

Education Policy, Power Relations, and Structural Inequality in Indonesia (2019–2025): A Critical Policy Analysis of the Merdeka Belajar Reform

Luthfi Anshori Rahman, Umar Dalimunthe, Muhammad Syaifuddin, Muhammad Sanusi

Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau Pekanbaru

luthfianshori2001@gmail.com, dalimuntheumar29@gmail.com, muhammadsyaifudin74@gmail.com,
m.sanusi0397@gmail.com

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Abstract

Educational policy in Indonesia has never emerged in a space free from political interests. This study aims to analyze the relationship between political power dynamics and Indonesian education policy during the 2019–2025 period, as well as to identify structural factors that hinder the realization of educational equity. The study employs a qualitative approach using a policy analysis design. Data were analyzed through three complementary techniques: content analysis of regulatory documents using the Bardach and Patashnik policy analysis matrix, critical discourse analysis based on Fairclough's model to uncover power relations embedded in policy texts, and source and theoretical triangulation to ensure the validity of the findings. The findings reveal that although the Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) policy introduces significant paradigmatic reforms, its implementation is consistently constrained by four structural factors: disparities in regional capacity, unequal digital infrastructure, recurrent institutional fragmentation, and weak evidence-based evaluation systems. The policy narrative, which consistently emphasizes equity and justice, is not matched by proportional resource distribution, thereby widening the gap between developed and underdeveloped regions. This condition directly affects the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, where persistently high levels of learning poverty indicate that Indonesia is not yet on a sufficient trajectory toward inclusive and equitable education by 2030.

Keywords: educational policy politics; Merdeka Belajar; educational inequality; learning poverty; critical discourse analysis

(*) Corresponding Author: luthfianshori2001@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia has undergone a long trajectory in the development of its national education system. Since the reform era, the government has consistently promoted educational policy reforms through various strategic regulations, ranging from the enactment of the National Education System Law to the implementation of large-scale transformative programs. Entering the 2020s, these efforts have been further strengthened through the Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) policy, which encompasses curriculum reform, strengthening of the teaching profession, and expanded access to higher education. At the institutional level, the state has demonstrated a concrete commitment by allocating 20% of the national budget to education, as mandated by the Constitution, and by introducing various affirmative programs to reach historically marginalized regions.

At the regulatory level, Indonesia possesses a relatively comprehensive legal framework for education. Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System serves as the foundational legal basis, reinforced by Law No. 14 of 2005 on Teachers and Lecturers,

along with various derivative regulations that continue to be updated. Ministerial Regulation of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology No. 12 of 2024 on the Merdeka Curriculum represents the most recent evidence of the state's commitment to adaptive and responsive policy reform. The Guru Penggerak (Teacher Mobilizer) program, developed within the Merdeka Belajar ecosystem, has successfully engaged thousands of teachers across Indonesia in transformative training initiatives, with generally positive evaluations from multiple stakeholders.

At the implementation level, several indicators demonstrate significant progress. Gross enrollment rates across educational levels continue to increase, school infrastructure has been expanded through special allocation funds, and digital transformation initiatives have begun to reach previously isolated regions. The Merdeka Curriculum, which promotes differentiated learning and is oriented toward the Pancasila Student Profile, has been widely adopted by thousands of schools across the country. Overall, the narrative of Indonesian education policy during the 2019–2025 period reflects a highly dynamic system: regulations are continuously revised, programs are launched, budgets are allocated, and institutions are reorganized in pursuit of equitable education.

