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A Critical Analysis of Educational Accessibility and Relevance Policies in Indonesia: Post-Pandemic Challenges and the Era of Disruption

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ABSTRACT

Education in Indonesia faces complex challenges regarding geographical disparities, economic inequality, and digital disruption, which intensified following the COVID-19 pandemic. This study critically analyzes the dynamics of educational accessibility and relevance, as well as the effectiveness of various government policies in Indonesia. Utilizing a library research design with a qualitative approach and inductive reasoning, this research systematically examines secondary literature. The analysis reveals that although various government initiatives—such as the Smart Indonesia Program (PIP), the School Zoning System, and the Independent Learning (Merdeka Belajar) policy—have expanded physical enrollment, their implementation suffers from significant structural disparities. Critical barriers remain, including limited digital infrastructure in remote areas, uneven teacher competence, and a persistent curriculum mismatch with the labor market demands of the disruption era. Consequently, expanding access has not directly translated into enhanced educational quality and relevance. The practical implication of these findings suggests that policymakers must shift focus from mere quantitative coverage toward building inclusive digital infrastructure and contextualizing curricula to meet regional and industrial needs.

ABSTRAK

Pendidikan di Indonesia menghadapi tantangan kompleks terkait kesenjangan geografis, ekonomi, dan disrupsi digital yang kian tajam pasca-pandemi COVID-19. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis secara kritis dinamika aksesibilitas dan relevansi pendidikan serta efektivitas berbagai kebijakan pemerintah di Indonesia. Menggunakan metode library research berpendekatan kualitatif dan metode berpikir induktif, penelitian ini mengkaji literatur sekunder secara tematis. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa meskipun berbagai kebijakan—seperti Program Indonesia Pintar (PIP), Sistem Zonasi, hingga Merdeka Belajar—telah berhasil memperluas partisipasi fisik, implementasinya masih mengalami ketimpangan signifikan. Faktor struktural seperti keterbatasan infrastruktur digital di daerah terpencil, ketimpangan kompetensi guru, dan ketidaksesuaian kurikulum (mismatch) dengan kebutuhan pasar kerja era disrupsi masih menjadi hambatan utama. Oleh karena itu, pemerataan akses belum sepenuhnya berbanding lurus dengan peningkatan kualitas dan relevansi pembelajaran. Implikasi praktis penelitian ini menegaskan perlunya pengambil kebijakan untuk mengalihkan fokus dari sekadar perluasan kuantitatif ke penguatan infrastruktur digital yang inklusif serta penyelarasan kurikulum berbasis kebutuhan daerah dan industri.

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INTRODUCTION

Education is fundamentally a transformative process aimed at preserving cultural values while fully developing human potential. From a philosophical perspective, humans are learners equipped psychologically with the capacity for critical thinking, ethical behavior, and adaptation to their environment. Therefore, the primary output to be achieved through education is the emergence of independent, principled individuals with the capacity to contribute positively to society. Schools function as functional social institutions trusted by society to carry out the role of developing student potential to realize personal and collective national aspirations, where the role and quality of educators serve as key factors in achieving this equity (Kawuryan et al., 2021). Substantively, education is also a fundamental Human Right inherent to every individual regardless of social, economic, or geographical background. Public accessibility to quality education serves as a key indicator in driving the improvement of the Human Development Index (HDI) in Indonesia (Kusuma, 2020). HDI, which encompasses components of a decent standard of living, health, and educational attainment, indicates that the quality of a nation's human resources depends heavily on the extent to which the state can guarantee equal learning opportunities for all its people, which ultimately exerts a positive impact on regional economic performance (Kusuma, 2020) and fosters overall economic growth (Sabur et al., 2021).

Based on these philosophical principles and human rights, poor and marginalized communities, as well as children with special needs (disabilities), possess the equal right to access education without discrimination (Afkar et al., 2020; Faragher et al., 2020). The construction of an inclusive education system is an absolute prerequisite to ensure that no citizen is excluded from their basic rights, even though challenges regarding unequal access for children with special needs at the primary level remain common (Dari et al., 2020). Educational equity must guarantee that every child in remote corners of the country receives equal facilities, curricula, and pedagogical support to maximize their finest potential. In relation to the implementation of inclusive education, teaching strategies applied by teachers in rural areas (Kurniawati, 2021) and the utilization of digital interventions (Liza et al., 2023) serve as essential means to support the reach of such services. From a legal and regulatory standpoint, the state's commitment to delivering equitable and high-quality education is explicitly enshrined in the Indonesian constitution. The Preamble to the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia mandates that one of the primary objectives of establishing the unitary state is to educate the life of the nation. This constitutional mandate is further reinforced in Article 28C paragraph (1) and Article 31 of the 1945 Constitution, which obligate the government to manage and conduct a national education system capable of elevating faith, piety, and noble character in the context of intellectualizing the nation.

