

School zoning and equal education access in Indonesia

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Article Info

Article history:

Received Apr 14, 2022

Revised Dec 18, 2022

Accepted Jan 15, 2023

Keywords:

Education Indonesia

Equal education

School zoning system

Student admission

ABSTRACT

The implementation of the school zoning policy in the student admission system of the lower secondary schools since 2017 aims to promote equal educational access for all pupils in Indonesia. The new policy has been constantly under scrutiny, confusing the grounds, particularly for parents whose kids failed to get admitted. Based on a qualitative study in the typical Indonesian regency of Temanggung, Central Java, the article underscores that the geographical based of school zoning system might have never assured equal education access for all pupils as the available seats in all state-owned public schools combined do not meet the number of prospectus students in the regency per annum. Moreover, there are some different understandings among government officials, particularly regent educational officers, schools' principals, and teachers, regarding the primary goals of the policy as well as attention to its long-term unintended impacts. Under this zoned student admission system, some traditionally reputable and favorite state-owned public schools have to admit students with diverse academic motivation and performance, including the lower one, which eventually leads them to struggle to maintain academic quality and reputation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The school zoning policies have become one of the favorable efforts to promote equal access to education for pupils in various countries in the last decades. The policies have been intended to regulate student admission by prioritizing home-to-school proximity based on geographical distance. The school zoning system is also known as a catchment school which refers to the political boundaries set at the location based on the proximity to the place of residence [1]. It was first implemented in the United States in 1954 to eliminate racial segregation in obtaining basic education for all pupils [2]. Several other countries, including the United Kingdom and Australia, have successfully implemented this school zoning policy to reduce racial, ethnic, and social class segregation for pupils in obtaining knowledge. These countries have proved this to fulfil the right to education without racial segregation.

The zoning policy was originally formed to eliminate segregation between white and black races. Over time the school zoning system was adopted to promote a more profound goal namely to ensure the equal education access for all youths in the population. As is the case in Adamawa State, it had initially problems with the persistent socio-economic segregation between families which caused educational inequality; which has been later reduced with the implementation of the school zoning policy by successfully creating an integrated school environment and further limit the existing socio-economic and religious

differences [3]. While in other countries New Zealand, the policy is considered a success in reducing not only the racial-based unequal access to education but also to leverage urbanization, poverty, and other social problems in the country [4].

However, to promote equitable access to primary and secondary education, the implementation of the school zoning policies faces challenges, hindrances, or unintended consequences. As shown in the US, the school zoning policy has unexpectedly resulted in the increasing values of home markets in areas near the considered good and favorite schools [5]. As insisted by Collins, the US's school zoning policy positively impacts students' academic achievement and creates a new problem by increasing house prices by 10% in areas adjacent to preferred schools [6]. The fact has eventually had negative consequences in perpetuating social segregation and a vicious cycle of poverty. People who are economically better off, predominantly the Whites, live in affluent neighborhoods close to relatively good schools. In contrast, Black people who are economically disadvantaged tend to live in deprived areas close to relatively poor-quality schools [5]. Similar conditions also occur in Australia, where people with good economic backgrounds will gather to live in school areas that have good or favorite quality [7]. If pursued without careful consideration, the school zoning policies might maintain social-economic segregation and further limit the social mobility of the lower-middle class members of society.

While in France, the implementation of school zoning policy has faced rather different challenges caused by more complex and heterogeneous social, ethnic, and religious differences, particularly after the arrival of people from its former colonies. Here, the school zoning regulation has been in place for years to ensure equal access to education for all pupils to reduce social inequality and foster further social integration, particularly for people of color. As a result, the zoned public schools tend to have students with super heterogeneous backgrounds in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, and social class, which is caused problems for the principals and teachers to manage and pursue their jobs to provide a better quality of education. This has encouraged parents with better economic status to send their kids to private schools as assumed to be less heterogeneous and better managed [8] though partially leading to another form of social segregation in the country. Likewise, in Estonia, the implementation of the school zoning policy might not have eventually provided equal access to education for young people due to the prevalence of social-economic inequality throughout the country. Many parents from the lowest social class have been unable to support their kids to go to school because they have no money to pay tuition fees or other expenses, including transportation [9]. It could be understood that the school zoning policy might not automatically promote more open and equal access to education due to other obstacles and internal challenges within the country.

