

Research Article

Education Policy as a Participatory Space: Reading Community Engagement Beyond Formal Approaches

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to analyze education policy as a participatory space by examining community involvement outside of formal approaches. The research uses a qualitative approach with a policy study design. Data was collected thru field observations, in-depth interviews with education actors and community members, and a review of relevant policy documents. The research results indicate that community participation in formal education policies is still dominated by procedural and administrative mechanisms, thus not providing adequate space for substantive involvement in decision-making. The relationship between schools and society tends to be hierarchical, which limits the bargaining power of society in determining the direction of education policy. On the other hand, more meaningful community participation is actually developing outside of formal approaches thru contextual and responsive community-based education initiatives that address local needs. This finding confirms that education policy needs to be understood as a social process that demands recognition and integration of community-based educational practices in order to create democratic and sustainable education policies.

Keywords: Education Policy; Community Participation; Community-Based Education; Participatory Policy

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is a social process that not only takes place in formal settings such as schools and universities but also lives and develops within the dynamics of society (Penna, 1979). Therefore, education policy cannot be understood solely as a technocratic administrative product of the state, but rather as a social construct influenced by power relations, cultural values, and the life practices of society (Genelza, 2022). In this context, education policy has the potential to become a participatory space that allows for the involvement of various actors outside the state, including local communities, families, and social organizations (Turkkahraman, 2015). However, educational policy practices in Indonesia are still dominated by formalistic and bureaucratic approaches (Rahman, 2019). Policies are formulated centrally, relying on regulations, national standards, and administrative mechanisms that tend to be top-down (Bjork, 2003). Initial observations by the author across various educational units and policy forums at the local level indicate that community involvement in education policy is generally limited to the implementation stage, rather than the formulation and evaluation processes. (Hall, 2021) Communities are often only involved as implementers of pre-determined programs, such as fulfilling school administrative tasks, providing financial support, or participating symbolically in formal meetings, without adequate space to express their aspirations, criticisms, or alternative ideas (Butterfoss, 2006).

Furthermore, initial observations also indicate that the available participation mechanisms tend to be procedural and formalistic. Education consultation forums, school committees, and public consultations often proceed ceremonially, with pre-determined agendas and decisions. In practice, the voices of the community especially from marginalized groups, indigenous communities, and remote area are less accommodated in the policy documents produced. This condition reinforces the position of society as an object of policy, rather than as a subject with contextual knowledge and a direct interest in the direction of education (Mangez & Hilgers, 2012). As a result, there is a significant gap between education policy and the reality of community needs at the grassroots level. Some policies are not entirely relevant to the local socio-cultural context, so their implementation often faces obstacles or informal adaptations in the field (Pasquini et al., 2013). These initial findings suggest that the dominance of a formalistic approach not only limits the space for public participation but also potentially undermines the effectiveness and legitimacy of the education policy itself.

A formal approach to education policy does indeed play an important role in maintaining uniformity, accountability, and quality control (Salter & Tapper, 2000). However, in a socially, culturally, and geographically pluralistic society, this approach often faces limitations. Overly uniform policies often fail to respond to local needs, disregard educational

practices that are alive in the community, and create a gap between policy and the reality of education at the grassroots level (Warren, 2014).

Beyond formal approaches, there are various forms of community involvement in education that are nonformal and informal. (Tudor, 2013) The role of families in character formation, local communities managing alternative learning spaces, religious organizations transmitting moral and spiritual values, and indigenous groups passing down local knowledge are concrete examples that society has a great capacity and concern for education (Latchem, 2014). These practices demonstrate that education is a collective responsibility, not a state monopoly. Unfortunately, such community involvement often does not receive adequate recognition within the framework of education policy. Community participation tends to be limited to administrative aspects, such as involvement in school committees or financial support, without sufficient space for substantive engagement in decision-making. As a result, education policies risk losing social relevance and cultural legitimacy in the eyes of the public (Thurston et al., 2005).

