



## Community Participation in the Application of Educational Policies to Improve Learning Outcomes in Rural Areas

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### ABSTRACT

Community participation is essential in improving education quality, particularly in rural areas facing resource and access limitations. This study explores the role and effectiveness of community involvement in implementing education policies to enhance student learning outcomes. A qualitative-descriptive approach was used, involving field observations, policy document analysis, and in-depth interviews with stakeholders in remote areas. Findings indicate that active participation from parents, community leaders, and local organizations supports policy monitoring, informal learning assistance, and a strong learning culture. However, effectiveness depends on policy literacy, local government support, and collaboration frameworks. The study highlights the need to adapt policies to local socio-cultural contexts and develop partnership models to ensure inclusive and sustainable rural education.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Education is the main foundation for sustainable and inclusive human development. However, inequality of access and quality of education between urban and rural areas is still a recurring structural challenge in various developing countries, including Indonesia. In the last two decades, although the government has launched various education policies aimed at equitable quality of education through compulsory learning programs, BOS (School Operational Assistance), and the Independent Curriculum, its realization and impact in rural areas tend to be unequal compared to urban areas. Factors such as limited educators, lack of educational infrastructure, hard-to-reach geographical conditions, and low policy literacy among local communities are the main obstacles to significantly improving student learning outcomes in rural areas (Kemendikbudristek, 2023; UNESCO, 2021).

In the context of inclusive and sustainability-based education, community participation has been identified as an important element in strengthening the implementation of education policies that are responsive to the local context. The World Bank (2020) emphasizes that community involvement in the education process is not only administratively complementary, but also a strategic component in supporting public accountability, policy oversight, and the creation of a socially and culturally conducive learning environment. The concept of community-based education was born from the realization that education policy cannot be top-down alone, but must involve local actors who understand the needs, aspirations, and dynamics of their communities (Bray, 2000; Anderson & Maughan, 2021). Through community participation, schools are expected to become not only a center for knowledge transfer, but also a space for dialogue between national values and local wisdom.

Studies have shown that active community involvement—in the form of parental participation, contribution of social institutions, collaboration with indigenous leaders, and supervision of education programs—is positively correlated with improved learning outcomes, especially in the context of regions with limited state resources (De Grauwe, 2005; Suryadi, 2019). At the practical level, this participation is reflected in the management of learning activities, the provision of supporting facilities, and moral and financial support for students. Nevertheless, community involvement in education policy in many rural areas is still sporadic and systemically uninstitutionalized. Many communities do not have the capacity to fully understand policies, or are not formally empowered in the school decision-making process (Bappenas, 2021).

Furthermore, national education regulatory frameworks still tend not to provide adequate space for community-based collaborative design, so collaboration between schools and communities often relies on the initiative of principals or community leaders alone, rather than as part of an integrated policy architecture. In fact, in an educational ecosystem that is oriented towards learning outcomes, the relationship between policies, implementers, and beneficiaries must be synergistic and mutually reinforcing (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Therefore, strong and targeted community participation is one of the

important prerequisites for the successful implementation of education policies in areas with structural vulnerabilities such as rural areas.

Based on this background, this study aims to critically examine the form and role of community participation in supporting the implementation of education policies to improve student learning outcomes in rural areas. The main focus is directed at mapping the involvement of local actors in policy implementation, identifying challenges and opportunities for community participation, and reflection on sustainable collaboration models between schools and communities. This research also proposes the importance of contextualized policy implementation as a framework in realizing equitable distribution of education. It is hoped that the findings of this study can make a conceptual and practical contribution to the development of participatory education policies that are more inclusive, adaptive, and relevant to the social realities of rural communities.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***Community Participation in Education***

Community participation in the context of education is understood as the active involvement of the community in various aspects of educational implementation, both directly through school activities and indirectly through social, cultural, and moral support. Bray (2000) divides community participation in education into three levels: financial and material support, involvement in decision-making, and contribution to the learning process. Community participation is not just a form of social relations, but has been recognized as part of a democratic and sustainable education development strategy.

In the context of rural areas, community involvement has distinctive characteristics, where the value of mutual cooperation, closeness between residents, and the role of traditional leaders are the main driving elements (Suryadi, 2019). In many developing countries, the role of local communities has been shown to contribute significantly to improving access to and quality of basic education (De Grauwe, 2005). However, such participation is still often informal and has not been institutionalized within the framework of education regulations, especially in areas where access to policy information is still low (Anderson & Maughan, 2021).

### ***Education Policy and Regional Disparities***

Education policy in Indonesia has undergone various reforms in the last two decades, ranging from the implementation of regional autonomy, the strengthening of school-based management, to the Independent Curriculum which emphasizes learning differentiation. However, the implementation of the policy has not fully answered the challenges faced by schools in rural areas. A study by the Ministry of Education and Culture (2023) shows that the distribution of teacher quality, infrastructure, and policy support is very unequal between developed and disadvantaged regions.