In Indonesia, the school zoning policy could be considered new as just introduced and implemented in the last 2-3 years, starting from the 2018-2019 academic year for the primary and secondary levels. In the first year, the zoning policy was still trialed in a limited area and faced several challenges due to limited socialization, resulting in misunderstandings between students and parents. Based on some recent studies, the pros and cons of the school zoning policy have occurred both in the design and implementation, particularly as it was sudden and largely based on the geographical location of the schools without considering the persistent unequal quality between schools in the regions. There are disparities in terms of access, quality, relevance, and competitiveness between developed and developing schools [10]. As a result, to ensure their kids receive good and qualified education, parents have opted to fake or manipulate their home addresses close enough to some good, better supported, and considered favorite schools to comply with the rule and get accepted [10]. Another problem in implementing the policy is related to the available support from other sectors, for example, public transportation. Due to the limited public transport for students, it was reported that students in Gresik, East Java, were unable to go to the designated schools even though they had been admitted based on the new school zoning policy in the area [11].

Considering the rather limited available studies in the field, the article further investigates the official design and implementation of the school zoning policy in a typical regency in Indonesia. Conducted in Temanggung, Central Java, Indonesia, the study evaluates the applicability of zoning policy and understanding different perceptions and opinions of the actors involved, including government officials in the education office, school principals, teachers, and parents. The study intends to provide a critical and in-depth investigation of the weaknesses and shortcomings of school zoning policy and the various misunderstandings that accompany the effort to promote the noble goal of realizing equal access and improving the quality of education in Indonesia.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The study has been conducted by employing a qualitative research method to investigate complex and delicate data linked to the design and implementation of the school zoning policy in Temanggung, Central Java, Indonesia [12]. Throughout the study, we have collected and analyzed central, regional, and regent government regulations related to the policy, documents, and archives from schools on the

implementation of the policy, including records of student admissions during the period. To elaborate further finding, we also interviewed six staff of the regent educational office who are in charge of the implementation of the policy; added with interviews involved 16 principals and teachers from four urban-located in the city of Temanggung and two rural-based schools in the district of Gemawang and about 25 parents of students in those schools. After the field research was finished, the study elaborated the main finding that revolves around the examination of the implementation of the school zoning policy to ensure equal educational access for pupils in the district and the understanding amongst stakeholders involved/affected by the policy.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study presents two prominent findings on how the school zoning policy has been carried out by the state-owned lower secondary schools in the regency of Temanggung, Central Java, in the 2019-2020 academic year. First, the school zoning policy has been designed and implemented limitedly on the basis of the geographical proximity of the schools as guided by the national and regional regulations. Though covering the whole regency, implementing the school zoning policy in this model might not eventually be aligned to ensure equal educational access for pupils in the regency due to some neglected demographic facts. Second, there are different and even conflicting interests and understandings about the school zoning policy to promote equal educational access for students either from the staff of the regent educational office, school principals, teachers, and parents of students. The two findings are elaborated on in the following presentation.

3.1. Geographical bias in the school zoning system

The implementation of school zoning policy in Temanggung has been regulated under the regent educational act (Perkadis) number 420/110 of 2019 referred to the National Education and Culture Ministry Act (Permendikbud) number 14 of 2018. In this case, the school zone system of the 2019-2020 student admission for the state-owned lower secondary schools was designed based on a radius of 6 kilometers surrounding the location of schools regardless of urban/rural differences. In other words, each school is addressed to cover or admit all prospectus students living around 6 kilometers. It was understood that all prospectus students living in all areas within Temanggung would be covered or admitted to the designated schools of their zone.