Theoretically, community participation in education policy can be understood thru the perspectives of participatory democracy and deliberative public policy. (F. Fischer, 1993) Arnstein emphasizes that participation cannot be reduced to symbolic involvement, but must be understood as the redistribution of power in decision-making. (Gea et al., 2023) In line with this, Habermas views public policy as the outcome of a deliberative process ideally built thru an inclusive space of communication between the state and citizens. In the context of education, Freire emphasized the importance of education as a liberating practice grounded in dialog and the lived experiences of the community (Vitale, 2006). A number of community-based education studies also show that substantial community involvement allows for the integration of local knowledge into policies, making education more contextual, relevant, and sustainable, particularly in regions with social diversity and limited access to formal education (G. Fischer et al., 2007).

From an educational democracy perspective, participatory policies are a prerequisite for achieving justice and sustainability in the education system. Meaningful community participation allows education policies to be developed based on real needs, local knowledge, and community aspirations (Rose, 2003). (Thus, policy serves not only as a regulatory instrument but also as a space for dialog, negotiation, and collaboration between the state and citizens (Gea et al., 2023). This issue is becoming increasingly important in the context of marginalized communities, remote areas, and island regions, where limited access to formal education remains a structural problem. In such situations, community-based education initiatives often become an effective alternative solution. Reading community involvement outside of formal approaches becomes a strategic step toward expanding a more inclusive and contextual perspective on education policy (Colclough, 1977).

Based on the description above, this paper aims to analyze education policy as a participatory space by examining forms of community involvement outside of formal approaches, as well as uncovering the potential and challenges of community participation in building democratic, relevant, and sustainable education policies. Although research on education policy and community participation has grown, most studies still frame participation within formal and institutional frameworks, such as the role of school committees, governance mechanisms, and compliance with regulations. Studies specifically examining community involvement outside of formal approaches, including community-based education practices, local knowledge, and community initiatives, are relatively limited and are often positioned as supplementary rather than an integral part of education policy. The research gap highlights the need for a perspective that views education policy not merely as an administrative product of the state, but as a social-participatory arena influenced by the dynamics and practices of community life.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs a qualitative approach with an educational policy study design, (Gregory T. Owen, 2014) aiming to understand educational policy as a participatory space and to examine community involvement beyond formal approaches. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to examine policies not only as regulatory products, but as social processes involving power relations, educational practices, and interactions between state actors and society within a specific context. Research data were obtained thru qualitative observation, in-depth interviews, and document studies (Nafisatur, 2024). Observations and interviews were conducted with education actors, such as educators, education unit managers, community leaders, and community-based education mobilizers, in order to capture community participation practices empirically. Documentary studies involve analyzing policy documents, educational regulations, and relevant previous reports and research to understand the formal policy framework and available spaces for participation. Data analysis was conducted thematically and qualitatively thru the processes of coding, categorization, and reflective interpretation of the data (Colclough, 1977). Data validity is maintained thru source and technique triangulation, comparing findings from observation, interviews, and documentation. The entire research process was conducted while upholding the principles of research ethics, including informed consent from informants, data confidentiality, and the use of data for academic purposes.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Results

Context and characteristics of the research field

This field research was conducted in formal educational institutions and community-based educational practices in areas with diverse social and geographical characteristics. The research involved 15 people, including education unit administrators, educators, community leaders, community education mobilizers, and students' parents. The selection of informants was done purposively, considering their direct involvement in educational practices and policies at the local level. Data was obtained thru observation, in-depth interviews, and a review of relevant education policy and program documents. Initial observation results indicate that education policies at the local level are primarily understood as a set of administrative rules that schools must implement. Meanwhile, the community positions itself as a supporter of program implementation, rather than as an actor involved in formulating policy direction. This finding provides an important context for understanding the form and quality of community participation in educational policy practices. The results of interviews with informants from the school element indicate that formal mechanisms for community participation are indeed available, but their scope of influence is limited. A school administrator stated:

"We always invite parents and school committees to meetings, but usually the program is already determined from above. The meetings are more for conveying policies, not for formulating them together."

