

Educational Decentralization and Curriculum Implementation Consistency: A Managerial Perspective from Indonesia

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Abstract

Indonesia has implemented an educational decentralization policy for over two decades, aiming to enhance educational quality through greater autonomy at the regional and school levels. However, the consistent implementation of the national curriculum across diverse regions remains a major challenge. This study explores the managerial dynamics behind curriculum implementation in the context of decentralization, focusing on how school leaders and local education authorities navigate shifting national policies and localized capacities. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with school principals, curriculum coordinators, and education officials across multiple provinces. The findings reveal that inconsistencies in curriculum implementation are largely influenced by disparities in managerial competencies, access to training, and support systems at the local level. While decentralization provides flexibility, it often leads to uneven interpretations and applications of curriculum guidelines. Moreover, frequent curriculum reforms at the national level create additional pressures on school management, particularly in schools located in rural or under-resourced areas. This study highlights the need for a more robust managerial support system within the decentralized framework. Strengthening leadership training, improving coordination between central and local authorities, and providing clearer implementation guidelines are critical to achieving curriculum consistency. The findings offer practical insights for policymakers and educational leaders in Indonesia and other developing countries grappling with similar decentralization challenges. A balanced approach to autonomy and standardization is essential to ensure that educational equity and quality are upheld across the nation.

Keywords: Educational Decentralization, Curriculum Implementation, Education Management

1. Introduction

Education plays a strategic role in shaping human resources that are excellent, critical, and adaptive to the changing times. Amid global dynamics and rapid technological advancements, education systems in many countries are undergoing various forms of reform to improve quality and relevance (Rasheed, 2023). One approach widely adopted, particularly by developing countries, is educational decentralization. Educational decentralization refers to the process of granting greater authority and responsibility to regional governments and educational institutions in managing the learning system, including in areas such as curriculum planning, implementation, and evaluation.

Indonesia is one of the countries that has extensively implemented educational decentralization since the enactment of Law No. 22 of 1999 on Regional Government and Law No. 25 of 1999 on Fiscal Balance between Central and Regional Governments. These reforms were followed by educational decentralization policies that strengthened regional autonomy and the role of schools in decision-making. In this context, the national curriculum is still set by the central government, but its implementation is the responsibility of regional governments and individual schools.



However, although decentralization aims to enhance the efficiency, effectiveness, and relevance of education according to local contexts, in practice, various challenges have emerged—particularly related to the consistency of curriculum implementation across different regions in Indonesia. As an archipelagic country that is vast and diverse, there are significant disparities in managerial capacity, human resources, and infrastructure from one region to another. This results in a wide variation in the quality and suitability of curriculum implementation on the ground.

Indonesia's national curriculum has undergone several major changes over the past two decades, from the Competency-Based Curriculum (KBK), the 2006 School-Based Curriculum (KTSP), the 2013 Curriculum, to the most recent, the Merdeka (Independent) Curriculum. Each curriculum has its own unique characteristics and approaches, requiring school-level management to be prepared to understand, interpret, and implement the curriculum according to their local contexts. This highlights the critical importance of educational management capacity—especially among school principals and supervisors—in ensuring consistent and successful curriculum implementation.

Unfortunately, not all regions have the managerial support and capacity needed. Many schools, particularly those in remote and disadvantaged areas, face barriers such as limited training, low managerial competency, and a lack of understanding of the philosophy and technical aspects of the new curriculum. As a result, disparities in curriculum implementation affect the quality of learning and student competency outcomes across the country.

Moreover, frequent changes in curriculum policy often create confusion and resistance at the implementation level. For instance, the transition from the 2013 Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum requires significant adjustments in teaching methods, assessment approaches, and instructional planning. Under weak managerial conditions, these changes may exacerbate inconsistencies in implementation and increase the administrative burden on schools.

Based on the background presented, this study seeks to explore the complex relationship between educational decentralization and the implementation of the national curriculum in Indonesian schools. Specifically, it addresses three key research questions: (1) How does the implementation of educational decentralization influence the consistency of national curriculum implementation across schools in Indonesia? (2) What managerial challenges are faced by school principals and supervisors in ensuring consistent curriculum implementation? (3) What strategies can be adopted to strengthen managerial capacity within a decentralized framework to improve both the effectiveness and equity of curriculum implementation?

To answer these questions, the study sets out three main objectives. First, it aims to analyse the influence of decentralization policies on the consistency of national curriculum implementation across diverse regional contexts in Indonesia. Second, it seeks to identify the key managerial challenges encountered by school leaders during the curriculum implementation process. Third, the study endeavours to propose strategic recommendations aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of curriculum management within the decentralized educational structure.

