

Of Power and Learning: District Heads, Bureaucracy, and Education Policies in Indonesia's Decentralised Political System

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Abstract

This paper examines the politics of education policies in a decentralised political system. Under what conditions does decentralisation promote learning-enhancing policies? Despite the numerous works that have been written on decentralisation and education, little is known about how politics influenced local education policies. To address this problem, this paper looks at the linkages between local politics, bureaucratic capacity, and the development of learning-enhancing policies in Indonesia's decentralised political system. More specifically, it assesses how regional variation in the discretionary power of district heads over employment decisions in the state bureaucracy explains the variation in local education policies in four districts in Indonesia. The primary data were collected through in-depth interviews with political leaders, bureaucrats, district education councils, school principals, teachers, teacher organisations, parents, non-government and community-based organisations, journalists, academicians, and other relevant informants. Using Mill's method of difference, the comparative analysis presented in this paper demonstrates that institutional constraints on the discretionary power of the district head over employment decisions in the state bureaucracy do matter for the development of learning-enhancing policies. Such constraints can pave the way for the development of the bureaucratic capacity required for governments to pursue learning-enhancing policies. Absent constraints on the discretionary power of district heads over employment decisions in the state bureaucracy, the extent to which districts implement learning-enhancing policies will depend on district heads' commitment to student learning.

Keywords: Learning, decentralisation, district heads, discretionary power, bureaucratic capacity, Indonesia



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Acronyms and Abbreviations

Baperjakat	<i>Badan Pertimbangan Jabatan dan Kepangkatan</i>	Advisory Board for Bureaucratic Position and Rank
Bappeda	<i>Badan Perencanaan Pembangunan Daerah</i>	Regional Development Planning Agency
K3S	<i>kelompok kerja kepala sekolah</i>	school principal working group
KAN	<i>Kerapatan Adat Nagari</i>	Village <i>Adat</i> Council
LEA		local education agency
MABR		Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform
MoECRT		Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology
NGO		non-governmental organisation
RB	<i>reformasi birokrasi</i>	bureaucratic reform
RPJMD	<i>Rencana Pembangunan Jangka Menengah Daerah</i>	Medium-Term Regional Development Plan
SAKIP	<i>Sistem Akuntabilitas Kinerja Instansi Pemerintahan</i>	Government Agencies Performance Accountability System

1. Introduction

Improving learning remains a big challenge for many governments around the world. Proponents of decentralisation argue that decentralisation will improve education. By making governments “closer to the people,” decentralisation will increase the voice and participation of diverse groups in decision-making processes, improve accountability and responsiveness of the government to people’s needs, lower the unit cost of public expenditures, and enhance service delivery (Channa and Faguet, 2016; Faguet, 2014). However, some evidence indicates decentralisation had negligible impacts on learning (Leer, 2016; Muttaqin et al., 2016). Local governments’ responses to learning deficit problems have varied considerably. A few local governments pursued learning-enhancing policies, but many others did not (Zulfa et al., 2019). This variation in approaches begs the question: under what conditions do local governments promote learning-enhancing policies?

Despite the numerous works that have been written on decentralisation and education (i.e., Elacqua et al., 2021; Jeong et al., 2017; Leer, 2016; Kristiansen and Pratikno, 2006), a clear understanding of how decentralisation can improve learning is lacking. Research on the impact of decentralisation on education has focused on the efficiency gains and effectiveness of schools in a decentralised system. Little is known about how politics under decentralisation affects local governments and their policies in education.

Based on their main objectives, education policies can be generally distinguished into whether they focus on enhancing school access or improving learning. The former may include building schools or providing scholarships for students from poor families, while the latter may consist of reforms intended to improve school management, enhance the accountability and performance of teachers, school principals, and education officers, and strengthen parents’ participation (Grindle, 2004). The latter type of policy can be more difficult to implement as it usually requires stronger commitment from the government. This paper focuses on this issue by examining the linkages between politics, bureaucratic capacity, and learning-enhancing policies. As many researchers have shown, the extent to which decentralisation will deliver its promises of improving public services will depend on how decentralisation strengthens the capacity of local governments (Arends, 2020; Halimatussadiyah 2020).

This paper aims to assess the conditions under which decentralisation can promote learning-enhancing policies by comparing the development of education policies in two pairs of districts in Indonesia. The country offers a good opportunity to examine the effect of local politics on education policies. Indonesia decentralised its government system shortly after the fall of Soeharto in 1998. Except in matters related to defense and security, foreign affairs, monetary and fiscal policies, justice, and religious affairs, sub-national governments are now responsible for the provision of public services (Holtzappel, 2009; Rasyid, 2003). Indeed, local districts in Indonesia did pursue local education policy initiatives, but few of those initiatives focused on learning, as Zulfa et al. (2019) noted. This development allows us to scrutinise the linkages between decentralisation, local politics, and education policies. Building on previous work on the professionalisation of the patronage state (Schuster, 2016; Shefter, 1977) and the rise of the developmental state (Cingolani et al., 2015; Evans, 1995; Amsden, 1985), this paper focuses on the effect of institutional constraints on the discretionary power of district heads over employment decisions in the state bureaucracy on bureaucratic capacity and local education policies.

This paper demonstrates that institutional constraints on the discretionary power of district heads over employment decisions in the state bureaucracy can have positive impacts on the development of learning-enhancing policies. We define institutional constraints on the discretionary power of district heads as norms or rules, which can be formal or informal, that limit or check the power of district heads in making employment decisions in the state bureaucracy. Such constraints can pave the way for the development of local bureaucratic capacity, which is needed for local governments to pursue learning-enhancing policies.

The lack of constraints allows district heads to use bureaucratic appointments to advance their political interests, making it difficult for local governments to improve the bureaucratic capacity of the state bureaucracy. Under such conditions, the extent to which local governments will pursue learning-enhancing policies will depend on the political will of district heads. Districts with leaders who have a strong commitment to learning are likely to implement learning-enhancing policies. Nevertheless, unless a specific mechanism is put in place to sustain the policy, it can face the risk of a policy change by a successor if the latter has no strong commitment to learning.

This finding has significant implications for the current debate about how local governments could better address the learning deficit problem. The finding urges the importance of the long route of accountability to the improvement of certain public services like quality education. So far, debates about government accountability have been focused on the short route of accountability (World Bank, 2003). Compared to the long route of accountability, which often deals with persistent problems in the political system like patronage, the short route of accountability can be more manageable to deal with as it deals with the direct relationships between citizens and service providers like doctors, nurses, or teachers. However, evidence on the effectiveness of the short route of accountability in improving public services has been mixed. Improvements in the short route of accountability need to be supported by strategic approaches to addressing the persistent problems in the long route of accountability (Smith and Benavot, 2019; Blair, 2018; Dewachter et al., 2018; Fox, 2015). This paper highlights the significance of institutional constraints on the discretionary power of elected public officials on employment decisions in the state bureaucracy to the development of local governments' accountability.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. After the introduction, Section 2 discusses our hypothesis concerning the linkages between the discretionary power of district heads on employment decisions in the state bureaucracy and the development of learning-enhancing policies. To describe the context of the study, Section 3 discusses the development of local political systems and education policies in Indonesia after the country decentralised its government system in 2000. Section 4 discusses our research method and case selection. We present the results of the study in Section 5. First, the section traces the linkages between the discretionary power of district heads on employment decisions in the state bureaucracy and the development of local bureaucratic capacity. Later, we discuss in the section why bureaucratic capacity is needed for local governments to pursue learning-enhancing policies. Finally, Section 6 discusses the policy implications of the finding and concludes the paper.

2. Decentralisation and the Politics of Education Policies

2.1. The Politics of Public Policies under Decentralisation

The widespread notion that decentralisation would improve public policies relies on a strong assumption that decentralisation would improve local governments (Arends 2020). However, decentralisation does not necessarily create better local governments. Decentralisation affects local political configurations differently across regions, depending on the existing political structure and local economic resources. These differences in the local political configuration will affect the performance of local governments (Grindle, 2009).

Decentralisation changes the rules or norms that structure the interactions among these actors (Malley, 2003; Widodo, 2003). In some regions, these changes may empower lower social groups. In Kerala State, India, for instance, Heller et al. (2007) reported that the decentralisation of planning promoted by the Government of Kerala from 1996 to 2001 increased people's participation in development planning. The participation was quite inclusive in that women constituted 41% of participants in the second year of the

policy implementation, and Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes were overrepresented in the planning processes. However, decentralisation may pave the way for, on the contrary, the consolidation of local, predatory political elites. In Argentina, for example, decentralisation allowed provincial political elites to exploit transfers from the central government to expand clientelist political bases in their home provinces (Ardanaz et al., 2014). These differences in local political processes brought by decentralisation have consequential impacts on public policies. The domination of local politics by predatory political elites will limit government accountability, thus making the government susceptible to capture by local elites or their cronies (Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2006).

Elite capture may involve the politicisation of bureaucracy. While bureaucracy can never be entirely free from politics, and the politicisation of bureaucracy is not always 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 programmes and policies with the elected leaders' policy objectives. Meanwhile, behavioural politicisation of bureaucracy is detrimental to public policies if such politicisation ends up in the subjugation of bureaucracy to elected leaders' political motives. Elected leaders may use bureaucracy simply for political patronage purposes or other political ends (Purnomo et al., 2020; Berenschot, 2018; Awortwi, 2011). As political actors, state leaders are motivated by certain incentives to act. Only under certain circumstances will they be willing to improve public policies. Therefore, how decentralisation shapes the behaviour of local leaders will have consequential impacts on public policies, including those in the education sector.

