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To cite this article: Sirojuddin Arif, Risa Wardatun Nihayah, Syaikhu Usman & Niken Rarasati (2025) Does decentralisation promote learning? Local political settlements and education policies in Indonesia, *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 55:6, 992-1010, DOI: [10.1080/03057925.2024.2344523](https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2024.2344523)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2024.2344523>



Published online: 25 Apr 2024.



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Does decentralisation promote learning? Local political settlements and education policies in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the effect of local political settlements on education policies in a decentralised political system. Under what conditions does decentralisation promote learning-enhancing policies? Despite the numerous works on decentralisation and education, little is known about how local politics influences student learning. We develop a novel approach to the politics of education policies by looking at the effect of local political settlements on education policymaking. Using a heuristic case study method comparing three districts in Indonesia, we found that constraints on the discretionary power of the district head over employment decisions in the bureaucracy matter for the development of learning-enhancing policies. Such a constraint can pave the way for the development of the bureaucratic capacity required for local governments to pursue quality-promoting reforms. In the absence of such a constraint, the extent to which district governments will implement learning-enhancing policies depends on district heads' commitment to learning.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 18 September 2022
Accepted 18 March 2024

KEYWORDS

Education; learning; decentralisation; political settlement; bureaucratic capacity; Indonesia

Introduction

Improving learning remains a challenge for many developing countries. In 2017, the World Bank estimated around 125 million children worldwide did not attain functional literacy and numeracy even after four years of schooling (Hossain and Hickey 2019). The proponents of decentralisation argued that by bringing the government closer to the people, decentralisation will enhance public services including education (Channa and Faguet 2016). Yet, the impact of decentralisation on education has been mixed. Decentralisation increased the average years of schooling, but it had negligible impacts on learning (Leer 2016; Muttaqin et al. 2016). The conventional wisdom suggests that decentralisation stimulates policy innovations (Cai and Treisman 2009; Strumpf 2002). Yet, local governments' responses to learning deficit problems varied considerably. In Indonesia, for example, some governments pursued learning-enhancing policies, but others did not (Zulfa, Suryadarma, and Bima 2019). What explains this variation? Under what condition does decentralisation promote learning-enhancing policies?

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Although many researchers have written about decentralisation and education, a clear understanding of how decentralisation can improve learning is lacking. Research on this subject has focused on the efficiency gains or effectiveness of schools (Elacqua et al. 2021; Jeong, Lee, and Cho 2017). Little attention has been given to how politics affects education policies. We address this problem by showing the impact of local political settlements on the development of learning-enhancing policies. Following Khan (2010, 4) we define political settlements as ‘a combination of power and institutions that is mutually compatible and also sustainable in terms of economic and political viability.’ Research on the linkages between political settlements and the development of learning-enhancing policies can be an important, initial step to shedding light on how local politics affects learning.

The cases and the puzzle

Based on their key objective, education policies can be distinguished into access-broadening and learning-enhancing policies. If the former aims to increase access to schools, learning-enhancing policies seek to enhance the quality of education. The latter includes a variety of reforms required to improve school management, enhance accountability and performance of teachers, school principals, and education officers, or strengthen parents’ participation (Grindle 2004). Learning-enhancing policies can be more difficult to pursue as they involve more complex problems of policy coordination. The policy may also generate resistance from various actors ranging from teachers, school principals, and parents to religious authorities and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (Bruns, Macdonald, and Schneider 2019).

We examine the politics of quality-promoting reforms by assessing the development of learning-enhancing policies in three districts in Indonesia, hereinafter anonymised as Kawi, Lontara and Nagari. Despite the differences in their political and socio-economic backgrounds, all three districts pursued learning-enhancing policies (Table 1).

Lontara and Nagari showed continued support for learning-enhancing policies. Nagari implemented ‘Peer Supervision of Teacher Performance’ and ‘Family Education’ programmes. The former aims to improve teacher performance, while the latter seeks to enhance parents’ awareness about the function of the family, including the role of parents in education. In Lontara, the ‘School Security Guard’ programme implemented in 2009 recruited more than 500 security guards to enhance teacher attendance. Each security guard was equipped with a motorcycle to pick up teachers so they would

Table 1. Case selection.

Variables	Nagari	Lontara	Kawi
Learning-Enhancing Policies	Yes	Yes	Shifted from Learning to Access
Constraints on the Discretionary Power of District Heads	Yes	No	No
Bureaucratic Capacity	High	Low	Low
District Head’s Commitment to Learning	Low	High	Changed from High to Low
Elite Cohesion	No	Yes	No
GDP per Capita (US\$)	62.65	25.06	49.53
Population	121,028	785,836	132,434
Poverty Rate	4.92 %	8.42 %	4.94 %
Educational Attainment (2020; average years of schooling)	11.33	8.19	10.23

Sources: Statistics Indonesia (n.d.) and World Bank (2019).

not be late for school. In 2017, in collaboration with an NGO, Lontara established a Teacher Learning Centre to improve teacher professionalism. The district also implemented the 'Student Automatic Promotion' policy to reduce the high dropout rate in the district. While enabling students to be promoted to the next grade despite their poor performance on a particular subject(s), the policy stipulated students who did not master a subject would be provided remedial classes and tutoring so they would meet the minimum standards.

