

# EXCELLENT SCHOOL, STATUS AND ITS EXISTENCE

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## ABSTRACT

The excellent school and effective school share their characteristics. Their main characteristic is that higher student academic achievement and there is no disparity or gap across the scores gained. The status of the excellent school is a dynamic process. It should not be decided by educational authorities. The existence of the excellent school has become heated discussions lately. The status of the government supported excellent schools including the RSBI (International Standard School Pilot Project) has recently been revoked. However, the existence of the school should be maintained. Further research on the excellent school is badly needed.

**Keywords:** Excellent school; Effective school; Excellent School status; Excellent School existence.

## INTRODUCTION

'Excellent Schools' had been mushrooming before the Ministry of Culture and Education brought them to an end in 2013. The status of the excellent school is questioned and its existence has also been recently revoked. This writing tries to present the concept of the excellent school, its status and existence. In most of the literature, the term effective school is more frequently found than the term excellent school, which is often associated with '*sekolah unggul*', '*sekolah unggulan*', '*sekolah model*', '*sekolah percontohan*', and '*sekolah khusus*' in Bahasa. Apart from these schools, the RSBI (International Standard School Pilot Project) also refers to '*sekolah unggulan*' or excellent school. In international literature, the effective schools/excellent schools are frequently associated with *lab school*, *effective school*,

*demonstration school, experiment school, or accelerated school* (Abidin, 2007). However, scholarly speaking, the concept of the excellent school is different from that of effective schools or high performing schools, even though one day the excellent school is hoped to become an effective school. In Malaysia, effective school is often referred to '*sekolah berkesan*' or 'high performing school.' Output, which is normally expressed in terms of students' academic achievement, is often measured as a standard of school effectiveness (Rahimah & Zulkifli, 1996). Taking output student achievement as a standard of school effectiveness is coincided with what elucidated by Idris (2006) that the main measure of effectiveness is higher student achievement, which is measured by employing standardized test. It is also found in the literature that aspects of school environment and school climate have also been used to measure the characteristics of effective schools because they affect student achievement as well.

In Aceh, Indonesia the status of the excellence is decided and inscribed in an official decree by the Head of the Education Service Office of Regency/City level together with regents or mayors, and school administrators in Aceh (Laisani, 2009). Since the characteristics of effective schools are often found similar to those of excellent schools, which are less frequently mentioned in international literature compared to effective schools, it is academically safe to discuss the characteristics of effective schools.

### **Characteristics and Criteria**

Before describing the characteristics of effective schools it is academically sound to mention some alleged characteristics of a "less effective" school." After visiting "less effective" schools in urban areas Rahimah and Zulkifli (1996) found at least 7 characteristics of "less effective" schools in contrast to those of effective schools: (1) based on the information gathered during unplanned conversation with the teachers in the teachers' sitting room, principal of the school was unpopular among the teachers; (2) the principal did not talk much about the school; (3) the principal complained about his transference from another place recently to fill in the vacant post in this particular school; (4) she was looking forward to retiring shortly; (5) the score on *interpersonal relationship* of "less effective" school was lower than

that of its effective counterpart; (6) concerning the items that measure the four constructs namely: *Interpersonal Relationships, Teaching & Learning, Administration and Physical Facilities*, the students and teachers of “less effective” schools tend to agree to a lesser degree on the items compared to their counterparts in effective schools; (7) principals from a “less effective” school resembles more of a responder, rather than an initiator, directive from higher authorities. (Rutherford, 1985, in Idris, 2006) also questioned the principal of a “less effective” and that of an effective school. The principal of an effective school answered the questions on school missions and goals confidentially. However, the principal of a “less effective” school answered the questions in doubt such as:

We have good school and teachers and I would like to maintain this condition; we have heard some recommendations from the commission, and I think we have implemented most of the recommendations; we are going to have a safe and tidy school.

It is not easy to find a well organized concept of effective schools of Indonesian context. However, educators have a common view that “less effective schools” usually accept future students of any level of intelligence or even the loser who fails to enter favorable schools; the facilities are inadequate or less than those of effective schools; the teachers and students are not familiar with technology such as internet; the teachers are rarely given opportunities to upgrade themselves concerning the most current theories and practices in their fields (Zainoeddin, 2010); the teachers of “less effective schools” must work extra hard to upgrade the below average students in the same period of time as effective schools. Some teachers of “less effective schools” say that “we have to thank God that with limited facilities and weak inputs we are able to make students pass national examination and gain good achievement” (Winggowati, 2011). Some analysts even suggest that the paradigm of effective school be changed. The title of effective school (*sekolah unggul*) should be granted to the general schools which are able to educate low capacity students to be high achievers.