2.2. District Heads' Power and the Politics of Learning-Enhancing Policies

Many researchers have shown that the extent to which decentralisation improves public services depends on the extent to which decentralisation policies strengthen the local state's capacity (Halimatusa'diyah, 2020; Brieba, 2018; Cingolani et al., 2015). In education, such capacity will certainly be needed, especially when it comes to quality. Unlike access-broadening policies, which mostly rely on the distribution of resources, quality-enhancing policies often deal with the difficult tasks of improving teacher performance, curriculum, and school oversight (Hossain and Hickey, 2019; Grindle, 2004). Addressing these problems may face strong opposition from various actors ranging from teachers, teacher unions, school principals, and teacher training colleges to parents and students. Reform proposals may also face strong opposition from religious figures or authorities, policy networks, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and international development agencies (Bruns et al., 2019; Grindle, 2004).

According to Hossain and Hickey (2019), a state's capacity to pursue education policy reforms that are needed to improve learning is more likely to develop under certain political conditions. Based on the distribution of power and institutions that maintain the local political system, Hossain and Hickey (2019) distinguished four types of political settlements: dominant-personalised, dominant with rule-by-law, competitive clientelist, and competitive with rule-by-law. The last two political settlements suffer from the fierce inter-elite competition, which makes it difficult for the elite to make credible commitments to development. In contrast, elite cohesion characterises elite interaction in dominant political settlements. Some regions may be able to institutionalise rules that regulate the exchange of power and distribution of resources (dominant with rule-by-law) while others may not (dominant-personalised). Consequently, power and resources in the latter will be exchanged or distributed based on personal networks rather than formal rules. Regardless of this difference, however, elite cohesion in these two political settlements allows the government to build developmental coalitions needed to advance development agendas. Therefore, quality education reforms are more likely to be adopted under dominant political settlements rather than competitive ones (Hickey et al., 2019; Hossain and Hickey, 2019).

By focusing on elite cohesion and its impacts on education, the political settlement approach provides a useful corrective to the managerial approach to education. The latter perceives deficits in learning as technical problems in organisational designs or programme implementation that can be addressed by improving the autonomy and administrative capacity of service providers (Pritchett, 2019). In contrast, the political settlement approach suggests that politics does matter for certain development agendas like education. Nevertheless, the political settlement approach's focus on elite cohesion has made it rather insensitive to the relationship between political power and bureaucracy. The approach gives no clear prediction as to how bureaucratic capacity improves under different types of political settlements. Hickey and Hossain's (2019) conjecture about the rise of a developmental coalition under a dominant political settlement overlooks the fact that a clientelist dominant political settlement can be a fertile ground for the establishment or consolidation of a political dynasty, which can be detrimental to bureaucracy and public goods provision (Tusalem and Pe-Aguirre, 2013). Besides, the political settlement approach also neglects the important role of political leaders in shaping local policies.

Different from Hossain and Hickey (2019), this paper focuses on the position and role of leaders. First, this paper argues that rather than the extensive power of political elites under a dominant political settlement, it is constraints on the discretionary power of political leaders over employment decisions in the state bureaucracy that matter for education policies. The bureaucratic capacity of the local state is more likely to develop under institutionally constrained district heads. Some evidence shows that large discretion in employment decisions by district heads has negative effects on the quality of bureaucracy. At the recruitment stage, great discretionary power will incentivise district heads to use personal connection rather than merit as the key criteria for selecting bureaucrats. In Brazil, for instance, Colonnelli et al. (2020) found that considerable discretion in employment decisions by elected politicians caused not only the proliferation of patronage but also the weakening of bureaucracy. Political connection determined most of the employment decisions in the state bureaucracy and led to the rise of less competent individuals. Among bureaucrats, the politicisation of bureaucracy will incentivise bureaucrats to pay more attention to political connection rather than skills and competence in building their careers (Berenschot, 2018).

Constraints on the discretionary power of district heads over employment decisions in state bureaucracy are likely to make local bureaucracy not only more insulated from politics but also more competent. These constraints will make it difficult for district heads to politicise bureaucratic appointments, such as rewarding political allies. Therefore, under such conditions, competence and skill will play an important role in determining bureaucratic appointments in local government, thus allowing the bureaucracy to develop the required capacity to deal with issues and problems within its policy domain. As argued by Schuster (2016), political rules or norms that deprive the executive of patronage power will force the executive to improve bureaucratic capacity, especially when challengers control the legislative branch of the government. Under such circumstances, the executive will prefer a meritocratic bureaucracy rather than a politicised one so that it can maintain its power (i.e., increase the chance of re-election) and at the same time prevent challengers from exploiting the spoils of patronage (Schuster, 2016).

Constraints on the discretionary power of elected leaders may come from various sources. They may result from institutions or rules and norms that structure social interactions. Some rules or norms are formally written like the system of government. Yet, constraints on the discretionary power of district heads may also come from informal institutions. By "informal institutions" here we mean informal norms or rules that prescribe the behaviour of actors or interactions between actors in the system (Helmke and Levitsky, 2004, p. 725). Some evidence shows that informal institutions shape many important political behaviours or outcomes (Helmke and Levitsky, 2004). In the case of public good provision, for instance, Tsai (2007) argued that unofficial rules or norms enacted by the presence of local solidary groups may substitute for a formal accountability system and encourage government officials to establish or enforce their public obligations. In rural China, she found that the increased moral or social standing that lineages

or clan groups gave to village officials who performed well in the office discouraged them from enriching themselves with public money and incentivised these officials to use village money to develop local infrastructure, build schools or improve public services.

Second, while agreeing with some criticism on the political settlement approach’s neglect of the role of political leaders in shaping public policies, we argue that role of political leaders in public policy is not free from criticism either. Political leadership can indeed play a crucial role in defining the focus of local government policies (Brierley, 2020; Rosser and Sulistiyanto, 2013; Von Luebke, 2009). In education, Grindle (2004) has shown the crucial role of political leaders in navigating the difficult task of institutionalising pro-quality education reforms. Nevertheless, it is also important to note that political leadership needs to be embedded in social and political contexts to make a real contribution to social improvements (Evans, 1995; Tandler, 1997). Feedback from society is needed for leaders to make policy decisions that are socially relevant to the need of the people. Otherwise, leaders’ policy decisions may serve only the specific interests of political elites or their allies (Williams, 2019). Besides, dependence on the personal commitment of a political leader faces the risk of a policy reversal by that leader’s successor unless a mechanism has been put in place to ensure the sustainability of the policy.

To summarise, our review of the literature on the linkages between district heads’ discretionary power, bureaucratic capacity, and quality education policies results in the following propositions (summarised in Figure 1). First, institutional constraints on the discretionary power of district heads are necessary to develop the bureaucratic capacities of local education agencies. This development of high bureaucratic capacity will allow local education offices to better address existing problems, including the problem of learning deficits (Hypothesis 1). Second, in the absence of strong bureaucratic capacity, the extent to which local education offices will pay attention to education quality will be highly dependent on the political will of district heads (Hypothesis 2). Without leaders who have genuine interests in quality education, a district will not pursue pro-quality education policies. Some districts are fortunate to have such leaders who implement policies that can enhance student learning. Yet, without a good bureaucracy ready to defend and sustain such policies, a new leader may change the policy easily, especially when that leader has large discretionary power over public employment in the state bureaucracy. They may use political connections rather than competence or skills as the criteria for making a bureaucratic appointment. Therefore, institutional constraints on the discretionary power of district heads, with which local bureaucratic capacity is more likely to develop, can be a solution to the problem of learning deficits in the decentralisation era.

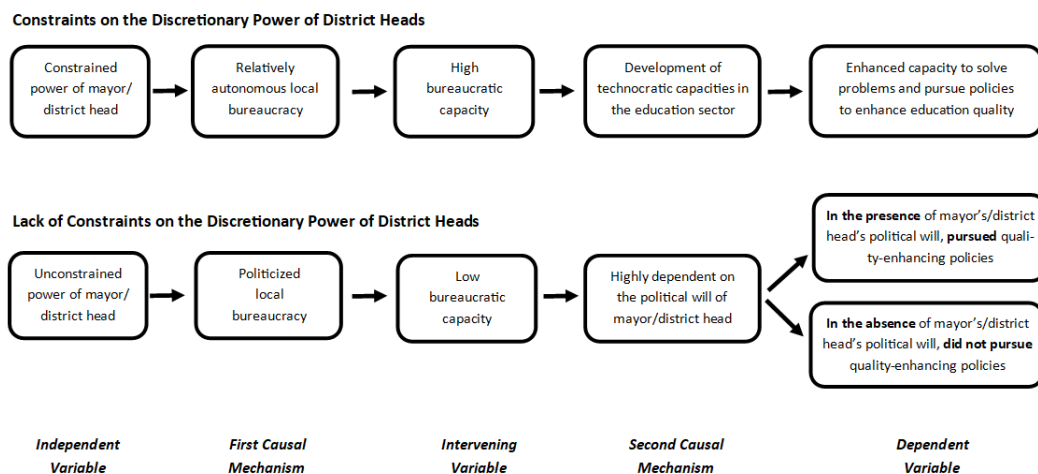


Figure 1. Summary of Propositions

3. Local Politics and Education in Indonesia's Decentralised System

Indonesia began to decentralise its government system shortly after the fall of Soeharto's military regime in 1998. In 1999, the country passed decentralisation laws: Law No. 22/1999 on regional government and Law No. 25/1999 on intergovernmental fiscal relations. The latter set out a new system of financial arrangements between the central and sub-national governments, while Law No. 22/1999 stipulated the devolution of administrative and political authority to the sub-national governments. Except in matters related to defence and security, foreign affairs, monetary and fiscal policies, justice, and religious affairs, sub-national governments, especially district governments, are now responsible for the provision of public services. In 2004, the central government revised these laws by passing Law No. 32/2004 on regional autonomy and Law No. 33/2004 on intergovernmental fiscal relations. Included in this revision is the direct election of district heads, which began in 2005 (Holtzappel, 2009; Rasyid, 2003).

The decentralisation policy brought many significant changes to local politics in Indonesia. The number of districts in the country increased significantly from 298 in 1998 to 514 in 2014 (Nur 2022). Nevertheless, some evidence shows that the effects of decentralisation on the dynamics of local politics in Indonesia vary across regions. In conjunction with the democratisation process that the country was also undergoing after the fall of Soeharto's regime, decentralisation opened new opportunities for various social groups to articulate their interests (Antlöv, 2003). According to Rosser et al. (2005), the opening of political space after the decentralisation removed some obstacles to the organisation of the poor and other marginalised groups as well as NGO activists, thus allowing them to engage in collective action to influence policy-making processes.