However, theoretical perspectives and scholarly standards suggest an ideal benchmark that goes far beyond regulatory activity. Ideally, educational policy success is not measured merely by the quantity of programs implemented, but by their coherence, consistency, and tangible impact across all segments of society without exception. Dunn (2018) emphasizes that sound policy analysis must be grounded in robust empirical evidence and capable of producing measurable outcomes. Bardach and Patashnik (2020) argue that effective public policy requires systematic deliberation, from problem definition to accountability mechanisms, demanding strong institutional capacity at all levels of governance. Ball (2012) highlights that education policy is inherently a contested arena of power relations, often influenced by narrow interests, thus requiring strong democratic oversight to ensure public accountability. Sahlberg (2021) further demonstrates that successful education systems such as Finland are characterized by long-term policy stability, minimal short-term political intervention, and strong trust in teacher professionalism. Meanwhile, the World Bank (2024) asserts that reducing learning poverty significantly requires education policies that prioritize measurable equity, rather than national averages that obscure regional disparities.

The gap between the empirical reality of Indonesian education policy (*das sein*) and the ideal standards proposed in the literature (*das sollen*) lies in the deep divide between regulatory productivity and substantive effectiveness. On the one hand, the state remains highly active: regulations are issued, programs are launched, and budgets are allocated. On the other hand, policy coherence remains weak, evidence-based evaluation is not yet institutionalized, and disparities in implementation capacity across regions remain pronounced. The 2024 ministerial restructuring marked by the separation of ministries further reflects a recurring pattern of institutional fragmentation in Indonesian education governance. Digital inequality between urban and rural areas, inconsistent budget distribution, and weak accountability mechanisms at the local level demonstrate that regulatory activity at the central level does not automatically translate into educational equity on the ground.

This gap raises a fundamental research problem: why has Indonesian education policy, despite its regulatory dynamism and ambition, not consistently succeeded in producing equitable educational outcomes across regions? This question necessitates a deeper examination of the relationship between political power dynamics and education policy direction, while also seeking a policy model capable of bridging constitutional ideals and implementation realities.

Previous studies on Indonesian education policy have expanded significantly, particularly over the last decade. Several studies have examined the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum from pedagogical, managerial, and regulatory perspectives (Mardiana & Emmiyati, 2024; Mukhdlor et al., 2024; Wati et al., 2023; Irawati et al., 2022; Lembong et al., 2023). These studies generally conclude that while the curriculum design is progressive, its implementation is constrained by disparities in institutional and regional capacity. Research on educational decentralization has also highlighted its implications for quality and equity (Hendra & Fadriati, 2023; Ridwan & Sumirat, 2021; Saprianto et al., 2023; Runiasih & Ahmad, 2025), consistently finding that decentralization in Indonesia remains largely administrative rather than substantive, with fiscal inequality across regions as a persistent structural barrier.

Studies on teacher empowerment programs have also received considerable attention (Rohman et al., 2023; Wiryatmo et al., 2023; Satriawan et al., 2021), particularly regarding the effectiveness of the Guru Penggerak and Sekolah Penggerak initiatives. In addition, issues of digital inequality and ICT infrastructure in education have gained increasing scholarly attention (Fadhila & Kartiasih, 2024), while studies on regulatory inconsistency in education policy have begun to emerge (Kusuma et al., 2024; Ishak, 2022). However, most of these studies remain fragmented, focusing on individual programs, specific dimensions, or limited time frames. There is still a lack of integrative analysis that simultaneously examines political power dynamics, regulatory architecture, and policy implementation effectiveness within a unified analytical framework for the 2019–2025 period. This gap is what this study seeks to address.

The novelty of this study lies in its integrative analytical approach, combining document-based policy analysis, critical discourse analysis, and political education perspectives within a coherent framework to examine Indonesian education policy dynamics during 2019–2025. Unlike previous studies that are largely thematic and fragmented, this research systematically maps how power relations shape policy architecture, how regulations are translated (or fail to be translated) into practice, and how institutional disparities produce systemic educational inequality. This contribution is aligned with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which emphasizes inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all an agenda that cannot be achieved without a deep understanding of how politics and policy interact within educational systems.