Kawi pursued learning-enhancing policies between 2008 and 2018. The district implemented the 'Community Learning Hours' programme, which was intended to improve human development. In addition to requiring parents to turn off the television and other electronic devices during evening study hours, the programme asked parents to provide a good learning environment at home. However, despite the positive impact of such a programme on student learning activities (Wigati 2017), Kawi discontinued the programme in 2018 and focused instead on access-broadening policies like providing scholarships.

Building on the political settlement approach to development (Khan 2018), some scholars argue that learning-enhancing policies are more likely to be pursued under a dominant political settlement (Levy and Walton 2013; Hickey and Hossain 2019). As will be further discussed below, dominant political settlements refer to a certain type of power configuration in which elites can maintain their cohesion as a political group. Elite cohesion will allow the emergence of a developmental coalition that has a long political horizon so the elite would be willing to invest in the quality of education (Hossain and Hickey 2019). In Ghana, for example, the rise of a developmental coalition made possible by the political alignment between local political and bureaucratic elites in the district characterised by a dominant political settlement allowed the local government to pursue quality-enhancing reforms by increasing teacher accountability and addressing teacher absenteeism (Ampratwum, Awal, and Oduro 2019, 61).

However, out of the three districts, only in Lontara did a dominant political settlement prevail. There emerged a strong local political dynasty able to defeat all political challengers and strengthen its control over the district. The other two districts, Kawi and Nagari, which also pursued learning-enhancing policies, had competitive political settlements. No political actor or party dominated the two regions. Successions happened between different parties. Therefore, the fact that Kawi and Nagari also implemented quality-enhancing policy reforms implies that such a reform cannot be attributed to elite cohesion. We need a better theoretical perspective to account for the development of learning-enhancing policies, especially at the local level.

Focusing on local political settlements, we look at how political configurations define the power of district heads, especially in making employment decisions in the state bureaucracy. Constraints on the discretionary power of district heads on employment decisions in the state bureaucracy can pave the way for the enhancement of the bureaucratic capacity required by the local government to pursue learning-enhancing policies. It is in the absence of such constraints that the personal commitment of district heads can play a role in shaping education policies. Nevertheless, dependence on the personal commitment of district heads faces the risk of a policy reversal by the succeeding leader, especially if the latter does not have the same commitment to learning. We will further discuss this approach in the following section.

Political settlements, district heads, and the politics of education policies

The political settlement approach offers constructive criticism of the new institutionalism in explaining the effect of institutions on development (Khan 2018). Consisting of rules or norms structuring social interactions, institutions shape how people behave or make decisions. Institutions affect economic or political development as they can minimise coordination problems and reduce transaction costs (North 1991). Nevertheless, the new institutionalism cannot explain why a similar institution can have different effects in different societies (Khan 2010). For example, industrial policy institutions supporting export-oriented industries worked well in South Korea but failed in Pakistan (Khan 2018). The difficulty in explaining such a problem from an institutionalist perspective stems from the absence of power analysis in new institutionalist works (Khan 2010).

The political settlement approach addresses this problem by examining how the balance of power between social or political actors affects the operation of institutions (Khan 2010). Power matters as it can determine how institutions work. The power of groups to support or challenge norms or rules will affect how these norms or rules can be implemented. Consequently, the extent to which institutions can address coordination problems or reduce transaction costs will depend on the underlying distribution of power in society (Khan 2018). The political settlements approach assesses the linkages between power, institutions, and development by proposing two levels of analysis. The first or higher level of analysis looks at the configuration of power among various actors at the level of society, while the second or lower level of analysis further looks at how the distribution of power explains the operation of institutions (Khan 2018).

Based on the configuration of power among political elites and the extent to which impersonal rules have been institutionalised in the political system, we can identify four major types of political settlements: dominant-personalised, dominant with rule-by-law, competitive clientelist, and competitive with rule-by-law political settlements. The last two types of political settlements suffer from inter-elite competitions, which make it difficult for the elite to make credible commitments to development. In dominant political settlements, elite cohesion characterises political interactions in the system. Some countries or regions were able to institutionalise rules regulating the exchange of power and distribution of resources (dominant with rule-by-law) while others were not (dominant-personalised). Power and resources in the latter were distributed based on personal networks rather than formal rules (Hossain and Hickey 2019).

Levy and Walton (2013) argue that development is more likely to occur under institutionalised dominant political settlements (dominant with rule-by-law). Personalised, dominant political settlements will create greater incentives for the political elites to prioritise their interests rather than advancing common goods, especially less politicised ones like quality education. Empirical findings on the negative impacts of political dynasties on public goods provision support this proposition (Tusalem and Pe-Aguirre 2013). Nevertheless, some evidence suggests that patronage and clientelist relationships under personalised, dominant political settlements do not necessarily hinder development. Countries like Singapore, South Korea during the 1980s to 1990s, and Indonesia during the late 1980s to early 1990s, experienced rapid economic developments under personalised, dominant political settlements. Therefore, Hossain and Hickey (2019) suggest that researchers also

examine the condition under which education reforms, including those aimed at promoting higher-quality learning, under personalised, dominant political settlements.