However, some researchers also showed that decentralisation often allowed different factions of the old, established political elites to strengthen their power (Malley, 2003; Widodo, 2003). According to Buehler (2010, p.274), local politics remained elitist. Some regulations concerning the election of district heads and the high cost of campaigns created many practical hurdles for ordinary citizens or even party officials to compete in local elections. In thirty-three gubernatorial elections between 2005 and 2008, Buehler (2010, p.275) found that nearly 85% of candidates for governors and deputies were figures from within the traditional political circles. Similarly, Hadiz (2003) argued that decentralisation in Indonesia allowed "old" predatory political interests nurtured under Soeharto's authoritarian regime to re-organise their power and extend their control of local politics and economic resources after the fall of the regime in 1998.

Regarding education, decentralisation in Indonesia gave ample room for district governments to pursue policies that could better address education problems in their regions. District governments not only control the education budget, but they also have the authority to manage teachers. Nevertheless, evidence of the effect of decentralisation on learning and educational attainment in Indonesia has been mixed. According to Simatupang (2009), under decentralisation, the national average years of schooling, adult literacy rate, and female literacy rate improved. The policy also decreased senior secondary school dropout rates in the country. However, other research found that the impact of decentralisation on educational attainment has been negligible. While the mean years of schooling increased after decentralisation, educational attainment in Indonesia grew faster in the pre-decentralisation era (Muttaqin et al., 2016). According to Leer (2016), decentralisation had no significant impact on numeracy and literacy achievement. Beatty et al. (2021) even found that student learning declined approximately by 0.25 standard deviations between 2000 and 2014.

To some extent, decentralisation led some district governments to pursue local policy initiatives to improve education. Yet most of these policies have been concentrated on issues related to access to education. For example, some regions attempted to provide education for all citizens by allocating additional funds from the local government's budget to support children from poor households who could not continue their education in secondary schools without government support (Rosser and Sulistiyanto, 2013). Regarding education quality, few local governments implemented policies that were specifically designed to improve learning (Zulfa et al., 2019). When it comes to teachers, for example, local governments' policies have been divided between teacher training and financial remuneration, with the latter tending to be more dominant. Besides being easier to manage, the latter policy, along with teacher recruitment, can be manipulated by local politicians to develop political patronage. Such a strategy has been pronounced during election years, especially in regions where the former ruling authoritarian party must compete with new entrants (Pierskalla and Sacks, 2019). Related to teacher performance, Leer (2016) found that teachers' efforts, as measured by the average number of hours spent in the classroom per week, declined after decentralisation. The extent to which these differences in education policies had something to do with the dynamics of local politics after decentralisation is worth scrutinising.

4. Research Method

4.1. Case selection

To test the hypotheses outlined in Section 2, we carefully selected four districts—hereinafter anonymised as Kawi, Nagari, Siliwangi, and Lontara—that represent the socio-economic heterogeneity of districts in Indonesia. The first two districts, Kawi and Nagari, were selected from urban areas while the other two were from rural ones. Table 1 shows that these districts differed in the outcome of interests (education policies) and the hypothesised explanatory variables, namely the discretionary power of district heads, bureaucratic capacity, and leaders' commitment to learning. As outlined in Section 2, the first of our hypotheses deals with the effect of the discretionary power of district heads over employment in the state bureaucracy on bureaucratic quality and education policies. In the second part of the hypotheses, we highlight the important role of political leaders' commitment to learning in shaping local education policies, especially when the district has low constraints on the discretionary power of the district heads on employment decisions in the state bureaucracy. The following sub-sections discuss the variation in education policies, the discretionary power of district heads, and the quality of bureaucracy. We will further discuss the variation in leaders' political commitment in the following section, especially when discussing the role of political leaders' commitment to learning.

Table 1. Case Selection

Dependent and Explanatory Vars.	Nagari	Kawi	Siliwangi	Lontara
Education policies	Learning-Enhancing	Shifted from Learning to Access	Access-Broadening	Learning-Enhancing
Constraints on the discretionary power of district heads	Yes	No	No	No
Bureaucratic Capacity	High	Low	Low	Low
District head's attention to learning	Low	Low	Low	High
Political settlement	Competitive-Clientelist	Competitive-Clientelist	Dominant-Personalised	Dominant-Personalised
Control Variables				
Education budget (as a share of district government spending)	11.36%	10.87%	11.29%	16.21%
GDP per capita 2014-2018 (USD)	62.65	49.53	37.72	25.06
Population	121,028	132,434	6,088,233	785,836
Poverty rate	4.92 %	4.94 %	8.57%	8,42%
No. of sub-districts	3	3	40	18
Area	25.24 km ²	20.21 km ²	2,663 km ²	1,888 km ²
Year of establishment	1938	1918	1482	1950
Middle-class and aspiring middle-class (AMC) ¹	8% of the population AMC rate: 51%	9% of the population AMC rate: 51%	no data available	no data available
Educational attainment (2020; average years) ²	11.33	10.25	8.30	8.19

Sources: Centre for Policy Analysis and Synchronization, Ministry of Education and Culture (2019); BPS-Statistics Indonesia (2019); World Bank (2019).

4.1.1. Local Governments' Education Policies

Table 1 presents the differences and similarities across the selected cases. Regarding the outcome of interest, we selected cases based on whether they pursued learning-enhancing policies or not. Lontara and

¹ World Bank (2019) only showed the most growing cities with the middle class, including Nagari and Kawi. In this report, World Bank classified five consumption classes in Indonesia that put aspiring middle class (AMC/grade 3) as a group of people who no longer live below the poverty line (grade 1) nor vulnerable (grade 2), but they are not yet economically secure like the middle class (grade 4) or the wealthiest Indonesians called the upper class (grade 5). This informs that both Nagari and Kawi people are more stable economically than Siliwangi and Lontara, which have higher poverty rates.

² <https://www.bps.go.id/indikator/26/415/1/-metode-baru-rata-rata-lama-sekolah.html>

Nagari showed continued support for quality-enhancing policies. The latter district implemented what they called “Peer Supervision of Teacher Performance.” As will be discussed later, this programme was intended to improve teachers’ performance. Once a week, principals and school supervisors in each sub-district gathered and paid a visit to one of the schools in the sub-district and observed teachers’ teaching practices in the school. The goal of the programme was to give feedback to the teachers and host principals. Nagari also implemented “Family Education” a community-based programme for parents. Those interested in the programme would attend sixteen weeks of in-class sessions, usually held in village offices. The goal of the programme was to improve parents’ awareness and knowledge about the function of the family, including the proper role of parents in children’s education.

Lontara also pursued some quality-enhancing policies. The district began implementing the “Student Automatic Promotion” policy in 2011 to reduce the high dropout rate in the district. This policy enabled students to be promoted to the next grade despite their poor performance on a particular subject(s). Students who did not master a subject would be provided remedial and additional tutoring after school hours so that they would meet the minimum standards. Furthermore, Lontara enacted two policies to improve teacher competencies. First was the “School Security Guard” programme designed to overcome high teacher absenteeism. Since 2009, the Lontara District Head has hired more than 500 security guards assigned to all primary and junior secondary schools throughout the district to monitor teacher attendance. Each security guard was equipped with a motorcycle to pick up teachers so they would not be late for school. The second policy was the “Teacher Learning Centre”, a joint programme by the Lontara District Government and a national NGO concerned with education, implemented in 2017. The programme aimed to build a coaching system and provide training to enhance teacher professionalism.

Kawi also pursued some quality-enhancing policies, especially between 2008 and 2018. The district implemented the “Community Learning Hours” programme during this period. The programme stipulated that each neighbourhood must form a task force consisting of male neighbourhood administrators and a motivator team from the Islamic women group called *Muslimat* to supervise programme implementation. This task force applied rules such as turning off the television, other electronic devices, and party sound systems and prohibiting buskers during the evening study hours from 6 to 8 pm. However, the policy was abandoned as the district elected a new head at the end of 2018. Instead of continuing the “Community Learning Hours,” the new district head focused on policies that broadened access, such as student vouchers and contract teachers’ incentives policies.

Compared to the other three districts, Siliwangi showed the least attention to student learning. Only a few of its district heads showed interest in education policies, even in the access-broadening area. It was not until 2019 that Siliwangi had education programmes that can be aptly described as access-broadening. A few months after the newly elected district head—the sister of the former district head—took office, the local education agency (LEA) launched a set of programmes under the grand theme “SMART” that aimed to revitalise school infrastructure and provide student vouchers and incentives for contract teachers. As part of the same programme, the district head also allocated a significant budget for Islamic education institutions such as *pesantren* and *madrassa*. Also, since most *pesantren* do not provide formal education to their students, known as *santri*, the LEA allocated a budget for *santri* in the district interested in attending formal education hosted by the centre for community learning. The Siliwangi District Government also provided scholarships, including for higher education, for Muslim students who can memorise the Koran (called *Hafiz*).

4.1.2. Constraints of the Discretionary Power of District Heads

Indonesia's decentralisation system gives district heads enormous power to control local governments. Law No. 22/1999 stipulated that district heads' authority spans a wide variety of policy areas ranging from managing bureaucracy and maintaining a regional budget allocation to developing local state-owned enterprises and allocating state concessions on natural resources. Although Indonesia's decentralisation system also empowered local legislatures to maintain the working of self-autonomy at the district level (Rasyid, 2003), the poor institutionalisation of the party system made it difficult for the local legislatures to provide the required check and balances for the executive. Local politics often become personalised as politicians relied more on personal networks rather than party ideology and organisation (Tomsa, 2014). Nevertheless, decentralisation also empowered other actors, including cultural ones. The extent to which such actors could exert their influence in local political processes could significantly shape the district head's power on many important issues, including employment decisions in the state bureaucracy.

