

Translating Nordic Educational Equity Into the Global South: Institutional Adaptation in Indonesia's Sekolah Rakyat

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Abstract

This study examines how principles of Nordic educational equity are translated and institutionally adapted within Indonesia's Sekolah Rakyat initiative. Drawing on institutional theory and policy translation perspectives, the research employs qualitative documentary analysis of government policy documents, educational reports, and comparative education literature. The findings indicate that Sekolah Rakyat does not replicate the Nordic educational model directly. Instead, principles of equity are reinterpreted through a targeted inclusion strategy aimed at economically vulnerable populations. While Nordic systems pursue educational equity through universal welfare-state arrangements, Sekolah Rakyat integrates residential education, social protection, and poverty alleviation within a centralized governance framework. The study identifies this arrangement as a hybrid welfare-education model that combines global equity principles with local institutional realities. These findings contribute to comparative education scholarship by demonstrating that policy transfer involves institutional adaptation rather than simple policy borrowing. The Indonesian case illustrates how educational equity can be reconfigured to address poverty, exclusion, and social mobility in the Global South.

Keywords: educational equity, institutional adaptation, Sekolah Rakyat, Nordic education, Global South

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Introduction

Educational equity has become one of the most influential normative principles shaping contemporary educational reforms across the world. Beyond merely ensuring access to schooling, educational equity seeks to address structural inequalities that affect learning opportunities, educational outcomes, and social mobility. Scholars have argued that education systems function not only as mechanisms of human capital formation but also as institutions that reproduce or challenge existing social hierarchies. The growing prominence of educational equity reflects broader concerns regarding social justice, redistribution, and equal citizenship in increasingly unequal societies. As educational systems become interconnected through globalization, governments frequently look beyond their national borders for policy solutions perceived as successful elsewhere. Consequently, educational reform is increasingly characterized by processes of policy borrowing, policy learning, and institutional translation across different socio-political contexts (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Phillips & Ochs, 2004; Rawls, 1971).

Among the educational systems frequently celebrated for achieving high levels of equity are those of the Nordic countries, particularly Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. The Nordic educational model is commonly associated with universal welfare principles, strong public investment, inclusive schooling structures, and a commitment to reducing socioeconomic disparities in educational achievement. Rather than emphasizing competition and marketization, Nordic systems historically developed through state-led efforts to ensure equal educational opportunities for all citizens regardless of social background. Researchers have noted that educational success in Nordic societies cannot be separated from broader welfare-state institutions that support social protection, healthcare, housing, and family well-being. Consequently, educational equity in the Nordic context represents a deeply embedded institutional arrangement rather than a discrete educational policy that can be easily replicated elsewhere (Aasen, 2006; Antikainen, 2006; Esping-Andersen, 1990; Telhaug et al., 2006).

Despite their global reputation, the transfer of Nordic educational principles into non-Nordic settings presents significant theoretical and practical challenges. Comparative education scholars have long cautioned against assumptions that successful policies can be directly transplanted across national contexts without substantial modification. Educational institutions are embedded within distinct political traditions, administrative capacities, cultural norms, and socioeconomic structures that shape policy implementation and outcomes. As policies move across borders, they are often translated, reinterpreted, and reconstructed rather than simply copied. This process frequently generates hybrid institutional arrangements that combine external policy ideas with local political priorities and organizational realities. Therefore, understanding educational reform requires attention not only to policy diffusion but also to institutional adaptation and contextual transformation (Meyer et al., 1997; Scott, 2014; Steiner-Khamsi, 2014).

These concerns are particularly relevant in the context of the Global South, where educational inequalities are often intertwined with poverty, regional disparities, informal labor markets, and uneven state capacity. While governments increasingly adopt globally circulating educational models, the outcomes of such reforms vary considerably because local institutions mediate external influences in different ways. Scholars of development and comparative education have emphasized that imported educational ideas frequently undergo processes of localization as states seek to reconcile international norms with domestic political and social realities. Consequently, educational reform in developing countries should

be understood as an active process of institutional negotiation rather than passive policy adoption. Examining how globally recognized models are adapted within the Global South therefore offers important insights into the relationship between global policy agendas and local governance structures (Hall & Taylor, 1996; North, 1990; Tikly, 2004).

