



The political economy of teacher management reform in Indonesia

Andrew Rosser^{a,*}, Mohamad Fahmi^b

^a University of Melbourne, Australia

^b Padjadjaran University, Indonesia



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ABSTRACT

Indonesia faces serious problems in the number, cost, quality and distribution of teachers. In recent years, its central government has introduced a range of reforms to address these problems but they have produced modest results. This paper suggests that this outcome reflects the way in which predatory political and bureaucratic elites have used the school system for decades to accumulate resources, distribute patronage, mobilize political support, and exercise political control rather than promote improved learning outcomes. Efforts to reduce teacher numbers, enhance teacher quality, and improve teacher distribution have accordingly constituted an assault on the interests of these elites, provoking powerful, if often subterranean, resistance. Broadly, reform has only occurred where the central government has employed policy instruments that have disciplined local governments and maintained a commitment to these instruments in the face of resistance. The paper concludes by assessing the implications for Indonesian education.

1. Introduction

Indonesia has plenty of teachers, around 3 million by one estimate (The Economist, 2014). Indeed, with an overall supply of one teacher per 16 students at primary school level and 15 students at junior-secondary school level, it has one of the most generous student-teacher ratios in the world (Heyward et al., 2017: 245). But the quality of Indonesia's teachers is poor—many lack basic competencies, particularly with regards to subject knowledge and pedagogical skills¹—and a substantial proportion fail to turn up to work on any given day² (Jalal et al., 2009; Pisani, 2013; Chang et al., 2014; McKenzie et al., 2014). At the same time, Indonesia's teachers are unevenly distributed between districts and between schools in urban areas and ones in rural and remote areas within districts (USAID Prioritas, 2015; Heyward et al., 2017). Finally, rising teacher salary costs, driven by growing teacher numbers and pay rises, have impaired the government's ability to invest in other areas needed to improve education quality (Chang et al., 2014).

Together, these problems have contributed to poor learning outcomes for Indonesian students. Indonesia regularly ranks in the bottom few countries in international standardized tests such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) below neighboring countries such as Vietnam, Thailand, and Singapore; and its performance has improved little since the early 2000s. To address these problems, the

Indonesian central government has introduced a range of teacher management reforms over the past decade but these initiatives have produced few results. Indonesian teachers remain poor quality, often absent, inequitably distributed, and costly.

This paper examines the reasons for this. Much analysis of teacher management reform in developing countries and Indonesia specifically has focused on defining and describing Indonesia's teacher management problems, prescribing policy solutions to these problems, and assessing the effectiveness of implemented solutions through impact evaluations. This paper, by contrast, endeavours to bring the political and social dimensions of teacher management to the fore. It argues that the failure of teacher management reform in Indonesia so far has reflected the way in which predatory political and bureaucratic elites have for decades used the school system—and teacher management in particular—to accumulate resources, distribute patronage, mobilize political support, and exercise political control rather than to maximize educational performance and equity. In this context, central government attempts to reduce teacher numbers, improve teacher quality, and promote better teacher distribution have represented a direct assault on elite interests—and, in particular, given the central role of local governments in managing the teacher workforce, the interests of local political and bureaucratic elites. Reform initiatives have consequently encountered considerable—if often subterranean—resistance. In broad terms, reform initiatives have only been successful where the central

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: andrew.rosser@unimelb.edu.au (A. Rosser).

¹ This is indicated, for instance, by the results of standardised assessments of teacher competency. See Section 5.1 for further detail.

² McKenzie et al. (2014: xiii) estimate that around one in ten teachers is absent when they are scheduled to be teaching.

government has devised policy instruments that have been effective in disciplining local governments and maintained a commitment to these policy instruments in the face of this resistance.

In presenting this analysis, the paper begins by briefly outlining a conceptual framework for understanding teacher management reform in developing countries (Section 2). It then identifies the actors, interests and agendas that have been involved in struggles over teacher management in Indonesia (Section 3) and provides an overview of how these struggles have shaped teacher management policy and its implementation in Indonesia during the New Order and post-New Order periods (Sections 4 and 5). The final section (Section 6) presents the conclusions.

2. Analytical framework

Much analysis of teacher management policy and its implementation in developing countries has focused on three analytical tasks. The first has been to define and describe teacher management problems in these countries. In this respect, it has been concerned with questions such as the adequacy of teacher supply, utilization, and distribution; the adequacy of teachers' skills and capabilities; the quality of in-service and pre-service teacher training; the effectiveness of systems for teacher recruitment, evaluation and management; and the adequacy of teacher pay. The second analytical task has been to prescribe technical policy solutions to these problems taking into account existing levels of economic and social development and budget constraints. The third analytical task has been to assess the effectiveness of proposed solutions through evaluations of the impact of projects and programs and consider the implications for project/program design. The central problematic of this work has been how to maximize educational benefit (as measured, for instance, by national performance in PISA and similar examinations) within the context of a given resource envelope, understood in terms of both government budget finances and human resources. [Mulkeen's \(2010\)](#) detailed analysis of teacher supply, training and management issues in Anglophone Africa and [Gaynor's \(1998\)](#) analysis of teacher management decentralization in developing countries represent perhaps the most prominent exemplars of this type of analysis. This type of analysis has also featured strongly in various recent reports on teacher management in Indonesia (see, for instance, [Jalal et al., 2009](#); [World Bank, 2010a, 2010b, 2015](#); [Chang et al., 2014](#); [USAID Prioritas, 2015](#)).

