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Indonesia's RSBI Project: Looking Back and Lesson Learnt

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Abstract

At the beginning of the 2000s, Indonesia, a developing country with one of the largest populations in the world, instituted a series of reforms in its education practices; one of them was the decentralization policy. A part of this policy was education internationalization through the inclusion and enforcement of the international-standard schools pilot project known as *Rintisan Sekolah Bertaraf Internasional* (RSBI) project. Nevertheless, the government discontinued the initiative in 2013 as a result of some disapproval of its implementation. This paper aims to address how the RSBI project diverged from social justice values in a democratic society. By analysing the influence of globalization on educational policies and their implications, it elaborates on how the project led to an increase in social inequality and contributed to the loss of national identity.

Keywords: RSBI, Education Internationalization, Globalization, Education Policy Reforms, Social Justice

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Davies and Guppy (2018) claim that formal education has moved to the centre stage of Canadian social life over the past centuries; they call it a “schooled society” (p. 2). Despite the fact that Canada and Indonesia are different in many aspects, the trend toward the importance of formal education can also be observed in the latter country. It shows how schooling has been increasingly inextricable from people's lives everywhere. Therefore, it is not an exaggerated statement that, in the current order of the world, there is not a single country that does not strive to raise the standard of formal education among its population. Obviously, this notion cannot be dissociated from the profound question of what the purpose(s) of education is, which provides direction to the schooling process and, more importantly, forms the bedrock of educational policy reforms. In the eyes of John Dewey, a prominent figure in the progressive movement, education is a means for extending and reforming the democracy of social life (Flinders & Thornton, 2022). According to Bobbitt (2022), education must provide both knowledge and proficiency that children need for their distinctive occupational class futures in the pursuit of social efficiency. In addition to those views, Hattie and Larsen (2020) believe that education purposes have to be plural, contending that education does not have an overarching visionary objective or a mandatory and permanent rationale. However, they argue that there is a concept at the core of education known as *bildung* or self-cultivation (Hattie & Larsen, 2020, p. 219).

Indonesia is a developing country with the fourth largest population globally. As noted by Kristiansen and Pratikno (2006), following the 1998 financial crisis, the central government faced a pressing need to cut public expenditure, including education, and thus encourage the lower government and the people to take on more responsibility. Consequently, the involvement of the private sector in education has gradually gained importance, marking the emergence of the neoliberal project in the country's education system. It has become increasingly apparent since 2001, when Indonesia instituted a series of reforms in its education practices, including the decentralization policy (World Bank, 2020). A part of this decentralization policy was education internationalization through the inclusion and enforcement of the international standard school pilot project, known as *Rintisan Sekolah Bertaraf Internasional* (RSBI). It is in accordance with Act No. 20/2003 on the National Education System, "The government and local government organize at least a unit of education at all levels of education to be developed further as a unit having international-standard education" (Ministry of State Secretariat, 2003). With this paradigm, at least one school in each district should be prepared to transform into an international-standard school, namely *Sekolah Bertaraf Internasional* (SBI), with central government and local government support.

The Indonesian government believes that improving human resources through quality education by initiating the RSBI project is paramount to facing the challenges of globalization (Akuntono, 2012). However, Muchlas Suseno, a former facilitator of the RSBI project said that its implementation veered from its initial objective to provide a high-quality education for Indonesian citizens (Mappiasse, 2014). He further argued that schools had become commercially viable products because they promoted international education agencies and corporations to achieve international standard labels. In addition to using the government's allocated budget, the SBI needed other funds derived from tuition fees. Therefore, only students from upper-middle-class families could attend the SBI, resulting in discrimination in education and social segregation. Another critique emphasized that English as the mandatory language of instruction at the SBIs could potentially undermine national identity (Daud, 2013). In response to these concerns, many non-governmental and civic organizations concurred that the RSBI project is contrary to the spirit of the 1945 Constitution. Eventually, the government decided to officially terminate the project on January 8, 2013.

