Authentic Assessment versus External Examination for Instructional Improvement in Indonesian Schools

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Authentic Assessment versus External Examination for Instructional Improvement in Indonesian Schools

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Abstract: Improved student learning achievement has been the key measure for examining school public accountability. Empirical studies have thrown accumulating evidence on the contribution of school leadership for improved student learning outcomes. This study was conducted to explore perceptions of Indonesian school principals and teachers on how they asses instruction in their school and what practices they execute for instructional improvement. Six principals and fourteen teachers were interviewed and the data analysis revealed three practices of assessing instruction: benchmarking on national examination results, using data from teacher-made tests, and communicating the implications of national examinations with parents. As benchmarking on national examination results got a significant emphasis during the interviews, it means that data from this external evaluation has more authority in deciding instructional programs than data from authentic internal evaluations.

1 INTRODUCTION

Providing better learning for students measured in their improved learning achievements has been the key emphasis of educational policy worldwide as the means to increase school public accountability (Leithwood and Day, 2008; Pont, Nusche, and David, 2008; Robinson, 2010; Sofo, Fitzgerald, and Jawas, 2012). An underlying reason for the increased accountability on student learning outcomes is driven by the aspiration to minimise the constant gap in learning achievement between various social and ethnic groups and the confidence on the ability of school principals as school leaders to achieve this objective (OECD, 2001 cited in Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe, 2008). Such demand has brought substantial pressures for school leaders to show the contribution of their work (Gunter and Fitzgerald, 2008; Gurr and Drysdale, 2012; Leithwood and Day, 2008). Effective school leaders are now recognised based on their ability to ensure academic success for every student in their school (Davies, 2005; Donaldson, 2006;; Leithwood and Jantzi, 2005; Southworth, 2005).

The confidence in the capacity of school leaders to make a substantial difference to student learning achievements is supported by research examining the impact of leadership exercised by school principals on school effectiveness and improvement, that consistently recognises the roles of school leadership for teaching effectiveness (Day, et al., 2008; Harris, 2008; Robinson, et al., 2008; McDougall, Saunders, and Goldenberg, 2007; Robinson, et al., 2008). The existing literature also acknowledges the quality of school leadership as a determining key to sustainable learning and improvement (Datnow, 2005; Hargreaves and Fink, 2006; Robinson, et al., 2008). One of the main aspects for school leadership to have direct impacts on student achievement is monitoring school progress by using assessment to inform instruction, communicating information on student data to all stakeholders, constantly evaluating the instructional quality and academic progress of the school, and using school and student data to guide instructional decisions (Hattles and Herrington, 2007). This study explored perceptions of school principals and teachers on how they asses instruction and what practices they execute for instructional improvement.

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2 METHOD

To answer the research questions, in-depth interviews with principals and teachers were conducted. Data from teachers were also used for data triangulation. The interviews were designed as structured interviews. To interpret the data, inductive analysis was incorporated to reduce and reconstruct data through coding and categorization processes (Kumar, 2005). To select the participants for the interview, this study used stratified purposeful sampling to ensure that all types of senior secondary schools were represented. There are three different senior high schools in Indonesia: general, Islamic/madrasah, and vocational. Each is run by government (public) and private. So altogether there are six senior high schools. There were six principals participating in the interviews; three from public and three from private school. Five of the principals were male and only one female. There were fourteen teachers interviewed; nine teachers from public and five teachers from private school. Seven of the teachers were female and seven others were male. Table 1 summarises the sample size who participated in the interviews.

Table 1: Profile of research participants.

ID	Type of Senior Secondary School	Position	Gender
P1	Public	Principal	Male
P2	Public	Teacher	Male
P3	Public	Teacher	Female
P4	Public	Teacher	Female
P5	Public	Teacher	Female
P6	Public Islamic/madrasah	Principal	Male
P7	Public Islamic/madrasah	Teacher	Male
P8	Public Islamic/madrasah	Teacher	Male
P9	Public Vocational	Principal	Male
P10	Public Vocational	Teacher	Female
P11	Public Vocational	Teacher	Female
P12	Public Vocational	Teacher	Male
P13	Private	Principal	Male
P14	Private	Teacher	Male
P15	Private	Teacher	Female
P16	Private Islamic/madrasah	Principal	Male
P17	Private Islamic/madrasah	Teacher	Male
P18	Private Vocational	Principal	Female
P19	Private Vocational	Teacher	Female
P20	Private Vocational	Teacher	Male

3 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From the analysis of interview data, three practices of assessing instruction were identified: benchmarking on national examination results, using data from teacher-made tests, and communicating the implications of national examinations with parents.