The existing literature of Indonesian context on effective school (*sekolah unggul*) indicates that they have something in common. They illustrate that effective

schools generally accept only superior or academically excellent students; they have adequate facilities; at the end of the year, it is not surprising that the students reach a high level of achievement; grade point average of the students is higher than those of “less effective schools;” students have no problem passing entrance test to further their education to a higher level or tertiary education (Ahsan, 2010); teachers and students are familiar with technology such as internet; teachers are recognized and given the opportunities to keep abreast of the development of the most current theories and practices in their fields (Zainoeddin, 2010).

Characteristics of an effective school vary in number. Garibaldi (1993), for example, set six characteristics of effective schools: the schools have pleasant environment and in which goals and rules are well articulated; takeover rates of the teachers are low; principals function as instructional leaders; teachers are involved in decision making; teachers feel that they are supported by the school leaders, parents and community; students enjoy the school learning and social atmosphere. The characteristics indicating an effective school not only vary in terms of size of characteristics, but also their substance.

According to McLaughlin (2005), an effective school is a school that can, in measured student achievement terms, demonstrate the joint presence of quality and equity. Said another way, an Effective School is a school that can, in measured student achievement terms and reflective of its “learning for all” mission, demonstrate high overall levels of achievement and no gaps in the distribution of that achievement across major subsets of the student population (McLaughlin, 2005, p. 5).

Referring to the above definition, it can be inferred that an excellent school is the school whose whole students could achieve a common quality and equity in measured student achievement terms, and there is no disparity among the students in terms of the achievement. Effective school studies indicate that both students from less fortunate and wealthier family backgrounds are successful. The studies consistently show that instructionally effective schools set a high standard of expectations for student attainment. Principal instructional leadership plays the most significant role for success of these effective schools (Hallinger & Murphy, 1987). Most literature on effective schools has something in common that is the professional principal is counted as one of the most important elements of the criteria.

McLaughlin (2005) also specifies 8 factors that make a school be called an Excellent/Effective School:

#### 1. Professional Leadership of the Principal

A qualified and professional principal who has a comprehensive understanding on the overall school operation is an effective school leader. Only an effective and professional head master with leadership capacity, integrity, and managerial skills could encourage students to excel. Effective school leadership is a key to students' academic success.

#### 2. Reliable and Professional Teachers

Teacher plays the most significant role in promoting an educational institution. Reliable and effective teachers are able to realize the expectations of the school principal and parents. Thus, the capacity of the students is more likely to be enhanced.

#### 3. Clear Operational Philosophy

Most schools are operated based on a well formulated philosophy. However, if the philosophy cannot be brought into reality, the impact of the philosophy on school operation could hardly be noticeable. The philosophy should be shaped into a statement of vision and mission. The vision and mission must later be specified into academic goals. Then, it is necessary to clearly elaborate the goals into objectives and policies of the schools. Finally, the objectives and policies have to be fully figured out and mandatorily practiced by all school elements in carrying out their school activities.

#### 4. Conducive Learning Environment

Good setting for learning does not necessarily mean luxurious classroom with extravagant facilities. The most important consideration is that the learning environments provide students with feeling of comfort and make them learn peacefully, be it in the middle of the field, under a tree or anywhere else. The comfortable environment that ensures students can learn to their best potential.

#### 5. Good Organizational Networking

Good organizational networking is often misunderstood by the principal. Some principals assume that networking here means linear communication between

the principal and the teachers and other school elements. As a matter of fact, organizational networking here has a notion of parallel communication between principals, teachers and parents particularly on the problems and constraints encountered by the teacher and students in the teaching-learning process. In addition, the members of this organization especially parents should be well informed particularly in terms of school atmosphere and education in a broader sense.

