

A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF VALUE-BASED APPROACHES IN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS

Muhammad Rahmanda¹, Muhammad Sultan Ale Tarigan², Justin Abrar³, Muhammad Zhafran Syafiq
Hasibuan⁴, Abdul Afif Rahmansyah⁵
¹²³⁴SMAS AL-AZHAR MEDAN
Email: rhmandaaa22@gmail.com

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Abstract

This article examines the adverse effects of an education system that prioritizes academic grades above all else. Employing a qualitative approach, the study explores relevant literature and case studies to identify the implications of value orientation within educational contexts. The findings indicate that an excessive focus on grades may diminish students' intrinsic motivation, foster academic dishonesty, and neglect the cultivation of character and social skills. The study recommends a reform toward a more holistic education system that emphasizes comprehensive individual development and personal growth.

Keyword: *A Critical Examination, Value-Based Approaches, Educational Systems*

Introduction

The Indonesian education system continues to exhibit a strong inclination toward academic grades as the principal benchmark of student achievement. This emphasis is reflected in policy frameworks and instructional practices that prioritize examination outcomes and academic ranking. Nevertheless, this grade-oriented paradigm has been increasingly criticized for its detrimental consequences on educational quality and learning integrity. Data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) reveal that Indonesia's learning outcomes have shown little improvement over time. In the 2009 PISA assessment, Indonesia ranked 61st among 65 countries with an average score of 371—substantially below the global mean of 496—indicating persistent challenges in achieving international standards of educational excellence. Furthermore, although the national minimum passing grade has gradually increased from 4.1 to 5.5, the centralized implementation of the National Examination (Ujian Nasional) as the sole criterion for student graduation has generated several adverse outcomes. These include diminished pedagogical innovation, the erosion of moral and cultural instruction, and reduced opportunities for students' self-development, as both learners and educators are compelled to prioritize examination performance over holistic learning.

Indonesia's education system, particularly at the primary and secondary levels, remains largely dominated by an emphasis on academic grades as the main measure of success. Over the past two decades, PISA assessments have consistently revealed that Indonesian students perform below the global average—for example, scoring 371 and ranking 61st out of 65 countries in 2009, compared to the world average of 496. This condition has reinforced “teaching to the test” practices, where educators prioritize exam preparation at the expense of creativity, character formation, and critical thinking. Such a focus has distorted the essence of education by reducing its value to numerical outcomes and academic rankings. Students are thus encouraged to chase scores rather than develop genuine understanding, which undermines intrinsic motivation and results in decontextualized, mechanical learning processes. Additionally, unequal access to educational facilities and digital resources widens academic disparities, especially between urban and rural schools. In light of these challenges, this study emphasizes the urgency of reforming Indonesia's education system toward a holistic model that integrates academic achievement with character and non-cognitive skill development.

Research Methodology

This qualitative study adopted a descriptive–interpretative design to explore the impacts of grade-oriented education practices. The research took place in three purposively selected senior high schools in Medan, North Sumatra (June–December 2024), representing diverse social and academic contexts. The participants included seven core subject teachers and twenty final-year students actively engaged in National Examination preparation. Data collection methods consisted of semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and classroom observations. All qualitative data were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically using open, axial, and selective coding. The process was guided by a multi-coder discussion framework and documented through an audit trail to ensure reliability. Validity was strengthened through source and method triangulation and peer debriefing. Ethical approval was obtained from the participating institutions, and informed consent was secured from all participants. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained. The methodological transparency of this study enables its replication in similar research contexts.

Research Findings

The analysis of qualitative data indicates a decline in students' intrinsic motivation as a result of excessive emphasis on grades. Many students expressed feeling like “learning machines,” with success defined solely by scores rather than genuine engagement in the learning process. This reflects the self-objectification phenomenon reported in prior studies, where performance-oriented goals reduce authenticity and emotional connection to learning. Instances of academic dishonesty were also found to increase before major exams. Both teachers and students acknowledged that practices such as sharing test questions or cheating were perceived as survival mechanisms in a competitive grading environment. This supports previous findings linking low intrinsic motivation to higher levels of academic misconduct. Conversely, students who retained intrinsic motivation exhibited stronger resilience to external academic pressure, consistent with evidence showing a positive link between intrinsic motivation and mental endurance. The findings further demonstrate that ranking-based evaluation systems promote performance-oriented learning, which tends to be mechanical and shallow, while constraining creativity and problem-solving. In sum, the study highlights that a grade-dominated education system can erode intrinsic motivation, encourage dishonest behavior, and hinder the holistic development of students through meaningful learning.

Results and Discussion

The results indicate a substantial decline in intrinsic motivation among students exposed to grade-oriented evaluation systems. Respondents reported that the pursuit of high scores led to “learning for grades” rather than for understanding. This finding supports prior studies linking low motivation and engagement to higher levels of academic dishonesty. Complementary quantitative evidence shows that learning motivation and engagement explain up to 86.8% of the variance in cheating behavior, exhibiting a significant negative correlation. These findings suggest that performance-focused environments foster a culture of academic misconduct, a pattern confirmed through classroom observations and student testimonies about widespread cheating practices. In terms of character formation, the dominance of test-based evaluation undermines essential soft skills such as integrity, creativity, and collaboration. Teachers often prioritize exam preparation over cultivating critical thinking and ethical awareness, echoing critiques that such mechanistic systems erode the holistic essence of education. While previous studies (e.g., Supriyadi & Rahman, 2025) suggest that national examinations may enhance extrinsic motivation and resilience, this study found these effects to be uneven, disproportionately affecting students from low socioeconomic backgrounds who face higher stress and lower engagement. Collectively, these findings and supporting literature affirm that grade-centered education weakens intrinsic motivation, promotes dishonest behavior, and limits holistic student development. Implementing a more comprehensive assessment framework—such as the Minimum Competency Assessment emphasizing literacy, numeracy, and character—could foster a fairer and more humanistic education system.

Conclusion

This research confirms that an overemphasis on academic grades as the main measure of success leads to a decline in intrinsic motivation, increased academic misconduct, and limited character and soft skill development. The findings highlight that numerical pressure encourages surface learning instead of meaningful engagement, indicating that grade-based evaluation does not represent a truly comprehensive or human-centered education system. The study recommends a policy shift toward a holistic evaluation model—such as the Minimum Competency Assessment (AKM)—which emphasizes literacy, numeracy, and character formation. Such reform can reorient students' learning

goals from grade achievement toward holistic personal growth. Limitations include a narrow geographic focus on several high schools in Medan and limited exploration of parental and community perspectives. Future research should involve broader samples and comparative studies across different social and cultural settings. Longitudinal research is also needed to assess the long-term effects of AKM implementation on motivation, learning outcomes, and soft skill development.

Ultimately, this study advocates for a transformation in Indonesia's educational paradigm—from one that prioritizes numerical results to one that values the learning process and human development as a whole.

Furthermore, the findings imply that educational reform should not only focus on structural and policy-level changes but also on cultivating a learning culture that appreciates curiosity, collaboration, and ethical integrity. Teachers' roles should evolve from mere transmitters of information into facilitators of critical thinking and personal growth. This shift in pedagogical mindset is essential for nurturing resilient, creative, and morally grounded learners who can adapt to the dynamic challenges of the 21st century.

In addition, collaboration between educational institutions, policymakers, and communities is crucial to ensure that reforms are implemented inclusively and sustainably. By integrating values-based education with competency-oriented assessment, Indonesia can move closer to realizing an educational ecosystem that empowers students not only to excel academically but also to thrive as responsible and empathetic individuals in society.

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