In Nagari, the re-organisation of local politics during the early years of decentralisation led traditional *adat* leaders to re-organise the *adat* institution so that they could have a more influential role in local politics (F. and K. von Benda-Beckmann, 2007). Although they failed to establish the *Kerapatan Adat Nagari* (KAN), an association of local traditional figures representing their clans, as a formal political organisation in Nagari's political system (Irawati, 2012), the KAN leaders were able to exert some influence in shaping the way the district head and other formal political actors behave in the system thanks to the ability of KAN leaders to maintain their cultural and moral legitimacy. KAN leadership embodies an indigenous model of bottom-up democracy as KAN is rooted in the traditional kinship systems. Each kin group is represented by a leader who should bring aspiration from the grassroots to the higher level of representation. These leaders have the responsibility to raise the aspiration of their kin members during formal or informal engagement with the district head.

As will be further discussed later, the local political norm stipulating that district heads should have regular meetings with KAN leaders or consult them on important issues allows the KAN leaders to exert some influences not only on the policy-making processes but also in bureaucratic appointments in Nagari. A bureaucrat may contact a KAN leader when facing an unreasonable rotation plan by the district head. In response, KAN leaders will usually use their influence on the district head or the members of the local legislature to prevent the plan. Such a mechanism makes it more difficult for district heads to use state bureaucracy to support their political interests. Even though the final decision about bureaucratic employment remains in the hand of the district head, they cannot disregard the role of the Advisory Board for Bureaucratic Position and Rank (*Baperjakat*) in assessing the competence of the candidates for any bureaucratic appointment.

Unlike in Nagari, district heads in the other three regions faced no significant constraint in making employment decisions over the state bureaucracy. In these districts, the *Baperjakat* practically had no role in advising the district heads concerning bureaucratic appointments. The magnitude of the district heads' power over bureaucratic appointments can be seen, for example, in the high turnover of the heads of the local education offices. In Kawi, six bureaucrats led the local education office between 2012 and 2021 (1.5 years on average for each office head). In Siliwangi, the local education office was led by ten bureaucrats between 2004 and 2021 (1.7 years on average for each office head). In contrast, Nagari's local education office had only three heads between 2003 and 2021 (6 years on average for each office head).

Like that of Nagari, Lontara's local education office was led also by only three bureaucrats between 2004 and 2021 (around 5.7 years on average for each office head). However, rather than reflecting the effect of significant constraints on the discretionary power of district heads over employment decisions in the state bureaucracy, this low turnover of local education office heads resulted from the strong commitment of the

district heads to the education sector. As indicated above, the district pursued learning-enhancing policies during this period. Yet, in terms of discretionary power, the district heads of Lontara faced no significant constraint. The political control of the local bureaucracy by the district heads was strong and even stronger than that in Kawi or Siliwangi. The network of family relations in the district as well as in the province as the basis of the ruling regime’s power allowed the regime to extend its political control to cover not only the executive body but also the legislative branch of the government (Buehler and Tan, 2007). Moreover, the ruling family was also able to eliminate the influence of the local aristocrat family, which—like the traditional actors in Nagari or other regions—also sought to revive its political power in the regions after the decentralisation. Thus, unlike KAN leaders in Nagari, the local aristocratic family did not influence the local government. With his huge political power, the current district head as well as his predecessor—which happened to be the current district head’s father—faced no constraints in making any decision concerning the bureaucracy.

4.1.3. Differences in Bureaucratic Capacity

To measure the differences in the bureaucratic capacity of the selected districts, we use the bureaucratic accountability and reform indicators developed by the Indonesian Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform. The former was commonly known as SAKIP (*Sistem Akuntabilitas Kinerja Instansi Pemerintahan*, or Government Agencies Performance Accountability System) while the latter as RB (*Reformasi Birokrasi*, or Bureaucratic Reform). The Ministry conducted the SAKIP and RB assessment to improve the quality of government agencies’ performances regarding their effectiveness and efficiency of budget use since 2009. The SAKIP includes five components of assessment, namely planning, performance measurement, report, internal evaluation, and performance achievement. Both SAKIP and RB use a 100 scale, further broken down as follows:

- AA or very excellent (>90 – 100)
- A or excellent (>80 – 90)
- BB or very good (>70 – 80)
- B or good (>60 – 70)
- CC or sufficient (>50 – 60)
- C or low (>30 – 50)
- D or very low (0 – 30)

As measured by the SAKIP and RB indicators, Nagari’s bureaucratic capacity outperformed those of Kawi, Lontara, and Siliwangi Districts (Table 2). Overall, Nagari earned BB and B in the SAKIP and RB indicators, respectively. The lowest performance was shown by Lontara District, which scored B and CC.

Table 2. Bureaucratic Performance

District Name	Indicator	
	SAKIP	RB
Nagari	BB	B
Kawi	B	B
Siliwangi	B	B
Lontara	B	CC

Source: Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform (2020).

4.2.Data Collection

The analysis presented in this paper was based on primary and secondary sources. For the primary sources, we conducted fieldwork from October 2020 to April 2021 and interviewed a total of 118 informants in the selected four districts. These informants were selected purposively to cover many different perspectives among the local actors in making sense of the formulation and implementation of education policies at the local level. In each district, we interviewed heads of the LEA, two high officials at LEA, two senior bureaucrats from different local agencies who work closely with the LEA, and two school supervisors. To get a better sense of the politics of local education policies, we also interviewed the district secretary and politicians or members of the legislature representing both the political coalition of the district head and its opposition. We also sampled three schools in each district based on their academic performance and school status as a public or private schools. In each school, we interviewed the school principal, two senior teachers, and two parents with high and low socio-economic backgrounds. We also spoke with local journalists, local NGO activists, representatives of local teacher organisations, local academicians, and representatives of the local education council to triangulate the data collected. Additionally, we interviewed some traditional leaders in Nagari and Lontara as well as the district head of Kawi and a member of the expert team of the district head of Siliwangi.

We conducted fieldwork in the four districts consecutively. We used a semi-structured interview guide to ensure that we asked the same questions to informants in each district. Nevertheless, we provided some flexibility for informants to provide other relevant information. The data collection was also open to new questions that arose during the interview or were suggested by the results of the previous fieldwork in the other districts. Follow-up interviews were conducted with some informants when needed. Besides, we also consulted the primary data collected with secondary sources, such as papers, books or book chapters, and news coverage of the development of local politics and education policies in the four districts.

4.3.Method of Comparison

We establish the causal relationship between the institutional constraints on the discretionary power of district heads, bureaucratic capacity, leaders' commitment to learning, and learning-enhancing policies by comparing the development of education policies in the four districts using Mill's method of difference. The method suggests that the variation in the outcome of interest between two or more entities can be explained by the differences in the hypothesised explanatory variable controlling the systemic similarities of these entities (Skocpol and Somers, 1980; Przeworski and Teune, 1970). To apply this method, we develop two pairs of districts based on the differences in the education policies of the district. The first pair consists of Nagari and Kawi while the second is Lontara and Siliwangi. Each pair of districts shows systemic similarities except in the outcome of interest (whether they pursued learning-enhancing policies or not) and the hypothesised explanatory variables. Both Nagari and Lontara showed continued support for learning-enhancing policies. In contrast, Kawi showed a switch in its policy orientation from learning-enhancing to access-broadening policies while Lontara pursued no learning-enhancing policies. We expect that the differences in education policies between districts in each pair can be explained by inter-systemic differences between the districts controlling their inter-systemic similarities.

Building on the two propositions outlined in Section 2.2, we assess a different hypothesis for each pair of districts. The first pair, Nagari and Kawi, shows the linkages between the constraint on the discretionary power of district heads, bureaucratic capacity, and the development of learning-enhancing policies (Hypothesis 1). Yet, while still focusing on the variation in local education policies, the second pair demonstrates the conditions under which district governments may pursue learning-enhancing policies

despite the lack of constraints on the discretionary power of district heads and bureaucratic capacity (Hypothesis 2).

Tables 3a and 3b show these two comparisons. Table 3a, which compares Nagari and Kawi, demonstrates that constraints on the discretionary power of district heads and bureaucratic capacity do matter for the development of learning-enhancing policies. We will show in the following section how the constraints on the discretionary power of district heads on employment decisions in the state bureaucracy pave the way for the development of bureaucratic capacity, which, in turn, can play a pivotal role for local governments in pursuing learning-enhancing policies.

Nevertheless, Table 3a also suggests that leaders' commitment to learning may play an important role in the development of learning-enhancing policies, especially in districts where the district head has a large discretionary power on employment decisions in the state bureaucracy. Such a circumstance allows district heads to use personal connections rather than competence and skill as the main consideration for making bureaucratic appointments, thus hindering the development of the bureaucratic capacity of local government. Consequently, the extent to which a district will pursue learning-enhancing policies will depend on the political commitment of district heads. We further test this position in Table 3b, which compares Lontara and Siliwangi. This comparison confirms that absent constraints on the discretionary power of district heads and the bureaucratic capacity of the local state, leaders' commitment to learning are required for local governments to pursue learning-enhancing policies. Yet, taken together, Tables 3a and 3b further suggest that dependence on the personal commitment of political leaders faces the risk of a policy reversal by the succeeding leaders. The following section will marshal our evidence to support these arguments.