This quote reinforces the finding that public participation in education policy tends to be procedural and informative, rather than deliberative. The community is present administratively, but does not hold a strategic position in decision-making. This condition indicates that although the policy framework normatively opens up space for public participation, its implementation is still dominated by administrative logic and structural compliance. Community participation is reduced to a supplementary mechanism in the policy cycle, rather than an integral part of the decision-making process. In this context, participatory forums like school committee meetings function more as spaces for legitimizing established policies, rather than as arenas for dialog and collaborative policy formulation.

Furthermore, the interview results indicate an imbalance in the power relationship between school actors and the community. Schools are positioned as implementers of state policy, while the community is placed as supporters expected to adapt to the programs that have been designed. This kind of relationship limits the community's opportunity to convey contextual knowledge, local experiences, and aspirations that are truly relevant to the development of education policy at the grassroots level. The impact of this procedural pattern of participation is evident in the low sense of ownership among the public regarding education policies. Some informants stated that the policy is often perceived as a "school matter" or a "government matter," rather than a shared responsibility. As a result, community participation tends to be reactive and temporary, limited to meeting administrative needs or providing incidental support, without long-term involvement in policy development.

This finding also reveals a gap between education policy and the reality of community needs. Policies formulated top-down are less sensitive to local social, economic, and cultural conditions, thus requiring informal adjustments in their implementation. These adaptations are often made discreetly by schools and communities so that policies can still function, even if they are not fully in line with formal regulations. Overall, the results of this study confirm that community participation in formal education policy remains at the procedural and symbolic level. This condition strengthens the argument that education policies have not fully functioned as participatory spaces. This finding also opens up space for further analysis on how community engagement practices outside of formal approaches actually lead to more substantive and contextual forms of participation in supporting the sustainability of education.

Forms of community participation in formal education policy

Within the framework of formal education policy, community participation is normatively positioned as one of the essential elements in the administration of education. Various educational regulations provide space for community involvement thru institutional mechanisms, such as school committees, consultative forums, and cooperation between schools and parents. However, the extent to which this space for participation functions substantively in educational policy practice at the local level still requires empirical examination. Therefore, this section presents field findings regarding the form, character, and quality of community participation in formal education policies as they occur in practice. The interview results indicate that community participation in formal education policies generally occurs thru procedural mechanisms, such as involvement in school committees, formal meetings, and support for the implementation of school programs. Most informants assessed that this space for participation served more as a means of socializing and legitimizing pre-determined policies, rather than as a space for dialog and joint decision-making. Community aspirations are rarely substantively accommodated, whether in program formulation, the development of contextual curricula, or in the process of evaluating education policies. Unlike the pattern of participation within a formal framework, interviews with community education

organizers revealed that community involvement outside of formal approaches was more active, flexible, and contextual. Community-based education initiatives emerged as a direct response to the limitations of formal policies in reaching citizens' educational needs. A community education activist said:

“If we wait for official policies, many children will have already dropped out of school. So, we started by learning in residents' homes, with whatever we had, as long as the children kept learning”.

The quote affirms that community participation does not always depend on a formal policy framework, but rather arises from collective concern and awareness of educational needs at the local level. In this context, the community not only serves as a program supporter but also as an educational actor actively designing, implementing, and managing alternative learning practices.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that although formal participation mechanisms are in place, the relationship between schools and communities remains hierarchical. Schools tend to position themselves as implementers of state policy, while communities are placed in a position of following and adapting to decisions that have already been made. This pattern of relations limits the bargaining position of communities in influencing the direction and substance of education policy. This condition shows that education policy has not yet fully functioned as a participatory space that allows for the exchange of ideas and equal decision-making between the state and citizens. These findings reinforce the research objective of reading education policy as a social arena that is still dominated by formalistic logic, while also showing that more substantive community participation actually develops outside of the formal approach.