The urgency of this study is evident. Indonesia currently stands at a critical juncture: post-ministerial restructuring transitions, evaluation momentum of the Merdeka Curriculum, and global pressure to significantly reduce learning poverty by 2030 in line with SDG 4 targets. Without a comprehensive understanding of the root causes of policy ineffectiveness, policy responses risk remaining fragmented and superficial. This study therefore provides an academically grounded contribution aimed at generating actionable policy insights to support equitable education reform, in line with Indonesia's constitutional mandate under Article 31 of the 1945 Constitution.

Based on the above background, this study addresses two main research questions. First, how do political power dynamics shape the direction, coherence, and quality of Indonesian education policy during the 2019–2025 period? Second, what structural factors hinder the realization of educational equity in the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar policy, and what policy recommendations can systematically address these constraints?

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach using policy analysis as the research design. The data were obtained from three main categories: (1) education policy documents

from the 2019–2025 period (Law No. 20/2003 on the National Education System, Law No. 14/2005 on Teachers and Lecturers, Permendikbudristek No. 7/2022, and Permendikbudristek No. 12/2024); (2) reports from international organizations such as the OECD and the World Bank; and (3) scientific journal articles indexed in SINTA and Scopus. Data collection was conducted through systematic document analysis and literature review covering publications from 2019 to 2025, using the keywords education policy, Merdeka Belajar, education decentralization, and educational inequality across Google Scholar, SINTA, and Scopus databases.

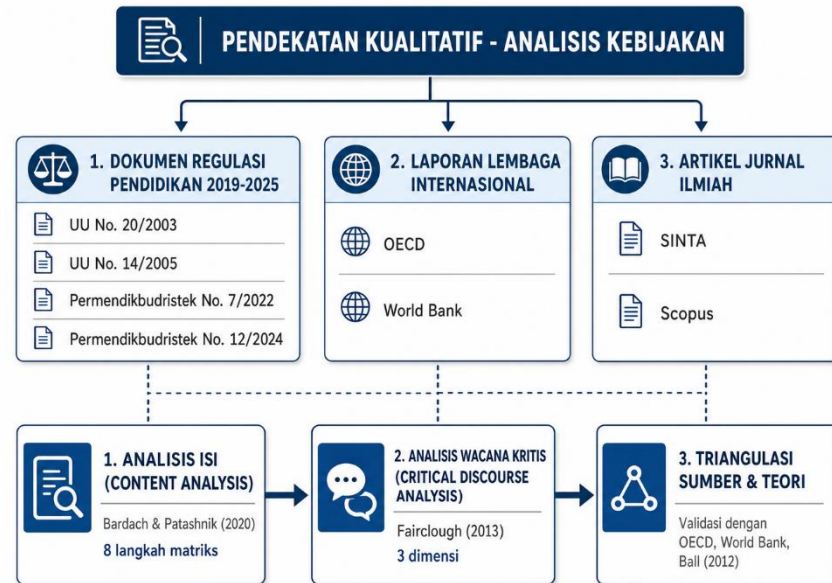


Figure 1. Research Method Framework

Data analysis was carried out through three complementary stages. First, content analysis was applied to policy texts using the eight-step matrix developed by Bardach and Patashnik (2020) to map the consistency between policy objectives, instruments, and accountability mechanisms. Second, critical discourse analysis (CDA) based on Fairclough’s model (2013) was used to uncover power relations embedded in policy narratives, particularly in documents related to the Merdeka Belajar curriculum and the Teacher Mobilizer Program, through three dimensions: text, discursive practice, and social practice. Third, source and theory triangulation were employed to validate findings by comparing policy document analysis with empirical data from OECD (2023) and World Bank (2024) reports, as well as Ball’s (2012) theoretical perspective on policy as text continuously negotiated in practice.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Results

Education policy in Indonesia during the 2019–2025 period is characterized by a complex configuration of power relations involving state actors, political institutions, bureaucratic agencies, and global governance frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Policy formulation does not occur in a politically neutral environment but is continuously shaped through negotiation among competing interests.