1.2 Research Questions

This paper evaluates the RSBI policy implemented by the Indonesian government two decades ago. It delves into the lessons that can be learnt from this policy because turning education into a competition is one of the blatant influences of neoliberal ideology. The research question is: How does the implementation of the RSBI Project diverge from the social justice values of a democratic society? Therefore, an essential topic of discussion is the extent to which Indonesia's education internationalization policy, as implemented through the RSBI Project, contradicts social justice values.

This paper is structured around two sub-questions in order to provide further detail, as follows:

1.2.1 *How did the RSBI project lead to inequality in education?*

1.2.2 *How did the RSBI project contribute to undermining national identity?*

1.3 Theoretical Lens

The paper follows the theories that are derived primarily from those of scholars who contribute to *Bridging Educational Leadership*, *Curriculum Theory*, and *Didactic: Non-affirmative Theory of Education* to analyze the result of its literature review. In his forewords, Pinar (2017) examines that in the process of redefining the relationship between school and society, Uljens and Ylimaki challenge the terms of the neoliberal by invoking them by saying that "education is preparing students for the existing, but it does so by problematizing that world" (p. v). He further argues that, naturally, the world is globalized, but globalization is understood not only in terms of standardization, quantification, and homogenization but also in terms of localization and cosmopolitanism (Pinar, 2017). Thus, in the literature review and analysis, the paper highlights globalization and other aspects that are closely linked to it, one of which is neoliberalism.

Throughout this paper, the arguments presented above will guide in answering the research questions. Although the context in the book is closer to the US and North America, the author believes there is a significant relationship between the theories offered for related research on education policy in non-Western countries.

1.4 Context

Located in Southeast Asia, Indonesia is a developing country with an estimated population of over 240 million. It is also a vast and diverse country comprising more than a thousand archipelagos. In general, its educational system is composed of four different levels: primary (grades 1 to 6), junior secondary (grades 7 to 9), senior secondary (grades 10 to 12), and higher education. The World Bank (2020) reports that there are 3.3 million teachers in this education system who are working to educate 53.1 million students from primary level to secondary level. To provide equal education opportunities for all, since 1984, Indonesia had initiated a six-year compulsory education for the primary level (age 7-12), after which, in 1994, it was expanded to nine-year compulsory education for junior secondary level (age 15). To date, the government has been confronted with multiple challenges within economic, geographic, and socio-cultural contexts in its efforts to implement the twelve-year compulsory education. The complexity of its schooling system arises not only from the country's demographics but also the fact that it is administered by two different ministers, namely the Ministry of Education and Culture, Research and Technology (MoECRT) and the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA).

The MoECRT is responsible for managing and supervising the conduct of education in public and private educational institutions. Public schools are typically common schools, whereas private schools are both religious-based and secular. In public schools, the government controls most of the funding, regulations, and standards; contrastively, the latter is established and managed by private sectors that have more flexible regulations. The MoRA is in charge of Islamic religious schools (*madrasah*) and Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*). *Madrasah* is predominantly privately owned, while all *pesantren* are entirely private. According to Bangay (2005), one of the most notable characteristics of Indonesian educational institutions run by private is their diversity. Several of them are small, family-run foundations operating on a limited budget and managing a single school; others have solid financial support that handles a wide range of schools and businesses.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Education and Globalization

Discussion regarding the connection between globalization and education has drawn much attention in recent decades. According to Giddens (1990), globalization strengthens global social relations so that events that happen many miles away impact local occurrences and vice versa. Haan (2012, as cited in Lopez, 2015, p. 172) mentions that while globalization has resulted in an explosion in information resources, it has also made people become members of multiple overlapping communities; thus, people reside in highly diverse environments in terms of language, information flow, and cultural practices. In the view of Uljens and Ylimaki (2017), globalization manifests itself in several ways, not the least of which are technological advancements and world economic interdependence. In education, in particular, globalization can present itself as cosmopolitanism, manifested through new national, international, and transnational governance practices, regulations, and procedures (Uljens & Ylimaki, 2017). Therefore, they conclude that schools today also find themselves operating in constantly changing environments on a national and global scale. With the process of globalization comes the inevitable restructuring of a country's roles, which poses significant issues for its curriculum development, educational evaluation, policymaking, leadership, and teaching (Uljens & Ylimaki, 2017).

