

# Beyond PISA Rankings: A Comparative Analysis of Education Policy Transformation in Indonesia and China

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## Abstract

Education plays a crucial role in improving the quality of human resources and international competitiveness. Indonesia and China are two countries on the path to becoming developed nations with distinct educational systems, particularly in terms of governance and policy. This study aims to analyze the comparative transformation of Indonesia and China's education systems, emphasizing policy mechanisms, governance structures, and their implications for educational reform. This study employs a qualitative approach with a comparative study design through educational policy analysis. Data were obtained from national policy documents, international organization reports, and articles from reputable international and national journals. Data analysis was conducted using qualitative content analysis and cross-case comparative analysis. The results show that Indonesia's education system tends to be decentralized with implementation flexibility at the regional level, while China's system is more centralized with strong central government control and support from a data-driven evaluation system. These differences have implications for the effectiveness of policy implementation, the consistency of educational quality, and accountability mechanisms. This study contributes to the development of comparative education studies by offering a systems-based and policy-based analysis, as well as providing strategic recommendations for educational reform in Indonesia.

**Keywords:** *Comparative education, Education policy, Education governance, Indonesia, China*

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## Introduction

Education plays a strategic role in shaping the quality of human resources and determining a nation's competitiveness amidst increasingly complex global dynamics. In the era of globalization, the fourth industrial revolution, and digital transformation, the education system is no longer viewed solely as a social instrument, but rather as a long-term investment in economic development, innovation, and national stability. Therefore, various countries are striving for continuous educational reform to ensure that their education systems are adaptive to changing times and future needs.

In a global context, Indonesia and China are two developing countries with different demographic, social, and political characteristics, yet both face significant challenges in improving the quality and equity of education. Indonesia manages its education system within a decentralized framework that grants broad authority to local governments, while China employs a more centralized approach with strong control



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from the central government. The fundamental difference in governance. This management makes the two countries relevant and interesting objects for comparative study.

Several international indicators, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), are often used to compare education performance across countries. However, an excessive focus on learning outcomes tends to obscure a deeper understanding of the policy mechanisms, governance, and systemic processes that shape these outcomes. Yet, understanding the structure and dynamics of education systems is a crucial prerequisite for formulating sustainable and contextualized education policies.

Previous research in comparative education has generally focused on comparing learning outcomes, curricula, or teaching practices at the micro-level. Several studies have addressed education reform in Indonesia, highlighting issues of decentralization, national curriculum implementation, and teacher quality challenges. On the other hand, studies on education in China have emphasized the country's success in improving academic achievement, standardizing the curriculum, and using data for policymaking. However, studies systematically comparing the policy mechanisms and governance of the education systems between Indonesia and China are still relatively limited.

Furthermore, most comparative studies are still descriptive in nature and fail to integrate a systemic analysis that encompasses the relationship between policy structures, governance models, and their implications for national education transformation. This gap creates a need for research that compares not only what education systems achieve but also how they are designed, implemented, and controlled.

Based on these conditions, this study offers novelty through a comparative, systems- and policy-based analysis of education in Indonesia and China. This research focuses not solely on educational rankings or achievements, but rather on the policy logic, governance structures, and implementation mechanisms that shape the transformation of education systems in both countries. Thus, this study is expected to enrich the body of comparative education theory and provide practical contributions to the formulation of education policies in developing countries.

The main objective of this research is to analyze and compare the transformation of education systems in Indonesia and China from a policy and governance perspective. Specifically, this research aims to answer the following questions: (1) What are the characteristics of education system policies and governance in Indonesia and China?, (2) What are the main similarities and differences in the implementation mechanisms of the education systems in the two countries? , (3) What implications can be drawn from the results of this comparison for education reform in Indonesia?

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach with a comparative research design aimed at obtaining an in-depth understanding of the characteristics, mechanisms, and dynamics of education policy within different national systems. A qualitative approach is considered appropriate as it enables a comprehensive exploration of complex policy phenomena, particularly in comparing the education systems of Indonesia and China. Specifically, this research adopts a comparative policy analysis framework, which conceptualizes education policy as a product of the interaction between governance structures, ideological orientations, and socio-political contexts. The object of this study focuses on the national education systems of both countries, with emphasis on educational governance structures, national curriculum policies, evaluation and accountability systems, and policy implementation mechanisms. The selection of Indonesia and China is grounded in academic considerations, as both are developing countries with large populations but contrasting policy models—decentralized and centralized systems—making them highly relevant for comparative analysis. The study utilizes secondary data derived from official policy documents, including education laws, government regulations, and national strategic plans, as well as reports from international organizations such as UNESCO, OECD, and the World Bank, and scholarly articles published in reputable national and international journals.