This condition is consistent with Ball's (2012) conception of policy as a negotiated text embedded within power relations rather than a purely technical administrative product.

Empirically, education policymaking involves multiple stakeholders, including central ministries, parliament, local governments, international organizations, and epistemic communities. The interaction among these actors produces policy outputs that tend to reflect compromise based arrangements, often resulting in reduced long-term coherence.

The Merdeka Belajar reform agenda represents the dominant policy trajectory in this period. It encompasses structural interventions such as the abolition of the National Examination, implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, the Teacher Mobilizer Program, Kampus Merdeka, and national assessment reform. Lembong, Lumapow, and Rotty (2023) identify this reform as the most ambitious post-decentralization transformation, marked by a shift from uniform standardization toward contextual and differentiated learning systems.

However, implementation data indicate a structural asymmetry. Schools in urban and resource-rich areas demonstrate higher adaptive capacity, while schools in remote and disadvantaged regions experience dual constraints: cognitive adaptation to new policy paradigms and structural limitations related to infrastructure, human resources, and institutional readiness.

Institutional restructuring further reflects political influence in education governance. The separation of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology into two ministries in 2024 introduces new governance fragmentation risks, including overlapping authority and weakened policy coherence across education levels. Kusuma et al. (2024) conceptualize this phenomenon as "policy entanglement," where institutional redesign is driven more by political rationality than by evidence-based system improvement.

At the discourse level, Fairclough's (2013) critical discourse analysis reveals a structural contradiction between policy rhetoric and implementation reality. While policy texts consistently emphasize equity and inclusion, empirical implementation patterns demonstrate widening disparities in access to resources and institutional capacity across regions.

Regulatory dynamics further show high policy productivity but limited consistency. The rapid issuance of Permendikbudristek No. 7/2022 and No. 12/2024 reflects a responsive policy environment. However, Bardach and Patashnik (2020) argue that effective policymaking requires structured deliberation, problem clarity, and evaluation readiness. When regulatory change exceeds system absorption capacity, implementation tends to produce confusion rather than transformation. Empirically, Irawati et al. (2022) confirm that many schools implement curriculum reforms as administrative compliance rather than pedagogical transformation.

In the context of decentralization, Indonesia exhibits persistent structural imbalance. Although decentralization was intended to strengthen local responsiveness, Ridwan and Sumirat (2021) find that it remains largely administrative rather than substantive. Local fiscal and managerial capacity has not developed proportionally with delegated responsibilities. This condition is reinforced by unequal education financing structures (Runiasih & Ahmad, 2025). Saprianto, Simbolon, and Hukom (2023) further identify a paradox in which high-capacity regions demonstrate efficient budget utilization, while low-capacity regions experience persistent inefficiency, thereby reinforcing inequality. Overall, the results indicate a persistent tension between rapid reform intensity and uneven implementation capacity across regions.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that Indonesia's education policy system (2019–2025) is structurally shaped by a fundamental mismatch between policy ambition and systemic capacity. This mismatch reflects what Ball (2012) describes as the gap between policy as design and policy as practice, where policy intentions are continuously reinterpreted and reshaped through contextual constraints.

The Merdeka Belajar reform illustrates a paradigmatic shift in policy orientation; however, its effectiveness is constrained by structural inequalities across educational ecosystems. Mukhdlor, Syam, and Syahri (2024), using the CIPP evaluation framework, demonstrate that while policy design is strong at the context and input levels, significant disparities emerge at the process and product levels. These disparities reflect uneven pedagogical capacity, leadership quality, and institutional support systems across regions.

Similarly, Mardiana and Emmiyati (2024) emphasize that implementation gaps are not primarily caused by resistance to change, but by limited pedagogical capital and insufficient institutional scaffolding, particularly in resource constrained schools. This suggests that policy success is highly dependent on pre existing system capacity rather than policy design alone.