In contrast to formal participation, the study found that community involvement outside of formal approaches was actually more active and meaningful. Community-based educational practices, such as alternative learning classes, home tutoring, literacy activities, and religious and cultural education, have grown in response to the limitations of formal policies in meeting community needs. These initiatives are managed independently by the community, utilizing local resources and strong social relationships. Informants from community leaders emphasized that these non-formal educational practices are more flexible, contextual, and relevant to the daily lives of the community. These findings show that community participation is not only supportive but also productive in creating alternative learning spaces that directly contribute to fulfilling citizens' right to education. This condition shows that education policy has not fully functioned as a participatory space that allows for the exchange of ideas and equal decision-making between the state and citizens. These findings reinforce the research objective of reading education policy as a social arena that is still dominated by formalistic logic, while also confirming the limitations of community participation in the framework of formal education policy.

Education policy as an arena for social negotiation

In practice, education policy does not always proceed as a linear instruction from the state to educational units, but rather undergoes a process of interpretation and adaptation at the local level. Interactions between schools, communities, and policy actors give rise to dynamics that show that education policy often becomes an arena for social negotiation. Therefore, this subsection presents field findings on how education policy is negotiated and adapted in the social context of the community. The results of the field analysis show that in practice, education policy is not always implemented linearly in accordance with official documents, but undergoes a process of negotiation and adaptation at the local level. Schools and communities often make informal adjustments so that policies can be implemented and remain relevant to local social, economic, and cultural conditions. This adaptation process indicates that education policy is not entirely technocratic in nature, but operates as a social arena involving interaction, compromise, and participatory practices, even though this is not fully recognized within the formal framework. These findings are reinforced by the results of interviews with community leaders who describe how education policy is negotiated informally in everyday practice. One community leader informant explained:

“The rules from above sometimes do not suit our conditions here. In the end, schools and communities simply adjust to each other so that things can continue to run smoothly, even though not everything is written in the rules.”

The results of this interview show that policy adaptation is not merely a form of deviation from regulations, but rather a practical strategy employed by local actors to bridge the tension between formal policy demands and the realities of community life. In this context, the community and schools play an active role as agents who interpret and adapt policies according to local needs. Overall, these findings reinforce the perspective that education policy cannot be understood solely as a product of state administration, but as a social process influenced by community relations, practices, and knowledge. Thus, community involvement outside of formal approaches is not merely complementary, but an integral part of the dynamics of education policy and contributes to the sustainability of policy implementation at the local level.

The potential and challenges of community participation

Community participation in education policy not only presents opportunities, but also poses various challenges in practice. Understanding these potentials and challenges is important in assessing the extent to which community involvement can contribute to inclusive and sustainable education policy. Therefore, this subsection outlines field findings related to the strategic potential and obstacles faced in community participation outside of formal approaches.

Based on the research results, community participation outside of formal approaches has great potential to increase the relevance and sustainability of education policy. Community-based involvement allows education to be tailored to the real needs of citizens and to reach groups that are underserved by the formal system. However, this study also found challenges in the form of a lack of policy recognition of community education practices and the absence of clear integration mechanisms between formal policies and community initiatives. Although community-based education practices are growing, the interview results show that there is limited recognition from formal policies. One of the parents of a student said:

“Learning activities in this village help our children, but they are never counted or recognized. It is as if only school education is considered education.”

The results of this interview confirm one of the main challenges of community participation, namely the lack of adequate policy recognition of non-formal and informal education practices that exist in the community. The results of this study show that the research objectives have been achieved, namely to reveal that education policy has the potential to be a participatory space, but its implementation still tends to be formalistic. Substantive community participation has actually developed outside of the formal approach, thus requiring stronger recognition and integration within the framework of democratic and sustainable education policy. Overall, the results of these interviews reinforce the findings that education policy has not yet fully functioned as a participatory space, especially within the formal framework. Instead, substantive community participation has developed outside of the formal approach through community initiatives and local adaptations.

