

Revisiting the Equity Promise of School Zoning Policies in Indonesia: Between Idealism and Implementation

Sisilia Putri Adinda

History Education, Universitas Negeri Padang, West Sumatra, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

Purpose – This study critically examines the impact of Indonesia's school zoning policy on efforts to achieve social justice in education. Although the policy was designed to distribute educational access more equitably, its implementation has revealed unintended disparities and new forms of inequality. The research focuses on the gap between the normative goals of the policy and its practical outcomes, especially in terms of distributive justice.

Design/methods/approach – A qualitative approach was employed using a systematic literature review design. Data were collected from peer-reviewed academic articles, policy reports, and relevant documents. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns related to the implementation of zoning policy in different Indonesian regions.

Findings – The study identified four key findings: the zoning policy has expanded educational access for students from low-income families; however, quality disparities among schools within zones persist; the policy's effectiveness is shaped by local capacity and spatial planning; and the policy has generated new social dynamics within school communities. These findings suggest that equitable education requires more than geographic distribution—it demands structural and systemic reform.

Research implications/limitations – This study is limited to recent literature within the last five years and does not include primary field data. Nevertheless, it offers significant insights into the evaluation of zoning-based education policies and emphasizes the need for locally responsive implementation strategies and comprehensive institutional capacity development.

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Corresponding Author:

Sisilia Putri Adinda

History Education, Padang State University, West Sumatra, Indonesia

Prof. Dr. Hamka Street, Air Tawar, Padang, West Sumatra, Indonesia

Email: adindasisilia49@gmail.com

Introduction

Education is a fundamental right and a cornerstone for building a just and inclusive society. However, in practice, Indonesia's education system continues to show significant disparities, especially in access to quality education for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged and geographically marginalized communities. To address this, the Indonesian government introduced the school zoning policy, designed to redistribute educational access based on geographic proximity. The policy aims to reduce inequality between schools, dismantle the perception of “elite” institutions, and promote social diversity in school environments (Ismail et al., 2024; Latifah et al., 2024). Moreover, it reflects the broader vision of equal opportunity in education, ensuring that proximity equates to accessibility.

Normatively, the zoning policy can be examined through the lens of John Rawls's theory of justice (2011), which asserts that a just society allows inequalities only if they benefit the least advantaged. In educational contexts, this implies that public policy—such as zoning—must ensure fair access for marginalized students. Complementing this, the Coleman Report (1995; 1966) shows that academic performance is strongly shaped by students' social backgrounds, suggesting that zoning has the potential to facilitate social mobility. Amartya Sen's (2009) capability approach further deepens this perspective, emphasizing the importance of expanding individuals' real freedoms to access meaningful educational opportunities. Thus, zoning must go beyond logistical regulation; it must be a deliberate tool for distributive justice.

Empirical studies in Indonesia reveal mixed outcomes of zoning implementation. In regions like Yogyakarta and Batam, the policy has enhanced access for lower-income students and encouraged improvements in local school services (Hajaroh et al., 2021; Melati & Teovani Lodan, 2023). Nonetheless, challenges persist, including capacity imbalances between schools, declining reputations of certain institutions, unequal infrastructure, and public resistance due to perceived restrictions on school choice (Dipo Piswatama & Tiur Malasari Siregar, 2024; Sulistyosari et al., 2023; Susanto et al., 2024). Zoning also increases student diversity, which, without adequate classroom management strategies, can become a challenge rather than an asset (Hendrik et al., 2024). These challenges indicate a gap between the idealistic goals of the policy and the practical outcomes of its implementation.

International literature also reveals contrasting results. In the United States, school zoning without affirmative intervention has exacerbated racial and socioeconomic segregation (Schwartz et al., 2012). In contrast, South Korea complements its zoning policy with equitable teacher distribution and infrastructure improvements, enhancing educational equity (Sullivan-Sego et al., 2016)). These cases underscore that zoning alone is insufficient; it must be supported by structural and systemic interventions. In Indonesia,

weaknesses in planning, educational governance, and funding allocation present major barriers to the full realization of zoning objectives (Mukminin & Habibi, 2019; Pelawi, 2021).

