. The researcher also masked the names of people, places, and the research sites through the use of pseudonyms for the participants, places, and research site. Participation was voluntary. Participants signed informed consent forms before participating in interviews; and the participants’ identities were kept confidential.

To establish the trustworthiness or to verify the accuracy of data and interpretations (Creswell, 1998, 2007), the data, interpretations, and conclusions were shared with the participants to get their feedback on the accuracy and credibility of the data, and interpretations, and conclusions. In the words of Lincoln and Guba (1985), this is “the most critical technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314). Additionally, rich and thick descriptions (Merriam, 1998) and narratives of senior high school female English teachers’ perceptions on the unintended and intended consequences of the NSE policy on teaching English in the classroom were provided, which included verbatim examples from the transcribed interviews data.

FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative inquiry, within Starratt’s (1991, 1994) well-known tripartite framing of the ethics of critique, justice, and care, was to explore and describe the perspectives of local female English teachers on the National Standardized Exam [NSE] policy as a high-stakes exam to gauge student performance nationally at four senior high schools in Jambi City, Indonesia. Two salient themes with their sub-themes that emerged were (1) disheartening views on the use of the NSE policy and (2) major consequences the NSE policy (curriculum and instruction, teaching and learning, teacher motivation, student motivation, less attention to non-tested disciplines, and widespread cheating). These themes and sub-themes represent common perspectives of senior high school female English



teachers on the consequences of the NSE policy on teaching English in the classroom related to the instruction, curriculum, teacher motivation, and student motivation, less attention to non-tested disciplines, and widespread cheating.

Disheartening Views on the Use of the NSE Policy

Within this theme, the findings showed that all participants believed that the National Standardized Exam was inadequate, improper, and inaccurate for assessing their students' English ability because it was a one-time test while learning English means learning a skill. With regard to this issue, participants reported, for example:

The national exam does not accurately measure my students' learning and development in English subject. In English subject, we have four language skills. They are listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In the national exam, the four skills were not tested. (Anna)

You know, we cannot judge the English ability of our students just based on a one-time test. The use of the national exam is not appropriate to measure skills like speaking, listening, reading or writing. Only teachers know their students' ability. You know...students may be nervous when taking the test. (Diana)

You as a lecturer in university should voice more on the bad side of the test. It is proper if the evaluation of students' learning is held by educators or teachers not by the government. I feel we teachers are just like machine. We have no right to measure the progress of our students. You know learning English is a process. One student cannot be judged as a good one because he gets a high score in the exam, but I know he cannot speak English well. (Lily)

Participants also reported that although the national standardized exam was made by talented people in the central government, the exam was unfair, improper, and inaccurate because the policy had ignored the gaps among schools in terms of socio economic status [SES] and school resources across the country. One of the biggest concerns that they had was particularly related to the ability and their students' backgrounds to succeed in the exam for English subject.

For me, the exam is just a project. The government never considers our limited resources to help students to succeed in the test. They made the exam in Jakarta, the capital. I am not sure if the people who make the test have ever visited schools like ours. No quality books and teachers. Parents are mostly farmers. It is hard and it is unfair for us within this system, especially for English subject. (Hanna)

Most of my students' parents are farmers and they have low motivation in studying English and even coming to school. How come our government keeps testing our students with the same test as students in the city or in Jakarta. Please tell the government. Did you record it? (Veronika)

The exam for English subject is accurate if it is given to rich and smart students in the cities. For our students who just live in villages with poor facilities in school and at home, it is like to kill them. What we can do to help them is to find the key answers for them although it is illegal. But if not our students will fail. (Suryani)

Additionally, all participants perceived that the exam was not accurate and was too difficult for students who learned English as a foreign language and who studied at poor schools. For participants, the exam was too centralized in Indonesia, the content was of course generalized for all Indonesian students, but the government failed to provide adequate resources or inputs for schools, teachers, and students.

The national exam was too difficult for my students who live in the village. No time for them to repeat the English subject. After school, my students went to farming areas to help their parents. (Susan)



You should know that I do not like the national exam and other English teachers too. The exam is difficult not only for my students but also for us as teachers to answer. (Verawati)

The findings above showed that all participants were very concerned with the accuracy of the national standardized exam for English subject due to their students' socioeconomic backgrounds, school resources, and level of difficulties. Participants perceived that the exam would not help their students to succeed in their education; instead it seemed that the exam would demotivate their students to continue their educational career.

