Free but Not Fair? Analyzing the Implementation of Free Education Policy in Malang City through a Justice-Oriented Framework

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Abstract

This study examines the implementation of a free education policy in Malang City, Indonesia, and its implications for equity in access and outcomes. Although the policy guarantees uniform financial assistance for all students in public elementary and junior high schools, its execution reveals substantial gaps between the promise of equality and the lived experiences of students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Based on qualitative data gathered through interviews, document analysis, and field observations, the study identifies three major challenges. First, the interpretation of "free education" varies across schools, leading to inconsistencies in application and confusion among beneficiaries. Second, limitations in bureaucratic coordination, technical capacity, and communication contribute to inefficiencies in fund distribution and reporting. Third, the flat-rate subsidy fails to account for indirect costs borne disproportionately by low-income families, such as transportation, uniforms, and extracurricular participation. The findings suggest that the policy's universal design, while administratively efficient and politically popular, does not ensure equitable outcomes. Without mechanisms for targeting or flexibility, students most in need may continue to face barriers to full participation in schooling. To address these issues, the study recommends context-sensitive reforms that combine universal access with additional support for vulnerable groups. It also calls for stronger institutional feedback loops and school-level autonomy in addressing local needs. In conclusion, achieving meaningful educational access requires a shift in perspective—from providing the same for all, to ensuring success for those who need more.

1. Introduction

Education is a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of societal development, recognized globally and enshrined in national constitutions such as Indonesia's 1945 Constitution. Governments are mandated to ensure inclusive and equitable access to quality education, as emphasized in Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) (Romlah et al., 2023). However, the realization of these ideals is often constrained by structural and contextual challenges, particularly within decentralized governance systems and in rapidly urbanizing secondary cities in Indonesia (Senatama, 2023), (Desimaria & Rahayu, 2022). The concept of

"free education" has been widely adopted as a policy instrument to ease household financial burdens and increase student enrollment and retention rates (Romlah et al., 2023). Yet, the implementation of such policies often fails to consider existing socio-economic disparities and may unintentionally perpetuate educational inequality—especially when financial support is distributed uniformly, without regard to students' economic backgrounds (Fadhil & Sabic-El-Rayess, 2020), (Karolina et al., 2021), (Rosser et al., 2011).

This study focuses on the implementation of the free education policy in Malang City, Indonesia—a city historically dubbed the "City of Education" (*Kota Pendidikan*). The local government implemented the policy through Mayor Regulation No. 50/2013, channeling financial support directly to schools via the regional budget (APBD). While the policy aims to eliminate financial barriers to education, its actual impact on low-income families remains unclear.

While existing studies on education policy implementation in Indonesia often concentrate on administrative compliance, financial distribution, and technical outcomes (Muhdi, 2019), they rarely engage with normative questions of fairness, justice, and equity—particularly in how policies such as "free education" operate in real-world settings. This gap is critical, as universal provisions may inadvertently obscure structural disadvantages, failing to meet the differentiated needs of students (Romlah et al., 2023), (Pujiastuti et al., 2017). This study seeks to address this blind spot by applying Edward III's policy implementation model—focusing on communication, resources, dispositions, and bureaucracy—alongside Grindle's contextual model, enriched by a social justice framework. Examining the case of Malang, the research uncovers how local dynamics of decentralization influence whether free education mitigates, reproduces, or transforms social inequalities (Rosser et al., 2011), (Desimaria & Rahayu, 2022). By integrating a social justice lens, particularly aligned with Rawlsian and egalitarian principles of equity in education (Ribeiro, 2014), this article argues for a shift from uniform support models toward targeted, needs-based education financing that better addresses localized inequality.

2. Methods

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive case study approach to examine how the free education policy is implemented in Malang City. As noted by Yin (2018), case studies are particularly well-suited for investigating contemporary phenomena within their real-life contexts, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly defined. Given the complexity of public policy implementation in decentralized settings, this method allows a holistic and contextual analysis. A qualitative approach further enables the researcher to capture participants' perspectives, institutional behaviors, and social dynamics that are often missed in quantitative models (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

Research Setting and Case Context
The research was conducted in Malang City, East Java, Indonesia—widely known as a center of education and public sector reform. The policy under examination is Mayor Regulation No. 50 of 2013, which mandates the provision of free education at the basic level through local government funding (Anggaran Pendapatan dan Belanja Daerah, APBD). The implementation agency is the Department of Education and Culture of Malang City, with public schools serving as the operational frontlines of policy execution.