Based on the official data of the regent educational office and the location of schools around Temanggung, we have drawn an illustrated map of the school zoning coverage of the whole regent, in which, as assumed, the whole area of the regency is covered under the 6 kilometers radius of the school zoning policy as presented in Figure 1. It could be said that all prospectus students of the regency, particularly during the 2019-2020 academic year, would be automatically admitted to the designated schools according to the zone they are living without any problems whatsoever. In other words, those prospectus students are guaranteed seats in the designated zoned schools. Realizing education in each region regardless of social background, gender, and race [13] means the effort to promote equal educational access for all students has been on the right track, particularly in this regency.

However, during the field study, we have documented complaints, disappointment, and confusion shown by parents who found out that their kids failed to get seats in the designated schools even though they live in the zone. Similar problems in implementing the school zoning policy in the country are reported in previous research [10], [11]. Another problem is the housing gap, the distribution of school quality is still not resolved in various regions [14]. Then we found out that the problem was lied on the school zoning policy's very design as only based on the geographical proximity of the school coverage but not considering the demographic density of prospectus students in the district area. Based on the official data released by the regent educational office, 44 state-owned lower secondary schools spread across 20 districts in Temanggung offer 6,605 seats for new students in the 2019-2020 academic year compared to 9,913 prospectus students just finishing their primary schools. As shown in the Table 1, it indicated that even without the school zoning policy in place, 3,308 prospectus students would not get any seats in the state-owned lower secondary schools in this regency, thus looking for alternative private schools.