Major Consequences the NSE Policy Curriculum and Instruction

Broadly, curriculum can be defined as something related to the experiences, both overt and covert, that students learn in school (Bennett, 2003; Oenstein&Hunkins, 1998). Oenstein&Hunkins (1998) specifically defined a curriculum "as a plan for action or a written document that includes strategies for achieving desired goals and ends (p. 10). Additionally, Nieto & Bode (2008) defined that curriculum was related to "what should be learned and under what conditions it is to be learned" (p. 127). Given that curriculum is related to what is important for students to know, it includes "the knowledge, attitudes, and traditions valued in society" (p. 127). However, the current challenges for participants related to English curriculum and the national standardized exam are not only to focus on the curriculum but also to help student to succeed in the exam. Nonetheless, all participants in this study reported that most of teaching activities were concentrated on helping students to be familiar with previous versions of the test. This activity resulted in participants not to focus and ignore the quality of classroom instruction and the contents of curriculum and they even paid no attention to their lesson plans. However, participants had no choices; they were highly expected by principals, students, parents, and national and local governments to help their students to be successful in the test.

The test lets us focus on thinking skills. It seems that the purpose of education as stated in the national curriculum will not be achieved. I have no real teaching English for my students. (Anna)

This is not only for English subject, but all. The test does not provide the students with the knowledge and skills required to survive in today's society as indicated in the national curriculum. (Verawati)

Other participants shared similar feelings and concerns on the unintended effects of the NSE on the national curriculum to create future leaders of the country. The findings above indicated that participants' concern with how the NSE had affected the curriculum. Raising test scores and helping all students to pass the exam has become the single most important indicator of school success. Consequently, English teachers felt enormous pressure to ensure that all students succeed in the NSE. English teachers narrow and change the curriculum to match the NSE. Teachers' methods of teaching conform to the multiple-choice format of the NSE.

Teaching and Learning

The work of any teacher, including English teachers is to promote learning in their students. Particularly, English teachers are expected to promote authentic learning for their students within their classrooms. However, the practices of the NSE have interfered with these goals of education. For participants in this study, the NSE policy has changed the ways of their authentic teaching to "teaching to the test." The following quotes reflect some of their feelings and thoughts,

My school is not a famous school and the pressure to raise students' test scores is too much, especially for the last year's students. I have no real teaching and learning processes.

The facilities in my school are not that good and what I can do is I have drilled my students on the English test items. So, the focus on my teaching is the content of the test. It is not good actually, but we must do that to help our students.

You know, the national exam is a big thing for our school and students. If my students fail, it means I fail and English is a difficult subject to teach since our students live in the villages. So, I spend considerable student time to test preparation activities not on the lessons that I already planned. I do not like it, but you know I need to help my students too.

I teach my students to learn English at school, but what they learn is mostly related to the test preparation, not to books or materials that they are supposed to study. As a teacher, my major concern is that the exam results are used not to collect information on what should be improved, but to promote students. So, teaching to the test is the way that we always do for the last grade.

My teaching activities are mostly related to drill students so that they are familiar with previous versions of the tests. So, I do not teach them on how to communicate in English.

The findings indicated that the NSE policy forces English teachers in this study to concentrate on teaching to the tests and drilling their students to be familiar with previous versions of the tests, instead of developing fundamental and higher order abilities. Teaching and learning processes in English subject did not happen as it was supposed to, especially for students in their final year. This might be due to the pressure to raise students' test scores in the exam. Another interesting finding in this theme is that participants felt pressured to help their students succeed in the test since their schools had lack of facilities and their students' low socioeconomic status.

Teacher Motivation

All participants in this study reported that they felt stressed and were less motivated to teach English as the national curriculum has mandated because the pressure from the NSE policy was immense. Participants also reported that they felt demotivated to teach every lesson of English subject that they had prepared before they started teaching because worksheets, drills, practice tests, and similar rote practices had consumed greater amounts of classroom time. They reflected,

The bad thing is I felt that the most important thing in teaching English was to help my students be able to answer the questions in the exam. You know my motivation to teach is not really big now. I felt the pressure to focus to the exam was too much.

To be a teacher nowadays is not easy. Our profession seems not to be respected because of the national exam. Everybody in this country seems to focus on the exam not on the process of learning. Real teaching and learning has not happened in our education, especially for students in their last year. (Suryani)

I have a dilemma as a teacher whether to teach the real materials or to prepare my students to face the national exam. I sometimes feel exhausted to what I face now as a teacher. I cannot be a creative teacher because the mission is to help our students to pass the exam. That is it.

