

Reconceptualization of school readiness: neoliberal paradigm and privatization in early childhood education

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Abstract

Privatization and neoliberalism have significantly impacted educational policies, exacerbating inequalities in access to education, particularly for children from low-socioeconomic backgrounds. This study investigated the effects of these policies on access, quality, and character development at TK Cendani, Bandung. Employing a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through observation and interviews and analyzed using Grounded Theory. The findings revealed a paradoxical interplay between inclusivity and exclusivity within the education system. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds were often denied equitable opportunities, leading to discriminatory practices that hindered their development. Teachers' needs frequently took precedence over students', resulting in an imbalanced teaching and learning environment. Moreover, the proliferation of elite schools accessible only to children from affluent families further exacerbated educational disparities. These results underscore the necessity for a more inclusive educational policy that harmonizes academic achievement with the development of children's character.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, the dynamics of early childhood education (ECE) have undergone significant transformation due to the dominant influence of privatization and neoliberalism, which has had a broad impact on accessibility, quality, and educational goals (Ball, 2007, p. 14; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). The concept of privatization, which facilitates the involvement of the private sector in providing educational services, opens up various opportunities for the public to access a wider range of educational services and facilities that may be of higher quality. (Levin & Belfield, 2003). However, in many cases, privatization has widened the gap between different socioeconomic groups, as revealed by (Gupta, 2014). When education becomes a commodity that can be purchased, access to quality education often becomes a privilege for families with adequate financial capacity (Harvey, 2005b). This phenomenon has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, where restrictions on activities and a decline in people's income have caused many families from the lower and middle socioeconomic classes to face increasing difficulties in financing their children's education, as explained by (Tabulawa, 2010)

This inequality demonstrates that privatization not only affects the quality of education but also deepens inequities in access to education (Verger et al., 2016a, p. 27). On the other hand, neoliberalism, with its emphasis on the development of individual competencies and increased competitiveness, has directed early childhood education policies towards a greater focus on academic achievement and competition (Hervey, 2005). While this approach may improve children's academic outcomes, there are serious concerns about the neglect of other important aspects such as character formation, social values, and ethics (Ball, 2012a). A study by (Mulya, 2016) underlines that an education orientation that is overly focused on developing academic competencies without sufficient attention to instilling moral and spiritual values can have negative impacts on children's personal development. Children may face an increased risk of apathy, low self-esteem, and difficulties in adapting to their social environment, as a result of the neglect of character formation (Brown et al., 2008a)

Furthermore, educational policies often produce unintended consequences, both planned and unplanned (Brown et al., 2008c). According to (Brown et al., 2008c) policy outcomes are not always accurate due to various factors that are often not transparent in their implementation. One key variable that often leads to discrepancies between designed policies and achieved outcomes is the local context, which includes cultural norms, social values, and the specific needs of communities in each region (Nganga & Kambutu, 2019). (Ball, 2012a) indicates that unique local contexts can influence the implementation of educational policies, and mismatches between policy and local context often result in unintended consequences such as increased exclusivity and inequity in access to education (Gupta, 2014). (Gupta, 2014) clarifies that the implementation of policies that do not consider the local context can exacerbate inequalities in the education system (Tabulawa, 2010)

In Indonesia, educational disparities based on socioeconomic status and gender have been exacerbated by the dominance of private education systems, resulting in children from low-income families often lacking equal access to quality education (Muttaqin, 2018). (Lamsal & Maharjan, 2017) reveal that this exclusive private education system widens educational inequalities, as children from poor families are often marginalized in terms of access and quality of education (Nsamenang & Tchombe, 2017.). Although the Indonesian government has made various efforts to address this disparity, many children and women continue to face discrimination in accessing education, primarily due to the exclusivity system that reinforces inequalities based on socioeconomic status, as highlighted by (Mistry, 2018).