Examining a specific case may help to illustrate globalization and its effects on education. However, it is essential to acknowledge that the influence of globalization is varied and cannot be uniformly compared across different countries. In their study, Forsberg et al. (2017) provide an illustrative understanding of Sweden's vertical and horizontal shifts over the last two decades, depicting globalization that transpires in the education system. Vertically, globalization of education manifests itself in decentralization, deregulation, policy transfer, and involvement in programs established by international organizations such as the European Union (EU) and the

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Forsberg et al., 2017). On the horizontal level, many school suppliers can be identified, including private companies or non-profit organizations that operate independent schools in addition to schools that the local governments manage (Forsberg et al., 2017).

Young et al. (2014) state that an educational policy refers to a broad guideline that influences decisions or actions that significantly impact the daily environment of teaching and learning in schools. Furthermore, Uljens and Ylimaki (2017) argue that today's educational policy research has successfully drawn attention to the fact that neoliberal politics is one of the driving factors underpinning globalization. According to neoliberal rationale, one of the most critical roles of governments is to encourage market trends (Brown, 2006; Olmedo & Wilkins, 2017, as cited in Winton, 2019, p. 9). In response to this notion, Anderson (2009, as cited in Uljens & Ylimaki, 2017, p. 38) examines schools from a critical educational standpoint as "sites of struggle over material and cultural resources and ideological commitments." Meanwhile, Winton (2019) claims that as a substitute for directly providing social services, governments encourage the participation of the private sector in public program delivery and place greater responsibility on individuals to achieve social and economic goals.

2.2 RSBI Project: An Overview

The previous section has explicitly demonstrated how powerfully the neoliberal drive has impacted educational policy within and between countries. One of the transformations may be noticed from the evident influence of transnational agencies, particularly the OECD, in global education over the previous two decades (Hopman, 2008, as cited in Moos, 2017, P. 153). In the context of Indonesia, the study conducted by Ma'arif (2011) reveals how the government invests in quality education to produce human resources that are adaptive, productive, innovative, and competitive by initiating a decentralization policy. Bray (1996) and Hasbullah (2007) state that decentralization, in the context of the country's education and schooling system, refers to the transfer of decision-making authority from the central government to local governments for the betterment of educational outcomes (as cited in Winardi, 2017, p. 81). This decentralization policy includes mandating internationalization in education across districts through the RSBI project.

The RSBI project is a basis for planning and managing the education internationalization policy across Indonesia. Act No. 17/2010 on the Education Management and Administration states: "International-standard education is education that meets the national-standard education and is enriched with developed countries" (Ministry of Laws and Human Rights Affairs, 2010, p. 8). Therefore, international-standard schools can be defined as schools that have fulfilled the national-standard education and additional components taken from the developed countries, notably the OECD. According to Act No. 19/2005 on the National Standard Education, the national-standard education consists of (1) content/curriculum; (2) process; (3) graduate competency; (4) assessment; (5) teachers and education personnel; (6) facilities and infrastructure; (7) management; and (8) finance (Ministry of Laws and Human Right Affairs, 2005). As a result, in order to transform into international-standard education, schools must meet additional requirements from developed countries; two of them are the use of English as a mandatory language of instruction and an OECD-approved curriculum (Balitbang, 2013).

