

Implementation of the Governor's Policy on Free Education in Improving the Quality of State Vocational High School Education in Banten Province, Indonesia

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Abstract

Based on the constitutional mandate and the promulgation of Governor Regulation No. 52 of 2020, the policy of free education in the Banten Province eliminates the financial barriers of students in Public Senior High School, Public Vocational Senior High School, and Public Special Needs School with the goal of providing equal opportunities and human resource development. This study aimed to investigate the implementation of the policy and its implications for the quality of vocational high schools, which are significant in regional development and labor market integration. Data collection methods employed in the study were observations, in-depth interviews, and documentation using the qualitative descriptive approach. The researcher utilized government publications and foreign literature as sources of information for the study. The analysis of the data collected in the study was underpinned by the theory of policy implementation with emphasis on decentralized governance, administrative capacity, and regulatory clarity. The validity of the study was ensured through triangulation. The results indicate that inter-institutional collaboration, sufficient funding, and the existence of a cogent legal regime are essential for the successful implementation of policies. Although the dropout rates have reduced and access has increased, quality enhancement demands investments in infrastructure, leadership skills, monitoring, and teachers' competence. Further, the financial support must be supplemented with a system of accountability, quality control, and constant evaluation to ensure the effectiveness of the policies in the long term. In the decentralized education system in Banten, in developing countries, the link between equity-oriented funding and results-oriented governance ensures that enrollment is supplemented with significant improvements in learning outcomes and workforce readiness.

Keywords: Free Education Policy, Educational Quality, Policy Execution, Equality and Access

INTRODUCTION

Strategic regional initiative, the "Banten Province Free school Policy" seeks to eliminate costs associated with operations for students enrolled in public senior secondary school institutions. This strategy seeks to enhance long-term human capital building while operationalizing the constitutional mandate of fair access to education, as it eliminates costs associated with operations for students, parents, and guardians. Many people think that education, which is funded at public expense, is a good solution to increase access to education while reducing inequalities, particularly in developing nations, as income constraints are a common reason students are denied access to education (Barrera-Osorio et al., 2011; Borkum et al., 2013; UNESCO, 2015). In the human capital development framework, secondary education funding is considered to be a type of productive investment in human capital, aside from it being a social expenditure (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2012; Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018). Therefore, it is also possible to view this Banten policy not just as a welfare policy but also as a policy for economic growth.

The main goal of this policy is to enhance the quality and inclusiveness of upper secondary education and maximize the opportunities for students to enter the labor market or pursue further studies. There are considerable implications for the participation rate of secondary school students, particularly for poor families, in vocational and regular streams of secondary education, when there are no financial barriers to access school. For instance, removing fees and associated operating costs may improve grade advancement and dropout prevention, and increase school enrollment (Barrera-Osorio et al., 2011; Filmer & Schady, 2014; Baird et al., 2016). However, it is also important to point out that it is not guaranteed that quality is achieved by providing financial support. Other complementary investments in educational infrastructure, curriculum, and school administration are equally important, as highlighted in Glewwe & Muralidharan (2016) and Kattan & Burnett (2004). Thus, the effectiveness of the Banten Free Education Policy has to be evaluated in terms of learning outcomes and school performance in addition to participation rate.

The institutional base for this policy is a set of formal regulations established through Governor Regulation No. 31 of 2018 (Banten Province, 2018), which was supplemented by Governor Regulation No. 52 of 2020 (Banten Province, 2020). The legal base for implementation in public special needs schools, public vocational high school, and public senior high schools is established through these sets of regulations. Through a clear specification of roles and responsibilities, financing mechanisms, and accountability mechanisms, regulation clarity is a key determinant for enhancing the efficacy of regulation implementation from a public policy perspective. As argued by implementation theory, a lack of administrative coordination and clear lines of authority can lead to failure in policy implementation (Sabatier, 1986; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984; Hill & Hupe, 2002). In a decentralized system of government such as Indonesia, where service delivery is decentralized to districts, coordination among provincial authorities, schools, and local education agencies is a key requirement for uniform service delivery in a fragmented system.

Other factors that impact policy success include financial sustainability and governance capability. For instance, to ensure the continuation of aid without any interruption that may lead to public distrust, there is a need for sustainable allocation of funds. According to international best practices, it is vital to ensure that there are proper monitoring systems, allocation of funds based on performance, and transparent budgeting to ensure that there is proper public accountability in public-funded education initiatives (Bruns et al., 2011; World Bank, 2018). The positive impact of this policy on disadvantaged learners may be undermined by inefficiency or leakages in funds if proper management is not in place. Therefore, it is vital

for the Free Education Policy to be accompanied by proper and methodical systems of assessment.