Indonesia provides a particularly important case for examining these dynamics. Although significant progress has been achieved in expanding educational access since the democratic transition, educational inequality remains closely associated with poverty, geographic marginalization, and social vulnerability. Large segments of disadvantaged populations continue to face barriers related to educational quality, learning continuity, and socioeconomic exclusion. In response to these challenges, the Indonesian government has recently introduced Sekolah Rakyat as a strategic initiative targeting children from economically vulnerable households. While the program aims to expand educational opportunities through state-supported boarding and welfare-oriented educational services, its underlying logic also reflects broader international discourses concerning educational inclusion, social mobility, and equal opportunity. As such, Sekolah Rakyat can be viewed not merely as a social assistance program but as an emerging institutional experiment seeking to translate principles of educational equity into the Indonesian context (Freire, 1970; OECD, 2018; Sen, 1999).

Existing scholarship on educational reform in developing countries has largely focused on policy implementation, governance effectiveness, or educational outcomes, while comparatively limited attention has been devoted to understanding how equity-oriented educational models are institutionally adapted when transferred across different societal contexts. In the Indonesian case, emerging discussions surrounding Sekolah Rakyat have primarily emphasized its administrative design, poverty alleviation objectives, and educational accessibility. However, there remains a significant gap in understanding how the program selectively appropriates, modifies, and reinterprets principles commonly associated with Nordic educational equity. Addressing this gap is important because institutional adaptation often determines whether imported policy ideas become sustainable reforms or remain symbolic initiatives disconnected from local realities. A closer examination of Sekolah Rakyat therefore contributes to broader debates concerning policy translation, institutional change, and educational justice in the Global South (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000; Steiner-Khamsi, 2014).

This article investigates how principles commonly associated with Nordic educational equity are translated and adapted within Indonesia's Sekolah Rakyat initiative. Drawing upon institutional theory and policy translation perspectives, the study argues that the Indonesian experience illustrates neither direct policy borrowing nor complete policy divergence, but rather a process of selective institutional adaptation shaped by local governance structures, welfare priorities, and socioeconomic conditions. By analyzing the emergence and design of Sekolah Rakyat, this research contributes to comparative education literature in three ways: first, by extending discussions of Nordic educational influence beyond Europe; second, by highlighting the agency of Global South institutions in reshaping imported policy ideas; and third, by offering a framework for understanding educational equity as a contextually negotiated institutional project rather than a universally transferable policy model.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative comparative policy analysis to investigate how principles associated with Nordic educational equity are translated and institutionally adapted within Indonesia's Sekolah Rakyat initiative. The research is situated within the interpretive tradition of policy studies, which conceptualizes policy not as a fixed instrument but as a socially constructed process shaped by competing meanings, institutional contexts, and political interests (Fischer, 2003; Wagenaar, 2011; Yanow, 2000). Such an approach is particularly relevant for examining educational reforms that emerge through the circulation of global policy ideas, where institutional outcomes are influenced not only by policy objectives but also by local processes of interpretation and adaptation. Rather than assessing the effectiveness of Sekolah Rakyat in terms of educational outcomes, this study focuses on understanding how educational equity is reconstructed when transferred from one institutional environment to another. Comparative education scholars have long argued that educational policies do not travel intact across national borders; instead, they are reshaped by historical legacies, governance structures, and sociocultural conditions (Phillips & Ochs, 2004; Steiner-Khamsi, 2014; Verger et al., 2018). Consequently, Sekolah Rakyat is examined as a site of institutional translation where globally recognized equity principles encounter the realities of Indonesia's welfare and education systems.