A similar phenomenon is observed in Kenya, where an education system driven by neoliberal policies has created significant inequities (Heyneman, 2003). (Suzuki, 2014) demonstrates that a strong emphasis on competitive values in high-stakes examinations has fueled the proliferation of for-profit private schools that are better equipped to prepare students for standardized tests (Nishimura & Yamano, 2013). In contrast, government-funded public schools often lack adequate resources and facilities, resulting in children from low-income families being less prepared for standardized tests and reinforcing educational inequalities (Wamalwa, 2018)

The conceptual frameworks of neocolonialism and neoliberalism provide a crucial perspective in understanding how educational policies in developing countries are often influenced by global economic interests and international institutions such as the World Bank (Apple, 2006). (Nsamenang & Tchombe, 2011) highlight that the neoliberal view of education as a for-profit business has intensified competition in education through high-stakes standardized testing (Resnik et al., 2008). Globally, there is an increasing demand for for-profit private schools that focus on standardized test performance, often neglecting the development of essential skills such as communication, creativity, critical thinking, and collaboration, as outlined by (Nganga & Kambutu, 2019). Neocolonialism also plays a role in shaping educational policies that are more supportive of the economic interests of developed countries, neglecting local needs and creating space for the growth of for-profit private schools in developing countries, as described by (Tabulawa, 2010)

In addressing the challenges posed by privatization and neoliberalism in early childhood education, it is crucial to adopt a more context-sensitive approach that considers the specific needs and circumstances of local communities (Ainscow, 2020). This approach involves close collaboration among government, educational institutions, and the community, paying attention to cultural, historical, and lived experiences (Anderson-Levitt, 2003a). (Anderson-Levitt, 2003a) emphasizes that effective policy strategies must consider cultural contexts to minimize negative impacts and ensure equitable and inclusive access to education, thereby reducing inequalities and improving the quality of education for all.

Research on privatization and neoliberalism has been extensive, and studies such as those conducted by (Verger et al., 2016b) demonstrate that education privatization has a significant impact on access to and quality of education, with private schools often offering better services but widening the gap between economic groups. In Indonesia, (Muttaqin, 2018) research reveals that children from low-income families are marginalized in the private education system due to high costs and lack of financial support. Other research by (Lamsal & Maharjan, 2017) shows that exclusive education policies exacerbate inequalities based on socioeconomic status. When education is treated as a commodity, children from low-income families lose access to adequate resources. Similar phenomena occur in other countries, such as Kenya, where neoliberal policies create significant inequities in access to and quality of education (Heyneman, 2003). Similarly, (Nganga & Kambutu, 2019) highlight that educational policies that are not aligned with local norms and cultural values can have unintended consequences. Therefore, it is crucial to develop policy frameworks that are responsive to local needs, to ensure access to early childhood education for all, regardless of socioeconomic status.

This research presents a new approach to examining the impact of privatization and neoliberalism on access to early childhood education in Indonesia by integrating a deeper local perspective. Unlike previous studies that tend to focus on economic aspects, this study also explores the cultural and social impacts of implemented education policies, as well as how local norms and values play a role in shaping educational accessibility. In this way, this research not only highlights the challenges faced by children from low-income families but also offers more adaptive and context-sensitive policy recommendations to improve educational equity and ensure more equitable access for all children. Based on the described conditions, the researcher is interested in conducting research on the dynamics of inclusivity and exclusivity through early childhood school readiness.

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative case study approach. A case study provides an in-depth, comprehensive, and meaningful exploration of a program, event, activity, process, or individual(s) within a specific context, such as a particular place and time (Creswell, 2013). The objective of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of how education policies influenced by neoliberalism contribute to social exclusion and exacerbate inequities in educational access through school readiness. The research subjects include the principal, teachers, and students at TK Cendani Bandung, consisting of 10 boys and 12 girls. Data collection techniques and instruments used include interviews and observations. Data analysis is conducted using grounded theory with coding stages of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding involves

breaking down the data and comparing similarities and differences. Subsequently, data from open coding is further processed in the axial coding stage, which is integrated into the selective coding stage to form a theme.

table 1. The coding process can be seen in

Theme	Selective coding	Axial coding
Paradox of Inclusivity and exclusivity	Discrimination in child development	Developmental disparities
	Discrimination based on parental background	Socioeconomic exclusivity
	Teachers' needs are prioritized	Teacher welfare as a priority
	Elite school	Exclusivity and prestige
	Not afraid of having fewer students	Operational sustainability of the school

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

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a. Discrimination in Child Development

The research has uncovered evidence of discrimination in the assessment of children's abilities during the final 'sit-in' process conducted by teachers or the school. Despite the existence of a special 'sit-in' assessment, the final decision on a child's acceptance to TK Cendani remains dynamic and seems to be solely based on the school's criteria. This raises the question of the purpose of the 'sit-in' program if the final decision is not determined by the results of this program.

The discrimination is further evident in the principal's statement during an interview with the researcher: *"From the 18 children who participated in the 'sit-in' program, I chose Arkan, who has Down syndrome, because he is the safest and can be easily developed."* (Interview with the Kindergarten Principal, February 6, 2020).