Data Collection Techniques
Consistent with Creswell and Poth (2018), multiple data sources were utilized to enable triangulation and ensure data richness. First, in-depth interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including government officials, school principals, and education observers, all selected purposively based on their relevance to the implementation process. Second, document analysis was carried out on official regulations, budgetary documents, planning instruments, and internal reports. Third, direct field observation was conducted in selected schools to observe how the policy is enacted in everyday educational settings.

Analytical Framework
The analysis incorporates two prominent models of policy implementation. The first is Edward III's Four-Factor Model, which identifies communication, resources, disposition of implementers, and bureaucratic structure as key variables influencing policy outcomes

(Edward III & Sharkansky, 1978). The second is Grindle's Content-Context-Outcome Framework, which considers how policy content interacts with political, administrative, and socio-economic contexts to produce varied implementation results (Grindle, 1980). These frameworks are further complemented by a **social justice perspective**, particularly drawing on the distinction between equality and equity in education, which underscores the importance of differentiated policy responses based on socioeconomic status (Gewirtz, 1998; OECD, 2012).

Data Analysis Process

Following Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), data were analyzed through an interactive, iterative model consisting of three key stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Coding was performed manually using a hybrid strategy: deductive coding based on the theoretical constructs and inductive coding to capture emergent themes from the field. The process ensured both theoretical alignment and empirical sensitivity to the lived realities of policy actors and beneficiaries.

3. Results asnd Discussion

This section presents the empirical findings of the study, derived from in-depth interviews, document reviews, and direct field observations. The analysis is structured into three major themes reflecting both the policy implementation framework and the local realities: (1) interpretation of policy content, (2) contextual and institutional dynamics, and (3) equity concerns in uniform policy provision.

Interpretation and Application of Policy Content

The analysis of Mayor Regulation No. 50/2013 and its administrative guidelines confirms that the free education policy in Malang City provides uniform monthly financial assistance of IDR 75,000 for elementary and IDR 105,000 for junior high school students. This support is offered to all students enrolled in public basic education, regardless of their socioeconomic background, and is intended to complement the national BOS (School Operational Assistance) program by closing funding gaps at the local level.

At the policy design level, this universal approach was driven by two administrative motives: simplifying implementation and avoiding the stigma often associated with targeted assistance. Interview data from the Department of Education and Culture emphasized that the uniformity of support helps streamline budgeting processes and reduces potential conflict over eligibility criteria.

However, findings from interviews with school-level actors and direct field observations point to significant ambiguity in how the policy is understood and applied at the school level. One school administrator noted:

"We receive the funds regularly, but there's no specific instruction on whether it must go directly to students or to support school facilities. That part is interpreted differently by each school."

This variation was confirmed in field visits to several public schools. Two institutions allocated the funds to subsidize student activity fees, while another prioritized classroom infrastructure improvements. Such discretion in fund allocation has resulted in inconsistent implementation, despite a formally uniform policy design.

Furthermore, the interviews revealed concerns regarding the adequacy of the financial assistance, particularly for students from lower-income families. Several principals highlighted that the support does not fully cover indirect educational costs, such as uniforms, transportation, and extracurricular activities. One principal shared:

"The amount helps, but it's minimal—especially for those who struggle to afford lunch or transport. The gap is still real."

Another layer of complexity emerged from the perception of parents. Despite the term "free education," there is a widespread belief that it equates to zero financial burden, which often leads to unrealistic expectations and dissatisfaction. A parent committee member reflected:

"Parents were told education is free, but they still have to pay for school events or support funds. It's confusing, and some feel misled."

These findings suggest a disconnect between policy communication, interpretation, and practice. While the intent and legal framework are clearly articulated in official documents, their translation into operational procedures varies significantly across schools. This results in policy slippage, where the outcomes experienced by beneficiaries diverge from those anticipated in the policy's formal articulation. In short, the content of the free education policy, although seemingly straightforward, becomes fluid in practice due to implementation discretion, communication gaps, and the unresolved tension between regulatory clarity and contextual interpretation.

Contextual and Institutional Dynamics

The implementation of Malang City's free education policy is deeply embedded within its institutional architecture and local political landscape. Consistent with Grindle's (1980) policy context model, the interaction between political commitment, bureaucratic capability, and stakeholder coordination significantly shapes how the policy is translated on the ground.

A review of municipal education planning documents and annual budget allocations reveals a consistent commitment to maintaining the program. The policy continues to receive fiscal support through the regional development agenda, signaling that political will—particularly from the mayor's office—has been instrumental in keeping the policy afloat across administrative terms. However, interview data from education office staff and school administrators point to technical and institutional constraints that affect implementation quality. One education officer acknowledged:

"There are still schools that submit reports late or struggle with budget breakdowns. Sometimes it affects when the next transfer is approved."