Nevertheless, a focus on elite cohesion overlooks the consequential impact of the power relations between district heads and bureaucracy and how the power relations affect the development of bureaucratic capacity and policymaking. Hossain and Hickey (2019) gave little attention to how bureaucratic capacity can improve under different types of political settlements. A focus on elite cohesion also overlooks the important role of political leaders in shaping local policies. Therefore, while still looking at the configuration of power among political actors, this article proposes a rather different approach to defining local political settlements. It focuses on the discretionary power of district heads on employment decisions in the state bureaucracy and how it affects the development of bureaucratic capacity and education policymaking.

Based on the discretionary power of the district head on employment decisions in the state bureaucracy, we can distinguish political settlements into two: constrained leaders and autonomous leaders. In the latter, district heads have extensive discretionary power to make employment decisions in the bureaucracy. By contrast, constrained leaders may face certain institutions that delimit their power in making bureaucratic appointments in the state bureaucracy. These institutions can be either formal or informal. The latter may consist of un-written norms or rules that prescribe the behaviour of the district head and other political actors in the system. Despite being informal, such institutions can have influential impacts on politics (Helmke and Levitsky 2004). In public good provision, for instance, Tsai (2007) showed that unofficial rules or norms enacted by the presence of local solidary groups may substitute a formal accountability system and encourage government officials to deliver their public obligations.

District governments are more likely to pursue learning-enhancing policies under constrained-leader political settlements. Constraints on the discretionary power of district heads over employment decisions in the state bureaucracy are necessary for the development of the bureaucratic capacity, which is required for the government to pursue economic or social developments (Briebe 2018; Cingolani, Thomsson, and de Crombrughe 2015; Halimatusa'diyah 2020). In education, such a capacity is needed to implement policy reforms addressing learning deficit problems. As already mentioned, reforms to deal with this problem are usually more difficult to pursue than reforms to increase school access as the former will involve more complex problems of policy coordination among various actors. It is under the constrained-leader political settlement that such a high level of bureaucratic capacity is more likely to be developed.

The extensive discretionary power of district heads over bureaucratic appointments can have negative impacts on the development of the bureaucratic capacity. Districts under such a highly powerful district head are prone to the capture of the state by the elite through the politicisation of the bureaucracy. While the politicisation of bureaucracy may not always be bad for public policies (Almendares 2011), some differences can be made between institutional and behavioural politicisation of bureaucracy. The former, which refers to political control over bureaucracy by elected leaders, can benefit public policies if the control is meant to align government policies with the development goals of the leaders. Yet, behavioural politicisation of bureaucracy is detrimental to public policies as such politicisation leads to the subjugation of bureaucracy to elected leaders'

interests. Elected leaders may use bureaucracy for patronage purposes or other political ends (Berenschot 2018; Purnomo, Rusli, and Muchid 2020).

The extensive discretionary power of district heads over public employment decisions can adversely affect the state bureaucracy in many important ways. At the recruitment stage, the extensive discretionary power of district heads will incentivise them to use connections rather than competencies or skills as the key criteria for making bureaucratic appointments. In Brazil, for example, discretion in public employment decisions by elected leaders caused not only the proliferation of patronage but also the weakening of bureaucracy. The use of political connections in making bureaucratic appointments decreased the number of competent or skilled individuals in the bureaucracy (Colonnelli, Prem, and Teso 2020). From the bureaucrat's standpoint, the politicisation of bureaucracy will incentivise bureaucrats to pay more attention to political connections rather than competencies and skills in building their careers (Berenschot 2018).

Constraints on the discretionary power of district heads will make local bureaucracy not only more insulated from politics but also more competent. First, it will be more difficult for the district head to politicise bureaucratic appointments. Subsequently, competencies and skills will play a more important role in determining bureaucratic appointments, allowing the bureaucrats to develop their capacity to deal with problems within their policy domain. Second, rules or norms depriving the executive of patronage power may also force them to improve the capacity of the bureaucracy, especially when challengers control the legislature. The executive will prefer a meritocratic bureaucracy rather than a politicised one for the executive to maintain the power (i.e. increase the chance of re-election) and at the same time prevent the challengers from exploiting the spoils of patronage (Schuster 2016).

To some extent, the lack of constraints on the discretionary power of district heads may not keep the district governments from pursuing learning-enhancing policies. Districts with a leader strongly committed to learning may also pursue learning-enhancing policies. In Latin America, for example, Grindle (2004) demonstrated the crucial role of political leaders in navigating the difficult task of institutionalising pro-quality education reforms. Nevertheless, a dependence on the personal commitment of a leader faces the risk of a policy reversal, especially if the successor does not have the same commitment. [Figure 1](#) summarises our propositions about different pathways to learning-enhancing policies in different political settlements.

