

Compliance or Creativity? Students' Dilemma in the National Education Evaluation System

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Abstract

Indonesia's national education evaluation system often focuses on adherence to academic standards, emphasizing test scores as an indicator of student success. This study aims to explore the dilemmas students face in an evaluation system that prioritizes grades and academic standards over the development of creativity and critical thinking. The results indicate that pressure to meet academic standards reduces students' motivation to learn, creates anxiety, and limits their opportunities for creative and independent thinking. While standardized test-based evaluation systems, such as the National Examination (UN) and National Assessment (AN), attempt to provide a more holistic picture, they still face challenges in providing space for 21st-century skills. Furthermore, limited space for creative exploration in the learning process exacerbates this situation, with many students feeling inhibited from developing innovative ideas. This study recommends reforming the evaluation system to create a balance between academic achievement and creative skill development, by providing space for idea exploration and critical thinking. Project-based and portfolio-based evaluations can be alternatives to support the development of 21st-century skills.

Keywords: educational evaluation, academic standards, creativity, 21st century skills, academic pressure

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's national education evaluation system aims to ensure equitable education quality across all regions, measure achievement of graduate competency standards, and provide an objective picture of school services and performance as a basis for continuous improvement in education quality (Indahri, 2021). The evaluation model used is the National Examination (UN), which focuses on assessing students' academic achievement through uniform benchmarks across Indonesia. The UN has often been criticized for its tendency to emphasize memorization and final results, which can neglect the development of critical thinking skills, creativity, and character (Chaniago et al., 2025). In response, the National Assessment (AN) was introduced in 2021 to replace the UN, with the aim of providing a more holistic picture of education quality. The AN assesses students' competencies in literacy, numeracy, and character, rather than just academic aspects, to demonstrate more comprehensive development (Fajri et al., 2022). Both evaluation models are implemented through computer-based systems: the Computer-Based National Examination (UNBK) and the Computer-Based National Assessment (ANBK). However, the implementation of both faces various challenges, particularly related to uneven infrastructure and disparities in resources in several regions, which can affect the effectiveness of the evaluation implementation (Hidayatullah et al., 2020).

The current educational evaluation system in Indonesia places greater emphasis on student adherence to established standards and requirements, such as grades and standardized tests. This emphasis on achieving high scores often encourages students to memorize material, reducing the space for critical, creative, and independent thinking in their learning process (Jabali et al., 2024). This excessive focus on grades and conventional evaluations is known to hinder the development of students' creativity and critical thinking, as traditional assessment systems prioritize memorization and short-term learning (Long et al., 2022). In contrast, more holistic evaluation approaches, such as portfolio-based assessments, have been shown to be more effective in encouraging students' analytical, reflective, and creative thinking (Abdurahim-Salain, 2024). Educational policies that place greater emphasis on standardized test results can also narrow the space for innovation in education and hinder efforts to cultivate 21st-century skills such as creativity and critical thinking (Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023). Therefore, a more diverse and innovative evaluation approach is needed, such as project-based learning and integration of arts education, to create a learning environment that encourages students to develop their potential, think independently, and contribute actively to society (Abdurahim-Salain, 2024; Lukaka, 2023; Tretyak, 2024).

Educational systems that assess student success based on standardized knowledge and memorization are often major barriers to fostering creativity and innovative thinking. Students struggle to generate creative solutions because learning environments emphasize memorization over exploring new ideas and solving problems. Key barriers to fostering creativity include an emphasis on standardization and memorization, which discourages students from taking risks or trying new approaches (Calavia et al., 2021). Many teachers lack the pedagogical skills to teach creativity, resulting in monotonous learning that discourages divergent thinking (Suradin et al., 2025). Students' intrinsic motivation to think creatively also declines when creativity is not rewarded in the assessment system. Challenges in the learning process, such as standardized assessments, a focus on memorization, lack of time for exploration, and an inflexible curriculum, further exacerbate this situation (Manurung et al., 2022; Suradin et al., 2025). Therefore, it is important to create an environment that supports creativity by providing space for students to experiment, collaborate, and relate learning to real-life situations (Scott-Barrett et al., 2023). The teacher's role is also crucial in encouraging active participation, reflection, and self-assessment to help students become more confident in creative thinking.