This juridical foundation is articulated in greater detail in Law Number 20 of 2003 on the National Education System (UU Sisdiknas). Article 5 paragraph (1) of the law states that every citizen has an equal right to receive quality education, which is subsequently reinforced by Article 6 paragraph (1) regarding the obligation to attend basic education for children aged 7 to 15 years. These legislative regulations affirm a legal commitment that providing quality education is not merely a policy choice, but a constitutional duty that must be fulfilled by both central and regional governments. Historically, the Indonesian government has launched various strategic programs to expand educational coverage across all regions. These policy interventions began with the 6-Year Compulsory Basic Education

program from 1984 to 1993, which was later expanded to 9-Year Compulsory Education through 2008. Subsequently, this policy evolved into the 12-Year Universal Secondary Education program to encompass senior high and vocational school levels (Fauzi & Qurtubi, 2023). These sustained efforts have had a significant impact on increasing school enrollment rates both qualitatively and quantitatively, aligning with strategies to strengthen human capital through vocational education and higher education pathways (Indrawati & Kuncoro, 2021).

Although the legal framework and historical policies are firmly established, empirical field evidence reveals that educational disparity remains persistent due to various underlying factors (Harahap et al., 2020). Disparity within the education sector carries the potential to diminish quality of life and impede the achievement of SDG targets (Mahendra, 2024). Evaluations of government policies to date have tended to focus heavily on quantitative physical enrollment rates and facility expansion. Few studies have thoroughly examined why programs operating for decades have been unable to address fundamental issues such as learning reversal (Beatty et al., 2021), inter-regional quality disparities, and the mismatch between graduate competencies and labor market needs.

This is precisely where a crucial research gap lies that warrants further analysis. Existing literature largely addresses the issues of educational accessibility and relevance separately or in a purely descriptive-normative manner. There is a lack of systematic analysis that integratedly evaluates the interaction between structural accessibility barriers (such as geographical and socio-economic conditions) and the dynamics of curriculum relevance in responding to rapid digital-era shifts (Hamilaturroyya & Adibah, 2025; Saa, 2024). The urgency of this study is heightened when linked to recent post-COVID-19 dynamics and accelerated technological disruption (Ssenyonga, 2021). The pandemic has widened the digital divide between resource-rich urban schools and schools in 3T (frontier, outermost, and underdeveloped) regions with minimal technological infrastructure (Dwiana & Sutarno, 2023; Gemiharto, 2022; Valentia, 2023). Concurrently, the era of disruption demands graduates with digital literacy, critical thinking, and high adaptability to strengthen workforce competitiveness (Muslim & Ariyanto, 2025). The unreadiness of the education system to respond to these rapid changes potentially threatens national global competitiveness and widens the gap in vocational training alignment (link and match) (Ariefianto et al., 2025). Based on this background and research gap, this article aims to conduct a critical analysis of educational accessibility and relevance policies in Indonesia. This study inductively unfolds structural factors impeding quality equity, evaluates the effectiveness of existing government programs (Saputra & Hilyatunisa, 2025), and formulates strategic policy recommendations adaptive to the challenges of the disruption and post-pandemic era (Fatimah et al., 2023). The findings are expected to offer theoretical contributions to the field of educational policy studies and serve as a practical reference for policymakers in Indonesia.

METHOD

The literature collection and selection process applied strict inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure the credibility of the analyzed data. Inclusion criteria encompassed indexed scientific journal articles and official reports from government or international agencies focusing on issues of accessibility, educational inequality, curriculum relevance, and the impact of the pandemic in Indonesia, as well as applicable public policy and legislative documents. Conversely, exclusion criteria