Theoretical Framework

The analytical framework combines institutional theory and policy translation theory. Institutional theory provides a lens for understanding how organizations and states respond to external ideas while maintaining coherence with existing institutional arrangements. Institutions are understood as durable systems of rules, norms, and practices that shape policy behavior and organizational legitimacy (Hall & Taylor, 1996; North, 1990; Scott, 2014). From this perspective, educational reforms are embedded within broader governance structures and therefore cannot be understood independently from the institutional environments in which they operate. Policy translation theory complements this perspective by challenging linear assumptions embedded in traditional policy transfer literature. Rather than viewing policy movement as a process of simple borrowing, policy translation emphasizes the active role of local actors in interpreting, modifying, and reconstructing policy ideas as they move across contexts (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Steiner-Khamsi, 2014; Stone, 2012). The concept of translation is particularly useful for analyzing educational reforms in the Global South because it highlights how external policy models acquire new meanings when confronted with different developmental priorities and institutional capacities. In this study, Nordic educational equity is conceptualized as a global policy reference, while Sekolah Rakyat is examined as a localized institutional manifestation shaped by Indonesian political, social, and welfare considerations.

Data Sources and Collection

This research relies on documentary data as its primary empirical source. Documentary analysis has become an established method in policy research because it enables scholars to examine how policy ideas are formulated, justified, and institutionalized within governance systems (Bowen, 2009; Prior, 2003; Scott, 1990). Documents are particularly valuable for studying policy translation because they reveal both the formal objectives of reforms and the

discursive frameworks through which those reforms are legitimized. The documentary corpus consists of three interconnected categories. First, the study examines official Indonesian government documents related to Sekolah Rakyat, including ministerial regulations, strategic plans, implementation guidelines, legislative records, policy briefs, and official statements. These documents provide insight into the institutional architecture and policy rationale underpinning the initiative. Second, the study analyzes foundational literature on Nordic educational systems and welfare-state governance to identify key principles associated with educational equity, social inclusion, and universal educational provision (Antikainen, 2006; Esping-Andersen, 1990; Telhaug et al., 2006). Third, scholarly literature on policy transfer, policy mobility, and educational reform is examined to contextualize the Indonesian experience within broader debates concerning global educational governance (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000; Stone, 2012; Verger et al., 2018). Data collection was conducted through a systematic review of publicly accessible documents published between 2015 and 2026. Selection was guided by relevance to three central themes: educational equity, welfare-oriented educational intervention, and institutional adaptation. Documents were retained when they provided substantive information regarding the conceptualization, implementation, or governance of educational reforms linked to social inclusion and equal opportunity.

Data Analysis

The collected documents were analyzed using qualitative content analysis informed by a theoretically driven coding strategy. Qualitative content analysis is particularly appropriate for policy studies because it facilitates the systematic interpretation of textual data while preserving sensitivity to contextual meanings and institutional narratives (Krippendorff, 2018; Mayring, 2014; Schreier, 2012). The analytical process began with iterative readings of all documents to identify recurring themes related to educational equity, inclusion, welfare provision, social mobility, and institutional governance. Subsequently, coding categories were developed through an abductive process that combined theoretical concepts derived from institutional and policy translation theories with patterns emerging from the empirical material. This approach enabled the identification of both expected and context-specific dimensions of institutional adaptation. Comparative analysis was then conducted to explore how principles commonly associated with Nordic educational equity were reinterpreted within the design and governance of Sekolah Rakyat. Particular attention was given to moments of convergence, divergence, and modification that revealed the mechanisms through which policy ideas were translated into the Indonesian context. The final stage involved synthesizing the findings into an explanatory account of institutional adaptation. Following recommendations in comparative policy research, the analysis focused not on determining whether Indonesia successfully replicated a Nordic model, but rather on understanding how globally circulating ideas were selectively appropriated and embedded within local institutional arrangements (Ragin, 2014; Steiner-Khamisi, 2014; Verger et al., 2018).