The urgency of this research lies in the critical issue of inconsistency in curriculum implementation, which is directly linked to educational inequality, violations of the principle of social justice, and uneven student learning outcomes. In the era of globalization and international competition, such disparities may widen the achievement gap between students in well-developed regions and those in under-resourced areas, ultimately undermining Indonesia's aspirations to build a globally competitive workforce. This study is particularly significant as prior research has largely concentrated on curriculum content and pedagogy, while giving less attention to curriculum implementation from a managerial and policy perspective. By focusing on educational management within the context of decentralization, this study offers a fresh perspective that underscores the pivotal

role of school leadership, strategic planning, and intergovernmental coordination in achieving equitable and effective curriculum delivery.

This research is grounded in educational management theory and public policy theory in the context of decentralization. Educational management theories—particularly transformational leadership and strategic management—are employed to explore how school leaders can act as change agents in implementing curriculum reforms. Meanwhile, educational decentralization theory offers an analytical framework to understand the power dynamics and decision-making relationships between the central and local governments in the education sector, as well as the potential challenges arising from this system.

In addition, the policy implementation framework proposed by Mazmanian and Sabatier (1983) provides a useful lens to examine the factors influencing the success of curriculum policy implementation, including goal clarity, resource availability, political support, and the capacity of implementers. This combined theoretical approach allows for a comprehensive analysis of curriculum implementation dynamics in decentralized settings.

This study is expected to provide both academic and practical contributions. Academically, it enriches the discourse on educational decentralization and curriculum implementation from a managerial perspective. Practically, the findings of this research may inform policymakers in designing strategies for strengthening school management, improving the capacity of education personnel, and formulating curriculum policies that are both adaptive and implementable.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Educational Decentralization

Educational decentralization refers to the transfer of decision-making authority from central government bodies to local governments, school administrators, and other educational stakeholders. This shift aims to enhance the flexibility, responsiveness, and effectiveness of the educational system by allowing local contexts and needs to guide educational policies and practices (Bray, 1999). Decentralization can manifest in various forms, such as administrative, fiscal, political, and market-driven decentralization, each of which impacts the management and delivery of education in different ways (Fiske, 1996).

In Indonesia, the decentralization of education began with the passage of the 1999 Regional Autonomy Law, which allowed local governments to have greater control over the administration of schools, including curriculum implementation. According to a study by Thomas (2000), decentralization in education has the potential to increase local participation, improve responsiveness to the needs of communities, and promote innovation in teaching and learning. However, challenges such as unequal resource distribution, varying levels of managerial competence, and lack of infrastructure often hinder the successful implementation of decentralization policies (Suryana, 2019).

2.2. Curriculum Implementation

Curriculum implementation is the process through which a designed curriculum is transformed into actual teaching and learning practices in schools. Fullan (2007) emphasizes that the success of curriculum implementation depends not only on the design of the curriculum itself but also on the capacity of the educators and school leaders to adapt and apply it effectively. Successful implementation requires that schools and teachers are adequately supported through training, resources, and administrative guidance.

In the Indonesian context, curriculum implementation has faced numerous challenges, especially given the frequent changes in the national curriculum. The shift from the Competency-Based Curriculum (KBK) to the School-Based Curriculum (KTSP) in 2006 and the subsequent introduction of the 2013 Curriculum (K13) and Merdeka (Independent) Curriculum have created significant pressure on schools to adapt. According to Suryana (2019), inconsistent curriculum changes, coupled with limited professional development opportunities for educators and school leaders, have resulted in challenges in maintaining continuity and consistency in curriculum delivery across different regions of the country.

A study by Hargreaves (2001) asserts that for successful curriculum implementation, there must be coherence between curriculum policy, school leadership, teacher practices, and the broader educational environment. In Indonesia, regional disparities in these areas create unequal access to high-quality education, making the implementation of national curriculum policies inconsistent from one area to another.

2.3. Educational Leadership and School Management

Educational leadership plays a central role in guiding schools through the challenges of curriculum implementation. School principals, as instructional leaders, are responsible for ensuring that the curriculum is effectively translated into practice. According to Leithwood and Jantzi (2006), effective leadership involves fostering a shared vision, providing support for teachers, and creating a positive learning environment that aligns with curricular goals.