Rigorous standardized assessments in education significantly impact learning approaches. An excessive focus on standardized assessments often distracts teachers and students from developing deep understanding and creativity in learning, as more time is spent preparing for exams. This leads to a "teaching to the test" approach, where learning is oriented toward memorization and strategies for passing exams, rather than exploring new ideas and developing deeper understanding (Mittal, 2024; Lai, 2023; Paramole & Adeoye, 2024). Standardized assessments create high levels of pressure and anxiety for both students and teachers, which can decrease motivation and create stress. Limiting the space for creativity is also a major problem, as students tend to avoid different or risky approaches to assignments in favor of achieving a safe grade that conforms to familiar patterns (Lai, 2023). A curriculum limited to tested material further reduces students' opportunities to develop critical thinking skills and creativity. Therefore, standardized evaluations should be balanced with formative

assessments, projects, and open-ended assignments to ensure students have the space to think creatively and develop their potential (Mittal, 2024; Paramole & Adeoye, 2024). Teachers need support to develop learning methods that focus on 21st-century skills, rather than solely focusing on exam results.

Reforms in the national education evaluation system are crucial for creating a balance between academic standards and the development of student creativity. Traditional evaluation systems that emphasize standardized assessments and memorization have been shown to hinder students' potential for innovation and creativity (Karunaratne & Calma, 2023; Chiş et al., 2024). Therefore, adjustments to the evaluation system are essential so that evaluations not only measure academic knowledge but also creative thinking, problem-solving, and innovation skills. More flexible evaluations, such as authentic, formative, and self-reflective assessments, can encourage students to develop innovative solutions and explore new ideas (Bolden et al., 2020;). Holistic evaluations, which encompass both cognitive and non-cognitive aspects such as motivation, self-confidence, and social skills, will support students' holistic development. These evaluation reforms aim to balance academic achievement with the development of 21st-century skills, ensuring that students not only excel academically but are also prepared to face future challenges with strong creativity and innovation (Zhang et al., 2022; Bolden et al., 2020; Karunaratne & Calma, 2023).

This study aims to analyze the dilemmas faced by students in the national education evaluation system, which often emphasizes adherence to rigorous academic standards while neglecting the development of creativity and critical thinking. It will explore how the focus on grade-based evaluation and standardized tests can limit students' opportunities for independent thinking and exploration of new ideas, and how this affects their motivation and learning outcomes. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to understanding the impact of educational evaluation policies on the development of 21st-century skills, such as creativity and problem-solving, which are essential for preparing students to face global challenges. This research is expected to provide recommendations for policymakers and education practitioners to create a more balanced evaluation system that not only measures academic achievement but also encourages the development of creativity and innovation in learning.

METHOD

The research method used in this study is a qualitative approach (Sugiyono, 2019). This study aims to delve deeper into the dilemmas faced by students regarding compliance with the national education evaluation system that prioritizes academic standards, and its impact on the development of creativity and critical thinking. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with eight informants consisting of five students and three teachers at a high school in Jakarta. The school selected was SMA Negeri 22 Jakarta, a school with a good reputation regionally, but still faces challenges in balancing a rigid evaluation system with the need to develop students' creative skills. This school was selected based on the criteria that although it is not included in the category of schools with very high achievements, it still has a fairly good quality of education and has a diversity of student characters that can represent the problems in this study. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide to allow informants the freedom to express their views on the topic under study.

In addition to interviews, supporting data was also obtained through classroom observations, to directly observe how the evaluation process was conducted and the interactions between teachers and students within the context of the evaluation. All data obtained was then analyzed using thematic analysis techniques to identify emerging patterns related to students' and teachers' experiences in dealing with the existing evaluation system. In this analysis, the researcher focused on aspects related to the challenges of balancing compliance with academic standards and developing student creativity. The table listing the sources used in this study is as follows:

Table 1. List of Research Informants

No.	Name	Age	Work
1	Aditia Pratama	17	Student
2	Siti Nurhayati	16	Student
3	Rina Yulia	18	Student
4	Agus Setiawan	17	Student
5	Fina Rahayu	16	Student
6	Budi Santoso	35	Math teacher
7	Dewi Wulandari	40	Indonesian Language Teacher
8	Farhan Ardiansyah	45	Social Studies Teacher

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study aims to explore the dilemmas faced by students in Indonesia's national education evaluation system, which tends to prioritize adherence to academic standards, particularly standardized exams and assessments, and its impact on the development of student creativity. Through in-depth interviews with five students and three teachers at SMA Negeri 22 Jakarta, this study attempts to illustrate the challenges in balancing academic achievement with the need to develop students' creativity and critical thinking skills.

1. The Dilemma of Compliance with Academic Standards

The findings of this study indicate that students feel significant pressure to adhere to the academic standards set in the evaluation system. All student informants expressed a strong focus on grades and exams as measures of their success. Aditia Pratama, a 12th-grade student, stated:

"Every exam feels like a burden, because all the teachers always emphasize that exams are the most important thing. We often memorize the material more than we understand it, because if we fail the exam, we might get a bad grade, and that could ruin our future."