## 6. Well-Oriented Curriculum

School leaders play a crucial role in setting high standards for student performance in their schools. However, these high standards must be translated into ambitious academic content represented in the curriculum experienced by students. School leaders work with colleagues to ensure that the school is defined by a rigorous curriculum program in general and each student's program, in particular. However, the drawback is that all public high schools' curricula are currently provided by the Ministry of National Education of the Republic of Indonesia in a centralized manner. Only 20% of the curriculum content is regionally loaded. As a consequence of this, the teachers could hardly have any room to develop a curriculum considering local potentials. The students' intellectual development regarding their local culture and wisdom is unavoidably undermined. As the curriculum is nationally designed by the Ministry of National Education, evaluation is also conducted by following the nationally set standards.

Ideally, high school curriculum is regionally made. The Ministry of National Education had better offer the lattice, framework of the curriculum. The teachers develop the curriculum and learning objectives. In this way, each province will design fairly unique curriculum on the basis of the local potentials, by accommodating the local aspirations in agreement with the uniqueness of the region. For instance, Aceh could color its high school curriculum with syari'ah law.

## 7. Evaluation

Evaluation is aimed at looking at the progress students have made and their accomplishments based on the learning objectives stated in the curriculum. A properly organized curriculum would guarantee a measurable student achievement and map the students' strength and weaknesses.

## 8. Active Parent Participation in School Activities

At the least involvement, participation of the parents in school activities is simply controlling students during the break. The serious partaking is that parents take part in curriculum development. This role is considered significant part for parents to play, because involving in the curriculum arrangement would result in the parents' awareness of the students' learning and synchronize home and school learning. Thus, parents would feel accountable for the success of the learning. In turn, parents and community members as a whole would realize that education and human resource development is everybody's responsibility.

Regardless of the 8 indicators illustrated above, Hammond and Friedlander (2008) point out one distinctive feature of all five excellent schools researched in the United States in contrast to traditional high schools, that is their degree of personalization. The teachers are exceptionally responsible and close to students. In this respect, the schools establish a small learning environment; promote continuous, long term relationships between adults and students; and create advisory systems that systematically organize counseling, academic supports and family connections which make the school more effective.

MacGilchrist, Myers, and Reed (2004) viewed a shared vision and agreed upon goals as characteristics of an effective school. Sammons, Hillman, and Mortimore (1995) undertook a review of international school effectiveness literature. They focused on schools in the UK, North America and the Netherlands. Despite the many differences in approaches to education from one country to another, they were invited to evaluate whether or not it was possible to find distinctive features that effective schools have in common. The main indicators of 'success' of the schools under investigation are that the examination performance and improvements in tests.

The synopsis of the review provided as a result of the assessment is depicted in Table 2.1.

	<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Elements</b>
1.	Professional leadership	Firm and purposeful A participative approach The leading professional
2.	Shared vision and goals	Unity of purpose Consistency of practice Collegiality and collaboration

3.	A learning environment	An orderly atmosphere An attractive working environment
4.	Concentration on teaching and learning	Maximization of learning time Academic emphasis Focus on achievement
5.	Purposeful teaching	Efficient organization Clarity of purpose Structured lessons Adaptive practice
6.	High expectations	High expectations all around Communicating expectations Providing intellectual challenge
7.	Positive reinforcement	Clear and fair discipline Feedback
8.	Monitoring progress	Monitoring pupil performance Evaluating school performance
9.	Pupil rights and responsibilities	Raising pupil self-esteem Positions of responsibility Control of work
10.	Home-school partnership	Parental involvement in their children's learning
11.	A learning organization	School-based staff development

*Table 2.1 Eleven Characteristics Found in Effective Schools Resulting from a Review of International School Effectiveness Literatur taken from Sammons, Hillman and Mortimore (1995, p.8).*

### Status

The status of effective school is a dynamic process. The findings on effective school is growing. The present substantial body of the research literature on effective schools had no origin prior to the 1970s. Then, the researchers visited the apparently effective schools to see what they were like, to observe what were going on in them. Over the years, this body of research literature has grown (Owens, 2001). However, even though the pieces of research have increased in volume, scope and sophistication, the conceptualization and school settings are in diversity.

In addition, according to Rahimah & Zulkifli (1996) school effectiveness is a dynamic process. A school which is less effective at this moment may be more effective in the next couple years in the future, and this condition also applies in reverse. Based on this nature of effective school, it means that there is no special status of a school or a group of schools which are categorized into effective schools. The schools may meet the requirements to be effective schools any time, be it through changes made by administrators together with the teachers or government authorities or other parties, or other factors. This measure is in line with that used by Reuter (1992) suggesting that effective schools could be located or found anywhere either in urban or rural areas. In practice, in many developing countries high performing schools are associated with certain schools in urban areas. This is a consequence of the focus of development in those countries in which governments concentrate on developing urban areas.