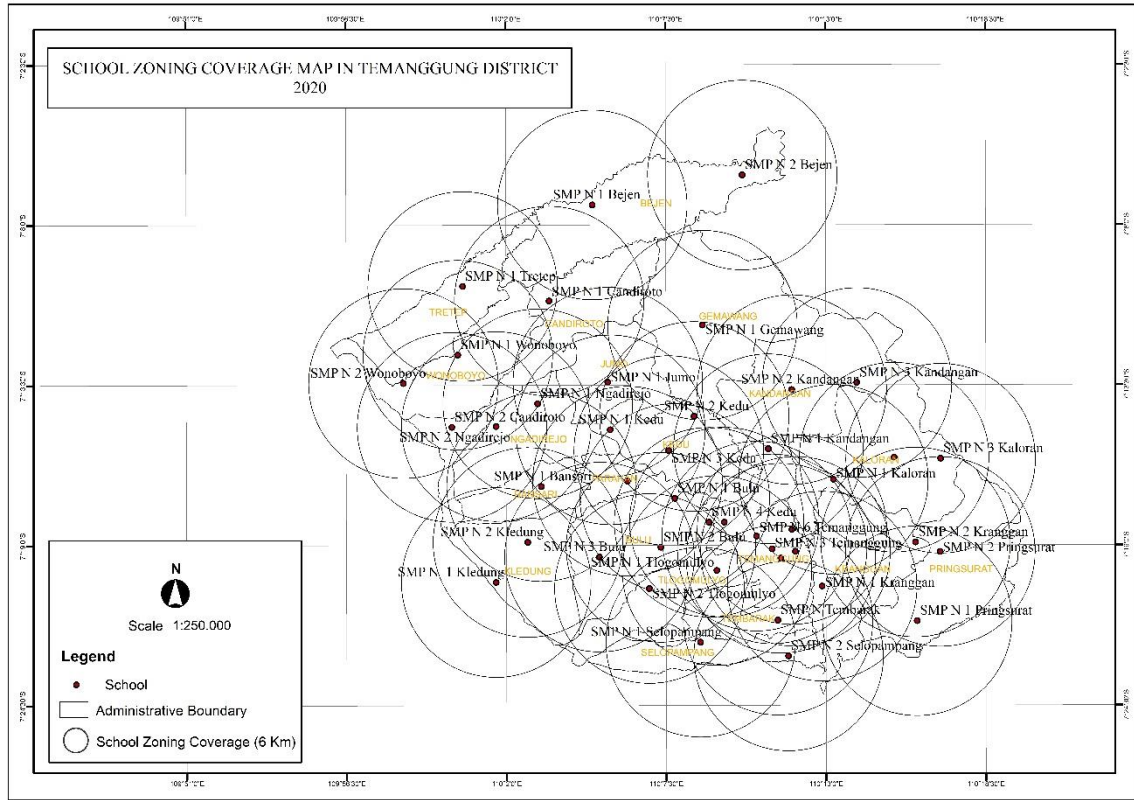


Figure 1. School zoning coverage map in Temanggung regency 2020

Table 1. The comparison between the number of seats available for new students and the number of prospectus students in Temanggung in the 2019-2020 academic year

District	Number of student capacity	Number of prospectus students	Discrepancy
Parakan	224	687	Over 463
Bulu	365	667	Over 302
Temanggung	1217	1448	Over 231
Tembarak	189	313	Over 124
Kranggan	289	632	Over 343
Pringsurat	449	576	Over 127
Kaloran	330	448	Over 118
Kandangan	434	506	Over 72
Kedu	548	575	Over 27
Ngadirejo	469	881	Over 412
Jumo	222	327	Over 105
Candiroto	269	385	Over 116
Tretep	85	249	Over 164
Kledung	248	390	Over 142
Bansari	204	290	Over 86
Tlogomulyo	300	322	Over 22
Selopampang	166	228	Over 62
Gemawang	222	418	Over 196
Bejen	214	238	Over 24
Wonoboyo	161	333	Over 172
Total number of students	6605	9913	Over 3.308

However, the inherent discrepancy between student capacity and the number of prospectus students in 44 state-owned secondary public schools is not the exclusive story. Based on the fieldwork data, it must be noted that it does not mean that all those schools have to reject groups of incoming students, as some are struggling to get a sufficient number of them. The case has been largely faced by schools that are located in the suburb where the school zones are geographically overlapped. Schools with close geographical proximity will fight for prospectus students with a zero-sum game-like result. This is exemplified by the condition faced by SMP Negeri 5 of Temanggung. The school is located on the outskirts of the city, where its zoning

coverage overlaps with four other schools in the same district. Since the four other schools have been established for years and had better academic and non-academic reputations, SMP Negeri 5 of Temanggung has fallen short of incoming students in the 2019-20 academic year. In contrast, the two state-owned public schools of Gemawang in the rural area of the regency have been overflowed by numbers of incoming students beyond their admission capacity, thus forced to reject almost half of them.

The problems and complexities that emerged in implementing the school zoning system in Temanggung are not unnoticed by regency education officials. They have been aware that there are many shorts of capacity of the state-owned public schools to the numbers of incoming students and the fact that some schools would struggle while others had to reject due to different demographic densities of each district. According to them, the educational office has provided real-time information on the student admission to all schools during the events; and advised parents to follow in sending their kids to appropriate schools in the zones. However, it has been admitted that many prospectus students would be failed to get seats in the schools of their zones and eventually forced them to enroll in private schools nearby for an alternative. Limited access to private credit to finance secondary education hinders equal opportunity in achieving learning outcomes [15]. As the government has allocated funds to finance students' fees only in state-owned, parents will have different economic burdens. However, the existing gaps in overall educational qualities as well as supports and facilities between state-owned and private schools, particularly in the typical Indonesian regencies like Temanggung, mean that the former is better and preferable.