3. Analysis and Discussion

It is interesting to look into the current trend of neoliberal politics and how it has been perceived and translated into national policies across the world (Antunes 2006; Lawn & Lingard 2002, as cited in Moos, 2017, p. 153). The trend can also be seen in how the government initiated a decentralization policy in education in Indonesia. In addition to delegating responsibility for education management to local governments, the government mandates each district to participate in the RSBI project, developing at least one national-standard school into an international-standard school. Suyanto, the former director-general of primary and secondary education at the MoEC, explained that the project aims to produce students who are highly competitive and exceed national education standards (Akuntono, 2012). Since 2007, international-standard schools steadily expanded, reaching 1,305 in 2011, including 239 elementary levels and more than 1,000 secondary levels (Dharmaningtias, 2013). The following section evaluates the perils of the RSBI project in a developing country from the lens of social justice education.

3.1 Education in the Marketplace and Inequality

According to Yemini (2017), global economy demands play a significant role in the increased policies to advance students' 21st-century abilities or education for global competence. As a result, it has been frequent how educational policy is subordinated to commercial thinking. In terms of funding, Subkhkhan (2011) highlights that the RSBI project is sponsored by 50% funding from the central government, which varies for each level, ranging from IDR 300 to 600 million, while the local governments must bear the remaining 50% of the cost. Moreover, international-standard schools are granted the authority to charge fees to parents to support operations and infrastructure (Mudzakkir, 2016). In other words, besides using the government's allocated budget, these schools typically need additional funds derived from parents' financial support, ranging from IDR 6 to 15 million per student (Dharmaningtias, 2013). Therefore, only children from upper-middle-class families could study at these schools, resulting in social inequality.

On the one hand, international labeling has piqued the interest of many upper-middle-class parents in sending their children to SBI (Subkhkhan, 2011). This enthusiasm is encouraged by one of the RSBI project's objectives, which is to enable students to win international competitions in various subjects such as science, mathematics, technology, arts, and sports (Dharmaningtias, 2013). In connection with this, Knapp and Hopmann (2017) state that considerable research indicates that the greater the emphasis placed on academic achievement as a primary variable in school systems, the more pressure is placed on disadvantaged students, and the more social segregation is promoted in the process. Additionally, they argue that the more energy students devote to achievement competition in primary areas, the less they can devote to other subject areas because "fewer resources are left for other educational issues such as social activities or civic engagement" (Knapp & Hopmann, 2017, p. 236). As a matter of course, this is in opposition to the objective of education as a way of promoting social change, or what Rousseau (1762, as cited in Uljens & Ylimaki, 2017, p. 47) refers to as "social transformation." Education, in this sense, should foster the development of a new ideal that does not yet exist. In other words, education must contribute to a more socially just future by instilling social justice values in the future youth of the nation.

On the other hand, the flagship teaching and learning programs of the SBI are designed to meet the needs of their students' career paths and academic success. As many low-quality public or private schools and other types of educational institutions (e.g., *madrasah* and *pesantren*) are unable to provide upper-middle-class parents with what they anticipate, the emergence of SBI is the remedy to their concerns. Thus, they must treat it as a severe matter. On the subject of parents and students being consumers, Whitty, Power, and Halpin (1998, as cited in Hill & Kumar, 2009, p. 15) find that one of the consequences of marker-driven education is boosting "parental choice" in schools. This preference must be paid accordingly by them at a high price, which compensates for the school's programs and facilities. Placing schooling as a commodity, or what Hirtt (2004) refers to as "merchandization" (p. 442), undermines the values of education. Instead of being a means for achieving social justice, these schools often constitute inequalities by giving more privileges to the rich. A financial resource is unquestionably a source of class privilege; children of families with more wealth have access to benefits and resources unavailable to those with less financial resources, and vice versa.

Based on the above arguments, the relationship between schooling and social inequality or schooling and social reproduction is apparent. Bowles and Gintis (2011) highlight that disparities in financial resources exacerbate disparities in schooling social relationships. Hirtt (2009) also believes that one of the four core roles of education in a capitalist world is social reproduction. By paying attention to the common trends, after completing secondary school, it is predicted that the more advantaged students have an opportunity to pursue higher education before finally returning to their social class. The disadvantaged children from lower-class families are reversed. This situation makes them unable to move from the social class they are raised in. This condition proves how schooling is legitimately an agent of social reproduction.