3.1 Benchmarking on National Examination Results

Reliance on national examination results to assess instruction was quite strong in all schools. It was believed that students' performance in national examinations influenced a school's profile in the community. The link between school achievements in the national examination and the desirable public profile of a school increased the pressure for successful performance in the examination. The pressure was even stronger for private schools. An examination preparation program became a common approach taken by the schools to help their students succeed in the examination.

The majority of the participants signified the scores students attained from the national examination in assessing whether desired instructional improvements had taken place or not in their schools. P1 said that data from the national examination were his school's "main reference in assessing instructional improvement". Similar statements were given by P6, P9, P13, P16, and P18. P6's school assessed instructional performance based on the "school profile in the national examination". P9 said that data from the national examination were used as "the indicator" in assessing instructional improvement in his school. For P16's school, national examination scores are "the main parameter in assessing instructional programs". For private schools like P13 and P18's school, data from the national examination were used not only to "assess the instruction" but also to "establish the school profile" in the community.

School achievements in the national examination were thought to have an impact on a school's public profile. P18 said that "better achievements in the national examination" would increase a "school's attractiveness to the community". She added that "parents of prospective students will enrol their children in a school based on the school's profile in this national examination". Similarly, P13 and P16 believed that high scores that their students attained in the examination would influence the "enrolment decision of the prospective parents and students".

For P13 and P18, increased student enrolment would determine the "survival" of private schools like theirs. In P9's opinion, the school's graduation rate would "shape the reputation of the school and increase the school's enrolment competitiveness". He added that it would enable the school to have a better selection of prospective students.

Data on students' scores in previous national examinations were used to analyse what subject matter needed to be strengthened to prepare students for future examinations. For P16, the scores would assist his school to "identify the strengths and weaknesses of current instruction, such as what topics students are still struggling to understand and what materials teachers need to provide more explanations and exercises". He added that once his school could identify the problems, they could decide what "appropriate actions" were required "to help the students perform well in the examination". P13 said that the scores would reveal "what subjects and topics need to be given more emphasis". Subjects that were found to be "difficult for the students" would get "more reinforcement". P1, P6, and P9 gave similar comments. They said that the analysis of scores of previous national examinations would "reveal in what subjects" that their school did "not perform quite well". They added that "reinforcement programs" in their school were "planned based on the results of the analysis".

In addition to reinforcement programs, a preparation program for the national examination was offered to the students to help them succeed in the examination. In P1's school, the program was "compulsory". During the programs, students were "intensely drilled with tests". P1 thought that the programs would help students to be "ready and prepared for the upcoming examination". He believed that an increasing rate of students who passed the examination was the result of the program. Similar preparation programs for the national examination were reported by P6, P9, P13, P16 and P18. To avoid disturbing learning hours, the programs were done "after school and intensified approaching the examination date". They expected that the programs would increase both "the number of students who pass in the examination" and their "school's graduation rate".

From the quotations, it shows a strong link between school achievements in the national examination and the desirable public profile of a school increased the pressure for successful performance in the examination. The pressure was even stronger for private schools. It was believed that student performance in national examinations influenced a school's profile in the community.

3.2 Using Data from Teacher-made Tests

Teacher-made tests were formative and summative tests. The results of the tests would inform learning progress achieved by the students during the on-going semester. The results facilitated teachers to identify learning problems and difficulties experienced by the students and to plan necessary remedial programs. This diagnostic ability meant the tests were perceived to be appropriate to assess instruction. Using data from teacher-made tests gave the opportunity to teachers to exercise a greater role in planning, executing, evaluating, and improving their instructional practices. It also helped them develop their evaluation skills and improve their teaching effectiveness. Data from teacher-made tests were thought to be authentic and factual. Using such data in assessing instruction would reveal a more accurate description.

For P1, data from teacher-made tests would assist his school "to know how far the students have progressed in their learning and how much they have mastered the lessons". Similar comments were given by P6, P9, P13, P16 and P18. They said that the results of teacher-made tests would "inform the learning progress" of their students. Teachers could also use the results to identify learning problems that required "immediate actions for improvement". P2, P3, P5, P8, P10 and P19 gave similar comments. P3 said that the tests she administered to her students provided her with the "data to help improve instructional activities". From the obtained scores, she did "item analysis to identify what part of the lesson the students still have trouble to understand". She then planned "required remedial programs". Similar practices were reported by P2, P5, P8, P10 and P19. For them, the results of the tests would help them identify their students' learning problems and plan remedial programs.