Given this context, it is essential to revisit the equity promise of Indonesia's school zoning policy. This study seeks to address whether zoning truly serves as an equitable and inclusive policy instrument or remains an idealized framework with uneven execution. Drawing on the theories of Rawls, Coleman, and Sen, and incorporating recent findings from educational policy research, this article analyzes how zoning is realized in practice and whether it aligns with the principles of social justice. Through a critical and reflective literature-based approach, this study aims not only to map the challenges but also to provide policy recommendations that can enhance the design and implementation of zoning policies to genuinely benefit the most disadvantaged students.

Methods

This research adopts a qualitative descriptive approach using a systematic literature review design, which enables a deep examination of Indonesia's school zoning policy through the lens of social justice and equitable access to education. This method was selected for its reflective and flexible nature, allowing the researcher to explore theoretical perspectives, empirical findings, and policy dynamics that have developed over the last two decades. Literature review, as a methodological strategy, provides the analytical foundation to connect abstract principles with real-world practices and critically assess whether the zoning policy genuinely aligns with the ideals of justice, fairness, and equity articulated in modern educational discourse (Booth et al., 2016; Zed, 2014).

The data used in this study were secondary in nature, drawn from a broad range of academic and policy-related documents. Sources included peer-reviewed journal articles indexed in Scopus, DOAJ, and Sinta, scholarly books, government regulations, ministry-level policies, and prior research reports published between 2005 and 2025. The data collection process involved a systematic digital search using relevant keywords such as: school zoning policy, educational equity, social justice in education, inclusive education, and public education policy in Indonesia. Articles were selected based on three key criteria: (1) thematic relevance to the research focus, (2) recency (preferably within the last two decades), and (3) methodological rigor and verifiability of academic sources. These criteria ensured the credibility and analytical depth of the selected materials.

Data analysis employed thematic content analysis, in which the researcher identified, classified, and synthesized major themes emerging from the collected sources. This process involved iterative reading of each document to detect patterns, contradictions, and nuanced findings within the literature (Salim, 2019; Sugiyono, 2023). Thematic codes such as "equitable access to education," "effectiveness of zoning policy," "implementation challenges," and "public responses to zoning" were used to organize the

data into coherent analytical categories. These themes were then synthesized narratively to present a structured, holistic interpretation of the existing body of knowledge. Although this study did not involve direct human subjects, academic ethical principles were rigorously maintained, including transparency of sources, accuracy in citation, and avoidance of interpretive bias. As such, the findings of this study are expected to be credible, replicable, and academically sound.

Result

This study reveals four key findings related to the implementation of the school zoning policy and its implications for social justice and equitable access to education in Indonesia. These findings are organized thematically based on the results of the literature analysis.

Table 1. Thematic Summary of Findings on School Zoning Policy in Indonesia

No	Main Theme	Key Findings	Key References
1	Access and Educational Equity	Zoning increases access for low-income students but does not eliminate quality disparities between schools	Latifah et al. (2024); Sulistyosari et al. (2023)
2	Implementation Effectiveness	Uneven school distribution; zoning boundaries not aligned with local contexts	Siga & Madhakomala (2023); Pисwatama & Siregar (2024)
3	Public Response	Mixed reactions: greater access for some, dissatisfaction and manipulation by others	Melati & Lodan (2023); Ismail et al. (2024)
4	Social Impact	Enhances classroom diversity but creates strain on both elite and under-resourced schools	Hendrik et al. (2024); Schwartz et al. (n.d.)

1. Access and Educational Equity

One of the main findings of this review is that Indonesia's school zoning policy has generally succeeded in expanding educational access for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. This system is designed to allow students to attend the nearest public school regardless of academic achievement or economic status. Studies by Latifah et al. (2024) and Hajaroh et al. (n.d.) emphasize that the mechanism provides opportunities for disadvantaged students to enroll in state schools that were previously dominated by middle- and upper-class students. This achievement is evident in reduced transportation costs, increased parental engagement, and higher school participation rates in urban and suburban areas.