Policies that are formulated centrally tend to ignore local complexity. This is in line with the findings of Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) who emphasize the

importance of a context-sensitive policy approach, where the implementation of education policies must be tailored to the social, geographical, and cultural context of each region. In this case, local communities can serve as a bridge that connects formal policy with the real needs of the education community at the grassroots level.

### ***Learning Outcomes as an Indicator of Educational Success***

Student learning outcomes are the main indicator of the success of the educational process. Within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially targets 4.1 and 4.5, improving inclusive and equitable learning outcomes is a global priority (UNESCO, 2021). However, student learning outcomes in rural areas are generally lower than in urban areas, which are influenced by variables such as teaching quality, family socioeconomic background, and out-of-school learning support (OECD, 2018).

Research by Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) emphasizes that the improvement of learning outcomes is not only determined by instructional quality, but also by the support of a collaborative educational ecosystem. In this context, community involvement is one of the important components in enriching students' learning experiences, instilling contextual values, and providing a sense of collective ownership of education.

### ***Community-Based Education Model***

Community-based education is an approach that emphasizes that the learning process does not only take place in the classroom, but also in social interactions that involve the wider community. This model reinforces the idea that the community is not only a support, but an active partner in designing, implementing, and evaluating educational activities (Bray, 2016). Community involvement in education has been shown to increase policy effectiveness, increase student retention, and strengthen the relevance of learning to local needs.

Furthermore, community involvement also serves as a reinforcer of cultural identity and a guardian of local values that are important for the formation of students' character. However, a challenge that often arises is the low capacity of communities to read and respond effectively to formal policies (World Bank, 2022). Therefore, there needs to be a more systematic and empowerment-based collaboration framework.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-exploratory design to deeply understand the form, role, and effectiveness of community participation in the implementation of education policies in rural areas. This approach was chosen because it is able to capture the social dynamics and subjective meanings that arise from community involvement in the context of education policy implementation, which cannot be reduced to mere numbers (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### ***Location and Research Subject***

The research location was purposively chosen in one of the rural areas that has an active level of community participation in educational activities. The selection of the location was based on the following criteria: (1) the existence of an education policy that is being actively implemented, (2) community involvement in school activities, and (3) the geographical and social characteristics that represent the rural context in Indonesia. The research subjects include school principals, teachers, community leaders, school committees, parents, and local education officials who are relevant to the policy implementation process in the field.

### ***Data Collection Techniques***

Data collection is carried out through three main techniques:

- 1) In-depth interviews were conducted with key actors such as principals, teachers, and community leaders to explore their experiences, perceptions, and strategies in engaging the community in education policy;
- 2) Participatory observation, used to directly observe forms of community participation in educational activities, both formal (committee meetings, school activities) and non-formal (social support, community initiatives);
- 3) Documentation studies are conducted on policy documents, school meeting minutes, educational activity reports, and student learning achievement data to assess the alignment between policy implementation and the learning outcomes achieved.

### ***Data Analysis Techniques***

Data analysis was carried out thematically, using the approach of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) which includes three stages:

- 1) Data reduction through the selection of important and relevant information from the results of interviews, observations, and documents;
- 2) Presentation of data in the form of descriptive narratives and thematic matrices to map the form and influence of community participation on policy implementation and student learning outcomes;
- 3) Conclusion and verification are carried out through a process of triangulating sources and methods to ensure the validity of the findings.

### ***Data Validity Test***

To ensure the validity and credibility of the data, this study applies the triangulation technique of sources, methods, and time. In addition, member checking was carried out on several main respondents to ensure that the researcher's interpretation was in accordance with the original meaning intended by the informant. The trustworthiness of the data is also maintained through trail audits and transparent documentation of the analysis process.

## **RESEARCH RESULTS**

This study identifies three main themes that represent the form and role of community participation in the implementation of education policies in rural areas, as well as their contribution to improving student learning outcomes. The three themes include: (1) the model of community participation in the implementation of education policies, (2) the factors that strengthen and inhibit participation, and (3) the relationship between community participation and learning outcomes.

### ***Community Participation Model in Policy Implementation***

The results of observations and interviews show that community participation in rural schools is reflected in various forms, both formal and informal. Formal participation can be seen in the involvement of parents and community leaders in school committees, the preparation of school work plans (RKS), and monitoring the implementation of the School Operational Assistance (BOS) program. Meanwhile, informal participation is manifested in the form of mutual cooperation in improving school facilities, moral support for students, and the provision of alternative learning spaces in the home environment.

Principals and teachers admit that the existence of a proactive community is very helpful in the smooth implementation of policies, especially when there are logistical constraints or budget constraints. For example, in the implementation of the national literacy program, the community provides donated reading books and a shared reading room at the village hall. This creates a learning environment that is not limited to formal classrooms.

### ***Factors Reinforcing and Inhibiting Participation***

Effective community participation is influenced by several strengthening factors, such as close social relationships between citizens, inclusive leadership of school principals, and the presence of community leaders who are active in the field of education. In addition, clarity of information about policies and transparent educational outcomes also increases public trust in schools.