Using data from teacher-made tests was thought to be the way to give the opportunity to teachers to exercise a greater role in planning, administering, and analysing tests as well as interpreting the results. P1, P3, P4, P9, P16 and P18 believed that "using tests made and administered by teachers" could "develop teachers' skills" in evaluating their "teaching practices". P18 added that these evaluation skills were "important to increase teaching effectiveness". In her opinion, successful teachers were "those who can plan, design, administer, assess

tests and then interpret the results for teaching and learning improvement". She expected that using data from teacher-made tests could help the teachers in her school fulfil this description of "successful teachers". For P16, data from teacher-made tests were "authentic". He said that the test items were "constructed based on actual teaching and learning activities". He believed that data from teacher-made tests provided "reliable data to assess instruction". Similarly, P4 said that the results of teacher-made tests gave "factual data on the progress of teaching and learning". Compared to other tests, P4 believed that using factual data from teacher-made tests in assessing instruction would "give a more accurate description of the achieved progress".

From the quotations, the diagnostic ability of teacher-made tests facilitated teachers to identify learning problems and difficulties experienced by the students and to plan necessary remedial programs. The participants believed that teacher-made tests gave the opportunity to teachers to exercise a greater role in planning, executing, evaluating, and improving their instructional practices. Data from teacher-made tests were thought to be authentic and factual and revealed a more accurate description of students' learning progress.

3.3 Communicating the Implications of National Examinations with Parents

The purpose of the practice was to involve parents in preparing the students for the examination. A low graduation rate had substantial implications not only for students but also for schools. Schools were perceived as under-performing if many of the students failed in the examination. This would severely influence the profile of the school in the community and school attractiveness to parents of prospective students. The pressure to have a high graduation rate in national examinations had initiated the need to communicate the implications of national examinations with parents.

Communicating the implications of the national examination with parents was intended to "share the responsibility for preparing students for the examination". P1 explained that his school wanted "all of Year 12 students to pass the examination". He realised that to achieve this goal, his school needed "the support from the parents". He believed that "parental control on their children's learning and a supportive home environment can help students do well in the examination". P3, P6, P9, P10, P13, P15, P17, P18, and P20 had similar thoughts. They said that "family environment and parental control" were the external factors "determining successful performance in the examination". They added that as "parents have more power in exercising these external factors, schools needed to "include and involve them in preparing the students for the examination".

To share the responsibilities and encourage parents to engage in their children's preparation for the examination, P18 communicated "the results of previous national examinations to the parents". She said it was not only to make them "aware of the challenges" that the school faced but also to make them "recognise their important role to help us and their children succeed in the upcoming examination". Similar practices were reported by P1, P6, P9, P13, and P16. They said that it was "important" to make the "parents know the graduation rate profile" of the school. They added that "parents' knowledge" about the profile would make it "easier for the school" to get "parental involvement" in their children's "examination preparation". They further added that knowing the "results of previous national examinations" would make the parents have "similar views to the school" of what needed "to be done" to help the students succeed in the examination.

For P16, preparing the students to "successfully perform in the national examination" was "not an easy job". It required "collaboration between school and parents". He explained that "schools cannot do anything once the students go home". He thought that it had to be "a priority of a school to engage parents" in their children's "preparation for the approaching examination". To do this, his school invited parents to school and communicated with them what they could do to help the school and their children. "Parental control is highlighted and encouraged in the communication". P6 said that when students knew that "their parents seriously pay attention to their study", it could "motivate them to put their best effort into preparing for the examination".

As explained in the practice of benchmarking on national examination results to assess instruction, school achievements in the national examination were thought to "have an impact on a school's public profile". For P1, P6, P9, and P18, "better achievements in the national examination" would increase their "school's attractiveness to the community". They added that "parents of prospective students will enrol their children in a school based on the school's profile in this national

examination". Similarly, P13 and P16 believed that high scores that their students attained in the examination would influence the "enrolment decision of the prospective parents and students". For P13 and P18, increased student enrolment would determine the "survival" of private schools like theirs. In P9's opinion, a school's graduation rate would "shape the reputation of the school and increase the school's enrolment competitiveness". He added that it would enable the school to have a better selection of prospective students. P13, P16 and P18 expected that "the communication" their school had with the parents would "make the parents understand these implications" of this national examination.