Based on this statement, the principal's reason for selecting a child with Down syndrome was that the child was perceived as "safe" and easy to manage. Teachers often view children who are considered "safe" as those who have developed well, require minimal attention, are compliant with school rules, and are easily guided towards the next educational level. This decision-making process is discriminatory and unfair, as it inadvertently sets standards that benefit the school without considering the negative impacts on other children and their parents.

b. Discrimination based on Parental Background

The selection process also involved interviewing parents to align their perceptions with TK Cendani Bandung's curriculum. However, this assessment was considered inappropriate when the principal stated,

"We also look at the parents, for example, now that times are advanced. We look at their external background by searching their names on the internet." (Interview with the Kindergarten Principal, January 17, 2020).

This practice of conducting online background checks on parents without their consent is discriminatory and raises concerns about privacy. It suggests that the school is making judgments about parents based on superficial online information, rather than on their interactions with the school or their child. This practice also blurs the lines between personal and professional life, as parents' employment or personal activities are being used as factors in their child's admission. Such a biased selection process limits opportunities for both parents and children and reinforces the perception that TK Cendani Bandung primarily benefits the school's interests.

c. Teachers Needs are Prioritized

The school and educators do not want to add to their workload. This is shown through the statement of the Principal of TK Cendani Bandung that *"teachers have many tasks, a teacher's job is not only to teach but we also write reports on children, we have full responsibility for the children"*. (Interview with the Kindergarten Principal, January 18, 2020)

The main task of the teacher seems to be a reference for Alam Bandung School to limit tasks that have been burdensome and not to make it a mandatory obligation to be fulfilled.

d. Elite School

One of the local residents around TK Cendani Bandung expressed their inability to send their child to the school due to economic constraints and the school's high tuition fees. The school has now acquired an 'elite' label among the local community.

"Oh, who can afford it? Alam school is an elite school now. When it was first built, the school was open to the local community, including my child. Now, my child who attended Alam school is the most independent among the others and has already started working. But my other children attend a regular kindergarten because we can no longer afford Alam School." (Interview with a local vendor near Sekolah Alam Bandung, January 8, 2020)"

This situation contradicts the original accessibility of TK Cendani Bandung, which was established to serve the local community, including the people of Cikalapa, with the provision of scholarships.

e. Not Afraid Of having Fewer Students

TK Cendani School is confident in its ability to attract new students. Given the high quality of education it provides, the school believes it will continue to be popular among parents. The principal of TK Cendani Bandung stated:

"Our school is confident that we will continue to attract students. We have implemented a 'sit-in' program to assess potential students and ensure they are a good fit for our school. While our tuition fees are competitive, we believe the quality of education we provide justifies the cost." (Interview with the Kindergarten Principal, January 20, 2020)

The Principal of TK Cendani Bandung conveyed her confidence in the school's ability to maintain a strong enrollment. She attributed this confidence to the high quality of education provided and the rigorous 'sit-in' assessment process for potential students. Given the school's prestigious reputation and exclusive status within the educational community, her statement is not surprising

Discussion

a. Child Development Discrimination

The selection and readiness approach implemented at TK Cendani reflects the fundamental principles of privatization and neoliberalism, which potentially harm access to education for all children. (Ball, 2012). Education privatization often focuses on efficiency, consumer choice, and enhancing quality through

competition (Levin & Belfield, 2003). Education privatization often focuses on efficiency, consumer choice, and enhancing quality through competition (Gupta, 2014). Schools that implement rigorous student selection based on predetermined readiness criteria tend to neglect the needs of more vulnerable children or those who have not developed according to the established standards, which in turn limits their access to quality education (Wamalwa, 2018).

b. Discrimination based on Parental Background

Neoliberalism, with its emphasis on free markets, competition, and individualism, reinforces a selection logic based on a child's ability to adapt to existing systems without considering the broader social context (Harvey, 2005). In this system, schools operate on the assumption that educational quality can be improved through market mechanisms, where only students who best meet the school's standards are allowed to participate (Brown et al., 2008b). This creates a hierarchy in educational access, where children from more advantaged backgrounds, both economically and academically, reap greater benefits, while those from disadvantaged backgrounds become increasingly marginalized (Apple, 2006).