This issue was echoed during field observations, where administrative staff in smaller schools described relying on outdated templates or informal peer assistance due to limited human resources. A junior high school clerk explained:

"When guidelines are revised, we're not always updated immediately. We ask other schools what to do. That slows things down."

These challenges are partly attributed to the multi-tiered bureaucracy through which the policy operates. From the education department to district coordinators, school management teams, and BOSDA administrators, each layer introduces a point of accountability—but also potential for miscommunication and delay. While this decentralized structure offers monitoring functions, it also imposes reporting burdens, particularly for under-resourced schools. Additionally, interviews with school principals and committee members highlighted occasional misalignment between policy expectations and operational realities. Some noted discrepancies between the education office's directives and the practical capacities of schools. As one school leader shared:

"There are times we're told to allocate the funds a certain way, but the school's priorities are different. We follow the rules, but we wish there were more space for adjustment."

Communication gaps were also noted—especially concerning the clarity of allowable expenditures and fund usage boundaries. Several actors, including parent representatives, mentioned that they were not always informed about fund allocation timelines or expenditure categories. This lack of transparency at the community level has contributed to uncertainty and uneven trust in the policy process.

Moreover, while city legislators (DPRD) are nominally involved in policy oversight, there is little evidence of structured feedback mechanisms between schools and policymakers. As a result, field-level actors—principals, teachers, and parents—have limited avenues to influence or recalibrate the policy based on evolving school needs. The implementation remains largely

top-down, with minimal participatory input, which restricts the policy's adaptability in diverse school contexts. In summary, while strong political endorsement and formal institutional support have ensured the policy's continuity, its operational execution is challenged by administrative rigidity, uneven communication, and limited local agency. These factors collectively contribute to gaps between policy intent and practical delivery, underscoring the need for more flexible, feedback-oriented implementation models.

Equity Challenges in Uniform Policy Provision

A key finding of this study concerns the tension between equality and equity embedded within the free education policy's design. Although the program is widely referred to as "pendidikan gratis" (free education), its practical interpretation and impact differ significantly across socioeconomic lines. The policy offers identical subsidies to all students enrolled in public elementary and junior high schools, regardless of family income or vulnerability status.

While this non-targeted approach has simplified administration and ensured universal coverage, it has also raised equity concerns among school stakeholders. Interviews with teachers and school committee members repeatedly highlighted that students from economically disadvantaged households struggled to benefit fully from the program. One elementary school teacher remarked:

"For students from better-off families, the support is just a bonus. For poorer ones, it doesn't even cover transport or food, which are their main worries."

Such economic gaps were further observed in low-income area schools. Field notes documented uneven participation in extracurricular activities—where some students quietly opted out of school events or clubs due to the inability to afford transportation, uniforms, or additional fees. Teachers acknowledged this pattern informally, noting that financial barriers persisted despite the "free" label.

Additionally, the perception of fairness emerged as a recurring theme. A school committee member posed a pointed question:

"If a government employee's child and a vegetable seller's child receive the same amount, is that really fair?"

This reflection underscores a fundamental misalignment between formal equality and social equity. The uniform design, while inclusive in theory, failed to respond proportionally to differentiated student needs in practice. The absence of socioeconomic classification or targeting mechanisms has resulted in what some informants described as "equal treatment, unequal outcomes."

However, discussions around adopting a tiered subsidy system—where students from lower-income backgrounds would receive higher support—were met with caution and institutional hesitation. Several school principals expressed concern about the risk of stigmatization and administrative complexity. One principal noted:

"We're open to adjusting support, but how do we decide who deserves more without making students feel singled out?"

This sentiment reflects a broader policy dilemma: while the intent to ensure fairness is recognized, the social and administrative capacity to implement a differentiated model remains underdeveloped. Additionally, document analysis revealed no existing instruments or data systems that would allow for systematic socioeconomic profiling of students, thus reinforcing the preference for universalism despite its limitations.

In essence, the findings suggest that while the free education policy has expanded basic access and reduced financial strain for many families, its blanket design under-serves those who need it most. The absence of flexibility and differentiation has led to a situation where equity remains rhetorical rather than operational. Without a shift toward needs-based resource allocation, the policy risks reinforcing existing educational inequalities under the guise of fairness.

