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Who gets - - -

Who gets the failing grade in exam fiasco?

B. Herry-Priyono
Jakarta

The day of soul-searching has arrived again. The disaster burst on the morning of Monday, June 19, when the national exam results for senior high school students were announced.

This is not a biblical apocalyptic story in which the first deservedly becomes the last and the last the first. Rather, it is a tale of a sleight of bureaucratic hand that made the first undeservedly the last, the last descend into limbo and left the rest stuck in a fiasco.

As has been widely reported, it all started with a jumbled program to hold a standardized, national exam for all high school students across the country, regardless of the abysmal differences in terms of demographic characteristics found throughout Indonesia. On the surface, at least, there seemed to be a noble basis for pursuing the standardized test, but, as forewarned by many experienced and committed educators, noble intentions that lack

social acumen are bound to result in disaster.

As if in a bubble of self-congratulation, the education bureaucrats take pride in statistics, saying the passing rate for all high schools has risen 11.74 percent, or from 80.76 percent in 2005 to 92.50 percent in 2006. It was clearly with a sense of pride that Bambang Suhendro, head of the National Education Standard Agency, said "the results reflect a significant improvement in the quality of national secondary education".

To add insult to injury, Vice President Jusuf Kalla added to the farce by saying that allowing students to retake failed exams would be unfair to industrious students.

One immediately wonders whether all these words come from people who really understand education. I don't think they do. When the fuss started a few years ago, it was quickly all too clear that the noble idea of holding a standardized national exam would not lift people up but would instead pull down the dream of improving the quality of secondary education. The reasons

are obvious.

The demographic, socioeconomic and sociocultural disparities between schools and students in each province are so stark that a one-size-fits-all exam is bound to flatten the differences.

Demographic and socioeconomic disparities are important since they are closely related to the infrastructural conditions that affect differences in scholastic aptitude.

This is certainly not meant to dignify the low quality schools that may have been the target of the standardized test policy. Nor is this an attempt to defend the lazy. Rather, these initial differences need to be addressed first before any attempt at standardization is made.

To pursue the point further, this initial disparity is less the outcome of laziness than of long abandonment of primary and secondary education in Indonesia. If indeed education at the primary and secondary levels is decreed compulsory, the starkness of the demographic, socioeconomic and cultural differences them-

INSIGHT



Courtesy of Herry Priyono

B. HERRY-PRIYONO

selves tells less about the socioeconomic conditions of the students or their families than about the consequences of this long abandonment.

Second, it is true that these initial differences seem to have been partially addressed by differentiating the more from the less developed provinces. Students from a high school in a remote area in Nabire (West Papua) or Singkil (South

Yogyakarta) were given a set of standardized tests different from their counterparts in Central Jakarta or Bandung in terms of its level of academic difficulty.

But it is clear from what happened that this stratagem is still a continent too far from representing the rich diversity that actually exists. Add to this the strange policy of having just three subjects — Math, Indonesian and English — as the only benchmark for passing, and what we have is the present fiasco.

Not only is a snap exam on these three subjects far too narrow to reflect the scholastic aptitude of high school students, but the squeezing of a three-year schooling process into a snapshot of three subjects is an ignorant way of managing national education. The net is too small for such a vast ocean.

This point is crucial, as we are here dealing not with mature persons but with children and adolescents at a stage of life when they are searching and exploring. At the historical juncture of this country's development, nothing has

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destroyed their searching souls more fatally than what has been done to them through a poorly standardized exam.

Many bright students who had already been admitted to best universities were crushed by the results, not because they were incapable but because the standardized test is too poor to measure their brilliance. For them, joy and laughter are over. As for many other students, it was a time for gross cheating, as many were given the wrong answers by their teachers. Other students still ran amok or, in extreme cases, committed suicide.

But why is such a standardized exam possible in many countries, but not here? This is where Indonesia grossly errs. These countries have a long history of giving real attention to the basic infrastructure of primary and secondary education. Only after addressing the gap that exists between schools across the country did they gradually try to carry out a national standardized test.

This is commonsense. And our problem seems not to lie in the commonsense, but in the

way we fail to ignore it. We often think that because something is being done in more advanced countries, we must do it too, here and now. If that is the result of our studies in those advanced countries, then it is simply a form of uninformed mimicry.

This tendency is not just found in education, but in other areas, too. For example, we zealously propagate a virtual economy without realizing that it has little to do with the growth of the real sector economy that is the concern of the majority of ordinary people.

Indeed, if we are unable in the next five years to rebuild all the school buildings that collapsed over the past 10 years, we had better forget the dream of a standardized test, let alone the dream of taking the future generation of Indonesian to a global competition or an economy based on information technology. That, surely, would be lunacy.

The writer is a lecturer in the Graduate Program of Driyarkara School of Philosophy, Jakarta.

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