c. Teachers' needs take priority

Prioritizing teachers' needs over students' within a neoliberal context can be analyzed through several theories. (Ball, 2012a) highlights how neoliberalism transforms the role of teachers into a more administrative one, where they are required to produce reports and quantitative evidence to measure performance. This aligns with the statement of the Headteacher of TK Cendani Bandung who indicates that teachers not only teach but are also burdened with administrative tasks, reflecting neoliberalism's demands for efficiency and outcome measurement. According to (Brown et al., 2008c) hierarchy of needs, teachers' well-being is indeed important, but there must be a balance between the needs of teachers and students for effective learning processes. (Nishimura & Yamano, 2013), with his child-centered education theory, states that the primary focus of education should be on children's developmental needs through direct learning. If teachers' needs are prioritized, such as excessive administrative burdens, then time and attention for children decrease, negatively impacting the quality of learning. (Gupta, 2014) emphasizes that administrative pressure on teachers can damage teacher-student relationships and lower the quality of teaching. Therefore, a balance between the needs of teachers and students is crucial for effective educational processes. When neoliberalism places greater emphasis on administrative efficiency, it can sacrifice students' needs and lower the overall quality of education.

d. Teachers Needs are Prioritized

The combination of privatization and neoliberalism in the context of TK Cendani's education also contradicts the principles of inclusive education, which emphasize the importance of providing equal opportunities for all children, regardless of their background (Anderson-Levitt, 2003a). Market-driven selection practices tend to disregard the diversity and individual needs of children, reducing inclusivity in education and exacerbating existing social and economic inequalities (Nsamenang & Tchombe, 2011). Therefore, a selection and school readiness approach that emphasizes efficiency and exclusivity rather than inclusivity and equality creates imbalances in access to education, exacerbates social injustice, and neglects the needs of more vulnerable children (Levitt, 2003). Therefore, it is important to reconsider the impact of privatization and neoliberalism policies in education, especially in the context of school readiness and equal access to education for all children (Nganga & Kambutu, 2019)

The selection and school readiness approach implemented in TK Cendani, which reflects the principles of privatization and neoliberalism, not only impacts access to education but also affects the overall character development of children (Ball, 2012b). Privatization of education, which often prioritizes efficiency, consumer choice, and quality improvement through competition, has the potential to create a more exclusive and less inclusive educational environment (Lamsal & Maharjan, 2017). Schools that conduct strict selection processes based on specific readiness criteria tend to neglect the needs of children

who may require more support to develop, and this has a direct implication on their character development (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010b).

e. Not Afraid Of having Fewer Students

In the context of neoliberalism, which emphasizes free markets, competition, and individualism, schools often operate with the logic that only children who are ready and able to adapt to set standards are worthy of participation (Ball, 2007b). This can lead to a situation where children who are considered 'ready' are those who already possess certain characteristics, such as independence, obedience, and high adaptability (Muttaqin, 2018). However, this approach can neglect and even hinder the development of a more holistic character, which should include diversity, empathy, and the ability to work in an inclusive social environment (Nishimura & Yamano, 2013).

Furthermore, by adopting narrow, competition-based readiness standards, schools like TK Cendani may inadvertently teach children that success can only be achieved through strict adherence to rules and the ability to compete (Wamalwa, 2018). This can shape children into individuals who tend to prioritize themselves, neglecting collective values such as cooperation and mutual respect for differences (Apple, 2006)

Conversely, if a more inclusive, child-centered approach to education is adopted, where the unique needs and potential of each child are valued, then the characters developed will be more diverse and balanced (Anderson-Levitt, 2003b). Children will learn to appreciate differences, cooperate with others, and develop empathy and social responsibility (Diamond, 2017). However, a selection approach driven by privatization and neoliberalism tends to steer children towards a more individualistic and competitive character development, which in turn can deepen social inequality and reduce social solidarity in society (Mistry, 2018). Therefore, it is important to consider the impact of privatization and neoliberalism policies not only on access to education, but also on the formation of children's character (Verger et al., 2016b). A truly inclusive and holistic education must consider the child's social context and develop a character that supports diversity, inclusivity, and social justice, not just narrow academic readiness (Ainscow, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This research reveals the negative impacts of the dominance of privatization and neoliberalism in early childhood education (ECE). Privatization widens the gap in access to education, especially for low-income families, while neoliberalism promotes a focus on academic achievement that neglects the development of character traits such as empathy and solidarity. These policies tend to exacerbate social inequality and disregard local needs. To address these negative impacts, a more inclusive and contextualized education policy is needed, one that emphasizes a balance between academic achievement and character development, and ensures equitable access to education for all children.

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