Nevertheless, spatial disparities between schools continue to pose a major challenge in achieving substantive educational equity. Although physical distance may be minimized, the quality of schools within the same zone is often uneven. Sulistyosari et al. (2023) and Ismail et al. (2024) stress that many students live close to schools with significantly inferior infrastructure, teaching staff, and management systems compared to others. In such cases, zoning may inadvertently reinforce systemic inequities by creating new stigmas associated with “less prestigious” schools.

2. Effectiveness of Policy Implementation

The literature review indicates that the effectiveness of zoning policy is heavily influenced by local capacities to map and design zoning boundaries fairly and realistically. A key issue identified is the unequal distribution of quality schools within zones. Siga and Madhakomala (2023) found that schools in densely populated areas often lack sufficient capacity to accommodate all students from the designated zone, while other regions may have schools with underutilized capacity. This mismatch generates confusion during the student admission process and adds psychological stress to students and parents alike.

In addition, unclear zoning boundaries frequently create administrative discrepancies. In several instances, students living in close proximity to certain schools are deemed ineligible due to inflexible administrative zoning limits (Piswatama & Siregar, 2024). This has led to manipulation of domicile data in an attempt to bypass the system, which undermines the integrity of the policy. These technical challenges highlight the gap between the inclusive ideals of zoning and the on-the-ground complexities of its execution.

3. Community Responses and Adaptation

Community responses to zoning policies are ambivalent. On one hand, the policy is seen as a step toward providing equal educational opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds without relying on competitive entrance exams. Studies such as Melati and Lodan (2023) show that many low-income parents view the policy positively as it allows their children to access schools that were previously out of reach. The system also alleviates the pressure of academic competition at an early age, which is common under merit-based admissions.

On the other hand, resistance is emerging from middle- and upper-class parents who feel deprived of their right to choose the best schools for their children. Many of them are now dissatisfied with their options, feeling constrained by the zoning system (Ismail et al., 2024). This dissatisfaction is compounded by insufficient public communication and socialization of the policy, leading to misinformation, anxiety, and in some cases, unethical practices such as falsifying address documents. The lack of public participation in planning and evaluating the policy further weakens its legitimacy.

4. Social Impact of the Zoning Policy

The implementation of zoning policies has broad social implications for school dynamics and educational communities. One positive impact is increased social heterogeneity in classrooms. With more diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds among students, schools can become inclusive spaces that foster tolerance and cross-class interactions (Hendrik et al., 2024). This contributes to social development, empathy, and awareness among students. However, this outcome depends heavily on schools' readiness in terms of management, infrastructure, and psychosocial support.

Conversely, the policy has also created new challenges for elite schools. In some cases, schools that were once considered prestigious have experienced a decline in public perception due to the influx of students from more diverse academic backgrounds. Meanwhile, previously under-enrolled schools have faced student surges without adequate infrastructure improvements (Sulistiyosari et al., 2023; Schwartz et al., n.d.). These inequalities in readiness may further exacerbate the decline in overall educational quality unless accompanied by comprehensive and supportive measures.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that Indonesia's school zoning policy holds considerable potential as an instrument for expanding inclusive educational access, particularly for low-income and socially marginalized groups. Normatively, zoning reflects the principle of distributive justice as formulated by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* (Rawls, 2011), which posits that public policies should favor the least advantaged. In the context of education, this principle is operationalized through admission quotas based on students' geographical proximity to schools, thereby minimizing reliance on academic merit-based selection that tends to benefit upper socioeconomic groups. Studies by Latifah et al. (2024) and Hajaroh et al. (Hajaroh et al., 2021; Kartika et al., 2025) have shown that this approach reduces financial burdens, strengthens family involvement in education, and improves school participation rates, particularly in urban and peri-urban areas.