The purpose of the practice was to involve parents in preparing the students for the examination. The pressure to have a high graduation rate in national examinations had initiated the need for schools to communicate the implications of national examinations with parents. Schools were perceived as under-performing if many of the students failed in the exam. This would severely influence the profile of the schools in the community and school attractiveness to parents of prospective students. The pressure to have high graduation rates in national examinations had initiated the need to communicate the implications of national examinations with parents.

3.4 Discussion

The first identified practice of assessing instruction was benchmarking on national exit examination results. This examination was a summative test organised by the Ministry of National Education. The examination was compulsory and taken by final year students. Students in year six of primary school, year nine of junior secondary school, and year twelve of senior secondary school were the test takers of this national exit examination. The government was in charge of constructing and scoring the tests while local schools were responsible for administering the examination. The passing standard for this examination was set nationally by the government. The result of the examination would determine whether students could continue their study to a higher level. The high stakes of this test have made it the most important reference in assessing instructional quality. From the interviews, the result of this exit examination was most referred to in assessing a school's instruction.

The practice of benchmarking to national exit examination results illustrated the effort to monitor students' progress. Monitoring students' progress was identified as a practice of instructional leadership (Nettles and Herrington, 2007). Benchmarking to national exit examination results could also be seen as a practice of supervising and evaluating instruction. This practice was listed as one of the practices in Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) model of instructional leadership. Instructional leadership basically emphasised the responsibilities of school principals in relation to classroom instruction (Nettles and Herrington, 2007). The instructional responsibilities of principals were for evaluating (Goldring, et al., 2009; Robinson, 2010) and monitoring assessment and student progress (Reitzug, et al., 2008).

The second practice of assessing instruction was using data from teacher-made tests. These tests were formative and summative tests. The results of the tests would inform the learning progress achieved by the students during the semester. The diagnostic attribute of the tests facilitated teachers to identify problems and difficulties experienced by the students and to plan immediate enrichment and remedial programs. Using data from teacher-made tests could be a strategy to enhance student learning outcomes. Instructional leadership promoted teaching strategies that were demonstrably effective in meeting the learning needs of all students (Hattie, 2005; Rowe, 2007).

The last practice of assessing instruction was communicating the implications of the national examination with parents. This practice was driven by the increasing pressure on schools to succeed in national exit examinations. The pressure to pass the examination challenged schools to achieve a high graduation rate. A low graduation rate has severe implications for schools. Schools could be perceived to be low-performing if many of the students failed in the exam. This would severely affect the profile of the schools in the community and the attractiveness of schools for parents of prospective students. The purpose of communicating the implications of the national examination with parents was to get their approval for school examination preparation programs. Strengthening parental involvement was found to be essential in managing the conflicts that occurred during the implementation of reform programs (Chen, 2008).

Although communicating the implications of the national exit examination with parents was not a direct practice of assessing instruction, the key purpose was to help schools ensure the learning success of their students. Communicating

information on student data to all stakeholders was among the leadership practices that have a direct effect on student learning outcomes (Nettles and Herrington, 2007). Accountability for improved student learning achievement determined the quality of leadership (Leithwood and Day, 2008). Effective school leaders are those who have the ability to ensure learning success for every student in their school (Davies, 2005; Donaldson, 2006; Leithwood and Jantzi, 2005; Southworth, 2005).Communicating the implications of the national exit examination with parents could be linked to the instructional leadership practice of communicating a school's goals to stakeholders. In summary, the identified practices of assessing instruction aimed at increasing learning outcomes and ensuring students' learning success.

4 CONCLUSIONS

A strong reliance on benchmarking on national examination results in assessing instruction means that data from this external evaluation has more authority in deciding instructional programs than data from authentic internal evaluations. However, because the national examination was administered one time only, it has a very limited capacity to capture the progress of students' learning. In addition, excessive confidence in the national examination could lead to the practice of teaching for testing, as proven by the flourishing examination preparation programs. These after-school programs were offered not only by schools themselves but also by private courses. The programs were intensive, where students were drilled with exam questions and problems. When learning is assessed by an achievement in this single national examination, it could lessen the relevance and meaning of learning.

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