You know teacher's function in the classroom is like a test preparation teacher. I introduced with some examples of the questions and strategies to answer the national exam to my students. This is not what a teacher is supposed to do.

Teachers in this study felt that their voices were largely overlooked by policymakers. They felt that they had been part of the process of educating students in the wrong way. For example,

Is education important now? Does our education still need teachers in schools if we just focus on the national exam? You know I feel I do not really enjoy my profession now, but I still love it. (Lily)



Every year, I feel the same situation, stress. I and other subject teachers should work hard to prepare our students to pass the exam. How long would this situation remain?

Although all participants in this study felt stressed and complained about the uncritical use of the NSE policy and felt demotivated due to the pressure of the NSE policy, they still continued doing their activities as teachers. The results of the data analysis showed that they had no choice to avoid teaching to the test, which also devalued their profession.

Student Motivation

Education is a means to develop all students' intellectual, political, social, economic, and cultural potential to their highest level (Nieto & Bode, 2008; Bennett, 2003). Therefore, school's mission is to provide all students regardless of their race, ethnicity, social class, ability, and other human differences with an equitable, equal, and high-quality education (Nieto & Bode, 2008). Ideally, all students should be encouraged to develop their highest potential in school. However, the findings of this study indicated that the motivation of students was to pass the national exam, which allows them to obtain regular school diplomas so that they could continue to the higher level of education. With regard to this issue, some participants reported,

My students told me that why we should study English seriously if the national exam would be used to measure our success. This kind of statement made me feel sad and it is hard for me to motivate them to study English seriously. The exam has changed everything in education.

I felt that my students' motivation to study English was so different from the first year to their final year. In their first year, they still had a high motivation to study, but in their final year, they changed their motivation, just to pass the exam. That is it.

It is hard to believe that teaching English in the era of the national exam is so difficult. My students feel stressed. They just asked to focus on the test preparation, they just wanted me to give them strategies to do the exam, and they just believed that the exam was the only way to succeed in their education.

The national exam has created a new motivation for students to come to school, namely passing the exam and teachers' job is only to help them.

The consequence of failure in the national exam will lead the failed students not to earn their regular high school diplomas in order to promote them to the next level of education. This will make them have serious psychological problems such as feeling stressed and embarrassed. Some teachers in this study reported that their students did not enjoy their school, felt stressed, were less motivated to study English in their final year.

Motivation of my students to study English was less and less in their final year. Every year, I could feel it that my students felt stressed because they had to succeed in the exam, if not, they needed more time to move to another level of education.

Students' stress is my big concern because of the exam. Also, the exam has changed their motivation to go to school. Studying English at school means passing the exam, not to know on how to communicate in English for their future and it is not easy for me to teach less motivated students.

Our education is in danger now because our young generation do not really enjoy their school. They are stressed because of the exam, especially in their final year. School is not a place to develop their potential now; instead, it is a place to measure their ability.



Tell me who proposes the exam and do you think all educators or teachers in Indonesia agree with it? This kind of exam should be changed. I want people from Jakarta come to my class and change my position so that they know what is going on when teaching English.

The transcripts of the interviews demonstrated that within the NSE policy, students' intellectual, political, social, economic, and cultural potentials are not well-developed, instead the policy has created a stressful environment for students and has changed students' motivation to focus on test preparation during their final year and the teachers' function is to provide them with strategies for succeeding in the exam.

Less Attention to Non-Tested Disciplines

In Indonesia, the NSE policy consisting of some specific subjects only tests cognitive skills (mental skill) but ignores the other domains of educational activities, namely, affective and psychomotor domains. Bloom (1956) argues that educational activities consist of three key domains, that is cognitive, affective (growth in feelings or emotional areas) and psychomotor (manual or physical skills). It means merely scores of limited subjects cannot be used to judge students' success in school. Standardized-test scores often measure superficial thinking (Kohn, 2000). The findings of this study indicated that English teachers in this study reported that other teachers whose subjects were not included in the national exam felt that their subjects received less attention from government, schools, and students. The following quotes reflect some of their feelings,

One of art teachers told me and complained that his subject was ignored by his students. He felt that his subject was not important.

My colleague, a sport teacher criticized that the exam led students to pay less attention to the importance of the sport subject.

A history teacher told me that she felt the national exam created a big gap between the tested and non-tested subjects. The tested subjects received more attention and she said it was not fair.