Research Trustworthiness

The credibility of the study was strengthened through data triangulation and theoretical triangulation. Drawing upon multiple categories of documentary evidence reduced the risk of relying on a single policy narrative and enabled cross-validation of interpretations (Flick, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010). The integration of institutional theory and policy translation theory further enhanced analytical depth by allowing findings to be interpreted from complementary perspectives. To ensure transparency, an audit trail was maintained

throughout the research process, documenting data selection procedures, coding decisions, and analytical interpretations. Consistent with qualitative research standards, emphasis was placed on contextual richness and analytical coherence rather than statistical generalization. The objective was to generate theoretically informed insights into the processes through which educational equity is institutionally reconfigured within the Global South.

Ethical Considerations

This study exclusively utilizes publicly available documentary materials and does not involve human participants, personal information, or direct intervention. Consequently, formal ethical review was not required. Nevertheless, the research adheres to established principles of academic integrity by ensuring accurate representation of documentary sources, transparency in analytical procedures, and appropriate attribution of all referenced materials (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Israel & Hay, 2006; Tracy, 2010).

Result

Nordic Educational Equity as a Global Policy Template

The analysis of Nordic education literature reveals that educational equity is embedded within a broader welfare-state framework. Rather than focusing solely on equal access to schools, Nordic countries seek to reduce the influence of socioeconomic background on educational achievement through integrated educational and social support systems. Four key principles consistently emerge from the literature: universal access, comprehensive support, inclusion, and social mobility.

Table 1

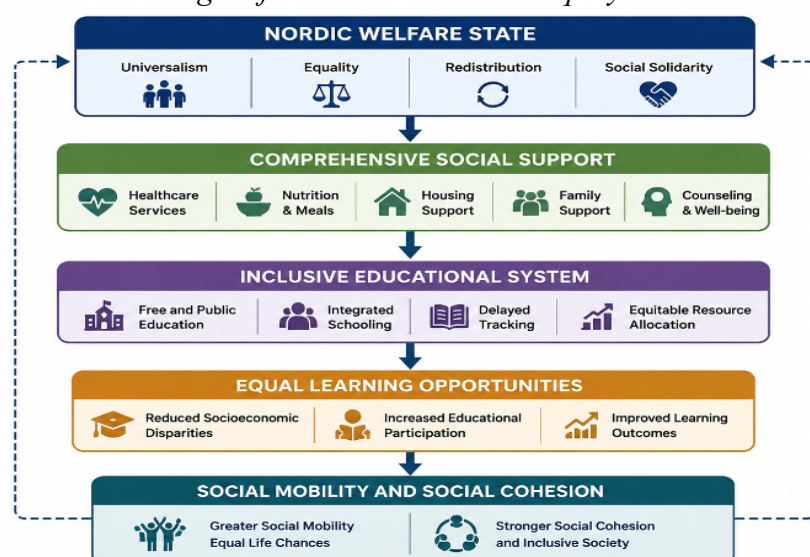
Core Principles of Nordic Educational Equity

Dimension	Institutional Expression	Expected Outcome
Universal Access	Publicly funded education	Equal opportunity
Comprehensive Support	Health, nutrition, and counseling services	Reduced learning barriers
Inclusion	Integrated schooling system	Reduced segregation
Social Mobility	Equal progression opportunities	Reduced social inequality

Source: Synthesized from Esping-Andersen (1990), Antikainen (2006), and Telhaug et al. (2006).

Table 1 shows that educational equity in Nordic countries extends beyond classroom instruction. Educational institutions operate alongside welfare mechanisms designed to mitigate structural disadvantages that affect learning participation. As a result, equity is treated as a systemic objective rather than a standalone educational policy.

Figure 1
Institutional Logic of Nordic Educational Equity



Source: Developed by the author.

Figure 1 illustrates that welfare provision functions as the institutional foundation of educational equity. The Nordic model therefore represents a comprehensive governance framework in which educational inclusion is supported by broader social policies. This characteristic becomes particularly important when examining how such principles are adapted within countries operating under different welfare and governance arrangements.