This work has served to define a reform agenda in relation to teacher management consisting of measures to increase/decrease the number of teachers (depending on whether countries are considered to be in shortage/deficit); distribute teachers more efficiently throughout the school system; enhance the quality of teacher training; make teacher recruitment and evaluation processes more meritocratic; and ensure that teacher pay is sufficient to attract good candidates into the profession without being excessive. But because this work has focused largely on technical issues, it has not, in most cases, examined the political dynamics surrounding processes of teacher management reform even though some authors have acknowledged that such processes are inherently political in nature (see, for instance, [Gaynor, 1998](#); [Chang et al., 2014](#)). At the same time, to the extent that it has explored the political dimensions of reform, it has tended to construe things in terms of individual teacher behavior rather than broader contestation between competing political and social groups (see, for instance, [Bruns et al., 2011](#)). The challenge, it is presumed, is to ensure that teacher incentives align with broader goals such as improved education outcomes and fiscal sustainability. This work has thus set aside an analysis of the broader political and social context and the limitations and possibilities this imposes in favor of making a case for a more efficient and effective allocation of resources and designing policy and institutional frameworks that establish the 'right' incentives for individual teachers.³

In contrast, this paper proposes that teacher management policy-

making and implementation should be understood as an inherently political process characterized by contestation between competing political and social groups over access to and control over resources and power within specific contexts. The point here is threefold. First, teacher management reform has redistributive dimensions: it shifts resources and power away from some political and social groups and towards others. In particular, it shifts resources and power away from political and bureaucratic elites, the patronage and political networks they control, and teachers and towards parents of schoolchildren, especially ones in poor areas that have under-resourced and poor quality schools. To the extent that budget savings are achieved through a more efficient allocation of teacher supply, it also shifts resources away from teacher salaries to other areas of public spending (including other areas of education spending) and the interests that are embedded in those areas of spending. For these reasons, teacher management reform is subject to political contestation between groups who stand to benefit from such reform and those who stand to lose from it. Second, this contestation plays out within specific historical and institutional contexts. The precise nature of the actors involved, their respective interests and agendas, the balance of power between them, and the particular forms that contestation takes (e.g. parliamentary struggles, court cases, street protests/demonstrations, media debates, strikes) all vary depending on countries' particular histories, social structures, political regimes, legal systems and so on. Third, contestation involves the use of context-specific strategies and tactics on the part of competing actors as they seek to prevail against one another in struggles over power and resources. The outcomes of these struggles reflect the effects of all these factors.

In this view, then, the analysis of teacher management reform in specific developing countries needs to focus on three levels of analysis⁴:

- **Level 1: Actors, Interests, and Agendas:** This level focuses on identifying the key political and social actors who are involved in teacher management policy-making and its implementation and their respective interests, policy agendas, and forms of leverage over policy and implementation. Such actors may be specific individuals (such as a local chief executive) but more commonly are groups of individuals or organisations. The latter may include, depending on the specific historical/structural context, technocratic elites, predatory political and bureaucratic elites, capitalist elites, teachers and their unions/representative organisations, non-government organisations (NGOs), and parent and student groups.
- **Level 2: Institutions:** This level of analysis is primarily concerned with understanding the way in which formal and informal 'rules of the game' such as written laws and regulations, cultural values, voluntary codes and standards, and the like structure interactions between political actors who have a stake in teacher management policy and its implementation. There is accordingly a strong emphasis on questions related to the institutional design of legal and political systems, the nature of laws and government regulations, bureaucratic structures, and the way in which these shape who has access to decision-making and implementation processes, citizens' ability to organise and mobilize for collective action, and the responsiveness of political elites to their interests and concerns.

³ One notable exception in this respect is [Bruns and Luque's \(2015\)](#) analysis of teacher management in Latin America. This combines a consideration of the technical and political dimensions of reform, although the latter is ancillary rather than a central focus. [Heyward et al. \(2017\)](#) have presented a similar analysis focusing on teacher redistribution in Indonesia.

⁴ Space does not allow us to trace in detail the intellectual roots of this framework. Suffice it to say that it has much in common with the framework developed by [Grindle \(2004, 2007\)](#) in her work on the politics of education reform in Latin America, that developed by [Hudson and Leftwich \(2014\)](#) for the Developmental Leadership Program, and the 'social conflict' approach to the study of Southeast Asia's political economy (see [Rodan et al., 2006](#)). The framework here is distinctive in its specific application to the problem of teacher management reform.

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