In Indonesia, the concept or dimension of effectiveness or excellence (keunggulan) of the schools as stated by the Ministry of National Education (Depdikbud) 1993 is indicated in the following criteria: the superiority of the student learning achievement demonstrated in school report card; the results of intelligence, creativity and physical test; the availability of infrastructure and structure that make it possible for students to channel their talents and ability both through curricular and extracurricular activities; conducive learning atmosphere both physical and psychological conditions for developing and realizing the talents; excellence in terms of teaching staff who are more capable and committed than those in regular schools; curriculum which is developed in such a way that is referring to the national curriculum with the enrichment and acceleration as needed; leadership capacity development of the student through practices around the schools.

In this era, educational institutions become more and more independent and the sources of funding may derive from any sources. Therefore, effective schools possibly emerge anywhere and anytime. There are diverse effective schools in Indonesia and are controlled by different government departments. There are in the main two Indonesian government ministries in charge of education: the Ministry of National Education and the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Except for those under the con-

trol of government ministries, there are a number of private effective schools of different levels under the management of boarding schools (pesantren or dayah) and foundations or firms.

## Existence

### 1. Controversy

It is said that the idea of the excellent school establishment is considered controversial. It is unaffordable, legally groundless and theoretically baseless. The emergence of the excellent school undermines the paradigm of inclusive education, Education for All, democracy and equity and it contradicts the philosophy that “no students left behind” which was sounded in Jomtien, Bangkok, in 1990. Government is obliged to ensure equal access to education for all citizens. Unfortunately, government especially regional government pays too special attention to the excellent schools or model schools ignoring the rest of the regular schools in the country (Daud, 2010).

According to a distinguished educator, Djohar (2007), the learning model of the excellent schools that are mushrooming now is not in accordance with the norm of education. Students are, more often than not, forced to master more materials especially science and to apply themselves to over loaded homework. In addition, parents still exhaust the students by making them take additional courses outside to guarantee their survival in the program. In this way, teachers and parents unconsciously chain them and violate their rights. The teaching learning process is mostly conventional in style by which the students are textually fed to ensure their success.

More ironically, the success of the school student is allegedly viewed due to the prior outstanding academic achievement and financial well-being of the potential enrolment (Nurkolis, 2002).

However, in fact, the basic idea of the excellent school refers to the theory of education, psychology, and pieces of research. It is essential that intellectually distinguished students be considered and treated in a special setting through schools with special model and system. This strategy is in line with the principal function of

education, namely, developing the potential of the learners wholly and optimally (Arifin, 2009).

A study conducted by the Ministry of Education of Indonesia in 1994 shows that around one-thirds of the learners encounter the symptom of under achievement. One of the factors cited is that the teaching-learning process of the regular system is not challenging enough for the strong to develop their ability optimally. In line with this finding, results of research carried out in a number of provinces of Indonesia such as in West Java, East Java, Lampung, and West Kalimantan in 1997, Widya-sono reminds us about mishandling of the gifted children. Based on this investigation Widya-sono, who is also a senior researcher of the Research Center of the Ministry of National Education of Indonesia, states that 20 % of the Junior High School (SLTP) students and 22 % of the Primary School (SD) students categorized into special or gifted students are more likely to fail to be promoted in school. According to him, the special or talented students do not get proper educational service yet. They are still treated in the same way as other children who learn at slower pace and have lower ability than them. Therefore, non-conventional system, as an alternative system, excellent/effective school is badly needed for the sake of catering to distinguished capability and talent of special students (Rahayu, 2009). In this way, the special learners are optimally educated and high quality graduates who are able to compete globally or on a par with the international students of the same levels are more likely to be produced.