Table 3a. The First District Pair

	Nagari	Kawi
Education Policies	Learning-Enhancing Policies	Switch from Learning-Enhancing to Access-Broadening Policies
Constraints on the Discretionary Power of District Heads	Yes	No
Bureaucratic Capacity	High	Low
Leader's Commitment to Learning	Low	Switched from High to Low

Table 3b. The Second District Pair

	Lontara	Siliwangi
Education Policies	Learning-Enhancing Policies	Access-Broadening Policies
Constraints on the Discretionary Power of District Heads	No	No
Bureaucratic Capacity	Low	Low
Leader's Commitment to Learning	High	Low

5. The Politics of Learning-Enhancing Policies in Indonesia's Decentralised Political System

5.1. Constraints on the Discretionary Power of District Heads, Bureaucratic Capacity, and Quality-Enhancing Policies in Nagari

5.1.1. *Constraints on the Discretionary Power of District Heads and Bureaucratic Capacity in Nagari*

As already mentioned, the implementation of decentralisation policies led the traditional *adat* leaders in Nagari attempted to re-organise the *adat* institution (KAN). This development allowed the traditional *adat* leader to have a more influential role in local politics (F. and K. von Benda-Beckmann, 2007). The local political norm stipulates that district heads should have regular meetings with KAN leaders or consult them on important issues. Support or agreement from KAN leaders is important for the government to ensure their programmes or policies are well implemented. Protest from the KAN leaders, especially when they were not involved or consulted in the policymaking, may adversely affect a policy. In 2016, for example, the government had to revise its policy to centralise the student graduation ceremony due to the protest from the KAN, which was not consulted by the government in making the policy. The government argued that the centralisation of the ceremony was needed to avoid traffic. Yet, the KAN leaders disagreed with the local government's decision as the centralisation eroded the KAN leaders' traditional roles during the student graduation ceremony. Thus, although the district head had some privilege to initiate policies or programmes, it was important to discuss the policy or programme not only with the responsible bureaucrats and the members of the local parliament but also with KAN representatives before the policy or programme could be implemented.

The presence of KAN leaders also created some constraints on the discretionary power of the district heads on employment decisions in the state bureaucracy. When a bureaucrat faces a difficult problem with their job, like an unreasonable rotation plan by the district head, he or she may talk to a KAN leader to discuss the problem. In response, KAN leaders will usually use their influence on the district head or the members of the local legislature to prevent the plan. Such a mechanism makes it more difficult for district heads to use state bureaucracy to support their political interests. Even though the final decision about bureaucratic employment remains in the hand of the district head, they cannot disregard the role of the Advisory Board for Bureaucratic Position and Rank (*Baperjakat*) in assessing the competence of the candidates for any bureaucratic appointment. In contrast to the common practices in other districts in Indonesia that *Baperjakat* practically had no role in advising the district heads concerning bureaucratic appointments due to the strong political interest of district heads (Rahmi 2013; Sulistiyawati and Nurlinah 2016; Krisdayanti and Edyanto 2017), the constraint in Nagari led the district head to abide by the rules in appointing bureaucrats, such as the prohibition to make bureaucratic appointments within six months before or after district head election.

The constraint on the discretionary power of the district heads over employment decisions in the state bureaucracy paved the way for the development of local bureaucratic capacity. As the bureaucracy was less politicised, competence and skills were required for bureaucrats in Nagari to advance their careers. The current LEA head and his predecessor, for instance, are known as highly capable individuals who were chosen to lead the LEA due to their previous 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 provincial, national, and international levels. With such accomplishments, she was appointed as the LEA head for two terms under two different district heads. The current head also took office with an excellent record of leadership positions at various government agencies for a decade. These include the positions of head of Finance and Assets Agency and head of Culture and Tourism Agency. Following the latest election result and the inauguration of the new district head in 2021, the current LEA head

continued his second term although he was known to support the opponent of the newly elected district head. Thus, politics did not affect his bureaucratic position. Competence and skills did matter in bureaucratic appointments in Nagari.

5.1.2. *High Bureaucratic Capacity and Quality-Enhancing Policies in Nagari*

The merit-based bureaucratic appointment practices in Nagari allowed bureaucrats to formulate and implement quality-enhancing policies. When it comes to policy formulation or discussing the policy with the district head, the bureaucrats would not just follow the district head's instruction without careful consideration. One senior bureaucrat at the LEA 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.*" To back up their policies, the bureaucrats often conducted a feasibility study first and search for evidence that supports the ideas.

The quality of local bureaucracy can also be seen in the support of high-quality education front-liners including school supervisors, principals, and teachers. Teachers' competency in Nagari District ranked 15th (of 514 districts all over Indonesia) at the national level. This achievement would not be achieved without the high skill and hard work of LEA officials in managing education. Not only was LEA responsive to the problems confronting the education sector, but they also welcomed initiatives from the front-line providers. As will be discussed later, the "Peer Supervision of Teacher Performance" policy, which brought positive impacts to improving teachers' performance, was initiated by a school supervisor who collaborated with some principals. With all these performances and achievements, it is reasonable for a senior bureaucrat to state that "*LEA bureaucrats are superb and highly capable to improve education services because previously they have engaged in the education sector.*"

Given their relative autonomy, bureaucrats in Nagari enjoyed more space to innovate in the policymaking process and improve local education policies. They were empowered to control budget allocation for programmes that are in line with the district's needs in the education sector and give input to the political leaders. This was seen not only among LEA bureaucrats but also in other agencies with which the LEA cooperated. The *Bappeda*, for instance, has the authority to ensure that the education policies of the LEA met the quality standard set by the Agency in the RPJMD. This condition made it possible for bureaucrats at LEA to sustain their quality education policies and argue with the district head should the latter show some disagreements. One senior bureaucrat at the LEA stated, "*Every district head continues the education policies run by the previous one if the evaluation of the programme is good. This evaluation does not come from the mayor's subjective opinion, but the LEA objective evaluation, schools, and community.*"

One notable innovation that Nagari's LEA made in improving education quality in the district is the assignment of good principals to low performing schools. Building on the central government's policies on teacher allocation, that schools should be provided with teachers according to the needs of the school, Nagari's LEA expanded the policy to the principal with a specific goal of improving school management and enhancing education quality across the district. Unlike the common tendency in other regions, where good principals were often promoted to good schools to reward their good performance, Nagari's LEA often transferred high performing school principals to low performing schools. The transfer was made not as a punishment but as a challenge for the principal to improve their skills. When a principal can improve a poor performing school into a good one, she/he might be promoted into a higher position or receive an award as a recognition of her/his accomplishment. Yet, at the same time, the LEA also developed a meritocratic system in the education bureaucracy. Promotion in Nagari follows a rigorous process to make sure it attracts the best candidates—often seen by officials from other districts as too competitive. This system has set high expectations for principals and teachers to perform their jobs. For those at the LEA, the meritocratic system required them to be able to address the current problems confronting the education sector. To address the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, LEA conducted an online survey in

early 2020 to establish school from home policies. Another survey of parents was conducted to consider school re-opening at the end of 2020. The LEA also did a teacher's survey aimed to design a minimum essential curriculum for teacher guidance.

Education bureaucrats in Nagari were also open to innovative ideas from their lower ranks. It is striking to note that Nagari's "Peer Supervision of Teacher Performance" programme stemmed not from the district head's instruction but from the initiatives of principals and school supervisors. Initially, it was an informal programme undertaken by a school supervisor in 2005. The "Peer Supervision of Teacher Performance" was inspired by the lessons learned by principals during study visits to other districts and neighbouring countries. However, study visits were not accessible to all principals regularly 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 not only benefit from receiving feedback from their peers but also from the opportunity to compare and reflect on their school performance with other schools.

The influential role of LEA bureaucrats in promoting quality education is also evident in the "Family Education" programme. Even though the idea for the programme came from the wife of the former district head—after she and some LEA bureaucrats conducted a study visit to a Women Empowerment and Children Protection Agency in other regions—it is the bureaucrats who designed the programme and developed the curriculum relevant to the stated goal of educating parents to actively participate in their children's education. The implementation of the "Family Education" programme was highly supported by bureaucrats from other government agencies who alternately became facilitators in each session. Even though the lecture was conducted after office hours, the bureaucrats taking the course did not receive any allowance. Such an attitude indicates the effectiveness of the local bureaucratic machine, which emphasises public services delivery. This stands in contrast to the common image of the Indonesian bureaucracy as being predominantly influenced by what is literally translated as "sectoral ego"³, which often hinders the improvement of state bureaucratic accountability promoted by the national government.

Hence, bureaucrats in Nagari hold a combination of both bureaucratic classical and political mindsets characterised by Putnam (1973). In some sense, these bureaucrats are "classical bureaucrats" who run bureaucratic machines based on the agreed rule and stick to the RPJMD that was mutually agreed upon by various agencies beforehand. However, they also have a "political bureaucrat" mindset that welcomes politics and public voices as part of their job. They put serious attention on public interests as we described in the case of school closure and re-opening during the COVID-19 pandemic when they asked parents' and teachers' opinions before formulating certain policies. Likewise, in the case of peer supervision, bureaucrats and education service providers in Nagari were not hesitant to articulate their ideas or policy preferences without having to wait for directives of the district head. Unlike bureaucrats in other districts, who tend to follow their superior's orders, bureaucrats in Nagari demonstrate the willingness to "advocate and even fight for his own preferred policies" (Putnam, 1973, p.260).

³ "Sectoral ego" is a term that describes inter-government agencies' unwillingness to collaborate because of their individualistic nature, different goals of each sector, or unhealthy competition between sectors.

5.2. District Heads' Discretionary Power, Weak Bureaucracy and Policy Reversal in Kawi

5.2.1. *The Discretionary Power of District Head and the Politicisation of Bureaucracy in Kawi*

Unlike Nagari, Kawi had no institution that could check the district heads' discretionary power over employment decisions in the state bureaucracy. Political intervention by the district head also influenced bureaucratic promotion in Kawi which was often based on the district head's likes or dislikes. District heads could re-organise local bureaucracy as they wished without having to listen to the recommendation of the Advisory Board for Bureaucratic Position and Rank (*Baperjakat*) in Kawi. The *Baperjakat* showed no role in the bureaucratic appointment by the district heads.