Translating Educational Equity Into Indonesia's Sekolah Rakyat

The findings indicate that Indonesia's Sekolah Rakyat reflects an attempt to address persistent educational inequalities associated with poverty and social vulnerability. However, rather than adopting the universalist orientation characteristic of Nordic educational systems, the program focuses on targeted interventions aimed at economically disadvantaged populations. Consequently, educational equity is translated from a principle of universal provision into a mechanism for social inclusion among vulnerable groups.

Table 2
Translation of Nordic Equity Principles Into Sekolah Rakyat

Nordic Principle	Indonesian Adaptation	Institutional Form
Universal Access	Targeted access for poor households	Student selection based on socioeconomic status
Comprehensive Support	State-funded boarding services	Residential education model
Inclusion	Educational access for vulnerable groups	Integrated social assistance and education
Social Mobility	Poverty alleviation through education	Human capital development

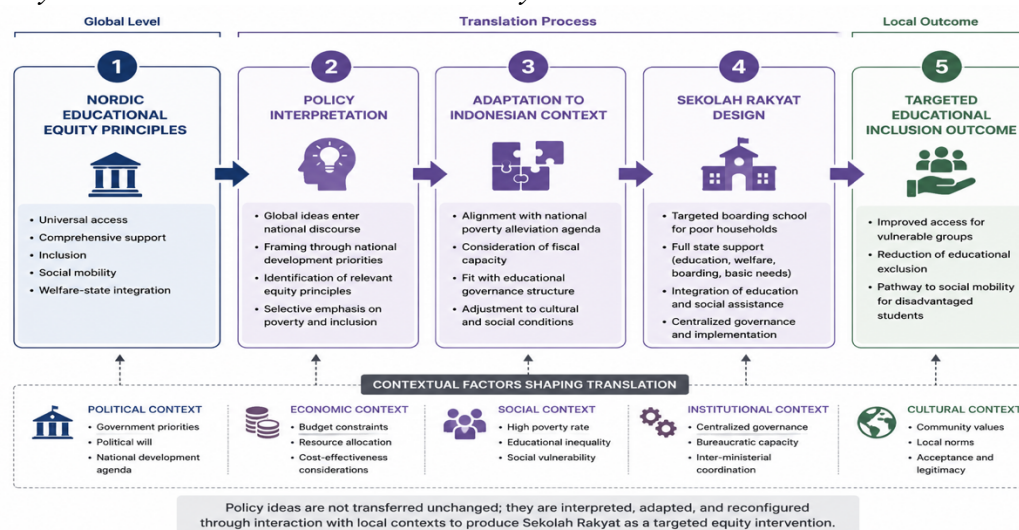
Source: Author's synthesis based on policy documents related to Sekolah Rakyat.

Table 2 demonstrates that the core principles of educational equity remain visible within Sekolah Rakyat, although their institutional expression differs substantially. Universal access is reinterpreted as targeted inclusion, while comprehensive welfare support is operationalized through state-funded residential schooling. The adaptation process therefore reflects local

efforts to address educational inequality within the constraints of existing governance structures and fiscal capacities.

Figure 2

Policy Translation Process in Sekolah Rakyat



Source: Developed by the author.

Figure 2 illustrates that policy translation occurs through a process of reinterpretation rather than direct replication. Nordic educational ideas serve as normative references, but their implementation is shaped by domestic priorities related to poverty reduction, social welfare, and educational accessibility. The resulting program reflects both global influences and local institutional realities.

Institutional Adaptation and the Emergence of a Hybrid Welfare-Education Model

The analysis further reveals that Sekolah Rakyat cannot be classified as a direct reproduction of the Nordic model. Instead, it represents a hybrid institutional arrangement that combines educational inclusion objectives with poverty alleviation strategies. This hybridization emerges because Indonesia operates within a different welfare regime, administrative structure, and socioeconomic environment from those found in Nordic countries.