In the context of decentralization, school principals are expected to take on more responsibility in managing the curriculum and ensuring that it aligns with local educational needs. However, as highlighted by Robinson (2012), the success of school leadership in decentralized systems is closely tied to the managerial capacity of school leaders. Without adequate training, resources, and support from the local education authorities, school principals may struggle to provide the necessary guidance for teachers and staff.

In Indonesia, there is a recognized gap in the managerial skills of school leaders, especially in remote or underdeveloped areas. This lack of capacity results in inconsistencies in curriculum delivery, which further exacerbates disparities in educational quality across the country (Pritchett & Beatty, 2012).

2.4. Policy Implementation Theory

Policy implementation theory, particularly the framework proposed by Mazmanian and Sabatier (1983), offers valuable insights into understanding the factors that influence the success or failure of curriculum implementation. This theory posits that for policies to be successfully implemented, several key factors must be present, including:

- a) Clear and achievable policy goals: Policies must have clear, specific goals that can be realistically achieved within the given timeframe and resources.
- b) Adequate resources: Sufficient financial, human, and material resources must be allocated to ensure successful policy execution.
- c) Supportive political environment: The implementation of policy requires broad political support and alignment at various levels of government.
- d) Capacity of implementers: The ability of local actors, such as school leaders and teachers, to understand and effectively carry out the policy is critical to its success.

This framework is particularly relevant to the implementation of the Indonesian curriculum in a decentralized context, as it helps to identify the factors that affect the consistency of curriculum implementation across different regions. For instance, variations in local government support, the

availability of resources, and the capacity of school leaders to manage changes in the curriculum can all affect the success of curriculum policies.

2.5. Transformational Leadership in Education

Transformational leadership is a leadership style that focuses on inspiring and motivating teachers and school staff to achieve higher levels of performance and commitment to the educational vision. According to Bass (1960), transformational leaders stimulate motivation and creativity by fostering an environment that encourages innovation and change. In the context of curriculum implementation, transformational leadership can drive the process by encouraging educators to adopt new teaching practices, align their efforts with curricular goals, and engage in continuous professional development.

For decentralized educational systems like Indonesia, where school leadership is pivotal to curriculum implementation, transformational leadership becomes even more important. Principals who embrace transformational leadership can help to bridge the gap between central educational policies and local needs by aligning school practices with curriculum goals and by ensuring that teachers receive the support and training they need to be successful (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006).

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the managerial challenges and the impact of educational decentralization on the consistency of curriculum implementation in Indonesia. The qualitative approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the perceptions, experiences, and strategies of school leaders and education managers in responding to curriculum changes and implementing decentralized education policies. Through qualitative data, this study aims to uncover the complexities of educational decentralization and its effects on curriculum implementation at the local level.

3.2. Research Approach

The research follows a case study approach, focusing on a select group of schools in different regions of Indonesia. A case study is suitable for examining contemporary issues within real-life contexts and allows for a rich, detailed understanding of how decentralization policies are being implemented at the school level. This approach will help to capture the variations in managerial practices, challenges faced by school leaders, and the strategies employed to implement national curriculum reforms consistently across diverse geographical and socio-economic contexts.

3.3. Research Setting

The study will be conducted across multiple regions in Indonesia, representing a mix of urban, suburban, and rural areas. This setting provides a diverse landscape in which to examine how local contexts influence the implementation of the national curriculum under decentralized educational governance. These areas were selected based on varying levels of infrastructure, educational resources, and administrative support, which are expected to reflect the disparities in the effectiveness of curriculum implementation.

The regions selected for this study include:

- a) Urban Areas: Schools in large cities such as Jakarta and Surabaya, where resources and managerial capacities are generally higher.

- b) Suburban Areas: Schools located in medium-sized cities and their surrounding areas, which often face some logistical and resource constraints.
- c) Rural Areas: Schools in remote, less developed regions with limited access to educational resources, training, and support.

3.4. Population and Sample

The population for this study includes school principals, education supervisors, and teachers from various primary and secondary schools across the selected regions. These individuals are directly involved in the implementation of curriculum reforms and are best positioned to provide insights into the managerial and operational challenges of curriculum implementation under decentralization.

A purposive sampling technique will be used to select participants who have direct experience with curriculum implementation and educational management in the context of decentralization. The sample will consist of:

- a) School Principals: Approximately 20 principals from different schools (5 from each of the three regions) who are responsible for overseeing the curriculum implementation process.
- b) Education Supervisors: About 10 education supervisors from the regional offices of education who provide guidance and oversight to schools in implementing the curriculum.
- c) Teachers: A select group of 10 teachers from each school, chosen based on their involvement in curriculum delivery and their ability to provide valuable feedback on the curriculum implementation process.