The magnitude of the district heads' power over bureaucratic appointments can be seen, for example, in the high turnover of the heads of the LEAs. In Kawi, six bureaucrats led the LEA between 2012 and 2021 (1.5 years on average for each LEA head). Moreover, the high discretionary power of the district head could be observed when the current district head promoted many young bureaucrats to important positions at the LEA shortly after the inauguration. It was argued that the promotion was needed to pursue bureaucratic reform. However, as stated by a representative of the school principal working group (K3S), these newly appointed bureaucrats showed low performance as they lacked the required experience to implement education policies. Other informants also suggested that these newly appointed bureaucrats even had no suitable educational backgrounds. According to a former LEA senior bureaucrat, ideally, LEA bureaucrats graduated from teaching colleges and therefore understand student needs better. Yet, political agendas may neglect such considerations quite easily. One of the newly promoted bureaucrats was a close friend of the district head. Far from being merit-based, the bureaucratic appointment was made to give favours to the district head's political allies.

As bureaucratic promotions in Kawi were often based on the district head's likes or dislikes, political connection or loyalty seems to be the main rule characterising the relationship between the district heads and bureaucrats in the region. The bureaucrats-district head relationship became very hierarchical, creating a culture of obedience to the district head, even among senior bureaucrats. It became very difficult for the bureaucrats to express their opinion freely as they had to calculate whether what they would say would contradict the district head's interests or not. During our interview with the district head, for example, we observed how a senior bureaucrat had to manage his words very carefully when the district head passed on to him our question about the reason behind the termination of the "Community Learning Hours" programme. The bureaucrat knew that the district head did not like the question as it would reveal the latter's lack of attention to learning deficit issues in the district. However, he could not disclose the real reason behind the termination of the Programme as the district head certainly would not like such an answer.

The negative impact of bureaucratic politicisation on bureaucratic quality also manifested in the lack of motivation among bureaucrats to perform well. Kawi showed no clear patterns of improvement in its bureaucratic reform scores. The Bureaucratic Reform Index released by the MABR showed that while the district's score increased from 56.43 in 2016 to 62.58 in 2017, the score decreased to 58.86 in 2018 before it increased again to 62.31 in 2020. Our interviews with LEA bureaucrats suggested that bureaucrats would just follow the district head's instruction without any reservation, even when the instruction undermined the good policies they had implemented for a while. When the new district head instructed them to stop the "Community Learning Hours" without any clear reason, the LEA bureaucrats did so without any attempt to defend the programme. The lack of motivation to perform as well as experience in managing the education sector resulted in a decline in the performance of LEA. In the words of one of our informants, "*It is indeed time-consuming for us to wait for them to learn new job desks from scratch. This caused ineffectiveness of government policy implementation*".

5.2.2. *District Head's Commitment to Learning and Education Policy Reversal in Kawi*

Despite the lack of bureaucratic capacity, this district had a policy that aimed to improve education quality because the former district head paid good attention to education quality. He initiated a programme called the “Community Learning Hours,” which was intended to increase parents’ and communities’ participation in education by asking them to provide a conducive environment for school-age children to study at home. Such an initiative was badly needed given the low level of community participation in Indonesia’s education system. Research shows that parents were excluded from the decision-making process at schools during Soeharto’s authoritarian regime (1966–1998) (Pradhan et al., 2014; Vernez et al., 2012; Bjork, 2004). The “Community Learning Hours” programme was meant to change this condition. The long-term goal of the Programme was to improve the quality of human resources in the district by improving the quality of education. The policy was initially formulated by the former district head in 2008 when he served as the deputy of the district head. He later institutionalised the policy by issuing a district head decree on “Community Learning Hours” in 2009.

Not only did the former district head of Kawi initiate the “Community Learning Hours” programme, but he also played a major role in implementing the Programme. His years of work experience in education—as a teacher, principal, and head of the education board—did shape his commitment as a political leader to improving the quality of education (Schneider et al., 2018). Previously, he had implemented several educational innovations before he served as the deputy of the district head. One of our informants recalled that *"The former district head paid attention to education since he served as deputy of district head ... indeed, he showed consistent commitment to improving education."*

However, a dependence on the personal commitment of a political leader may put the sustainability of a policy at risk. Without bureaucrats who are capable and committed to supporting a programme, it is likely to wane or even be replaced with a different programme if the next district head does not support it. In Kawi, the large discretionary power of the district head in bureaucratic appointments generated little incentives for local governments to develop bureaucratic capacity. Neither the current nor the former district heads made significant efforts to improve the capacity of bureaucracy. Instead, they relied on the support of their political allies—local Muslim organisations in the case of the former district head—to implement policies. The former district head himself often monitored the implementation of the Programme, accompanied by high-ranking bureaucrats, by conducting weekly visits to the neighbourhoods. However, such a model of district head-bureaucrats working relationship had no significant impact on improving the capacity of the bureaucrats. One informant observed that *"The district head forced the bureaucratic machine to work at the maximum level, but the technical team at local agencies could only run slowly..."* Despite the former district head’s instruction, many bureaucrats showed a lack of competence to implement the “Community Learning Hours.” Subsequently, no attempt was shown by the bureaucrats to defend the “Community Learning Hours” policy when the new (current) district head discontinued the programme.

Despite the positive impacts of the “Community Learning Hours” policy on student performance, the current district head discontinued the policy soon after she took office. She did not take any initiative on education until the COVID-19 pandemic hit Indonesia in 2020, at which time she enacted short-term policies intended to minimise the shocks caused by the pandemic. These policies included teaching contest videos and providing internet credit for teachers and students. Many in the LEA believed that such policies would not give an impact in the long run. Yet, the culture of obedience in Kawi’s bureaucracy dictated them to praise the initiative as a good response and fresh ideas to motivate teachers and students during online learning. Despite the bureaucrats’ different view, they implemented the district head’s ideas anyway to demonstrate obedience without letting the leader know their perspectives, let alone bringing alternative ideas to the table.

Rather than focusing on improving the quality of education, the current district head focuses on the development of infrastructures in public spaces, which many suspected would give profit to her family business in the construction sector. When it comes to education, the new district head maintains only policies that dealt with resource allocation, such as student vouchers and unconditional contract teacher incentives, which took a big chunk of the regional budget. As shown in Table 4, the new district head expanded the coverage or increased the allowance of the existing policies by adding up to 50% of the previous budget.

Table 4. Shifting Focus of Education Policies in Kawi

Year	Policy	Former Leader(s)	New Leader
2001–now	Unconditional Teacher incentive	Up to \$50/month	\$70/month in 2019 \$100/month in 2020 \$120/month in 2021
2015–now	Student Voucher	Tuition and uniform	Bag, tuition, and uniform (2019–now) (There is another plan to add shoes)
2008–2018	Community Learning Hours	Allocated budget for neighbourhood team (Taskforce & <i>Muslimat</i>)	Terminated
2015–2018	School bus	Free of charge	Terminated

Source: Authors' elaboration from media and interviews.

This shift in Kawi's education policy orientation generated some questions about the commitment of the current administration to education. One bureaucrat claimed that the incumbent only cares about policies that potentially contribute to raising her votes. By boosting the budget of student vouchers and incentives for contract teachers, the said political agenda and legacy will likely be achieved than maintaining the quality education policy which does not allow distributing rent directly to her constituents. Yet, other than the personal interests of the current district head, the quality of LEA bureaucrats contributed to the deterioration of education policies in the district. The gap between the ideal bureaucracy and the capacity of the agency was the cause of the low performance of bureaucrats in the district. According to a senior legislator:

“The ‘Community Learning Hours’ sustainability depended on whether the bureaucrats could evaluate the programme. When there was no evaluation, the chances of the Programme being sustainable were small since there was no basis for considering its feasibility. So how the evaluation would go depended on [whether] the programme implementer [had the capacity to perform an evaluation]. Thus, the ‘Community Learning Hours’ termination was not due to the district head’s decision alone but also because of the matter of the [low or non-existent] capacity of the bureaucrats.”

In this situation, it was difficult for Kawi's LEA bureaucrats to argue with the new district head, who showed little interest in improving the quality of education in the district. The lack of the required capacity to handle and evaluate policy might provide the bureaucrats with no evidence to defend a policy, despite its ream impacts on student performance. Instead of defending or improving the policy, they would rather choose to just implement what the new district head instructed them to do

5.3. District Heads' Discretionary Power and Commitment to Learning-Enhancing Policies in Lontara

5.3.1. The Discretionary Power of District Heads and the Politicisation of Bureaucracy in Lontara

District heads in Lontara faced no significant constraints on their discretionary power over bureaucratic appointments. The network of family relations as the basis of the Lontara's ruling regime's power allowed the regime to extend its political control to cover 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 aristocrat family, which—like traditional actors in Nagari—also sought to revive its political power in Lontara after the decentralisation. Thus, unlike KAN leaders in Nagari, the local aristocrat family in Lontara had no significant influence on the local government. With his huge political power, the current and former district heads in Lontara faced no significant constraints in making decisions concerning the bureaucracy or other important issues.

However, this high discretionary power has adversely affected bureaucracy as institutionally unconstrained district heads tend to politicise bureaucracy. To some extent, bureaucratic appointments based on a political connection may create loyal bureaucrats who fully support the district head's policy agendas. However, such an appointment method is likely to compromise bureaucratic capacity. When it comes to political imperatives to reward allies or supporters, politicians often take loyalty over competence or skills (Berenschot, 2018; Bjork, 2004). The use of political connections as the basis of bureaucratic appointments can also discourage performance. Under a clientelist political system, bureaucrats would be incentivised to fulfil their patron's (politician) demands as failure to meet the demand may cause the bureaucrats to be considered to show no political loyalty and may result in punishments from the patron, such as transfer to undesirable or less lucrative positions (Brierley, 2020; Berenschot, 2018; Rosser and Fahmi, 2016).

Political intervention by the district head influenced the development of bureaucratic capacity in Lontara. According to a local politician, district heads or their trusted officials in the district often appointed their political supporters like in the recruitment of officers for the "School Security Guard" programme. Some informants stated that the district heads often promote their relatives to important positions in the bureaucracy or that others were promoted even though they lacked the competence and skills to hold the assigned posts. It was due to their connection to senior officials that they finally got promoted. Such a practice of bureaucratic appointments made it difficult for Lontara to develop a meritocratic system. As we have shown in Table 2, the district had the lowest score on bureaucratic reform compared to the other districts. As a result of nurturing bureaucratic loyalty above all else, many bureaucrats in Lontara lacked the required knowledge and skills to pursue quality-enhancing policies.