Table 3

Institutional Comparison Between Nordic Educational Equity and Sekolah Rakyat

Aspect	Nordic Model	Sekolah Rakyat
Target Population	Universal	Economically vulnerable groups
Welfare Orientation	Universal welfare provision	Targeted social intervention
Educational Structure	Comprehensive schooling	Residential schooling
Governance Model	Welfare-state integration	Central government initiative
Equity Logic	Universalism	Targeted inclusion

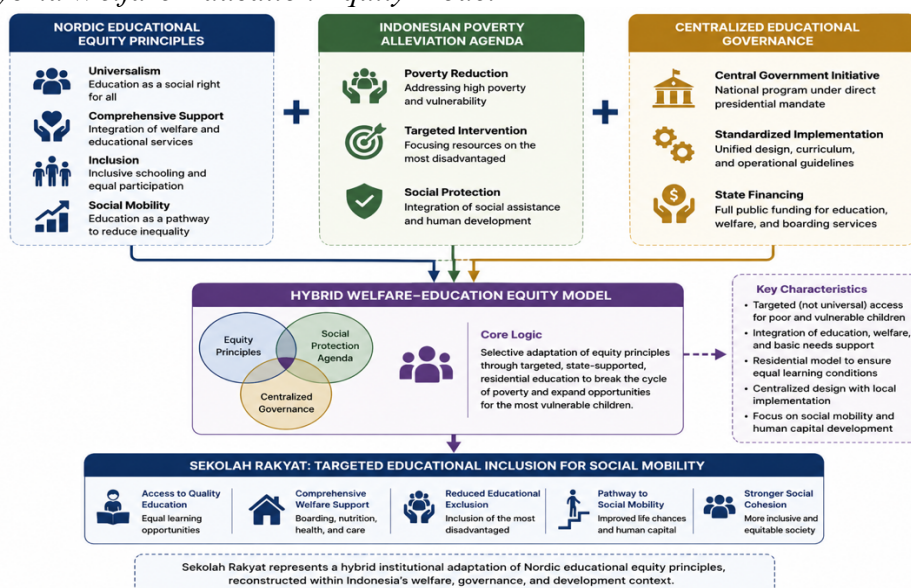
Source: Comparative analysis based on documentary evidence.

Table 3 highlights significant institutional differences between the two models. While both seek to reduce educational inequality, they pursue this objective through distinct governance mechanisms. Nordic countries rely on universal welfare arrangements, whereas Sekolah

Rakyat employs targeted interventions aimed at populations facing the highest levels of socioeconomic disadvantage.

Figure 3

Hybrid Welfare-Education Equity Model



Source: Developed by the author.

Figure 3 summarizes the principal finding of this study. Sekolah Rakyat emerges as a hybrid welfare-education model in which educational equity is pursued through the integration of social protection and targeted educational provision. Rather than replicating Nordic institutions, Indonesia selectively adapts key equity principles to address local challenges associated with poverty, educational exclusion, and social vulnerability. Overall, the findings suggest that educational policy transfer from the Global North to the Global South is best understood as a process of institutional adaptation rather than policy borrowing. The Indonesian case demonstrates how globally circulating ideas of educational equity can be reconfigured to accommodate local governance structures and developmental priorities while maintaining their core objective of expanding opportunities for disadvantaged populations.

Discussion

Beyond Policy Borrowing: Educational Equity as Institutional Translation

The findings demonstrate that Sekolah Rakyat cannot be understood as a straightforward example of policy borrowing from Nordic countries. Instead, the program reflects a process of institutional translation in which educational equity principles are selectively interpreted and reconstructed within Indonesia's socioeconomic and political context. This finding supports arguments advanced by comparative education scholars who contend that policy movement is rarely characterized by direct replication, but rather by adaptation and reinterpretation (Phillips & Ochs, 2004; Steiner-Khamsi, 2014). Consistent with institutional perspectives, the meaning of educational equity changes when it encounters different governance arrangements, welfare traditions, and developmental priorities (Hall & Taylor, 1996; North, 1990; Scott, 2014). From this perspective, Nordic educational equity functions less as a transferable institutional blueprint and more as a normative reference that informs local policy innovation. As Meyer et al. (1997) argue, globally circulating policy ideas often

acquire legitimacy because they embody internationally recognized norms, yet their implementation remains highly dependent on local institutional conditions. The Indonesian case confirms that educational reforms in the Global South are not passive reproductions of Global North models but active processes of institutional reconstruction shaped by domestic realities.