Data collection was conducted through a documentary research technique involving systematic processes of document identification, classification, and in-depth review of relevant materials aligned with the research focus. The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis combined with cross-case comparative analysis to identify patterns, themes, and meanings embedded in education policies across both countries. The analytical procedures included data reduction through the selection of relevant information, thematic coding based on governance, curriculum, and evaluation dimensions, comparative

analysis between Indonesia and China, and conclusion drawing through systemic interpretation of similarities and differences. To ensure the validity and credibility of the findings, this study applied source triangulation by comparing national and international documents, maintained an audit trail through systematic documentation of the research process, and conducted peer debriefing by relating the findings to prior studies. This methodological approach enables a holistic and rigorous understanding of the transformation of education systems in Indonesia and China.

## Results and Discussion

### A. Characteristics of the Education System in Indonesia

The results of the analysis of policy documents show that the Indonesian education system is managed within the framework of educational decentralization, as mandated in regulations.

National. The central government plays a role in establishing national education standards, curriculum frameworks, and strategic policies, while regional governments have significant authority in the implementation and management of educational units.

The national curriculum in Indonesia is designed with a relatively high degree of flexibility to accommodate diverse regional contexts. This approach allows educational institutions to adapt learning to local characteristics, but at the same time, it poses challenges in ensuring consistent quality and equity across regions. Educational evaluation systems also exhibit diversity, both in terms of instruments and implementation mechanisms.

### B. Characteristics of the Education System in China

Unlike Indonesia, China's education system is managed within a framework of strong centralized policymaking. The central government plays a dominant role in formulating education policies, standardizing curricula, and controlling education quality nationally. Policy implementation at the local level is hierarchical, with strict monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

China's national curriculum is more standardized and uniform, with a strong emphasis on academic achievement, discipline, and nationally defined core competencies. Furthermore, China's educational evaluation system is integrated with the use of large-scale data to support evidence-based decision-making. This approach allows for consistent quality but relatively limits local autonomy.

### C. Comparative Analysis of Indonesian and Chinese Education Systems

Based on the results of cross-document analysis, major differences and similarities were found between the Indonesian and Chinese education systems, as summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1. Comparison of the Indonesian and Chinese Education Systems**

No	Aspect	China	Indonesia
1	Grade level for students aged 15 years	The majority are in grade 10 or above, especially in the urban areas sampled by PISA (OECD, 2019).	The majority are still in grade 9, reflecting delayed learning progress and gaps in access (OECD, 2019).
2	Education culture	Influenced by Confucian values that emphasize discipline, hard work, and high respect for teachers (Tan, 2021).	Educational cultures are highly diverse; learning tends to be exam-oriented and uneven in the development of higher-order thinking skills (Schleicher, 2018),
3	Status and role of teachers	Teachers have a high social status with a selective recruitment system and strong professional	Teacher certification has improved the professional status of teachers in Indonesia, however its implementation shows

		identity (Li et al., 2020)	uneven quality and professional recognition between regions as seen in the distribution data of certified teachers and studies on the effectiveness of certification policies. (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2025).
4	Utilization PISA in policy	PISA is used systematically as a policy reference, including the alignment of curriculum and learning practices in certain regions (Wu, 2025)	PISA is mostly used as a policy diagnostic tool, with an uneven level of integration into learning practices (Lestari et al., 2022).
5	Education budget allocation	Public investment is strong and targeted at improving the quality and quality of learning (World Bank, 2020).	Allocation of $\geq 20\%$ of the APBN is in accordance with the constitutional mandate, but the effectiveness of distribution and governance remains a challenge (Kompas, 2024).
6	Equality and inequality	The urban–rural gap still exists, but is addressed through targeted national policies (Hannum & Wang, 2006)	Regional and socio-economic disparities remain large and impact student learning outcomes (OECD, 2019).

The table shows that Indonesia and China have pursued different paths to educational transformation. Indonesia emphasizes flexibility and local context, while China emphasizes consistency and centralized control. These differences reflect differing policy orientations and educational management philosophies.