Research method

The analysis presented in this article was based on primary and secondary sources. The latter includes articles, books, and news coverage of the development of education policies in Kawi, Lontara and Nagari. For the primary sources, we conducted fieldwork in the three districts from October 2020 to April 2021.

We interviewed a total of 88 informants selected purposively to cover the views of various actors about education policies. In each district, we spoke with education bureaucrats at the local education agency (LEA), bureaucrats from different agencies who work closely with the LEA, and school supervisors. We also interviewed the district secretary and politicians representing both the political coalition of the district head and its opposition. We sampled three schools in each district based on their academic

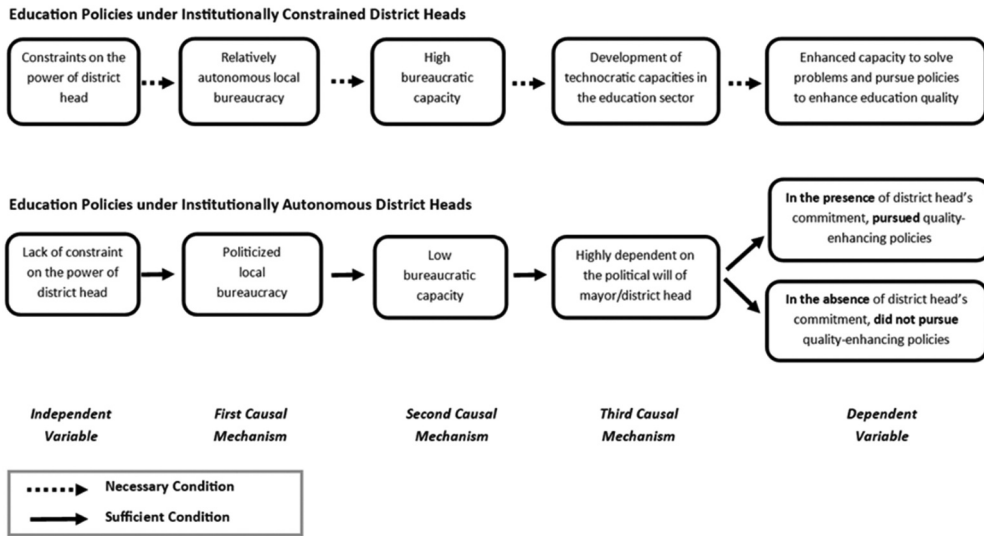


Figure 1. Summary of propositions.

performance and school status (public or private). In each school, we interviewed the school principal, senior teachers, and parents with high and low socioeconomic backgrounds. We also spoke with academics, journalists, activists, and representatives of the district education council and teacher organisations. We also interviewed traditional leaders in Nagari and Lontara as well as the district head of Kawi.

This article employs a heuristic case study approach to uncover the driver of learning-enhancing policies in the three selected districts. It is ‘a special type of case study that uses an analytic induction to discover or “find out” the essence of the case’ (VanWynsberghe and Khan 2007). Depending on the goal of the research, the approach can be useful to identify new variables, causal mechanisms, or causal paths (George and Bennett 2005). In this article, we use the approach to unpack the causal mechanism linking the power of district heads and the development of learning-enhancing policies. Due to the complexity of the education policy (Pritchett 2015), we selected three cases and conducted analytic induction to develop a theoretical construct from the cases. These cases serve as building blocks for identifying phenomenal regularity that underlines the development of learning-enhancing policies (Eckstein 2000). For each case, we conducted a within-case analysis to trace causal mechanisms linking the power of the district head and the development of learning-enhancing policies (George and Bennett 2005).

Decentralisation and local politics in Indonesia

While allowing ‘old’ predatory interests nurtured under Soeharto’s authoritarian regime to re-organise and extend their control of local politics after the fall of Soeharto in 1998 (Hadiz 2003), decentralisation also allowed other actors like NGOs and marginalised groups to engage in collective action to influence policymaking (Antlöv 2003; Rosser, Roesad, and Edwin 2005). Decentralisation also enabled traditional (*adat*)¹ leaders to articulate their interests (Davidson and Henley 2007; Tyson 2010). Some *adat* leaders

sought to enter the formal political system by competing in the local election, but many of them lost and failed to establish any influence in the system (Kurniadi 2020). Yet, there are cases where *adat* leaders were able to exert their influence, not through formal political mechanisms but informal ones like *adat* institutions.

Given the significant impact of decentralisation on local political re-configuration, a thorough assessment of local education policies must consider how local political settlements affect education policymaking. The following sections discuss how the two types of political settlement affected the development of local education policies. First, we start with the constrained-leader political settlement and show how constraints on the discretionary power of district heads on public employment decisions can lead to the development of learning-enhancing policies. Due to the influential role of bureaucratic capacity in this model, we call this path to learning-enhancing policies the bureaucratic capacity pathway. Second, unlike the bureaucratic capacity pathway, the autonomous leader pathway depends on the personal commitment of district heads. This condition makes the second pathway susceptible to policy reversal by the successor, especially if the successor does not have a strong commitment to learning.