Discussion

The implementation of free education policies in developing countries often reveals a persistent tension between intentions of inclusion and the realities of structural inequity. This study of the free education policy in Malang City, Indonesia, demonstrates how a well-intentioned, politically supported, and administratively functional policy may still fall short of delivering fair outcomes when viewed through a justice-oriented lens. Drawing upon policy implementation frameworks (Edward III and Grindle) and social justice theory (Rawls, Gewirtz, OECD), this discussion reflects on three core issues: policy ambiguity and discretion, bureaucratic friction, and the limitations of universalism in addressing equity.

Policy Interpretation, Discretion, and Slippage (Revised)

The first thematic finding—variation in policy interpretation—demonstrates the dynamics described by Lipsky's (1980) theory of *street-level bureaucracy*, where frontline implementers exercise discretion due to vague policy directives, limited resources, and contextual pressures. In the case of Malang's free education policy, although the policy formally mandates financial support for all public school students, the lack of detailed implementation guidelines has led to considerable variation in how schools allocate funds. Some prioritize direct student support, while others channel the resources toward broader institutional needs. This phenomenon mirrors the discretionary behavior of local bureaucrats found in Indonesia's forestry sector, where frontline actors adapted national policies to align with local priorities and administrative constraints (Permadi et al., 2022), (Ota, 2022).

As Grindle (1980) posits, policy implementation is shaped as much by context as by content. Local actors interpret and apply national mandates through the lens of their institutional realities. In Malang, discretion was exercised in ways that reflected both resource availability and subjective priorities, similar to patterns observed in education systems globally (Oliveira & Peixoto, 2021). However, this flexibility also produced inconsistencies, undermining the policy's equity goals. Moreover, the terminology "free education" holds symbolic meaning for different stakeholders. While the public often perceives it as full cost coverage, implementers may interpret it narrowly as basic tuition support. This misalignment fuels disillusionment and contributes to policy slippage. As Iskandar and Alwi (2021) argue, discretion can become a coping mechanism when rigid bureaucratic procedures are impractical, but without clear communication and guidance, it risks reinforcing inequities and confusion. In line with this, Evans (2020) emphasizes that discretion should not be seen solely as non-compliance but as an adaptive response to ambiguous policy environments. Therefore, the variation observed in Malang is not necessarily a failure, but a reflection of deeper governance dynamics that require clearer guidelines and participatory frameworks for interpretation.

Bureaucratic Structure, Capacity, and Implementation Quality (Revised)

The second thematic insight concerns bureaucratic dynamics and the structural factors that shape implementation outcomes. As Edward III (1980) emphasizes, effective policy implementation relies on four key variables: communication, resources, disposition, and bureaucratic structure. Although the free education policy in Malang benefits from consistent political and fiscal backing, its implementation quality is constrained by administrative fragmentation and capacity limitations.

Malang's multi-tiered education governance—from the mayor's office to the education department, subdistrict units, and schools—aims to enhance oversight. However, in practice, this structure often leads to delays, duplication, and confusion, especially in financial reporting. Similar findings were reported in the implementation of vocational education policies in East Java, where fragmented coordination and unclear responsibilities among stakeholders resulted in an "implementation gap" between policy design and operational delivery (Maharani et al., 2024).

Smaller schools in Malang frequently face compliance burdens, especially when faced with policy changes introduced without sufficient technical support. This mirrors patterns identified in the national character education policy, where implementers at school level lacked the human and infrastructural resources to translate mandates into meaningful practices (Lobud et al., 2025). Furthermore, bureaucratic procedures often rely on unfriendly templates and rigid reporting systems. As a result, teachers and administrators turn to informal peer networks for support, revealing a trust deficit in formal communication

structures (Ramadhan et al., 2023).

A critical gap is the absence of embedded monitoring and evaluation systems. Although the local legislature plays a role in budgetary approval, there is no participatory feedback mechanism to incorporate frontline insights. This finding aligns with research from the Smart Indonesia Program, which shows that lack of evaluation tools hampers responsiveness and weakens policy adaptability (Tadung & Triawan, 2022). Without structured feedback loops, policies risk becoming rigid instruments, unresponsive to the complex realities of frontline implementation.

Equality, Equity, and the Justice Gap

The most significant issue emerging from this study is the tension between formal equality in policy design and substantive equity in outcomes. Although Malang's free education policy ensures uniform assistance for all students, the real costs of schooling—transportation, meals, uniforms, and extracurricular participation—are unevenly distributed. For lower-income families, these indirect costs remain significant barriers, despite the elimination of tuition fees.

From a justice-oriented perspective, John Rawls' theory of justice as fairness insists that policy should improve the position of the least advantaged in society (Qingfu, 2006), (Beattie, 1982), (Ribeiro, 2014). Uniform support fails this principle, particularly when it results in regressive outcomes. Field data confirms that students who most need financial assistance often receive the least effective benefit, due to the absence of differentiated targeting or tiered support.