However, the study also found a number of inhibiting factors. Among them are low policy literacy among the public, the perception that education is the sole responsibility of the state, and the lack of a structured dialogue forum between schools and communities. In some cases, community involvement is only ceremonial or due to administrative compulsion, not on the basis of collective awareness.

### ***Correlation between Community Participation and Learning Outcomes***

In general, schools with high levels of community participation show better student learning outcomes, especially in terms of attendance, learning engagement, and basic academic values such as literacy and numeracy. For example, schools that involve parents in the home learning reinforcement class program have experienced an increase in the average score of Indonesian and Mathematics by 8-12 points in the past semester.

Community involvement also affects student motivation, because students feel supported by their social environment. Teachers noted increased

discipline, independence, and self-confidence of students who come from families or communities who actively contribute to education. These findings support the theory that a conducive social ecosystem plays an important role in the learning process of students (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

## DISCUSSION

The results show that community participation plays a strategic role in supporting the implementation of education policies in rural areas and significantly contributes to improving student learning outcomes. These findings reinforce the thinking put forward by Bray (2000) and Anderson & Maughan (2021), who state that community involvement not only improves the operational efficiency of schools, but also creates a sense of social ownership over the educational process.

Community participation in the form of the involvement of parents, community leaders, and local institutions seems to be able to fill the gaps in structural weaknesses that often occur in rural schools – such as lack of resources, limited learning facilities, and weak supervision of government programs. For example, in the context of literacy programs, the existence of community reading rooms and donations of local books have been shown to expand students' access to reading materials, as found by Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) who emphasize the importance of socially and culturally supportive learning environments.

However, the effectiveness of this participation does not occur automatically. This study found that the success rate is highly dependent on two main factors: (1) community policy literacy capacity, and (2) school leadership that is able to encourage cross-actor collaboration in an inclusive manner. In cases where the community does not have a sufficient understanding of education policy or is not involved in the planning and decision-making process, participation tends to be symbolic and does not have a direct impact on the quality of education. These findings are in line with the World Bank report (2022) which underlines the need for community empowerment as part of education reform strategies in 3T (frontier, remote, disadvantaged) areas.

Improved student learning outcomes as a result of community involvement also show relevant causal relationships in the context of locally-based education. Students' academic scores, especially in the aspects of literacy and basic numeracy, have increased after parental involvement in the home-learning program. This condition shows that education carried out through synergy between schools and communities has great potential in creating meaningful and contextual learning transformations. This reinforces the importance of implementing a context-sensitive policy approach as recommended by Darling-Hammond et al. (2020), that education policies need to be tailored to local characteristics and capacities to ensure effective implementation.

Conceptually, this discussion also confirms that education policy cannot stand alone without the support of non-state actors. The community-based education model offers an alternative approach to policy implementation that is more dynamic, responsive, and participatory. In the framework of

decentralization of education in Indonesia, national policies need to provide greater space for strengthening the capacity of local communities to become equal partners in the management of education in rural areas.

Thus, this discussion not only highlights the importance of community participation in practice, but also makes a theoretical contribution to the development of collaborative models in education policy. Meaningful participation is not just about attendance, but about engagement based on awareness, capacity, and ownership of the educational process.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This research confirms that community participation has a crucial role in supporting the implementation of effective education policies in rural areas. Through the active involvement of parents, community leaders, and local institutions, education policies are not only implemented administratively, but also lived out as part of a collective commitment to the future of children's education in remote areas. Diverse forms of participation—both formally through school committees and informally through social and cultural support—have been shown to have a positive impact on improving student learning outcomes, particularly in terms of motivation, discipline, and basic academic achievement such as literacy and numeracy.

However, the effectiveness of community participation does not occur automatically, but is greatly influenced by the community's capacity to understand policies, the school's openness to collaboration, and structural support from local governments. Therefore, there is a need to strengthen community capacity through sustainable policy literacy, as well as the creation of collaborative mechanisms that allow communities to be actively and equally involved in the entire education policy cycle—from planning to evaluation.

The main conclusion of this study is that education policies that want to succeed in rural areas are not enough to rely only on a top-down structural approach, but must integrate a community-based approach that respects local potential and makes communities equal partners in the education process. Thus, education can become more inclusive, adaptive, and contextual according to the real needs in the field. These findings make a theoretical contribution to the development of context-based policy implementation models, as well as practical contributions for policy designers and education actors in formulating more effective collaborative strategies in disadvantaged areas.

## **FURTHER STUDY**

Based on the conclusions of this study, future research should explore the development and evaluation of specific models of community-based collaboration in various rural contexts. Further studies could investigate how different socio-cultural environments influence the forms and effectiveness of community participation in education policy implementation. Additionally, examining the long-term impact of policy literacy programs on community engagement and student outcomes would provide valuable insights. Comparative studies between regions with strong and weak community involvement could also help identify key success factors. This would contribute

to designing scalable, adaptable frameworks for participatory education governance in underserved areas.

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