The bureaucratic capacity pathway: Nagari

In Nagari, decentralisation allowed *adat* leaders to re-organise the *adat* institution so they could have more influence in local politics (Von Benda-Beckmann and von Benda-Beckmann 2007). Although the *adat* leaders failed to establish the *Kerapatan Adat Nagari* (KAN), an association of *adat* figures, as a formal political organisation in Nagari (Irawati 2012), they could revive traditional norms in politics. The traditional political norm stipulates that district heads must consult *adat* or KAN leaders on important issues. The government needed an agreement from KAN leaders to ensure the successful implementation of their programmes or policies. Protests from KAN leaders, especially when they were not involved or consulted in the policymaking, may adversely affect a programme or policy.

The existence of KAN leadership also constrains the district heads' discretionary power over employment decisions in the state bureaucracy. When confronted with challenging work issues, such as an unreasonable rotation plan imposed by the district head, a bureaucrat may consult their KAN leader for assistance. In response, the KAN leader typically leverages their influence with the district head or members of the local legislature to thwart the plan. Such practices impede district heads from exploiting the state bureaucracy for their personal political interests. While the district head holds the ultimate authority over bureaucratic appointments, they cannot disregard the Advisory Board for Bureaucratic Position and Rank's (*Badan Pertimbangan Jabatan dan Pangkat/ Baperjakat*) role in assessing candidates' qualifications and suitability for bureaucratic positions.

Consequently, bureaucratic appointments became less politicised, emphasising the necessity of competencies and skills for bureaucrats to progress in their careers. The current LEA head and his predecessor, for instance, were chosen to lead the LEA due to their good track records. The former head was known for her achievement as the best school principal in the region. She represented Nagari in many prestigious events at the national and international levels. The current LEA head took office with an excellent

record of leadership at various government agencies. After the 2021 district head election, he continued his second term although he was known to support the opponent of the elected district head. His predecessor also led the LEA for two terms under two different district heads. Between 2003 and 2021, the district's LEA was led only by three heads (six years on average for each office head).

The insulation of bureaucracy from politics helped improve the competencies and skills of Nagari's bureaucrats. According to a senior bureaucrat, 'LEA bureaucrats are superb and highly capable of improving education services.'² With their relative autonomy, bureaucrats in Nagari could develop a space to innovate in policymaking and improve local education policies. The system trained the LEA bureaucrats to be able to address the prevailing problems in education. To deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, they surveyed parents online to establish school-from-home policies. Another survey was conducted to consider re-opening schools at the end of 2020. The LEA also surveyed teachers to design a minimum essential curriculum for teacher guidance. When formulating policies, the bureaucrats did not blindly follow the district head's directives without thoughtful consideration. Another senior bureaucrat stated, 'We must say what is right, is right, and if it is good, then say it is good. We do not merely please the leader.'³

Most of the education policy innovations in Nagari came from LEA bureaucrats. One notable innovation is the assignment of high-performing teachers and principals to low-performing schools. The goal of the policy is to enhance education quality across the district. Unlike the common tendency in other districts, where good teachers or principals were promoted to high-performing schools to reward their performance, Nagari's LEA frequently transferred them to lower-performing schools. The transfer was not a punishment but rather a challenge for the teacher or principal to improve their skills. Later, when a principal successfully improves an underperforming school, they might be promoted to a higher position or receive recognition through awards. Initially, the policy received many criticisms from teachers and principals. Nevertheless, the LEA could defend the policy, arguing that the policy's objective was to improve the quality of education in the district.

The influential role of LEA bureaucrats was evident in the development of the district's 'Peer Supervision of Teacher Performance.' The programme stemmed not from the district head's instruction but from the initiative of principals and supervisors in 2005. The programme was inspired by the lessons learned by principals during study visits to other districts and neighbouring countries. As study visits were not accessible to all principals due to budget constraints, a school supervisor then asked principals under his supervision to visit each other's schools in the district to give input on areas that needed improvement. Principals and teachers benefited not only from receiving feedback from their peers but also from the opportunity to compare and reflect on their school performance with other schools.

The autonomous leader pathway: Lontara

Unlike Nagari, Lontara also witnessed a strong political control of the bureaucracy by the district head. Although the local political system was fragmented, in which nine to ten political parties had representatives in the local legislature in the 2014–2019 and 2019–2024 periods (Puskapol UI 2015), a network of family relations allowed the ruling regime

to control not only the executive body but also the legislative branch of the government (Buehler and Tan 2007). The ruling family was also able to eliminate the influence of the local aristocratic family, which – like traditional actors in Nagari – also sought to revive its political power in Lontara (Kurniadi 2020).