According to the data from the Banten Provincial Social Service, the number of students from disadvantaged families that received free education assistance was recorded as 2,228. However, it is also noted that the number is not the same across all districts and cities, with the highest number recorded in Serang Regency. This is an indication that there could be differing results due to the disparities that could be attributed to the level of accessibility and the level of poverty in the respective districts and cities. In order to determine whether the distribution is in line with the actual needs in the education sector, it is essential to conduct an in-depth analysis. In order to optimize the effectiveness of the policies, as suggested by the studies on comparative education policy (OECD, 2019; Creemers & Kyriakides, 2008), the distribution of the policies should be balanced in terms of the distribution of funds. In order to determine whether the policies are effective in reducing inequality or simply following the existing demographic characteristics, the spatial distribution of the recipients is important as well.

The purpose of this study is to determine whether the free education support recipients have a quantified improvement in the quality of education, especially in public vocational high schools, taking into consideration the aforementioned aspects. In addition to the aforementioned aspects, academic achievements, graduation rates, skill competency results, and transfer rates from these schools to higher educational institutions or employment opportunities will be taken into consideration in the course of the study. This study intends to provide additional information on the reform of education financing at the sub-national level by placing the evaluation within the broader framework of human capital and policy execution. In the end, the results of the study will help the authorities in Banten Province determine the level at which the Free Education Policy affects the overall efficacy and quality of senior secondary education while at the same time increasing access.

METHOD

For the purpose of fully grasping the implementation process of the Free Education Policy at the senior high school level, the qualitative descriptive research design is used in this study. This is because it is possible to study the meanings and perceptions that can be seen through the qualitative method, which is not possible through the quantitative method (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2018). The main research environment is public vocational high schools, and the respondents were chosen through the purposive sampling method to ensure that they were relevant to the purpose of the study. The respondents could be the school principals,

teachers, administrative staff, and some students who enjoy the free education policy, among others. Apart from the secondary data that was obtained from books, government publications, and peer-reviewed international journal articles, the researcher also used the qualitative method through the use of interviews and observations. This is because it is possible to conduct an in-depth examination of the formal framework and its implementation at the school level.

For the purpose of this research, the methods of data collection that were employed included in-depth semi-structured interviews that were carried out under the supervision of an interview protocol, non-participant field observations to ascertain the contextual realities in the schools, and desk research that entailed the systematic data collection from offline and online sources. In order to ascertain the reoccurring themes in the implementation of policies, administrative issues, and educational results, the interviews were recorded and coded. The results obtained from the interviews were cross-checked through observations, which also entailed the assessment of the match between the recommendations and the scenarios that actually exist in the schools. The method of triangulation was employed as a means of cross-checking the data that was collected through various methods and sources in order to ascertain the validity and reliability of the results (Miles et al., 2014). Data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification are all part of the interactive model of the analytical process. The policy implementation theory, which includes the top-down and bottom-up approaches (Sabatier, 1986), and ambiguity-conflict theory (Matland, 1995) were used as a guideline for the analytical process in this research. This has allowed the research to systematically examine the effectiveness of policy implementation in the context of the interpretations and capacity of the stakeholders and the clarity of the policy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Banten's Institutional and Legal Foundation for Free Education

The official administrative and operational base on which rests the implementation of free education in Banten Province is Governor Regulation No. 52 of 2020 (Banten Province, 2020). The regulation sets out the framework for governance arrangements such as Provincial Management Team and Steering Committee, financial resources including State Budget and Regional Budget, as well as institutions at the provincial level. An effort to standardize procedures of coordination, as well as eliminating any confusion in the implementation of the program, is evident in this structure of rules. This rule seeks to ensure that financial assistance is disbursed in an open manner and in accordance with requirements by outlining the roles of

the supervisory institution, school administration, as well as the education office at the provincial level.

In general, it is widely accepted that a good legal framework is essential for the effective implementation of policies. Implementation theory posits that policies with ambiguous laws are likely to be misunderstood and unevenly implemented in different administrative regions (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984). The legislative framework provided by Governor Regulation No. 52 of 2020 justifies administrative processes and budgetary allocations in this case (Banten Province 2020). From a governance point of view, bureaucratic red tape and inefficiency are minimized by having a well-defined power structure and monitoring systems in place (Hill & Hupe, 2002). This is particularly significant in decentralized systems of governance, in which local and provincial authorities share responsibility for education management.

In addition, research on governance highlights how accountability mechanisms and finance systems significantly affect policy outcomes (World Bank, 2018; Bruns et al., 2011). In order to avoid duplication or leakages, financial planning and reporting systems need to be in place for regional/national budget (APBD) finance integration. In order for financial results to be expedited and in compliance with financial requirements, coordination by the Steering Committee and Provincial Management Team must be in place. Even a well-designed regulatory framework can be ineffectual in achieving its goals if it is not regularly monitored or evaluated.