3.2 Discussion

The results of this study indicate that community participation in formal education policy is still dominated by procedural and administrative mechanisms, even though normatively, space for participation has been provided through various education regulations. This condition is in line with Arnstein's (2007) classic study on the ladder of participation which remains relevant in contemporary policy analysis where community involvement in formal forums without decision-making authority is placed at the level of tokenism. In the context of education, this situation indicates that community participation has not yet reached the stage of power redistribution that allows citizens to influence the direction and substance of education policy (Arnstein & Arnstein, 2007). The dominance of bureaucratic and accountability-based approaches in education policy, as seen in this study, is also in line with recent education policy studies. Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2012), through the policy enactment framework, emphasize that education policy is never implemented mechanically but is interpreted and negotiated by local actors according to the social and institutional context. A similar pattern can be seen in practices at the local level, where schools and communities make various informal adjustments to bridge the gap between formal regulations and the realities of social life (Ball et al., 2012).

The hierarchical relationship between schools and communities as described in this study reinforces criticism of the lack of deliberative space in education policy. From Habermas' perspective, democratic public policy should be developed through inclusive and equal communication spaces. However, education policy practices show that such deliberative spaces have not been fully institutionalized. This condition is in line with the research by (Honig & Rainey, 2020) Honig and Rainey (2020), which shows that the implementation of education policy at the local level often depends on social interaction and informal negotiations, because formal mechanisms have not been able to accommodate the complexity of the local context (Honig & Rainey, 2020). The development of community participation outside of formal approaches shows that community-based educational practices actually present a more substantive and contextual form of involvement. This is in line with research by (Tikly, 2010), which emphasizes that in contexts with limited resources and social diversity, community-based educational initiatives play an important role in expanding access and increasing the relevance of education. From a critical education perspective, this condition is in line with Freire's thinking, which emphasizes that meaningful education must depart from the life experiences of the community and be built through dialogue and collective consciousness.

This trend is also evident in studies of education policy in Indonesia. Munadi (2013) shows that community participation in education policy is still consultative in nature and does not yet touch on strategic decision-making processes. Anwar (2022) emphasizes that the role of school committees is more as administrative intermediaries between schools and communities, so that substantive deliberation is still limited. Meanwhile, (Shepherd, 2014) shows that school committee participation generally focuses on the implementation of education programs, rather than on the policy

formulation stage. These studies reinforce the argument that the lack of policy recognition of community-based education is one of the main challenges in developing participatory education policies.

Thus, education policy cannot be understood solely as a product of state administration, but rather as a social process involving power relations, local knowledge, and community practices. Substantive community participation has not been fully accommodated within the formal framework, while participatory practices have developed through community initiatives. Therefore, strengthening democratic and sustainable education policies requires a reorientation of policies that not only open up space for participation in a normative sense, but also recognize and integrate community-based educational practices as an integral part of the education system.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that education policy at the local level has not yet fully functioned as a participatory space that allows for substantive community involvement in the decision-making process. Although various regulations have normatively provided mechanisms for participation, practices in the field show that community involvement in formal education policy is still dominated by procedural and administrative patterns. Community participation tends to be limited to formal forums and program implementation support, without sufficient authority to influence the direction, substance, and evaluation of education policy. The results of the study also show that there is still a hierarchical relationship between schools and the community, in which schools are positioned as implementers of state policy, while the community plays an administrative supporting role. This condition limits the space for deliberation and weakens the bargaining position of the community in education policy. As a result, the policies produced are often less responsive to the social, cultural, and economic needs of the local community, requiring informal adaptation and adjustment in their implementation. On the other hand, this study found that more substantive community participation actually developed outside of formal approaches through community-based education practices. These initiatives demonstrate the community's ability to act as active, contextual, and responsive educational actors in response to the needs of citizens, especially in reaching groups that are underserved by the formal education system. However, these community education practices still face challenges in the form of a lack of recognition and integration into the formal education policy framework. Based on these findings, this study emphasizes that education policy needs to be understood not merely as a product of state administration, but as a social process involving power relations, local knowledge, and community practices. Strengthening democratic and sustainable education policy requires a reorientation of policy that not only opens up space for participation in a normative sense, but also recognizes, integrates, and empowers community involvement as active subjects in the entire education policy cycle.

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