With their extensive power, the former and current district heads had no constraint in making employment decisions in the state bureaucracy. This political intervention of the bureaucracy by the district head also adversely affected the development of bureaucratic capacity. Both the district heads often appointed political allies or relatives to important positions in the bureaucracy irrespective of their competencies and skills. In the ‘School Security Guard’ programme, for instance, the former district head promoted many civil servants to supervise the programme even though they lacked the skills required to do the job. It was political connections rather than competencies or skills that often define bureaucrats’ careers. Consequently, as bureaucratic capacity was not developed, policies came mostly from the instruction of the district heads rather than the initiative of the bureaucrats. This top-down model of government was further exacerbated by the authoritarian tendency of the former district head, who ‘... did not hesitate to impose sanctions or punishment such as transfers or demotion for civil servants who did not follow his rules.’⁴

Nevertheless, Lontara managed to pay relatively good attention to the quality of education thanks to the personal commitment of the former and current district heads to learning. The former district head, who led Lontara since the early 2000s, was committed to improving the quality of education. He collaborated with several universities and appointed nine education professors as advisors in formulating and implementing education policies. The current district head also showed a willingness to improve the qualifications of high officials in the LEA. He appointed to the positions those graduating from teaching colleges, holding Ph.D. degrees, and having experience as a teacher so they could understand the obstacles to improving the quality of education in the district.

The current district head leveraged the collaboration with an education NGO in 2017 to improve teacher competencies by implementing a programme called ‘Teacher Learning Centre.’ The district head signed a memorandum of understanding and allocated a large budget (approximately US\$100,000) to support the programme. Lontara attempted to upgrade the teaching skills of teachers through this collaboration. Our informant suggested that the strong support of the district head helped enhance the implementation of the programme in Lontara compared to the implementation of a similar programme in other districts.⁵ This is visible from the number of teachers applying and their enthusiasm to participate in the programme. During the training, facilitators from the NGO facilitated teachers to enhance their teaching skills, develop modules, introduce active learning and active pedagogy, and encourage them to transfer the knowledge to their colleagues. The programme’s graduates also have successfully arranged 61 pieces of training which have reached at least 2,133 teachers in the district.

To maintain the educational policies of the previous district head, the current district head issued a decree declaring Lontara a ‘District of Education.’ This decree governs the legal commitment of the district government to improve education services continuously. Both the current district head and his predecessor realised that the impact of education policies would only be seen in the next twenty to twenty-five years.

Nevertheless, as recalled by one informant, ‘... [the district heads] often emphasised that education is particularly important for the progress of a district if you want to progress, you must start [the development] with education.’⁶

Autonomous leader and policy reversal: Kawi

Many researchers suggest that political leadership is instrumental in pursuing policy reforms (Grindle 2004; Rosser and Sulistiyanto 2013; Von Luebke 2009). Yet, in education, such a dependence on the personal commitment of political leaders can adversely affect the sustainability of the policy. Education quality is usually a less politicised policy domain that receives only a small attention from voters. Subsequently, not many politicians may be interested in promoting or continuing such a policy (Habyarimana, Opalo, and Schipper 2020). Therefore, the risk of policy reversal can be high in a competitive political system, especially when the successor does not have the same commitment to learning as their predecessors.

Local politics in Kawi was fragmented and competitive. Eight to nine political parties controlled the legislature in the 2014–2019 and 2019–2024 periods (Puskapol UI 2015). Nevertheless, despite the competitiveness of the system, the district head enjoyed extensive power to control the bureaucracy. Political power was concentrated in the hands of the district head. Political compromises between parties in the legislature prevented the members of the legislature from exercising control over the decisions of the district heads.⁷ Such control was also minimal from outside the formal political mechanism. The press played only limited roles in enhancing transparency as the local government was able to control journalists.⁸ While religion had significant influences on society, the influence of religious figures in politics has been limited by the existing political configuration. Many influential religious figures were directly involved in the system. The former district head was a prominent religious leader (*kyai*), and his successor also came from an influential religious family.

The extensive power of the district head affects the relationship between the district head and the bureaucrats in the district. District heads could re-organise state bureaucracy without having to listen to the recommendation of *Baperjakat*. Not long after her appointment as a district head in 2018, the current district head transferred many bureaucrats to important positions, including in the LEA. She argued that the transfer was needed to pursue bureaucratic reform. Yet, these newly appointed bureaucrats lacked the required experience to manage education policies as they had no suitable backgrounds.⁹ Rather than being merit-based, the appointment was made to give favours to the district head’s allies.¹⁰

Given that bureaucratic promotions in Kawi were frequently influenced by the district head’s personal preferences, the bureaucrats–district head relationship was hierarchical, and bureaucrats had to obey the district head’s instructions without reserve. This type of relationship creates a culture of obedience, even among senior bureaucrats. It became tough for the bureaucrats to express their opinions as they had to calculate whether what they said would contradict the district head’s interests. The negative impact of bureaucratic politicisation on bureaucratic quality also manifested in the lack of motivation among bureaucrats to perform well. Bureaucrats adhered to the district head’s directives even when those instructions undermined their implemented good policies.

Kawi used to implement learning-enhancing policies thanks to the influential role of the former district head in the education sector. His years of work experience in education – as a teacher, principal, and head of the district education board – shaped his commitment to improving the quality of education in Kawi. When he served as the deputy district head from 2008 to 2013, he initiated a new programme known as ‘Community Learning Hours’ (CLH). He aimed to increase parents’ and communities’ participation in education by providing a conducive environment for school-age children to study at home. When he was elected the district head of Kawi in 2013, he strengthened the programme. He envisioned developing Kawi as a service city and believed the government should prioritise human resource development due to the district’s lack of resources. He initiated the CLH programme and played a major role in implementing it. He visited neighbourhoods regularly to ensure that the programme was implemented.