applied to non-peer-reviewed popular opinion articles, non-authoritative general data sources such as personal blogs, general dictionaries, or Wikipedia, and articles lacking substantive relevance to the national educational policy context in Indonesia. Data analysis techniques were executed technically through a structured, inductive thematic analysis workflow. The analysis began with data reduction and coding to extract key information and specific findings from the selected literature, such as data on regional facility disparities, teacher competency qualifications, remote learning barriers, and challenges in remote areas. Subsequently, these specific codes were grouped into categorizations and thematic syntheses covering physical-financial accessibility barriers, disparities in the quality of facilities and infrastructure, curriculum linkage with the labor market, and evaluations of government program interventions. In the final stage, inductive reasoning abstraction was conducted by drawing conclusions from specific field facts toward the formulation of general propositions or a new conceptual framework, thereby generating a transparent analysis of how structural inequality and digitalization dynamics impact national educational quality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Educational accessibility and relevance in Indonesia are two closely intertwined and inseparable quality dimensions in human resource development (Indrawati & Kuncoro, 2021; Keran et al., 2024). Accessibility refers to the degree of ease with which an individual can access educational services without physical, economic, social, or geographical barriers, whereas relevance pertains to the alignment between graduate competencies and the demands of the digital disruption era and the labor market. In Indonesia, various accessibility barriers stem from an archipelagic geography and socio-economic disparities, which ultimately exert a direct impact on the low relevance of learning received by students.

Synthesis of Barrier Factors and Critical Evaluation of Accessibility Policies

Theoretically, educational accessibility is divided into a financial dimension (individual ability to pay) and a physical dimension that encompasses the reachability of facilities, travel time, and transportation networks (Perdana, 2015). In the Indonesian context, both dimensions are constrained by primary factors such as gender, region of residence, parental education level, distance to school, parental age at marriage, per capita income, and household size. Disparities between urban and rural/3T (frontier, outermost, and underdeveloped) regions reveal that rural children face a significantly higher probability of dropping out due to limited transportation options, technological infrastructure barriers (Suryani et al., 2023), curriculum adaptation constraints (Okta & Putra, 2025), and literacy challenges (Ramdhani & Pratama, 2024). Beyond physical and economic obstacles, discriminatory treatment or negative social attitudes toward marginalized groups, minorities, and persons with disabilities further widen the participation gap in education (Hilmi & Maryana, 2025; Khairanis, 2025).

The Indonesian government has actually intervened in accessibility issues through various historical and contemporary policies. On the physical dimension and the expansion of educational opportunities, the Primary School Development Policy (SD Inpres) was enacted through Presidential Instruction No. 10 of 1973, which was followed by the 6-Year Compulsory Education program (1984), 9-Year Compulsory Education (1994), up to 12-Year Universal Secondary Education and the School Zoning Policy in 2017 (Sulistyosari et al., 2023). On the other hand, to address illiteracy rates, the government launched the Learning Group (Kejar) Program in

1978, which statistically succeeded in significantly reducing the national illiteracy percentage over time. Nevertheless, a critical analysis of the effectiveness of these access expansion programs reveals fundamental implementation barriers. For example, although the SD Inpres Policy and Compulsory Education successfully increased the Net Enrollment Rate (NER) quantitatively, this expansion was not matched by equitable facility maintenance and distribution of qualified teachers. Similarly, the Zoning System, designed to prevent the concentration of high-achieving students in specific schools, actually triggered new controversies in regions with uneven school distribution, where prospective students in "school void zones" lost access to affordable public schools (Susanto et al., 2024).

Tabel 1. *Illiteracy Rate Trends among the Indonesian Population Aged 10 Years and Above (1971–2010)*

Census Year	Total Population (Millions)	Illiteracy Rate (%)	Literacy Rate (%)
1971	80,0	39,1%	60,9%
1980	147,5	28,8%	71,2%
1990	179,4	15,9%	84,1%
2000	205,1	10,4%	89,6%
2010	237,6	5,3%	94,7%

Source: Data processed from Statistics Indonesia & Ministry of Education (2024)

On the financial dimension, the government established the Smart Indonesia Program (PIP) in 2014 and the equivalency of formal/non-formal education pathways to address school dropouts caused by poverty. However, PIP's effectiveness is frequently hampered by inaccurate targeting data, bureaucratic complexity in disbursement, and assistance amounts that remain insufficient to cover implicit educational costs (such as transportation and school supplies). This condition was further exacerbated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which widened the digital divide. Distance learning (PJJ) during the pandemic proved that providing internet quota assistance and e-learning was ineffective for students in remote areas lacking adequate electricity infrastructure and internet signals, thereby causing learning access disparities to further accumulate.