"We are jealous because your subject is in the exam and get more attention than mine," said a citizenship teacher.

Although my subject is tested in the exam, I feel it is not fair because I get more pressure to help my students succeed while non-tested subjects teachers are relaxed.

Our interview data showed that the controversy over the tested and non-tested subjects was one of the unintended consequences that the NSE policy has contributed. The gap between the tested and non-tested subjects will create a discouraging atmosphere in the school among teachers if the NSE policy is continued to be used. Jealousy between the tested and non-tested subject teachers may not lead a school to be a learning organization where everybody should support each other to educate their students. Instead, every teacher may focus on teaching their subject and does not care others. Time may not be devoted for subjects like art, sport, citizenship, and history since school may provide more instructional time on commonly tested areas like Indonesia, English, science, and social sciences.

Widespread Cheating

Another consequence of the NSE policy that we found in this study was widespread cheating and dishonesty. Before this study was conducted, several national newspapers reported that cheating happened in several provinces. For instance, in North Sumatra Province, 17 teachers, including the principal, at a high school in Deli Serdang regency were caught by local police in the act of correcting their students' answer sheets after the exam. Then, in Surakarta, Central Java, in students' cell phones, the answer keys were found for English and Chemistry tests. Next, in Selat Panjang District, Riau



Province, the leaks of the exam answer keys were organized by a group of five high school principals and a number of teachers (The Jakarta Post, 2008). In this study, participants were very concerned with the cheating and dishonesty of the test administering. For example,

I found some students had the answer keys of the English test. I did not know from where they had it. I took it from them. This is very bad and this exam has taught them to do whatever they could do to pass the exam.

I was surprised when several of my students were busy with sharing the answer keys. I was afraid of the long-terms effect of this situation.

My students told me after the exam that they had been given the keys, but they did not tell me who gave it to them. I could not do anything for this.

English is one of the difficult tested subjects. This made my students to find ways of passing the exam. Cheating is one of the ways.

Honesty is out in our education. I was asked to supervise the exam at other school and I was shocked with the fact that students were freely cheating. One of the English teachers at that school told me not to report it because his students would be punished and fail the exam. Within this theme, another shocking unintended consequence that we found was several English teachers was forced by the school leaders to help their students to find the answer keys. However, they did not do it because it was unethical as an educator. They reported,

It was shocking that my principal and senior teachers discussed about finding the answer keys and they asked me to do that. I just said yes, but never did it.

I as a teacher felt guilty that I could stop cheating happened during the exam in my school. I was just a teacher and no power. Hope your research will stop it.

Pressure to help students succeed in the exam is big not only in the classroom but also during the exam. I was forced to send the answer keys through my phone to my students, but it was a big mistake and I did not do it.

I am a Muslim and I hate cheating in our education. I do not provide my students with the answer keys although was told to do so. I am not afraid even if I must stop being a teacher.

The biggest problem in the NSE policy in Indonesia is cheating and dishonesty of the test administering. This has resulted in principals and educational administrators at provincial and local levels will do whatever they can do to make all students successful in the exam, even the worse things such as forcing teachers to provide the answer keys to the students. However, although English teachers in this study were forced to provide the answer keys for their students, they did not do it, suggesting that teachers in this study still had morale as educators by not doing unethical behaviors to help their students succeed in the test.

DISCUSSION

Researchers and educators (e.g. McLaren, 2010; Nieto & Bode, 2008; Ladsons-Billings, 2006; Bennett, 2003; Banks, 2002; Rothstein, 1998; Greenwald et al., 1996; Levin, 1995) have viewed that it is unfair to compare students based on one-time standardized exam since students develop at different rates and are from various backgrounds. They claim that there are many factors related to student achievement such as students' parental involvement, socioeconomic status, school and teacher quality, and home life. Additionally, previous literature has documented the unintended outcomes of

standardized testing for many years (e.g., Marchant, Paulson, & Shunk, 2006; Jones & Egley, 2004; Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Hoffman, Assaf, & Paris, 2001; Linn, 2000; Jones, Jones, Hardin, Chapman, Yarbrough, & Davis, 1999; Herman & Golan, 1991; Shepard & Dougherty, 1991; Madaus, 1988). However, despite its biases, inaccuracies, limited ability to measure achievement or ability, and other flaws, the Indonesian government through MoNE requires all students in basic and secondary education in their concluding year to take the National Standardized Exam to gauge their performance nationally. The purpose of this qualitative inquiry, within Starratt's (1991, 1994) well-known tripartite framing of the ethics of critique, justice, and care, was to explore and describe the perspectives of local English teachers on the NSE policy as a high-stakes exam to gauge student performance nationally at four senior high schools in Jambi City, Indonesia.