However, the district discontinued the programme shortly after the election of a new district head in 2018. Rather than focusing on human development, her vision was to develop ‘an independent, competitive, and just economy that is committed to the economic welfare of the people by improving regional infrastructural development.’ Led by the vision, she focused instead on the development of infrastructures. In education, she paid more attention to access-broadening policies rather than quality-enhancing ones. Despite the potential impacts of the learning hours programme on improving students’ academic performance (Wigati 2017), the new district head discontinued the programme soon after she took office. Instead, she expanded policies dealing with resource allocation such as student vouchers and incentives for contract or non-permanent teachers. She raised incentives for contract teachers from around US\$70 in 2019 to US\$100 and US\$120 in 2020 and 2021, respectively. While higher incentives can raise education quality by increasing contract teachers’ motivation to teach, without significant improvements in the supporting environment as well as improvements in the quality of teachers, such a policy would have a minimal impact on learning (Alifia, Pramana, and Revina 2022; Revina et al. 2020).

Many bureaucrats in the LEA personally disagreed with the new district head’s education policies. Yet, the culture of obedience in Kawi dictated them to praise the district head’s initiative. Despite their disagreements, the bureaucrats implemented the district head’s ideas without letting the leader know their perspectives, let alone bringing alternative ideas to the table. The lack of bureaucratic capacity made it difficult for the bureaucrats to argue with the new district head. As a result, it was easy for the new district head to discontinue the learning-enhancing policy implemented by the previous district head.

Discussion and conclusion

Drawing on Indonesia’s experience, this article examines the politics of quality education at the local level. According to the mainstream political settlement perspective, education reforms that are aimed at promoting higher-quality learning are more likely to occur under a dominant political settlement (Hickey and Hossain 2019; Levy and Walton 2013). Elite cohesion in such a political configuration can pave the way for the rise of a developmental coalition that has a longer-term political horizon so that elites are willing to invest in developing better-quality human resources. Yet, our comparative

analysis of education policies in Kawi, Lontara and Nagari shows that elite cohesion is not necessary for the development of quality-promoting reforms. Lontara had a dominant political settlement but Kawi and Nagari did not. Nevertheless, despite the differences in their political configurations, all the districts pursued or once implemented learning-enhancing policies. What explains this puzzle?

As summarised in [Table 2](#), this article demonstrates that political settlements do matter for the development of learning-enhancing policies but in a way that differs from the expectation of the mainstream political settlement perspective. Rather than political dominance, it is political constraints on the discretionary power of district heads on employment decisions in the state bureaucracy that can have significant consequences on the politics of quality education reforms. The Nagari case indicates that constraints on the discretionary power of district heads on employment decisions would affect not only bureaucratic appointments but also power relations between district heads and bureaucrats. The constraint helped develop a meritocratic system of bureaucratic appointment and an egalitarian culture in the bureaucracy. When it comes to policymaking, these practices paved the way for the development of the bureaucratic capacity of the local government, which is needed to develop good policies in less politicised policy domains like quality education.

To some extent, a visionary leader may compensate for the lack of bureaucratic capacity. Districts with a low level of bureaucratic capacity may still be committed to promoting learning if they have a good leader committed to learning. Compared to Nagari, Lontara and Kawi provided no significant constraints on the discretionary power of the district heads on employment decisions in the state bureaucracy. The district head could use the bureaucracy for patronage purposes, including to reward friends and punish enemies. As in other regions (Berenschot 2018; Colonnelli, Prem, and Teso 2020), this kind of politicisation of bureaucracy created less competent bureaucrats,

Table 2. Summary of findings.

Nagari	Kawi	Lontara
Discretionary Power of District Heads Constrained by the political influence of <i>adat</i> (traditional) leaders.	Large discretionary power over employment decisions in the bureaucracy.	Large discretionary power over employment decisions in the bureaucracy.
Appointment of Bureaucrats Appointments are based on the competence/skills of bureaucrats.	Appointments are based on political connections.	Appointments are based on political connections.
District Head-Bureaucrats Relations Difficult for district heads to politicise the bureaucracy. Relatively egalitarian where bureaucrats can articulate their opinions.	Bureaucracy can be easily used for political purposes (patronage). Bureaucrats' obedience to the district head's sayings and policy preferences.	Bureaucracy can be easily used for political purposes (patronage). Bureaucrats' obedience to the district head's sayings and policy preferences.
Bureaucratic Capacity Bureaucrats were able to develop learning-enhancing policies.	Bureaucrats were dependent on the instruction of the district head.	Bureaucrats were dependent on the instruction of the district head.
Policy Outcomes Policy reforms to promote learning came from a variety of sources, including state-level bureaucrats.	The new district head discontinued the quality-enhancing policies pursued by the former district head.	The district continued its policy-enhancing policies thanks to the commitment and dominance of the ruling political dynasty.