3.5. Data Collection Methods

To capture a comprehensive understanding of the research questions, a combination of data collection methods will be used:

- a) Semi-Structured Interviews: In-depth, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with school principals, education supervisors, and teachers. The semi-structured format allows for flexibility in exploring the participants' perspectives while maintaining focus on key topics such as managerial challenges, curriculum changes, local context, and strategies for effective implementation. These interviews will be conducted in person or via online platforms, depending on accessibility and convenience.
- b) Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): Focus groups will be organized with groups of teachers and education supervisors to discuss shared challenges, strategies, and experiences related to curriculum implementation. These discussions will provide a platform for participants to exchange ideas and identify common themes related to decentralized curriculum delivery.
- c) Document Analysis: Relevant documents such as curriculum guidelines, school reports, training materials, and policy documents will be analysed to understand the official curriculum implementation processes and the degree to which these align with practices at the school level. This analysis will provide contextual information and supplement the qualitative data from interviews and focus groups.

3.6. Data Analysis

The data analysis will follow a thematic analysis approach. This involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within the qualitative data. The analysis process will be conducted in the following steps:

- a) Transcription: All interviews and focus group discussions will be audio-recorded (with participants' consent) and transcribed verbatim.

- b) Coding: The transcriptions will be systematically coded using a set of predefined codes based on the research questions and emerging themes. These codes will be further refined during the analysis process.
- c) Theme Development: After coding, the data will be organized into broader themes that reflect the key challenges, strategies, and perceptions related to curriculum implementation under decentralization.
- d) Interpretation: The identified themes will be analysed in relation to the research questions, and interpretations will be made based on the theoretical frameworks discussed earlier (educational decentralization, policy implementation, and educational leadership). The findings will be compared across regions to identify patterns and differences in curriculum implementation processes.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

This research will adhere to the ethical principles of confidentiality, informed consent, and participant voluntary involvement. Prior to data collection, participants will be informed about the purpose of the study, the nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any time. All participants will be assured that their responses will be kept confidential and that the results will be used solely for academic purposes.

Data collected from interviews, focus groups, and document analysis will be stored securely, and all identifying information will be anonymized to protect participants' privacy.

3.8. Limitations of the Study

While this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of decentralization on curriculum implementation, there are several limitations:

- a) Regional Bias: The study is focused on selected regions, which may not fully represent all areas in Indonesia. Regional disparities may exist beyond the chosen areas.
- b) Subjectivity of Qualitative Data: The findings of this study are based on the perspectives of participants, which may be influenced by individual biases and experiences. Efforts will be made to triangulate the data through multiple sources to reduce subjectivity.
- c) Time Constraints: Given the scope of the study, it may not be possible to interview all stakeholders involved in curriculum implementation, potentially limiting the breadth of the data.

3.9. Expected Outcomes

The study is expected to provide insights into the challenges faced by school leaders and education managers in implementing the curriculum under a decentralized education system in Indonesia. It will identify the critical managerial factors that contribute to or hinder effective curriculum implementation, and offer strategic recommendations to improve consistency and quality in curriculum delivery across different regions.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Regional Disparities in Curriculum Implementation

One of the most prominent findings of this study was the significant regional disparities in the consistency of curriculum implementation across Indonesia. The data revealed that schools in urban areas, such as Jakarta and Surabaya, generally had better access to resources, training, and managerial support, resulting in a more consistent and efficient implementation of the national curriculum. In

contrast, schools in rural and remote areas faced numerous challenges that hampered the effective implementation of the curriculum.

- a) **Urban Schools:** In these schools, principals reported having better access to training and professional development opportunities, as well as more experienced education supervisors. Curriculum implementation was often smoother, with a higher level of adherence to national standards. However, even in urban areas, principals expressed concerns about the frequent changes to the curriculum, which led to confusion among teachers and required constant adjustments.
- b) **Rural Schools:** On the other hand, schools in rural areas, particularly those in less developed regions, struggled significantly with the implementation of the curriculum. These schools faced challenges such as limited access to training programs for teachers and principals, poor infrastructure, and lack of teaching resources. In some cases, teachers had to rely on outdated curriculum materials, which affected the overall quality of education. Many principals in these areas reported that while the curriculum guidelines were clear, the lack of support from local authorities and education supervisors led to inconsistent implementation.