3.2 National Identity at Risk

According to Act No. 78/2009, one of the requirements for a school to become an SBI is to use English as the mandatory language of instruction (Mudzakkir, 2016). Besides using the developed national curriculum, these

schools must also be enriched with a global standard curriculum from the OECD, such as the Cambridge Curriculum and International Bachelorette. In connection with this, Knapp and Hopmann (2017) examine that over the previous 30 years, the tendency to import the European curriculum system, where such product control and dealing with evaluation in the form of student test results, is more widespread. Starting at this point, the connection between Westernizing education within the RSBI project and neocolonialism is obvious. According to Durokifa and Ijeoma (2018), neocolonialism can be referred to as “an indirect form of control by a superpower through cultural and economic means” (p. 356). However, in terms of education, it might be effective in overt and covert ways, depending on the context. Levitan (2018), in his collaborative ethnographic research examining the marginalized students’ voices in the Peruvian Andes, mentions that students’ intention to become professional elite and devalue their indigenous culture reflects the influence of neo-colonialism. In addition, Altbach (1995) notes that foreign technical consultants on education problems and the maintenance of foreign administrative models and curriculum patterns for schools are also examples of neocolonialism (as cited in Anwaruddin, 2014, p. 144).

From the examples of neocolonialism presented above, we can see how the RSBI project somehow severely restricts Indonesia’s ability to set its educational curriculum, unconsciously and consciously putting the country at a competitive disadvantage. The colonial concept is still embedded in Indonesia’s education policy practices even after it was independent of European colonization many decades ago. As Akena (2012) points out, the literary form of Western knowledge is more than just a functional link between society and individuals; it also carries ulterior motives that may be disparaging and colonizing non-Western ways of thinking. This notion is reinforced by Dei (2008, as cited in Akena, 2012, p. 601), that European and American educational systems, without a doubt, contributed to the establishment and maintenance of the colonizing knowledge system, which is marked by glaring disparities and inequities.

Regarding English as the language of instruction in SBI, Tollefson (2000, as cited in Pennycook, 2009, p. 17) emphasizes some issues about it by pointing out a paradox. On the one hand, some people regard English as meeting the imagined requirement for a single universal communication language; people all over the world connect directly to science, technology, education, employment, and mass culture. On the other hand, the spread of English presents a formidable barrier to education, employment, and other activities requiring English proficiency. Further, Pennycook (2009) mentions that the students who learn and speak English are exposed to the imaginings of Orientalism. Therefore, the cultural constructions of Orientalism are the cultures and characteristics of students who study and speak English. In contrast, the cultural constructions of Occidentalism are the virtues and glories of the West from where the English came (Pennycook, 2009). The colonial authority may not be the direct cause of the above scenario. However, the adoption of the Eurocentric curriculum models and the use of English that characterize the SBI can be seen as an unconscious attempt to perpetuate Western domination through the production and reproduction between teachers and students in the teaching and learning process.

4. Conclusion

As a developing country, Indonesia views globalization as a challenge and an opportunity for its development. In its context, it can be said that its education policy is developed to directly contribute to the country’s economic boost in the future. Bascia and Fredua-Kwarteng (2008), in *Reducing Class Size: Promises and Perils*, underline the tendency of various stakeholders to reckon that one single reform of class size reduction established in several Canadian and North American regions can make a total contribution to education and enthusiasm which they refer to as “magical thinking” (p. 31). Likewise, pertinent to the RSBI project, although the context is different, the argument on how an educational policy developed without carefully considering all relevant factors might have negative consequences that oppose social justice values. The perils associated with its implementation include increasing inequality in education and instilling in students the belief that Western knowledge is superior in dealing with globalization demands.

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