Source: Authors' analysis of primary and secondary data.

thus weakening the bureaucratic capacity of the government. Nevertheless, both Lontara and Kawi pursued learning-enhancing policies thanks to the strong will of the former district heads to promote learning.

However, dependence on the personal commitment of leaders was risky for policy sustainability. The political succession in Lontara did not affect the district's education policies as the new district head continued his predecessor's commitment to learning. Yet, the political succession in Kawi in 2018 brought significant changes to the district's education policy as the new district head had a different policy orientation compared to that of her predecessor. The former discontinued the latter's CLH programme and focused instead on policies whose direct linkages with student learning were minimal.

These findings have clear implications for education policy reforms. First, our comparative analysis suggests an equifinality of learning-enhancing policies at the local level. Both constrained- and autonomous-leader political settlements may promote learning-enhancing policies. These settlements can be either dominant or competitive. The autonomous leader path can be even more effective if the learning-promoting policies initiated by the leader could be strengthened by the succeeding one. Yet, this is a big if (conditionality), especially under a competitive political system. Political succession in such a system often leads to significant changes in the government's policy orientation. Therefore, as far as policy sustainability is concerned, the autonomous-leader path has a higher risk of a policy reversal than the constrained-leader path.

Second, this article also highlights the importance of the social accountability of policymakers in social provision. The 2004 World Development Report (World Bank 2003) suggests two routes of accountability: long and short. If the latter deals with the direct relationships between citizens and service providers like doctors or schoolteachers, the former deals with citizens' relationships with policymakers. Citizens cannot decide what or how services are to be provided but the government takes the responsibility. It is policymakers who will have the responsibility to decide the type or level of services to be provided (World Bank 2003). The short route of accountability has been preferred to the long one as the latter is often plagued by deep political problems like patronage. The short route of accountability can be pursued by using practical tools like a citizen report card. However, despite the promises of these tools to enhance government responsiveness, research assessing the impact of the short-route approach to accountability showed mixed results (Blair 2018; Dewachter et al. 2018; Fox 2015; Smith and Benavot 2019). This article suggests the importance of the long route to accountability in certain policy issues like addressing learning deficit problems.

Nevertheless, further research is needed to re-examine the generalisability of the findings. Although the article builds on a systematic method in case selection and data analysis, more cases may be needed to cover the heterogeneity of local governments. The scope condition of the finding may also need to be further specified. Additionally, what rules or norms can put some constraints on the discretionary power of district heads on employment decisions in the state bureaucracy needs further investigation. In Nagari, these constraints came from the influential role of the *adat* leaders in local politics. These leaders played an important role in providing an informal defence for bureaucrats from an unnecessary or unjustified mutation by the district heads. Yet, these *adat* leaders may also use their power to influence district heads in making bureaucratic appointments. Besides, these traditional leaders may also have certain interests or policy preferences that may not be well aligned with learning. Further

research is needed to explore different types of institutional constraints on the discretionary power of district heads and how these constraints can be institutionalised in the political system.

Notes

1. *Adat* means tradition. The term may refer to the holders of local traditions in many regions in Indonesia. In some regions, *adat* actors are traditional political leaders.
2. Interview with a senior bureaucrat on 31 March 2021.
3. Interview with a senior bureaucrat on 24 March 2021.
4. Interview with a local NGO officer on 11 November 2020.
5. Group discussion with three national NGO officers who have built partnerships with Lontara and other districts in Indonesia. The interview was conducted on 20 October 2020.
6. Interview with a senior bureaucrat on 11 November 2020.
7. Interview with a member of the local legislature on 6 February 2021.
8. Interview with the chief editor of a local newspaper on 8 February 2021.
9. Interviews with a former bureaucrat on 15 February 2021 and a school principal on 2 February 2021.
10. Interview with a local academic on 15 February 2021.

Acknowledgments

This research was funded under the RISE Programme by the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), the Australian Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. We are grateful to Andrew Rosser, Daniel Suryadarma, and Shintia Revina who have generously shared their thoughtful ideas, comments, and suggestions for the initial research design and the draft of the article. We also thank Chris Bjork, Scott Guggenheim, and RISE anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and criticism to improve the clarity of the article. We are indebted to Ridwan Muzir, Nuzul Iskandar, Muhammad Irvan Nur Iva, Nasrullah, Akhmad Fadli, Fajri Nida, Ratna Yunita, and Rizwar Anshari for their help and insights in data collection. We are also grateful to Alia An Nadhiva for her excellent research assistance. We also would like to express our sincere thanks to our informants, who have generously shared their time and knowledge with us so we can finish this article. The initial version of the article was presented at the 2021 ASA Sociology of Development Conference and the 2022 Annual Midwest Political Science (MPSA) Conference. We thank the participants of the conference for their valuable questions and feedback. We would also like to thank anonymous reviewers of this article for their thoughtful and constructive criticism and suggestions. The remaining errors are our own.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The work was supported by the RISE Programme.

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Ethical standards

The authors declare that the human subjects research in this article was reviewed by the Atma Jaya University Institutional Review Board under the Ethical Clearance Number 0156/III/LPPM-PM. 10.05/02/2019.

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