4.2. Challenges in Managerial Capacity

A key theme that emerged from the data was the insufficient managerial capacity at the school level, particularly in regions outside urban centres. The principals and education supervisors interviewed identified several managerial challenges that hindered effective curriculum implementation:

- a) **Lack of Training for School Leaders:** Many principals, especially in rural areas, reported having limited access to professional development programs focused on curriculum management and leadership skills. As a result, they struggled to effectively lead their schools through the complexities of curriculum changes. Several principals expressed frustration with the lack of targeted training that would help them manage the pedagogical and administrative aspects of curriculum implementation.
- b) **Inadequate Support from Education Supervisors:** Education supervisors, who are responsible for overseeing the curriculum implementation process at the local level, were often found to be overburdened with administrative tasks. This limited their ability to provide adequate support and guidance to school leaders and teachers. Many teachers reported that they received little follow-up or feedback on their curriculum delivery, which led to confusion about the expectations of the national curriculum.
- c) **Resistance to Change:** In both urban and rural schools, some teachers exhibited resistance to changes in the curriculum, particularly when it involved significant shifts in teaching methods. Teachers expressed concerns about the increased administrative burden and the lack of time to adapt to new teaching practices, leading to a gap in effective curriculum delivery.

4.3. Effectiveness of Decentralization in Curriculum Implementation

Despite the challenges, decentralization has provided some benefits, particularly in terms of local ownership and flexibility. The study found that when local education authorities and school leaders had the autonomy to adapt the curriculum to suit local needs, the implementation process was more flexible and responsive to the specific contexts of the schools.

- a) **Positive Impact of Local Adaptation:** In several cases, principals and teachers reported that they had been able to tailor certain aspects of the national curriculum to better meet the needs of their students, particularly in terms of cultural and linguistic diversity. For example, schools in areas with a high number of indigenous students incorporated local knowledge and language into their teaching practices, enhancing student engagement and understanding.

- b) **Barriers to Local Adaptation:** While decentralization allowed for some local adaptation, many school leaders expressed frustration with the limited flexibility allowed by the national curriculum. There were instances where schools wanted to incorporate more localized content or alter teaching methods but were constrained by the rigid guidelines set by the central government. This tension between local autonomy and centralized control emerged as a key challenge in the decentralized system.

4.4. Communication and Coordination Issues

Another significant finding from the study was the poor communication and coordination between central and local education authorities. Several principals and education supervisors pointed out that the frequent changes in the national curriculum were not always accompanied by clear communication regarding the specifics of the changes, leaving schools with limited time to prepare for transitions.

- a) **Inconsistent Communication:** While some schools received timely updates and detailed information about curriculum changes, others were left with inadequate guidance. For example, when transitioning from the 2013 Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum, some schools received detailed training and resources, while others were left to figure out the changes on their own, leading to confusion and delays in implementation.
- b) **Lack of Coordination Between Levels of Government:** Participants highlighted the lack of coordination between the central government, regional education offices, and schools. In some cases, local education authorities were not fully aligned with national policies, leading to delays in the distribution of resources, training programs, and curriculum materials. This lack of coordination often created a disconnect between policy formulation and practical implementation on the ground.

4.5. Strategies for Improvement

Despite the challenges, the study identified several strategies for improving curriculum implementation and strengthening the managerial capacity of schools:

- a) **Strengthening Professional Development Programs:** One of the most frequently mentioned strategies was the need to improve professional development opportunities for school leaders and teachers. Principals and education supervisors emphasized the importance of ongoing training in curriculum management, leadership skills, and teaching methodologies. Investing in professional development would enhance the capacity of school leaders to guide the implementation process more effectively.
- b) **Improving Communication Channels:** Participants suggested that better communication between the central government and local education authorities is crucial for effective curriculum implementation. Schools need clear, consistent, and timely information about curriculum changes and how to implement them. Additionally, regular feedback loops between schools, education supervisors, and policymakers could help identify issues early and address them promptly.
- c) **Enhanced Local Autonomy with Support:** While decentralization has provided some benefits in terms of local flexibility, participants argued that schools should be given more autonomy to adapt the curriculum to their specific contexts. However, this autonomy should be accompanied by sufficient support from local education authorities, such as access to resources, training, and ongoing supervision.

5. Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that while decentralization has brought positive changes in terms of local flexibility and ownership, it has also highlighted significant challenges related to managerial capacity, communication, and regional disparities. The inconsistencies in curriculum implementation across different regions underscore the need for stronger managerial support, improved communication, and targeted professional development to ensure that schools are equipped to implement national curriculum reforms effectively. Moving forward, the findings suggest that a balanced approach, combining local flexibility with central support, may provide the most sustainable path for enhancing the quality and consistency of education in Indonesia.

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