Rina Yulia, who is also 18 years old, shared her views on this matter:

"We often don't have time to explore ideas or try new things, because we have to prepare for exams and tests every day. Often we end up repeating material that has already been studied without really understanding it."

Agus Setiawan, a 17-year-old 11th-grade student, echoed this sentiment. He felt that teaching in schools was often driven by exam preparation and the exams themselves. Agus said:

"Teachers teach the material in a very structured way, as if we have to memorize all the information. There's no room for creative thinking. Everything is centered around test scores."

This adherence to strict academic standards suggests that students are more encouraged to meet the expectations set by the assessment system, rather than given opportunities to develop creativity and critical thinking. This creates a dilemma for students who want to explore and think beyond the boundaries of existing standardized tests.

2. Stress and Anxiety in Facing Evaluation

An evaluation system that emphasizes standardized test scores also creates psychological stress for many students. Siti Nurhayati, a 16-year-old 10th-grade student, described the anxiety this creates for her and her classmates:

"Sometimes I feel very anxious before exams, especially if I don't fully understand the material being tested. I feel stressed because my exam score determines how people judge me."

This anxiety is not only experienced by students, but also by some teachers. Budi Santoso, a math teacher, explained that he felt stressed by the pressure to prepare students for standardized tests. He said:

"As a teacher, I feel pressured to teach according to the existing curriculum, which is largely focused on exams. Sometimes I feel prevented from teaching creative concepts that might be more useful to students in real life."

Dewi Wulandari, an Indonesian language teacher, revealed that although she tries to integrate critical thinking skills into her lessons, the focus on exams often hinders those efforts:

"As a teacher, I want students to be able to think critically and creatively, but in this system, I have to prepare them for exams that mostly assess memorization."

That makes it difficult for me to develop learning that can stimulate their creativity."

3. Limited Space for Creativity

Based on interviews, almost all students expressed that the space for creativity in the learning process was very limited. Fina Rahayu, a 16-year-old student, described how the dense curriculum and constant exams limited the exploration of ideas:

"Many of my friends want to work on creative projects or experiments, but don't have the time because they're all focused on preparing for exams. I think our creativity is limited by the system in place."

Agus Setiawan shares similar sentiments. He says many opportunities that could have been used for deeper learning or exploring new ideas were lost due to the constant demands of exam preparation:

"We study not just to memorize, but to pass exams. Creativity? There's no time for that. This system doesn't allow for anything more free and creative."

In comparison, Farhan Ardiansyah, a 45-year-old social studies teacher, views the impact of this strict evaluation system from his perspective as an educator. He noted that while he strives to create space for students to think creatively, this is difficult in a system that constantly demands preparation for standardized tests:

"Sometimes I feel like I'm limited by the system. While I want to encourage students to think creatively, we still have to adhere to the exam schedule and established standards. It's very challenging."

4. Implications for 21st Century Skills Development

A significant finding of this study is that pressure to adhere to academic standards has the potential to hinder the development of 21st-century skills, such as creativity, problem-solving, and critical thinking. Rina Yulia feels that although she has the potential to be more creative, the rigid education system limits this:

"Sometimes I feel like I can do more than just memorize and get good grades. I want to be more creative, but I don't know how to do that with the system like this."

Students and teachers interviewed also agreed that an evaluation system that focuses too much on standardized tests hinders their ability to develop skills more relevant to real-world challenges, such as critical thinking and innovation.

Discussion

The research findings indicate that despite efforts to introduce a more holistic evaluation system, such as the National Assessment (AN), many challenges remain in providing students with the space to develop critical thinking and creativity. This discussion will analyze the research findings by linking several sub-chapters from the introduction,

namely the dilemma of adherence to academic standards, the pressure and anxiety of evaluation, the limited space for creativity, and the implications for the development of 21st-century skills.

1. The Dilemma of Compliance with Academic Standards

Indonesia's national education evaluation system emphasizes student adherence to rigorous academic standards, including test scores and academic achievement. This study found that many students feel pressured to meet these standards, even though they acknowledged that these evaluations often emphasize end-results, such as test scores, rather than in-depth learning and the development of creative skills. This illustrates a key dilemma in the current education system: students must meet established standards to achieve high grades, yet are left with no room to develop their creative ideas.

At SMA Negeri 22 Jakarta, despite efforts to introduce a more holistic National Assessment (AN), evaluations that prioritize test scores remain dominant. This emphasis on achieving high scores encourages students to focus more on memorizing material than on developing critical thinking or experimenting with new ideas. As Jabali et al. (2024) noted, an evaluation system that emphasizes test scores can reduce the space for students to think independently and creatively. In this regard, while the AN aims to provide a more comprehensive picture of student competency, there remains a tendency to assess students based on standardized academic benchmarks.