The findings have indicated that the same design formula of the school zoning policy, i.e., based only on the geographical coverage without considering the demographic density of population as well as the comparative balance number of the school admission seats and prospectus students in the zone, might have achieved the primary goal of promoting the equal educational access for all pupils. Otherwise, for some cases, as exemplified in SMP Negeri 5 of Temanggung and two other lower secondary state-owned public schools of Gemawang, have tended to prolong unjust practices in the schooling practices in the regency. However, it must be noted that the link between the implementation of the school zoning policies and the goals to provide equal educational access for students is not always in a straight line. Based on the results of research, zoning policies in Sweden, Finland, and Estonia show that zoning policies have not been able to realize equitable education [9].

The phenomenon that occurs in these three countries, where the student admission system is based on the school environment and geographical coverage for certain kilometers, creates further unequal practices based on the different socio-economic backgrounds of families. As shown in Estonia, where the level of social inequality has been quite high, this form of school zoning policy has encouraged affluent families to live in the residential neighborhood closed to their favorite schools and forced the others to leave for somewhere else [9]. Similar patterns have also shown in Sweden [16] and France [8] in which the policy has not eventually guaranteed the equal access to basic and secondary levels of education. Moreover, as in France, the policy tends to lead to a decline in school education quality as the management has to deal with students' unprecedented ethno-racial and socio-economic backgrounds [8].

3.2. Conflicting interests amongst stakeholders

Another issue to get attention in implementing the school zoning policy, as found in Temanggung, has been linked to stakeholders' different awareness and understandings, namely government educational officers, school principals, teachers, and parents. The implementation of democratic education ideally by increasing the participation of various stakeholders, including parents and the community [17]. The policy has meant differently for them as not fully imbued with the official goals to ensure equal educational access for pupils in the regency. Table 2 illustrates their diverse opinions on the policy could not be understood without linking them to different interests and motives, which are somehow conflicting and contradicting.

Aside from its official-and-normative goals, however, the school zoning policy has been presumed to potentially change the structured configuration of the overall lower secondary schools of the regency [18]. For years, the state-owned public schools had been privileged with better infrastructures, facilities, government funds, and state-employed teachers with recommended qualifications and the achievement-based student admission system. The quality of those schools had been largely assured while their students share similar motivation, support from families, and levels of above-average academic performance. These eventually brought local prides for the regency, especially the educational offices. Some students excel in academic/non-academic competitions at local, regional, or national levels, and some graduates can pursue their academic careers at reputable high schools/universities. The emerged nuance of the policy's long-term negative impacts, particularly on the potentially declining level of the education quality of some traditionally favorite and reputable state-owned public schools of the regency, has to get some attention. The increasing heterogeneous background of incoming students regarding their academic performance has been tendentiously blamed for these possible unpleasant consequences [3], [19].

Table 2. Different stakeholders' understanding and interests to the school zoning policy in Temanggung

	Government educational officers	School principals and teachers	Parents
Understanding of the policy	The new national student admission regulation for state-owned public schools in the regency on the basis of the geographical coverage (6 kilometers) rather than individual student achievement. Existing state-owned public schools have covered all districts of the regency (the school zoning coverage map).	The new national student admission regulation potentially changes overall students' diversity regarding socio-economic backgrounds and academic performance. State-owned public schools have been traditionally privileged with good and talented students with good academic support from families.	Constitutional rights for their kid to get a free and good education in established and fully supported state-owned public schools in the designated zone that the local government of the regency must provide for all pupils.
Institutional/personal interests	They are aware of the potential impacts of unreversed changes on the overall structure of the secondary schools of the regency in terms of education qualities; as some traditionally favorite state-owned public schools would struggle to get talented incoming students and maintain academic qualities local pride.	New challenges to teaching students with different socio-economic backgrounds, different motivations, different academic performances and supports from families. It has raised a sense of worries in the works on maintaining the high expectation of students' academic performance, particularly those in favorite state-owned public schools.	There are opportunities to get a free and good quality education (bonafide/favorite state-owned public schools) for kids in the zone regardless of their previous academic performance as used in the past student admission system.
Practical actions in the field	Made revision in the 2019/20 admission system by adding 30% seats on the basis of student academic achievement and sort affirmative criteria, thus leaving only 70% seats for prospectus students in the zones from previously 90%. This is implicitly addressed to help traditionally good, and favorite state-owned schools get more talented students, thus maintaining their regency reputation.	More welcome to the revision of the 2019/20 admission system as it is understood to help them admit some incoming students with good academic motivation, support, and achievement. Students with those profiles could be valuable socio/cultural capital required to achieve and maintain highly expected overall school academic performance and preserve the schools' reputation.	Tend to protest whenever the kids are not admitted in the zoned schools; and call the unjust policy and practice supported by the government (educational offices) and the schools. Yet, some affluent parents welcome the revision of the 2019/20 admission system; their talented and well-supported kids could be accepted in the traditionally good and favorite state-owned schools.