The government decided the legal basis for the excellent or model or effective or favorite school operation, as inscribed in the Broad Outline of the National Development Direction (GBHN) 1993 and Constitution (UU) No. 2/1992 on the Educational System. Although GBHN is not very popular after the collapse of the New Order Government, it used to be an effective national development guideline. GBHN 1993 on education, point *f* stated, "Students who have an excellent intelligence need to be specially considered, in order to push ahead the development of their achievement and talent." While in UU no. 2/89 there are several articles, among others, Article 8, point 2: "Citizens who have an excellent intelligence and ability deserve special attention." Article 24, point 1 stipulates that "each student

deserves to be treated in accordance with his or her talent, interest, and ability." Article 24, point 6: "Each student deserves to finish his or her educational program earlier than the period of time that has been determined." Then, Article 26: "Learners deserve to have the opportunity to develop their capability by studying all the time along the course of their life aligned with their talent, interest, and their ability." In the Governmental Regulations (PP) No. 28/1990 on Primary Education and PP No. 29/1990 concerning High School Education Article 16, point 1 and Article 17, point 1 is stated that the right of the student, among others, to be treated in conformity with his or her talent, interest, and ability.

## 2. Revocation

The status of the excellent school, including RSBI (International Standard School Pilot Project) was revoked by the government. This revocation gave a surprise to many community members, parents, teachers and educators. The reason why the law for the excellent school or the RSBI establishment was suddenly revoked is that because the establishment of the school is allegedly discriminative in terms of education provision. The RSBIs and government supported excellent schools just approve the applications of the have while the disadvantaged parents cannot afford to send their children to the schools, even though they are potential students. This discrimination is considered in conflict with the constitution. Early in 2013 many parties especially educational stakeholders were surprised by the issuance of MK (Constitutional Court) decree on the annulment of the RSBI and the excellent school. The Minister of Culture and Education, Muhammad Nuh, asserted that the annulment did not give any negative impacts on students because the status was converted into 'sekolah mandiri' (independent school). Unfortunately, on the annulment, the operational system of the 'sekolah mandiri' was not clearly defined yet.

At first the RSBI and the excellent school were aimed at improving the quality of education. However, the reality was that it became too expensive for economically average parents to afford. In fact, the school got more than enough financial support from government every year. Ironically, it allegedly indicated that many academically average students from the rich families were accepted by the

school. This practice deviated from the original idea of the RSBI and the excellent school erection in which intellectually superior students would get priority even though they come from the poor family.

Some people say that the revocation of the RSBI and the excellent school is public's victory, because the establishment does not contribute to the correction of the quality of education. The operation the RSBI just leads to the privatization and profit oriented education, without taking into account the graduate outcome quality and side effect of the discrimination (Diyah, 2013).

## CONCLUSION

The concept of excellent school is similar to that of effective school. The most important criteria of excellence or effectiveness is the best student achievement and there is no disparity or gap across the students scores of standardized tests. The status of the effective school is a dynamic process meaning that any schools may potentially become an excellent or effective school due to changes made such as principal leadership that focuses on academic affairs, teaching and learning. This also means that the status cannot be decided by any authorities. The existence of the school has long been controversial. Some people say that the existence of the excellent school undermines the concept of inclusive education, Education for All. It is discriminative and a waste of money. It is also criticized that the academic achievement gained by the students not because of better practice of teaching-learning, but because of students' previous academic ability and their family background. However, the advantages of the excellent schools outweigh the disadvantages. The school is the place where talented children are optimally educated. The concept of the school does not break the law. Among others, in the Governmental Regulations (PP) No. 28/1990 on Primary Education and PP No. 29/1990 concerning High School Education Article 16, point 1 and Article 17, point 1 stated that the right of the student, among others, is to be treated in conformity with his or her talent, interest, and ability. Some people argue that excellent students be treated in a special ways as special need students treated in special manners. In

Australia, one special need student deserves to have one teacher and it costs a fortune. Why should bother with the cost of the RSBI or excellent school?

A study conducted by the Ministry of Education of Indonesia in 1994 shows that around one-thirds of the learners encounter the symptom of under achievement. One of the factors cited is that the teaching-learning process of the regular system is not challenging enough for the strong to develop their ability optimally. Global competitiveness cannot be gotten rid of. All we have to do is to prepare and educate young generations who would become on alert and on a par with their counterparts in developed worlds. Government should not have revoked the status or closed the RSBI/excellent schools. If the management is wrong, it should be improved. If the teachers are not the capable ones, they deserve to be removed. Revocating the status of the school is not a wise measure to take. Further exploratory studies on the excellent school needs to be conducted.

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