The findings of this study shed light on our understanding of the perspectives of local female English teachers on the NSE policy as a high-stakes exam to gauge student performance nationally at four senior high schools in Jambi City, Indonesia. We found two major themes with their sub-themes, including (1) disheartening views on the use of the NSE policy and (2) major consequences the NSE policy (curriculum and instruction, teaching and learning, teacher motivation, student motivation, less attention to non-tested disciplines, and widespread cheating).

Findings in Relation to Theoretical Framework

Viewing the practices of the NSE policy through the ethical principles of Starratt's (1991, 1994) framework and applying the three ethics of critique, justice, and care to the policy, it seems that there are many unethical things that must be addressed by educators, educational leaders, and policymakers at national and local levels. The ethic of critique whose principles are to question how social and institutional structures are organized is intended to encourage or even force educators, administrators, leaders, and policymakers to consider the moral or ethical issues of a policy taken that may benefit some groups in society while may fail others (Starratt, 1991). However, the findings of this study indicated that instead of challenging the use of the NSE policy, English teachers in this study were forced to help students to pass the exam through teaching to the test, narrowing the content of curriculum, overlooking the quality of classroom instruction, drilling their students to be familiar with previous versions of the tests, and changing methods of teaching to conform to the multiple-choice format of the NSE. All was done by the participants due to the pressure to raise students' test scores in the exam. They were highly expected by principals, students, parents, and national and local governments to help their students to be successful in the test.

Additionally, from the perspective of the ethic of justice, educators and policymakers should address how they treat individuals (students) based on the standards of justice and how just and fair decisions or policies are made and applied to all individuals equally (Starratt, 1991, 1994). The four schools in this study were categorized as non-elite schools in terms of socioeconomic students, achievement, and facilities. We found that all participants reported that the NSE policy was inadequate, improper, and inaccurate for assessing their students' English ability because the national standardized exam was made by talented people in the central government and the policy had ignored the gaps among schools in terms of socio economic status [SES] and school resources across the country. From the perspective of the ethic of care whose principles involves absolute respect for the dignity and intrinsic values of each individual in relationships (Starratt, 1991, 1994). It focuses on how certain young people or students in schools are more vulnerable than others, and that the non-vulnerable people (teacher, educators, and government) should pay extra attention to the vulnerable students while making decisions that might affect them. The findings of this study indicated that participants who were from non-elite schools felt that the exam was too centralized in Indonesia, the content was of course generalized for all Indonesian students, but the government failed to provide adequate resources or inputs for schools, teachers, and students. Participants perceived that the exam would not help their students to succeed in their education; instead it seemed that the exam would demotivate their students to continue their educational career. For example, Suryani, a teacher from senior high school D reported, "The exam for English subject is accurate if it is given to rich and smart students in

the cities. For our students who just live in villages with poor facilities in school and at home, it is like to kill them.”

However, although the uncritical practice of the NSE policy has led to negative impacts on teachers, educators, schools, and students, particularly poorer schools and students in rural and remote areas throughout the country, the government enjoys using it to sort and select students who wants to continue their education to the higher levels. The government often uses the result of the standardized tests to make comparisons among students, teachers, and schools across the country. Linn (2000) argued that the government often connects the results of standardized test to high-stakes accountability for students, teachers, and schools. Additionally, faced with increasing pressure from international test results like the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), the Indonesian government seems to use the result of standardized achievement tests to evaluate the quality of education throughout the country. The achievement ideology, in the words of Bowles and Gintis (1976) who used a Marxist view for investigating the growth of the American public school, seems to convince teachers and students that schools (governments at national and local levels) have promoted equal learning and select students based on their ability, not based on their social ranks.

The facts show that only those who are from rich families that are able to be selected to continue to the next level of education because only those who have better resources and material opportunities are able to succeed in the test. Bowles and Gintis, (1976) added that the achievement ideology has camouflaged the real power relations in school and education. Hence, the organization of school and the school programs like the standardized exam in Indonesia is actually based on the ability of dominant groups to impose their will and values on subordinate groups through force, subordination, and manipulation. So, students who are from low income family and live in remote and poor areas but they are tested with the same exam, will not be able to succeed in possessing educational credentials. The patterns of schooling favouring certain groups’ (upper and middle- class students) values and interests embedded in the school’s programs (e.g. standardized exam) would not lead to social cohesion and order but rather to class supremacy and superiority. More importantly, standardized testing is made by the point of view of people who live in the cities with a PhD degree from a famous university and who maybe never even visit any remote areas where poor students live and will be tested by the test that he makes.