Synthesis of Barrier Factors and Critical Evaluation of Accessibility Policies

The inductive reasoning process from specific empirical findings highlights a deep-seated root problem regarding educator qualifications and welfare (Aulia & Cahyaningrum, 2023; Rahayu et al., 2023). Research indicates that approximately 54% of teachers in Indonesia do not yet possess adequate qualifications or engage in out-of-field teaching, and fail to meet the standards for pedagogical, personal, social, and professional competencies as mandated by Law No. 14 of 2005 (Sholihah et al., 2020). Concurrently, the majority of honorary teachers across various regions receive financial compensation well below decent living standards. Inductively generalizing these specific facts yields a broad proposition: low welfare guarantees and teacher qualifications directly suppress teaching motivation and professionalism, which ultimately triggers low learning process quality and graduate unreadiness to face modern workforce standards (Rasmitadila et al., 2024).

Responding to disruption-era challenges, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology launched the Merdeka Belajar (Emancipated Learning) policy, the Mover Teacher Program, and Mover Schools between 2019 and 2020 to transform the curriculum into a more flexible, student-centered model oriented toward the Pancasila Student Profile and literacy-numeracy competencies (Tobondo, 2024).

However, critical analysis reveals that the flexibility of Kurikulum Merdeka collides sharply with rigid field realities. In urban schools boasting abundant internet access, Kurikulum Merdeka successfully drives creativity and digital technology integration. Conversely, in remote regions still suffering from basic infrastructure crises and minimal teacher training, this policy imposes a new administrative burden that confuses educators. The limitation of vocational higher education institutions—comprising only about 5.4% of total higher education institutions in Indonesia—further underscores that curriculum flexibility remains systemically disconnected from industrial needs. Consequently, without equitable digital infrastructure distribution and massive capacity building for teachers in marginalized areas, digital transformation policies risk creating a new form of inequality in the era of disruption.

Table 2. Evaluation Matrix of Indonesian Government Policies and Intervention Relevance

Policy / Program	**Primary Focus**	**Primary Implementation Barriers**	**Critical Evaluation & Relevance**
SD Inpres & Compulsory Education	Expansion of physical school buildings and enrollment access.	Declining building quality, uneven teacher distribution.	Quantitatively successful, but neglected quality maintenance and learning facilities.
Smart Indonesia Program (PIP)	Financial assistance for underprivileged students.	Inaccurate targeting data, implicit costs remain uncovered.	Reduces dropout rates, but does not yet guarantee learning outcome quality.
School Zoning System	Equity in student distribution and school quality.	Uneven distribution of public schools across regions.	Intentions for equity are hindered by the physical scarcity of public schools in marginal zones.
Merdeka Belajar & Mover Schools	Curriculum flexibility and teacher leadership.	*Digital divide, administrative burden on teachers, adaptation challenges in 3T regions.*	Highly relevant to the era of disruption, but risks widening gaps if 3T regions are left behind.

Source: Author's Synthesis and Critical Analysis (2024)

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Critical analysis of educational dynamics in Indonesia demonstrates that the expansion of physical accessibility undertaken by the government over many years has not been fully directly proportional to improvements in learning quality and relevance. Structural barriers such as geographical disparities in 3T regions, socio-economic inequalities, and post-COVID-19 digital infrastructure limitations remain the primary factors determining accessibility lagging. Meanwhile, the low relevance of education is driven by curriculum mismatch with the demands of the digital disruption era, the scarcity of vocational institutions, and low teacher qualifications and welfare guarantees. Transformation policies such as Merdeka Belajar and the Zoning System possess good ideal concepts; however, their effectiveness is constrained by regional disparities in infrastructure and educator competencies. Therefore, the primary challenge facing Indonesian education today is shifting the focus from merely chasing quantitative enrollment figures toward achieving quality equity and contextual curriculum integration.

Based on the research findings, several strategic and actionable recommendations ought to be prioritized by decision-makers and educational institutions. First, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, alongside the Ministry of Communication and Digital Affairs, needs to prioritize the equitable provision of technological infrastructure and electricity in 3T schools prior to fully implementing digital learning platforms. Second, local governments and relevant ministries are advised to execute redistribution and continuous training for educators to resolve teacher qualification issues (specifically the disparity involving 54% of non-standardized teachers), balanced with improvements to honorary teacher salary schemes to meet decent living standards. Third, policymakers at the higher education and vocational levels should expand the proportion of vocational education and mandate regular curriculum coordination with industry associations to ensure the alignment of graduate skills with workforce needs in the era of disruption.

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