A major structural constraint is the persistent digital divide. Fadhila and Kartiasih (2024) empirically confirm that ICT infrastructure significantly influences educational inequality. However, disparities in internet access remain substantial (BPS, 2023). Given the increasing digitization of education governance through platforms such as Merdeka Mengajar and Rapor Pendidikan, digital inequality directly translates into unequal access to policy instruments, thereby undermining SDG 4 equity principles.

Institutional fragmentation further exacerbates implementation inefficiencies. Dunn (2018) emphasizes that policy effectiveness requires institutional coherence and continuity. However, Indonesia's education governance is frequently disrupted by policy discontinuities driven by leadership transitions. Hendra and Fadriati (2023) show that such fragmentation is reflected in inconsistent regional budgeting, while Wati, Aziz, and Fitri (2023) highlight regulatory ambiguity in curriculum implementation.

Teacher quality distribution represents another critical structural barrier. While the Teacher Mobilizer Program yields positive initial outcomes (Rohman et al., 2023), sustainability remains limited. Wiryatmo, Iriani, and Waruwu (2023) show that program impacts tend to decline post-intervention due to weak systemic reinforcement. Satriawan, Santika, and Naim (2021) further emphasize that teacher transformation requires strong instructional leadership and collaborative ecosystems, which remain uneven across regions. In comparative perspective, Sahlberg (2021) demonstrates that high-performing systems rely on long-term, system-wide investment in teacher professionalism rather than fragmented reform interventions.

Finally, weak institutionalization of evidence-based evaluation constrains policy learning. OECD (2023) and World Bank (2024) data indicate persistently low learning outcomes despite continuous reforms, suggesting limited policy effectiveness at the outcome level. Bardach and Patashnik (2020) argue that without systematic evaluation mechanisms, policy systems tend to reproduce regulatory output without substantive improvement in performance outcomes.

Based on these findings, systemic policy implications emerge. First, cross-ministerial coordination mechanisms must be institutionalized to ensure policy coherence across education subsystems. Second, education financing must shift toward needs-based allocation to reduce structural regional disparities. Third, digital infrastructure must be treated as a foundational condition for policy implementation, not a supplementary intervention. Fourth, CIPP based evaluation frameworks should be embedded within the

policy cycle to strengthen accountability and learning. Finally, sustained political commitment beyond electoral cycles is essential to ensure policy continuity and structural reform effectiveness.

Collectively, these implications underscore that achieving educational equity in Indonesia requires not only policy innovation but also systemic restructuring of governance capacity, resource distribution mechanisms, and evaluation systems in alignment with SDG 4.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that Indonesia's education policy during the 2019–2025 period is characterized by a structural tension between regulatory productivity and substantive effectiveness. The Merdeka Belajar policy, as a transformative reform agenda, has produced significant paradigmatic changes; however, its implementation is consistently constrained by four interlocking structural barriers: inter-regional capacity disparities, digital infrastructure gaps, recurring institutional fragmentation, and weak evidence-based evaluation mechanisms.

The relationship between political power and education policy is shown to be asymmetrical. While policy narratives consistently emphasize equity and justice, the distribution of resources and implementation capacity in practice tends to widen the gap between developed and underdeveloped regions. As long as education decentralization remains administrative rather than substantive, and political commitment is limited to five-year electoral cycles, the goal of equitable education will continue to be postponed.

These conditions have direct implications for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4, which mandates inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all by 2030. Persistently high learning poverty rates and widening digital divides indicate that Indonesia is not yet on a sufficient trajectory to meet its global commitments. Without reforming education financing formulas based on actual needs, institutionalizing systematic policy evaluation, and accelerating digital infrastructure development in disadvantaged regions, the SDG 4 target will be difficult to achieve on time.

This study emphasizes that meaningful educational transformation requires political will that transcends electoral interests a long-term commitment grounded in constitutional values and oriented toward substantive justice for all citizens.

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