Nevertheless, the expansion of access has not been matched by an equitable distribution of educational quality. In practice, zoning continues to perpetuate disparities between schools within the same administrative area. This is consistent with findings by Sulistiyosari et al. (2023) and Ismail et al. (2024), who report significant variations in infrastructure, teacher competence, and school management. These inequalities highlight that educational justice remains superficial, echoing Amartya Sen's (2009) capabilities approach, which asserts that justice must also ensure real opportunities for

individuals to flourish. When students from disadvantaged backgrounds attend nearby schools with limited resources, social justice remains unattainable, as they remain confined to educational environments that hinder their development. Thus, zoning must be supported by comprehensive policies aimed at improving school quality across all zones—not merely regulating admissions based on geography.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of the zoning policy is heavily reliant on local governments' technical and institutional capacities to define zones that are proportional, accurate, and contextually appropriate. The prevalence of domicile manipulation, as noted by Piswatama and Siregar (2024), reflects a systemic failure to design policies grounded in local realities. This undermines public trust in the zoning system and reveals a deeper issue of weak educational governance. As Dye (2013) argues, public policy encompasses both actions and inactions by the government—both of which have significant social implications. When zoning policies are not informed by accurate social and geographical mapping, they risk producing new forms of exclusion that contradict their original intent of promoting equity in education.

Public responses to zoning have been ambivalent, reflecting a gap between public expectations and the policy's design. On one hand, many low-income families perceive the policy as a breakthrough opportunity to access public education without the barriers of merit-based selection. The study by Melati and Lodan (2023) confirms that such perceptions contribute to the social legitimacy of zoning as an affirmative measure. On the other hand, middle- and upper-income families express dissatisfaction, feeling that their ability to choose quality education for their children has been compromised. This resistance is exacerbated by the lack of transparency and participatory mechanisms in the policy-making and evaluation process (Ismail et al., 2024). These findings underscore the importance of strategic policy communication and inclusive public dialogue to foster broader acceptance and legitimacy of zoning as a tool for educational equity.

The social implications of zoning are similarly double-edged. On the positive side, increased classroom heterogeneity promotes empathy, cross-class solidarity, and character development through richer social interactions (Hendrik et al., 2024). This diversity can serve as a new form of social capital that enriches civic education. However, these benefits often come with institutional challenges. Many schools are ill-equipped to manage diverse student populations, lacking adequate infrastructure, pedagogical tools, and teacher training. In some cases, such unpreparedness reinforces negative stereotypes against schools that begin admitting students from more varied academic and social backgrounds (Schwartz et al., 2012; Sulistyosari et al., 2023). Therefore, the success of zoning depends on its integration with inclusive education policies, including curriculum reform, teacher development, and psychosocial support systems that can facilitate students' adaptation.

While this study contributes significantly to understanding the dynamics and challenges of school zoning in Indonesia through the lens of social justice, it is important to acknowledge several limitations. This research relies entirely on secondary data, limiting its ability to capture the lived experiences of stakeholders. Moreover, the literature predominantly reflects urban areas with better policy documentation, potentially overlooking the unique challenges faced by rural or underdeveloped regions. Future research should therefore adopt field-based, participatory approaches involving students, teachers, parents, and policymakers at the local level. Longitudinal studies are also necessary to evaluate the long-term impacts of zoning on students' academic achievement, social mobility, and the overall realization of social justice in national education systems.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Indonesia's school zoning policy, while designed to promote social justice and equitable access to education, continues to face significant implementation challenges. The four main findings indicate that although the policy has expanded access for underprivileged groups, it has yet to resolve disparities in school quality, encounters technical issues in zoning boundaries, elicits mixed public responses, and generates new social impacts within school environments. These findings emphasize the need for context-sensitive policy evaluations and institutional strengthening to support diverse student populations. Conceptually, the study contributes to the discourse on distributive justice in spatially based education policies and urges policymakers to integrate ethical and social dimensions more comprehensively into educational design. Practical recommendations include the need for a more flexible zoning framework, greater transparency in execution, and the active involvement of communities and stakeholders in future educational policy assessments.

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