While educators have proposed needs-based models, concerns over stigmatization, social labeling, and administrative feasibility persist. These challenges are common in collectivist societies like Indonesia, where equity-based targeting can be politically and culturally sensitive (Fadhil & Sabic-El-Rayess, 2020). However, universalism and equity need not be mutually exclusive. As noted in recent policy comparisons in Southeast Asia, hybrid models—combining universal tuition coverage with targeted benefits like nutritional assistance or transport vouchers—have shown promise, as in Vietnam and Malaysia (Supianto et al., 2023).

Ultimately, the resistance to policy differentiation reflects a deeper discomfort with acknowledging inequality. As Rawls argues, pursuing fairness sometimes requires confronting uncomfortable truths about who benefits and who remains excluded under policies framed as equal (Latifah et al., 2024). Without reflexivity and structural courage, education policies risk becoming nominally inclusive but substantively exclusionary.

Toward Justice-Oriented Policy Reforms

This study underscores the need for educational policy in Indonesia to shift from symbolic universalism toward more justice-oriented, context-sensitive reform. Three key recommendations emerge to advance this agenda.

First, education policy should provide schools with structured autonomy to innovate in addressing local equity needs. A potential mechanism is the creation of "equity blocks"—discretionary funding pools that schools can allocate to support economically vulnerable students without resorting to stigmatizing means-testing. Evidence from comparative studies in Indonesia and Malaysia shows that locally responsive equity policies—when combined with sufficient support—can increase student participation and address regional disparities in access (Supianto et al., 2023).

Second, the government should adopt or refine social vulnerability indicators to guide progressive resource allocation. These indicators could include anonymized income brackets, geographic poverty mapping, or school-level deprivation indices. Similar models have been applied successfully in Vietnam and in climate vulnerability assessments across Southeast Asia, providing usable frameworks for identifying high-need areas without breaching privacy (Yusuf & Francisco, 2009).

Third, policy reform must embed institutional learning and participatory feedback mechanisms. Empowering teachers, parents, and civil society to participate in the monitoring and co-production of education outcomes enhances both policy legitimacy and responsiveness. This aligns with regional insights that highlight the need for ongoing public involvement and flexible reform pathways, particularly where political or infrastructural constraints limit top-down delivery (Sjöholm, 2002).

Finally, the broader discourse on "free education" must evolve. Instead of asking whether

education is free, policymakers and the public must consider: *for whom is education truly accessible, and under what conditions?* As emphasized in Indonesian education literature, true justice is not defined by the absence of formal costs alone, but by the presence of equitable opportunity and support mechanisms (As'ad et al., 2024). Ensuring that every child has the capacity—not just the right—to learn requires political will, institutional courage, and a commitment to justice as a living principle in policy practice.

4. Conclusion

The case of Malang City's free education policy reveals the complex intersection between well-intentioned public service delivery and the persistent realities of educational inequality. While the policy is politically supported, clearly formulated, and financially sustained through local government budgets, its implementation demonstrates that uniformity in access does not automatically translate into fairness in outcomes.

The study has shown that schools vary in interpreting and applying the policy, resulting in inconsistent experiences for students and families. Bureaucratic layers, unclear communication, and limited institutional capacity have further widened the implementation gap, reinforcing what policy scholars refer to as the distance between *policy-on-paper* and *policy-in-practice*. Most notably, the absence of differentiation in subsidy allocation has left many students from lower-income backgrounds unable to overcome indirect educational costs—such as transport, meals, and participation in school activities.

Viewed through a justice-oriented framework, this policy reflects a paradigm of equality in distribution, yet lacks responsiveness to context-specific needs. In doing so, it inadvertently perpetuates educational disadvantage under the appearance of inclusion. The findings align with broader critiques in education policy literature that warn against symbolic universalism—where the optics of fairness are maintained, but the outcomes remain inequitable.

To advance educational justice in decentralized contexts like Malang, reforms must embrace flexibility, contextual adaptation, and institutional reflexivity. Policy adjustments—such as tiered funding, equity-based school allocations, and participatory monitoring—can move beyond the limits of a one-size-fits-all model. Justice in education must be reframed not merely as the removal of fees, but as the creation of real, equal opportunities for participation and success. In the end, this study reinforces a critical question for all education policy makers: Is the promise of "free education" truly free—*and for whom*? The pursuit of equitable education requires policies that are designed with, and for, those who are most often left behind.

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