Reinterpreting Universalism Through Targeted Inclusion

A central finding of this study is the transformation of Nordic universalism into a targeted inclusion strategy. While Nordic educational systems seek equity through universal welfare provision, Sekolah Rakyat pursues similar objectives through focused interventions directed at economically vulnerable populations. This adaptation reflects the structural differences between welfare-state regimes in Northern Europe and developing countries, where fiscal constraints and social inequalities often require selective allocation of resources (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Esping-Andersen, 1990; Sen, 1999). The findings suggest that educational equity should not be viewed as a fixed institutional model but as a flexible governance principle capable of taking different organizational forms. In the Indonesian context, targeted inclusion emerges as a pragmatic mechanism for extending educational opportunities to marginalized groups while remaining compatible with existing state capacities. This observation aligns with Freire's (1970) argument that educational interventions must respond to concrete social realities rather than simply replicate external models. It also reinforces the notion that equity-oriented reforms are shaped by local understandings of social justice and development (Rawls, 1971; Sen, 1999; Tikly, 2004).

Toward a Hybrid Welfare-Education Model in the Global South

The most significant theoretical contribution of this study lies in identifying Sekolah Rakyat as a hybrid welfare-education model. The program combines educational inclusion, social protection, and centralized governance within a single institutional framework. This configuration differs substantially from Nordic welfare-state arrangements while retaining core objectives related to opportunity expansion and social mobility. Consequently, the Indonesian experience challenges binary assumptions that educational systems must choose between policy imitation and policy independence. The concept of a hybrid welfare-education model contributes to broader debates concerning institutional adaptation in the Global South. Similar to arguments developed by institutional scholars, hybrid institutions emerge when global norms interact with local governance structures, producing arrangements that are neither entirely imported nor entirely indigenous (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Bhabha, 1994; Scott, 2014). The case of Sekolah Rakyat therefore illustrates how educational equity can be reconfigured to address persistent inequalities while remaining responsive to local developmental challenges. More broadly, the findings suggest that future educational reforms in developing countries may benefit less from replicating foreign institutions and more from adapting equity principles to domestic social and institutional realities.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Indonesia's Sekolah Rakyat is best understood not as a direct adoption of the Nordic educational model, but as a process of institutional adaptation through which globally recognized principles of educational equity are translated into a distinct Global South context. While Nordic educational systems pursue equity through universal welfare-state arrangements, Sekolah Rakyat reinterprets these principles through targeted

educational inclusion, state-supported residential schooling, and the integration of education with social protection objectives. The findings reveal that policy transfer is neither linear nor replicative; rather, it involves the selective reconstruction of external ideas in response to local socioeconomic challenges, governance structures, and developmental priorities. The study proposes the concept of a hybrid welfare-education model to explain how educational equity can be institutionalized beyond the welfare-state environments in which it originally emerged. This contribution extends debates on policy translation and comparative education by showing that the Global South is not merely a recipient of policy ideas, but an active site of institutional innovation where global norms are reconfigured to address local realities of poverty, exclusion, and social mobility.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work, the author used generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools to assist with language refinement, grammar correction, manuscript organization, and the improvement of academic writing clarity. The AI-assisted technologies were used solely to enhance the readability and presentation of the manuscript. All conceptualization, data interpretation, analytical arguments, conclusions, and final editorial decisions were performed entirely by the author. The author carefully reviewed and edited all AI-generated content and takes full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the published work.

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