The prominence of political connection in employment decisions over the state bureaucracy implies that keeping good relationships with the district head became the key for bureaucrats in Lontara to maintain their position or further advance their careers. 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 strengthened by the authoritarian tendency of the former district head in managing the bureaucracy. According to one of our informants, "*The former district head was an autocratic leader and did not hesitate to impose sanctions or punishment such as transfers or demotion for civil servants who did not follow his rules.*" One of our informants, for example, was transferred to remote high land because he was considered to have violated the district head's decree that forbade the provision of after-school tutoring intended to give additional income to teachers. Nevertheless, bureaucrats might also have to do something beyond their normal duty to meet the district head's instructions. For example, teachers or LEA bureaucrats were requested to mobilise voters to support the re-election of the district head or even to

intimidate an education activist critical of the district head's policies. Such bureaucratic politicisation exacerbated the lack of a meritocratic system in the district.

The LEA bureaucrats made only a minimum contribution to the design of the education programme and its implementation. Similarly, bureaucrats at the Regional Development Planning Agency (*Bappeda*) focused only on the early stage of the policy formulation process, such as naming the proposed policies and aligning them with the Medium-Term Regional Development Plan (RPJMD). Such a minor role in policymaking stands in contrast to the substantial role of *Bappeda* bureaucrats in Nagari, which teamed up with the District's LEA in designing and ensuring that the government's education policies met the standards defined in the RPJMD. In Lontara, it was the district head and his expert team, rather than the LEA bureaucrats, who played a major role in designing and implementing the programme. Commenting on the development of education policies in Lontara, a representative of a national NGO stated that "*The district head is very innovative, and the selected teachers are committed and willing to develop their competence.*" However, the lack of competence and skills among LEA bureaucrats which resulted in poor implementation became the bottleneck for Lontara to improve the quality of education.⁴

5.3.2. District Heads' Commitment to Learning and Education Policies in Lontara

Despite the politicised bureaucracy, Lontara managed to pay relatively good attention to student learning thanks to the strong commitment of the former district head to improve the quality of education and the willingness of his successors to maintain his policy legacies. Unlike in Nagari, initiatives for policy innovation to improve learning in Lontara came primarily from district heads rather than LEA bureaucrats. In the absence of high-quality bureaucracy, the strong commitment of district heads to quality education helped the Governments of Lontara pursue quality-enhancing policies. In Lontara, the two district heads that led the region since the early 2000s were committed to improving the quality of education in their region. Since the beginning of his terms, the former district head collaborated with several top universities in Indonesia to improve the quality of education in his district. He appointed nine education professors as education advisors to an expert team in formulating and implementing education policies. Later on, the district head worked closely with a senior lecturer at a prominent teaching college in the province who happened to be the head of the LEA during the first term of new leadership. The successor, who is the son of the former district head, also shows a willingness to improve the qualifications of LEA's high officials. Under his leadership, high-ranking bureaucrats at the LEA are graduates of teaching colleges, hold doctoral degrees, and have worked as teachers who presumably understand better the obstacles to improving the quality of education in their district.

Thanks to the victories of this political dynasty in four consecutive elections, the quality of education policies in Lontara could be improved with the continuous support of the successor. The current district head has maintained the established partnerships and even leveraged the collaborations with a well-known education NGO since 2017 to improve teacher competencies by implementing a programme called "Teacher Learning Centre". This partnership was initiated by the Lontara District Government where the district head delegated his subordinates to visit the NGO office while attending a meeting with MoECRT in Jakarta. Thus, this policy is a joint programme in which the training was designed and delivered by the NGO, and the district head signed a memorandum of understanding and allocated a large budget to support the implementation. The approximately \$100,000 allocated by the district head for the "Teacher Learning Centre" demonstrated the commitment of Lontara's political leader in welcoming technical assistance from an external organisation and investing public budget to improve education quality.

⁴ As the consequence of weak bureaucratic capacity, we found no evidence that the local bureaucracy is capable to oversee the implementation of policies introduced by the district heads. For instance, previous studies showed the lack of Student Automatic Promotion implementation (Silfitriana 2016; Sartika 2018; Nihayah, Revina, and Usman 2020), but we found no attempt from LEA to address the incongruences.

The current district head, who is the son of the former district head, also shows good commitment to education quality. Other than maintaining the educational policies introduced by his father, he issued a specific 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 father realised that the impact of education policies would only be seen in the next twenty to twenty-five years. Yet, as recalled by one of our informants “... [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”.

The policies established by the former district head delivered some positive impacts on education services in Lontara. For instance, the “School Security Guard” has been effective at ensuring teachers come to school on time. In 2003, a survey by the SMERU Research Institute showed that 20.7% of teachers were absent from class (Usman et al., 2004). Ten years later, SMERU re-surveyed teacher absenteeism in Lontara and found teacher absenteeism rate in the region had fallen to 15.2% (ACDP, 2014). Our informants suggested that the “School Security Guard” played an important role in overcoming the problem of teacher absenteeism in Lontara. A senior bureaucrat explained that “*The role of the ‘School Security Guard’ is to help teachers streamline the teaching hours, streamline mileage so that teachers do not arrive late due to access or the long distance from their homes to schools, which used to be the reason teachers were late. And the attendance reports have shown that teachers come on time.*” Apart from monitoring teacher attendance, the “School Security Guard” has also improved student attendance and prevented students from skipping during school hours. Relatedly, the former district head also introduced “Student Automatic Promotion,” which contributed to reducing the dropout rate.

Under the leadership of the current district head, Lontara continued to promote pro-quality education policies. Through the “Teachers Learning Centre,” the district government attempted to upgrade the teaching skills of local teachers. A specific budget was allocated to support the programme so that participating teachers did not have to pay the cost of the training. Our interview with the NGO involved in the implementation of the “Teachers Learning Centre” 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 by the NGO in other districts. 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, active pedagogy, and encourage them to transfer the knowledge to their colleagues. The NGO reported that only one teacher did not pass the Programme. More importantly, the Programme’s graduates have successfully arranged sixty-one pieces of training, which have reached at least 2,133 teachers in the district. Some graduates we interviewed acknowledged that the “Teachers Learning Centre” was beneficial because the training taught them how to develop learning tools needed by teachers to improve their teaching skills and knowledge.

5.4. District Head’s Discretionary Power, Politicised Bureaucracy, and the Lack of Attention to Learning in Siliwangi

5.4.1. The Discretionary Power of District Heads and the Politicisation of Bureaucracy in Siliwangi

Like Lontara, Siliwangi also lacked a meritocratic system in bureaucratic appointments due to the high discretionary power of its district heads over employment decisions in the state bureaucracy. Rather than competence and skill, political connections often determined the appointment of high bureaucratic posts in the district. For example, the appointment of the current head of the LEA, a high bureaucratic position pursued by many high-ranking officials due to its prestige and high take-home pay, appeared to be based

on the political interest of the district head rather than the professional development of the office. The current head of the LEA was a former sub-district head who contributed significant electoral votes for the current district head to win the election. Besides, at least seven other sub-district heads that contributed to the victory of the district head were also promoted to lead various government agencies. This kind of political selection was carried out often at the expense of other bureaucrats who appeared to support other district head candidates. To promote his political supporter to the leadership of the LEA, the district head transferred the former head of the LEA to the Agency of Archives and Library Services, which was considered the least favourable agency in the district.

The lack of a meritocratic system in the bureaucratic assignment adversely affected the development of the bureaucratic capacity of the local government. In the education sector, our informants at various levels in Siliwangi suggested that bureaucrats were mostly concerned with fulfilling political leaders' demands rather than advancing the quality of education policies. The LEA secretary acknowledged that, given his background in civil engineering, he did not deserve his current position. It would be better to give the job to someone familiar with education issues. However, the district head's focus on school infrastructure development became the rule to follow. Similarly, other informants in the LEA stated that their main task was to ensure the implementation of the "SMART" programme, which was to monitor the procurement and completion of school infrastructure construction; the distribution of school uniforms, textbooks, and cash transfers for students; and the disbursement of unconditional allowance for contract teachers. These tasks became the main priority of the LEA's programmes as they were instructed directly by the district head. Without neglecting the benefits of these programmes for students and contract teachers, these programmes demonstrated the district head's little attention to learning deficit issues.

The lack of bureaucratic capacity was observed not only in the education sector but also in other sectors. One of our informants told us how the *Bappeda*, which was responsible for the making of the RPJMD, had difficulties making a development plan. When the agency finally hired consultants to finish the task, they hired people who did not understand well the development problems faced by Siliwangi. The final output was essentially a repetition of the RPJMD produced by the government five years ago. It appears that ideas or initiatives to advance good policies were not of priority. "*For civil servant officials,*" one of the informants lamented, "*showing up to work regularly is considered adequate.*" This condition made it difficult for the local government to strengthen their bureaucratic capacity.

5.4.2. District Heads and the Development of Access-Broadening Policies in Siliwangi

In line with our theoretical expectation, Siliwangi showed little attention to learning. The education programmes in the district were concentrated on broadening access rather than improving quality. The district's flagship programme, "SMART," focuses on building school infrastructure; providing students with vouchers, uniforms, and books; and providing contract teachers with allowances. The "SMART" programme also allocates significant resources to the Islamic community in the district. For instance, the LEA allocated a budget for *santri*, students in the *pesantren*, interested in participating in the formal education hosted by the centre for community learning. There are also scholarships, including for higher education, for Muslim students who memorise the Koran by heart. But the programme does not contain specific goals to improve the quality of education. As pointed out earlier, "SMART" was formulated to simply ensure the availability of school infrastructure, improve teacher welfare, and help parents provide basic school essentials for their children.