Findings in Relation to Previous Research

The controversy over standardized testing has been studied by researchers. For example, a study by Jones and Egley (2004) who surveyed 708 teachers in Florida on their perception of the high-stakes testing program found that most of the participants believed that the high-stakes test did not take schools in the right direction, the use of the one-time test scores were improper and inaccurate for assessing students’ learning and development. Also, Amrein and Berliner (2002) concluded that there was no convincing evidence that the implementation of high-stakes testing improved student achievement. In our study, we also found that teachers had negative perspectives on the standardized testing policy. Particularly, participants believed that the NSE policy was inadequate, improper, and inaccurate for assessing their students’ English ability because it was a one-time test. Additionally, Jones and Egley (2004) found that standardized testing brought about negative effects on the curriculum, teaching and learning, and student and teacher motivation. Their findings were consistent with our findings that the NSE policy led participants to have narrow curriculum and instructions. Worksheets, drills, practice tests, and similar rote practices had consumed greater amounts of classroom time. They ignored the quality of classroom instruction and the contents of curriculum and they even paid no attention to their lesson plans. We also found that participants had less motivation to teach due to the pressure to help their students succeed in the test.

In addition, in their study, Jones and Egley (2004), Hoffman, Assaf, and Paris (2001), and Shepard and Dougherty (1991) found that teaching to the test was another negative consequence of the standardized testing policy. Madaus (1988) argued that teachers taught to the test when they believed that important decisions, such as student promotion, would be based on test scores. The findings of our

study revealed that the NSE policy has changed the ways of participants' authentic teaching to "teaching to the test." Teaching and learning processes in English subject did not happen as it was supposed to, especially for students in their final year. Participants felt pressured to help their students succeed in the test since their schools had lack of facilities and their students' low socioeconomic status.

Another interesting finding in our study which was consistent with previous research (Jones & Egley, 2004) was related to students' less motivation to study. We found that students in the final year had less motivation to study English because they just wanted to pass the exam, which allows them to obtain regular school diplomas so that they could continue to the higher level of education. We also found two important sub-themes related to the issues of less attention to non-tested disciplines and widespread cheating. These two issues are important and should be addressed by educational leaders and policymakers at national and local levels.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The policies and actions should ensure that all students in Indonesia have access to high quality and affordable educational, learning, and training opportunities throughout their lives in order to be active citizens. The findings from this study indicated that NSE policy in Indonesia has brought about unintended and negative consequences to curriculum, students, teachers, and school. The NSE policy in Indonesia is more likely to promote learning for the rich than for the poor. The poor who live in urban, rural, and remotes areas will remain the poor because the exam is treated as a way for them to possess educational credentials that are supposed to change their life. However, the organization of the exam is intended to let them remain as they are. This is a difficult situation for the poor. Standardized exams are unfair because the questions requires a collection of knowledge and skills more likely to be owned by students from an affluent upbringing, suggesting that the low SES students are worse off because they are not able to have material opportunities such as paying tutors to teach them after school or buying test-preparation materials and services to help them prepare for the exam.

The achievement ideology, as Bowles and Gintis, (1976) said, has influenced the existence of the national standardized exam policy Indonesia. However, policymakers nationally and locally should re-examine that evaluation of student improvement or performance should not be reliant on a single exam. Standardized exams should be avoided being used to review the educational quality. The NSE policy is failing to consider students' socioeconomic backgrounds, student inputs, teacher inputs, and facilities and resources among schools across the regions in Indonesia. Unfortunately, today in the era of school and teacher accountability, the main pointer by which most policymakers and societies judge school effectiveness is higher student academic achievement on standardized exams. What should we do? Should we keep silent with the situation? Or should we become part of the proponent of the standardized exam policy? These questions are not easy to answer for some people, but easy to answer for some other people. The standardized exam policy is promoting more class supremacy than social justice in education. The poor remain poor and the rich will remain upstairs. This kind of exam has misled the goal of education and the functions of teachers. Using standardized exams, the goal of education is merely to teach students to be able to pass the exam rather than to teach them to learn something in school for their future life and teachers seem to be facilitators to help them to pass the exam by teaching how to succeed in the exams.

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