## Discussion

### Analysis of Findings in the Perspective of Educational Theory

The findings of this study can be explained through educational governance theory, which views the education system as the result of interactions between power structures, policy actors, and social contexts (Ball & Junemann, 2012).

Indonesia's decentralization model reflects a shared governance approach, which allows for broad participation but requires strong institutional capacity at the local level. When this capacity is not evenly distributed, disparities in education quality are a difficult consequence.

In contrast, China's centralized system aligns with the perspective of state-centered governance, in which the state plays a dominant role in directing and controlling education as a strategic instrument of national development. This approach allows for strong alignment between education policy and the economic development agenda, as explained in human capital theory. emphasizes education as a productive investment for economic growth (Han & Xu, 2019)

### **Links to Previous Research**

The results of this study reinforce previous studies that stated that educational decentralization does not automatically improve education quality without adequate capacity and accountability systems. Furthermore, China's success in maintaining consistent education quality aligns with research highlighting the effectiveness of state control in the context of planned development.

However, this research goes beyond previous studies by demonstrating that differences in educational attainment are determined not solely by the degree of centralization or decentralization, but rather by the coherence between policies, governance, and implementation mechanisms. Thus, these findings provide a theoretical contribution to comparative education studies, which have tended to focus on learning outcomes.

### **Theoretical and Practical Implications**

Theoretically, this research enriches comparative education studies by offering a systemic analysis linking policy structures and implementation dynamics. This approach strengthens the argument that comparative education studies need to move beyond quantitative indicators to understanding policy mechanisms.

Practically, the findings of this study have important implications for education reform in Indonesia. Indonesia can learn from China in strengthening data-driven monitoring and evaluation systems without sacrificing the principles of autonomy and local context. Thus, education reform can be directed toward a hybrid model that combines flexibility and consistent quality.

### **Limitations and Directions for Further Research**

This study is limited by its use of secondary data and analysis of policy documents, which means it does not fully capture the dynamics of implementation at the micro level. Future research could combine this approach with field studies or quantitative analysis to deepen our understanding of the impact of education policy.

#### **a. Policy Recommendations**

Based on the results of the discussion, several policy recommendations that can be put forward are as follows:

##### **i. Strengthening National Education Governance**

The Indonesian government needs to strengthen coordination between the central and regional governments through a more integrated policy framework. This strengthened governance is crucial for reducing disparities in education quality between regions, as recommended in studies (OECD, 2019), OECD, (2020), and World Bank (2020).

##### **ii. Development of a Data-Based Evaluation System**

Indonesia is advised to develop a more systematic and data-driven education evaluation system, emulating China's best practice of utilizing education data as a basis for policy decision-making (Li et al., 2021). This system can improve the accountability and effectiveness of education policies.

##### **iii. Balance between Standardization and Flexibility**

Education reform in Indonesia needs to be directed at striking a balance between national standardization and local flexibility. Clear national standards are needed to ensure quality, while flexibility is maintained to ensure education policies are contextualized to local needs (Fullan, 2016).

##### **iv. Strengthening Policy Implementation Capacity**

Improving the capacity of human resources, particularly policymakers and education managers at the regional level, is a key prerequisite for successful education reform. This aligns with UNESCO's findings (2021) in *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education*, which emphasizes that education must be restructured collectively through strengthening institutional capacity and the active participation of stakeholders, including policymakers and education managers, to achieve sustainable transformation.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the analysis and discussion, it can be concluded that the transformation of the education systems in Indonesia and China is significantly influenced by differences in policy paradigms and educational governance structures. Indonesia implements a decentralized education model that

grants broad authority to local governments and educational units, but faces challenges in consistent policy implementation and equitable education quality. In contrast, China has developed a relatively centralized education system with strong national standards, an integrated evaluation system, and the use of data as a basis for policymaking.

From a comparative education theory perspective, these findings confirm the view (Bray, Adamson, & Mason, 2014) that a country's political and administrative context plays a crucial role in shaping the character of its education system. Furthermore, these findings reinforce the theory of education governance, which states that the effectiveness of education policy is determined not only by policy design but also by the system's capacity to control and evaluate its implementation (OECD, 2020). Thus, this study makes a theoretical contribution by broadening understanding of the relationship between education governance and the transformation of national education systems in developing countries.

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