2. Stress and Anxiety in Facing Evaluation

The focus on standardized test-based evaluations often creates significant stress for students. Research shows that anxiety about standardized tests, such as the National Exam (UN) or even the National Assessment (AN), is a major factor influencing students' motivation to learn. Students feel they must memorize material in a limited time and focus on solving exam questions that often test memorization, rather than in-depth understanding.

This pressure has the potential to reduce students' intrinsic motivation to explore new ideas or think creatively. As mentioned in the introduction, rigorous standardized assessments can create stress, negatively impacting the quality of learning and students' mental health (Indrawati et al., 2024). In the context of SMA Negeri 22 Jakarta, despite efforts to provide a more balanced approach to the National Exam, students still felt excessive tension and anxiety about upcoming exams. This suggests that a more flexible assessment system that relies less heavily on standardized tests is urgently needed to reduce stress and provide students with opportunities to learn without undue pressure.

3. Limited Space for Creativity

The main finding of this study is the limited space for students to develop their creativity in the learning process. Although more holistic evaluations, such as the National Assessment (AN), are expected to include assessment of non-academic aspects, such as character and social skills, the results show that space for creative exploration remains very limited in the classroom. Students at SMA Negeri 22 Jakarta

felt that their learning focused too much on the material being tested, which limited their opportunities to think critically or try more innovative approaches.

This problem is related to the emphasis on memorization in the existing assessment system. Students spend more time memorizing information relevant to standardized tests, without being given the opportunity to apply creative ideas to their assignments. As explained in the introduction, an education system that focuses too much on standardized knowledge and memorization skills stifles student creativity (Calavia et al., 2021). At SMA Negeri 22, although there are several initiatives to stimulate creativity, such as extracurricular activities or small projects, these are still limited and often receive less attention than exam preparation.

Many teachers at SMA Negeri 22 Jakarta feel overwhelmed by the demands of a curriculum focused on standardized tests. They lack the time or freedom to integrate more creative or project-based learning methods. This study found that while some teachers strive to make the material more engaging and relevant to students' daily lives, they are often hampered by the strict curriculum and exam-based evaluations. Therefore, to foster student creativity, there needs to be a shift in teaching methods and more inclusive assessments that allow for experimentation and the exploration of new ideas.

4. Implications for 21st Century Skills Development

A crucial issue in 21st-century education is the development of more comprehensive skills, including creativity, problem-solving, and critical thinking. An evaluation system that focuses too much on standardized test scores, as is the case at SMA Negeri 22 Jakarta, hinders the development of these skills. Students are increasingly accustomed to memorizing and memorizing, while opportunities to develop critical and creative thinking skills are severely limited. This impacts students' inability to face the challenges of the workplace, which increasingly demands creative and innovative skills.

This research shows that although AN attempts to accommodate more holistic assessments, the focus on standardized tests remains a major obstacle to the development of 21st-century skills. Skills such as creativity and problem-solving are crucial for preparing students to face global challenges, but an education system focused on grades and standardized tests often neglects these aspects. Therefore, a more diverse and innovative reform of the evaluation system is urgently needed to create a balance between academic achievement and 21st-century skills. More authentic assessments, such as project-based or portfolio assessments, can provide students with opportunities to develop their creative skills more optimally.

In the long term, a more flexible and inclusive assessment system can help create a generation better prepared for the challenging world of work and social life. By reducing the emphasis on standardized tests that only measure students' cognitive abilities, more space will be available for students to develop the social, emotional, and creative skills that are essential for everyday life. Therefore, policymakers and

education practitioners must create an environment that supports the development of 21st-century skills through a more holistic assessment system that measures not only academic knowledge but also creativity, problem-solving, and innovation.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that Indonesia's national education evaluation system, which places a heavy emphasis on adherence to academic standards, often neglects the development of students' creativity and critical thinking. The focus on achieving high test scores and academic standards has created a dilemma for students, where they feel pressured to memorize material, reducing their opportunities for independent and creative thinking. Although the National Assessment (NA) was introduced as a step towards a more holistic evaluation, its implementation still faces challenges, particularly in providing space for the development of 21st-century skills, such as creativity, problem-solving, and critical thinking. The pressure and anxiety generated by standardized tests contribute to lowering students' motivation and creating stress, potentially hindering in-depth learning. The limited space for creative exploration in the learning process makes it difficult for students to think innovatively and develop creative solutions to complete assignments. Therefore, it is crucial to design a more flexible and innovative evaluation system that not only assesses academic achievement but also provides space for the development of creativity and other 21st-century skills. Reforms in the educational evaluation system are urgently needed to balance academic standards and the development of creative skills. Project-based evaluation, portfolios, and more authentic approaches can encourage students to think critically and creatively, which in turn will prepare them to face future global challenges.

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