The large discretionary power of district heads in the state bureaucracy and local politics allowed the district head to control local education policies. We found no opposition to the current district head's focus on access-broadening policies. Our informants at various levels mentioned that despite their

aspiration for quality-enhancing policies, education stakeholders in Siliwangi showed gratitude for the programmes. According to the legislative members we interviewed, the relatively smooth roll-out of the new district's programmes might be associated with the harmony maintained by the district leader with all parties in the local parliaments, including the oppositions. While local parliaments acknowledged the low quality of public schools in Siliwangi, particularly when compared to their private counterparts or public schools in the neighbouring districts, the parliaments agreed that the district government should probably focus on the physical infrastructure and the financial support for teachers and low-income parents. Even though the legislators from the oppositions admitted that they were not consulted on what areas are to prioritise during the formulation of the introduced education programmes, they did not show objection.

“In the formulation of the policies, we were excluded as we are not part of the district head's coalition group (or her campaign team). The programmes were created and implemented by the district head and her team. During the parliament meetings, all parliament members mainly just read and listened to the explanations from the district head and her coalition. As we all agreed on what the programmes proposed, we did not give many inputs. But we will surely monitor the implementation.”

Strikingly, when asked to describe the details of the education programmes, the members of the local legislature were unable to do so, indicating their negligence toward the programmes they had approved and promised to monitor. During the same interview, one legislator further commented that he observed many local parliament members did not provide input, at all, to the current education policies. He believed that this occurred because the constituents in the rural areas demanded direct cash transfers or health protections rather than a focus on school or teacher quality. Besides, parliament members often paid more attention to the amount of the budget and its allocation.

In a different interview, a legislator noted that, under the current direct elections system, the district head needs tangible evidence of the impact that can mobilise voters for the next election. There is a tendency toward short-term return over longer-term interests like education quality. In the case of current programmes launched by the district head to revitalise school infrastructure and provide students with vouchers, uniforms, and books, the legislator considered the programmes as the district head's way to please their voters—who are mostly from low-income families and have limited resources to provide basic school essentials for their children. The legislator further explained that the district head and her team proudly claimed their success in delivering their campaign promises as it took less than two years for such policy to be effectively implemented. Here, the district head's political will to create impactful education programmes that require a long-term implementation may be limited by her time preparing for the next election.

The parliaments also admitted that the ultimate goal of most, if not all, local politicians in Siliwangi is to reward their voters, who mostly resided in the rural parts of the district, distributed in over 400 villages—improving education may not be their priority to achieve the said goal. Moreover, the district head's exceptional recognition of the Islamic education community also indicates her effort to please her Muslim majority voters. The district head's family, who are affiliated with one of the largest Islamic-based political parties, has been known to have a close relationship with local Islamic leaders. The current district head was the vice-chairperson of the local parliament for five years representing the largest Islamic-based political party in Siliwangi. During the election period, district head or legislature candidates often try to secure voters in *pesantren* (Nurhadi and Sunarso, 2018; Nugroho, 2011). The Islamic leaders (*ulama* or *kyai*) have become a reference in making political choices for *santri* and local people. In the post-election years, *kyai* often plays a role as political mediators to mediate the political conflicts as well as political elites in the Islamic-based political party. Maintaining a good relationship with *kyai* and the Islamic community is seen as beneficial for any leaders at all levels. Consequently, including the Islamic institutions as beneficiaries of the programmes is the least that the district head could do to gratify the *kyai* or other Islamic organisation leaders for their support to win the election.

Overall, the large power of the district head resulted from her coalition with all parties that are supposed to be monitoring her actions. One of our informants described a peculiar relationship between the district head and the district's teacher union—that ideally should provide policy advice or criticism of the government's programmes. Not only does the district head serve on the advisory board of the union, but the current head of the teacher union also has family ties to the district head. One representative of the teacher union admitted that having the district head on their advisory board benefits both the head and the teachers. According to the union representative, the district-level union that organised nearly 30,000 teachers offers a vast number of potential voters for the next election. In return, teacher representatives have a direct line to communicate their aspirations to the district head as she is also an integral part of the union.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

School enrolment in the last few decades has increased worldwide but learning in many countries has stagnated. Drawing on the results of various international assessments, Altinok et al. (2018 cited in Pritchett 2019, p.200) showed that learning inequality persisted across countries. This suggests that learning is not only about sending children to school. Learning requires students to learn the right materials at the right pace with the right method. Meeting these requirements goes beyond the boundary of the education policy domain and economic development. Altinok et al. (2018 cited in Pritchett 2019, p.200) found that learning inequality persisted between countries with the same level of economic development. Many scholars suggest that politics, especially in its “good forms,” will be crucial in shaping learning outcomes by correctly aligning goals, practices, and resources required to improve learning (Hossain and Hickey, 2019, p.4). At the local level, our study demonstrates that constraints on the discretionary power of district heads indeed matter for student learning by paving the way for the development of the technocratic capacity of local bureaucrats to develop pro-quality education policies.

Building on a comparative analysis of the development of learning-enhancing policies in four districts in Indonesia, this paper demonstrates that local politics does matter for student learning in a decentralised political system. Different types of power relations between district heads and bureaucrats unleashed by decentralisation policies will shape the extent to which local education offices will be able to formulate relevant policies for improving student learning. As shown by the development of learning-enhancing policies in Nagari, institutional constraints on the district head's discretionary power on bureaucratic appointments can pave the way for the development of local bureaucratic capacity required to address learning deficit problems or respond to new challenges in the education sector. The lack of such constraints allows district heads in a politically decentralised system to use local bureaucracy as a political machine to reward friends or punish enemies. As many have argued (Colonnelli et al., 2020; Berenschot, 2018), this kind of politicisation of the bureaucracy will weaken bureaucracy. Political imperatives to reward political support often become a fertile ground for elected politicians to set aside competence in making employment decisions, thus leading to the rise of less competent individuals in the state bureaucracy. Our findings from Kawi and Siliwangi confirm this pattern of bureaucratic weakening under institutionally unconstrained district heads.

To some extent, a visionary leader with a strong commitment to learning may compensate for the lack of bureaucratic capacity. In Kawi and Lontara, we saw the rise of learning-oriented policies thanks to the genuine interest of the district heads in improving the quality of education in the two regions. However, unless a meritocratic appointment process could be institutionalised in the political system, such a commitment to enhancing learning can be easily shifted to another direction by succeeding district heads, especially when they did not commit to learning. In Kawi, for example, the election of a new district head in 2018 shifted the LEA's policy focus from learning quality to school access. It may be true that under a

visionary or good leader, the patronage system may still work to deliver public goods. At the school level, Toral (2021), for example, found that the political appointment of school directors can enhance the bureaucratic accountability and effectiveness of the school. Nevertheless, his analysis also showed that when politically appointed school directors lose their political connections—as a new district head is elected to replace the previous one—their schools experience a drop in quality. This confirms that meritocratic appointment remains a better choice. At the district level, our findings show that establishing institutional constraints on the district head's discretionary power over employment decision-making in state bureaucracy can be a better solution to address learning deficits in a decentralised political system.

This finding has clear implications for the efforts to improve public service delivery. Since the publication of the 2004 World Development Report (World Bank, 2003), efforts to improve public service delivery have often been framed under the rubric of social accountability. The report distinguishes two routes of accountability: long and short routes. If the latter deals with relationships between citizens and service providers, such as doctors, nurses, or schoolteachers, the long route of accountability deals with citizens' relationships with policymakers. Public service delivery involves a long route of accountability as 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, p.6). Among development communities, the short route of accountability has been preferred to the long one as the latter is often plagued by political problems, like political patronage. The short route of accountability can be pursued by using practical tools or instruments like a citizen report card or participatory budgeting. Nevertheless, despite the promises of these instruments to enhance government responsiveness, studies assessing the impact of the short route approach to accountability have shown mixed results (Smith and Benavot, 2019; Blair, 2018; Dewachter et al., 2018; Fox, 2015). The finding of our study contributes to improving the social accountability approach to public service delivery by addressing a specific issue in the long route of social accountability.

Many scholars have argued that practical approaches to accountability (short route) should be supported by more strategic approaches (long route) to address fundamental problems hindering government responsiveness to citizens' demands. The short and long routes of accountability should not be treated in isolation from each other as they may be intertwined. A focus on the short route of accountability, which emphasises the role of citizens as service users, may overlook the potential power of important actors like NGOs or political oppositions (Dewachter et al., 2018, p.158). The extent to which practical approaches to social accountability can be effective at improving public services may depend on the broader political environments that can activate citizens' voices to be real demands for service improvement. Social accountability may also need to be complemented by legal empowerment of citizens, especially the marginalised ones, to overcome the limitation of narrow, localised demands generated by users-service providers interactions (Joshi, 2017). Moreover, state capacity may also matter for the government to respond to citizens' demands as efforts to improve public services deal not only with the demand side but also with the supply side. Therefore, it is important to create an enabling environment for citizens to articulate their voices and for the government to respond to these demands adequately (Fox, 2015).

The results of this study suggest the importance of the long route of accountability in the effort to address the problem of learning deficits. As a high level of bureaucratic capacity is required for local governments to pursue learning-enhancing policies, strategic approaches are needed to address the persistent political problems that hinder the development of local bureaucratic capacity. This paper shows that institutional constraints on the discretionary power of district heads on employment decisions in the state bureaucracy can play a major role in reshaping the district heads-bureaucrats' relationships, thus paving the way for the development of local bureaucratic capacity. To some extent, a visionary leader who has a strong commitment to learning may compensate for the weaknesses of local bureaucracy. Districts with such a leader may still pursue learning-enhancing policies despite the weak capacity of the local education office. Yet, we may see a policy reversal by the next leaders unless a clear mechanism to sustain the good

legacy of the previous leaders is put in place. Nevertheless, further research is needed to assess the generalisability of the findings as the finding presented in this paper is based on a comparison of a small number of districts. Preferably, further research can be done using a large-n analysis. Other than to assess the generalisability of the finding, further research is also needed to explain different types of institutional constraints on the discretionary power of district heads on employment decisions in the state bureaucracy and how these constraints can be institutionalised in the political system.

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