For school principals and teachers, the previous admission system, based on student academic achievement, had situated them to teach considerable good students with good characters, strong motivation, and above-average academic competencies. This gave them more spaces and opportunities to do lots of innovations, strengthening teaching-learning environments, thus assuring good quality education for those good and talented students. However, under the new admission system, principals and teachers are likely to get more burdens as they have to change teaching-learning methods and approaches to students with diverse social-economic backgrounds and academic achievement; this has led to their disagreement [20], [21].

Another disappointment with the policy has been raised by some parents who are very concerned about their children's future education. The zoning policy has not changed the community's achievement toward the existence of favorite schools [22]. The sudden implementation of the school zoning system could raise another form of injustice in the basic education provision in the country [23]. Not only the equitable distribution of access to education but zoning politics also provides opportunities for education actors at the lowest level to take an inventory of crucial issues while at the same time linking them to regional and central government policies harmoniously and effectively [24]. This could happen for kids who have been spent a year or more studying to obtain good marks in numerous exams/assessments, which is previously highly considered to get admitted to the reputable state-owned public schools of the regency. From this point of view, the implementation of the school zoning policy generally based on the geographical coverage of the designated zone might have given disadvantages to talented and hardworking students and led to the decreased motivation and efforts for students to study hard as they have been already guaranteed a seat in the need by state-owned public schools [6]. In addition, students who are on the outskirts of the city feel that there are restrictions in getting their rights [25].

All different, rather unwelcome responses and opinions from stakeholders gathered in the study, nevertheless, have little attention to the primary goals of the school zoning policy, namely, to ensure equal educational access for all pupils in the country. The facts have revealed the more prominent issues regarding the provision of basic education in Indonesia, namely the rampant inequality of the education quality of overall schools in the country [6], [26], [27]. The gaps in the education quality between state-owned public and private schools are always noticeable where the formers are better average while the latter are widely diverse [28], [29]. Most stakeholders, including the regent educational officers, are more concerned with the

future education quality of those state-owned public schools affected by the policy rather than whether it addresses the goals to promote wider equal educational access for all pupils across the country. Good collaboration from all stakeholders in the field of education is very important to achieve the success of a policy [30].

4. CONCLUSION

Throughout the article based on the single case study in the regency of Temanggung, Central Java, Indonesia, we argued that the implementation of the school zoning policy in Indonesia promoting equal access to basic education has been imbued with internal problems inherently in its very own design as it is limited on the geographical basis but not the demographic density of the zone as well as the existing different and conflicting understandings and interests of all stakeholders in the field. It underscores that the primary concern of both government officials, school principals, teachers, parents, and other wider parties in the public is not related to the wider unequal educational access but to the overall education quality of secondary schools across the country, including the existing gaps between state-owned and private ones across the regions. The latter issue has been given numerous academic and public attention in recent years, yet with limited and adequate policy recommendations of the primary stakeholders in order to improve the equal quality of the education provision in the country.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was funded by a national research grant of the Ministry of Education and Culture Republic of Indonesia in 2020 number B/87/E3/RA.00/2020.




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