In terms of financing education, public investment must be for access as well as for quantified improvements in quality. Hanushek (2016) explained that more public expenditure in itself does not necessarily lead to improvement in learning outcomes unless public funds are effectively channeled for productive inputs such as quality teachers and resources. Research studies showed that removing tuition fees does not necessarily lead to improvement in student outcomes, although it does help in enrollment (Glewwe et al., 2011). In order for financial expenditure to lead to quantified improvements in education, financial governance in Banten strategy must include monitoring for results (OECD, 2019).

The Free Education Policy's implementation

Article 31 of the 1945 Indonesian Constitution, which guarantees the right to education for every citizen, is the intellectual foundation of the concept of free education in Indonesia. The Sustainable Development Goals and the international education framework support the notion of free and compulsory education on a global scale (UNESCO, 2015). The moral and

legal justification for the Banten government's free education program can be seen at the normative level; however, administrative capacity is required to turn the ideals into reality.

According to public policy implementation theory, the socio-political setting, goal specificity, and coordination of actors are all essential for effective implementation to take place (Sabatier, 1986; Matland, 1995). There may be issues of administrative and technical problems in overlapping powers between district and provincial governments in decentralized systems of governance. There may also be issues of coordination in decentralized systems of governance, as suggested by Faguet (2014), in case of unclear institutional roles. In Banten, coordination between provincial and school-level officials is vital in addressing issues of irregularities in targeting beneficiaries and delivery of budgets.

It is found that free secondary education plans can increase enrollment and participation rates significantly, and this is also proved by empirical data in various contexts (Barrera-Osorio et al., 2011; Lucas & Mbiti, 2012). But it is also found that rapid increases in enrollment can have a negative impact on the quality of education in the absence of a corresponding increase in the number of instructors, classrooms, and educational resources (Bold et al., 2017). Thus, the findings emphasize the necessity to find a balance between the two issues. To prevent a possible drop in the quality of teaching, Banten finds it is essential to maintain the teacher-student ratios, improve vocational resources, and strengthen management systems.

Free Education and Vocational Education Quality Are Correlated

However, when it comes to assisting students in entering the workforce as well as promoting economic growth at the regional level, vocational education plays a critical role. According to various international studies, finance methods, industry standards, as well as a competency-based curriculum, all need to be aligned in order to create a strong vocational education system (Eichhorst et al., 2015; OECD, 2010). In the case of free education funding, this measure could potentially increase the opportunities of economically disadvantaged children entering the workforce, as this measure could potentially reduce dropout rates as well as increase school attendance. According to various studies, financial aid has a positive effect on school retention (Baird et al., 2016). However, school leadership, teacher competence, as well as teaching methods, are all important factors in enhancing better learning outcomes (Creemers & Kyriakides, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2008).

Consistent investments in secondary and vocational education yield substantial long-run economic benefits when assessed through the human capital approach, as emphasized in the study by Psacharopoulos and Patrinos (2018). In this regard, the free education program in

Banten is seen to have the potential not only to increase social equity in the region, but also to increase the productivity and competitiveness in the region. However, the effectiveness of this program needs to be constantly monitored in order to address the challenges in this regard (OECD, 2019; World Bank, 2018). To ensure that access is complemented by substantial improvements in the outcomes in vocational education, it will be vital to develop systems and instruments for performance and quality assurance.

CONCLUSION

An important institutional marker in formally advancing free education in all public secondary schools, public vocational schools, and public special needs schools in Banten Province has been achieved with the issuance of Banten Governor Regulation No. 52 of 2020 (Banten Province, 2020). Given its importance in enhancing social mobility and regional competitiveness, it is also noteworthy that the Banten provincial administration has consistently placed education as one of the key pillars in human resource development in the region since 2018. The regulatory instrument may be seen as part of a larger governmental agenda in advancing educational opportunities, aside from providing legal certainty in operational and budgetary aspects of administration.

In essence, therefore, the free education policy was underpinned by a solid foundation of constitutional, philosophical, and legal underpinnings, which recognized education as a public good as well as a fundamental right. The argument that access leads to increased enrollments, decreased dropout rates, and equity, particularly for those from disadvantaged economic groups, is supported by empirical evidence from home and abroad. However, as a stand-alone strategy, access does not automatically translate to performance gains, which calls for the incorporation of supporting elements that are vital in maximizing the potential of eliminating tuition fees, which are likely to be limited by systemic inefficiencies or constraints.

Thus, the integrity of governance and the successful implementation of policies will be the link between the support for free education and the advancement of the quality of education. In order to ensure that quantified gains in learning and graduate competence are realized from public financing, the importance of financial transparency, performance indicators, and monitoring and evaluation will be critical. In order to prevent fragmentation and duplication of efforts, it will be critical to enhance coordination between supervisory agencies, schools, and local governments. The long-term viability and effectiveness of Banten's free education policy will be hinged on the development of a strong system of

quality assurance that can link access to quantified gains in learning and the development of human resources in the region.

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