

“THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF EDUCATION IN INDONESIA”

*Comparative Look at the RSBI
Project in Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta
and West Sulawesi*

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Introduction

During the later half of the 20th century throughout the world both developed and developing nations began to feel the impact of neo-liberal economic policies and the spread of globalization. With the spread of this new neo-liberal paradigm came the implementation of specific market-oriented reforms and the rise of urban cultures. While such reforms pushing for privatization and decentralization were considered key to development by the international financial institutions, civil society organizations throughout the world were working to counter such reforms that were already showing signs of continued inequality and uneven development. In Indonesia, the strength of such civil society organizations including NGOs, student groups, and religious organizations played an important role in bringing the authoritarian New Order regime to an end.

At the same time that civil society organizations were calling for more democratic governance Indonesia was also dealing with the effects of the 1997 Asian financial crisis. In order to satisfy demands for democracy giving greater autonomy to the diverse regions of Indonesia two specific decentralization policies were enacted in 1999 and put into action in 2001. Shortly after the implementation of these policies the Ministry of National

Education (MONE) initiated another project in 2003, which further supported efforts to contend with the influence of globalization in the area of education. This project that seeks to develop schools referred to as RSBI (*rintisan sekolah bertaraf internasional* – pioneer international standard school) and SBI (*sekolah bertaraf internasional* – international standard school) throughout all of Indonesia's provinces is one example of the influence of globalization on Indonesia's education system.

While it is of course important to encourage the development of higher standards of education throughout Indonesia, many individuals and groups have criticized the effectiveness and necessity of such a project to "internationalize" education in all regions of Indonesia (Fatma, 2011; Kustulasari, 2009; Siswadi, 2011). In examining the development and reception of this project I argue that it has led communities throughout Indonesia to accept the impetus of urbanization and supposed necessity to reach certain international standards. With focus placed on the development and success of RSBI schools, it can be argued that there is often a lack of attention paid to the efforts of civil society groups in the development of other alternative and effective educational initiatives as well as the impact of other more appropriate forms of education in Indonesia's more remote regions.

In order to gain a more in-depth understanding of educational development throughout Indonesia my research begins by looking specifically at RSBI schools in two provinces, namely the Special Region of Yogyakarta and West Sulawesi. Through an ethnographic examination of three RSBI schools and one national standard school which is currently working to obtain RSBI accreditation, I seek to establish a better understanding of the context of RSBI schools and the way they are received by the communities in which they exist.

Before examining the specific guidelines of the RSBI project it is necessary to take a look at the historical trajectory of educational decentralization in Indonesia. Although the RSBI project was implemented separately from policies of decentralization, the development and success of this project in different provinces has been strongly influenced by processes of decentralization. While specific decentralization policies namely, Law No.22/1999 and Law No.25/1999 were enacted in 1999, in the mid-1980's Indonesia's education system began to feel the influence of global trends to decentralize.

Prior to 1999 the management of education in Indonesia was described as “largely centralized, highly bureaucratic, and complex” (Kustulasari, 2009, p.36).

In the mid-1980s having achieved universal enrollment in primary education and compulsory education of nine years for all citizens informal discussions began based on the necessity of integrating a local component into the national curriculum. However, it was not until 1994 that Indonesia saw the implementation of a policy known as *local-content curriculum* or LCC (Kustulasari, 2009: 38). The goal of this reform was to give local regions more control in the planning and delivery of a certain portion of curriculum. In a country as large, diverse, and unequally developed as Indonesia such reforms were seen as a way in which to balance inequality and diversity.

Yet, as Christopher Bjork (2005) discusses in his ethnographic analysis of the LCC project, this initiative was not as successful as hoped for and faced many challenges in its implementation. One of the greatest obstacles identified in the implementation of local content curriculum was the willingness and participation of local actors. Bjork (2006) argues that the difficulty in changing the way that curriculum was implemented was based on the deep-rooted traditional top-down system and the lack of desire to take on higher levels of responsibility (p. 136).

Thus when official policies of decentralization were put into place the challenge of motivating local actors and ensuring even development persisted. As is argued in many discussions of decentralization in general and educational decentralization specifically, such policies were initially implemented based on economic perspectives and desires to create equality or greater efficiency with little attention paid to local context and historical systems of governance and control (McMichael, 2008).

Still working through new policies and responsibilities associated with increased autonomy and the difficulty of encouraging local actors, the MONE introduced the RSBI project in 2003. The RSBI project is based on conditions of Law No.20/2003, which state that, “The government and local government organize at least a unit of education at all levels of education, to be developed further as a unit having international standards of education” (Act of the Republic of Indonesia No. 20, year 2003 on National Education System, pp. 26-27). This statement translates into the goal of the RSBI project to establish

one class or more in a primary and/or secondary school in each province and/or district that satisfies certain international standards (Kustulasari, 2009: 2). As Ag Kustulasari discusses in her policy analysis of the RSBI project the difficulty with the implementation of international standards in Indonesian public schools is the definition of what “international” education signifies (Ibid, 10).

Looking more specifically at the goals of the RSBI project in her policy analysis Kustulasari describes the definition of an international standard school in Indonesian policy documents as “a national school that prepares the students based on the national education standards and offers an international standard (education) by which the graduates are expected to have international/global competitiveness” (Ibid, 53). In order to achieve SBI status each school must achieve official accreditation through fulfilling requirements stipulated by the MONE. The process of becoming an SBI school begins with a school’s initiative to apply for status as RSBI.

Following the completion of such an application, approval is required from the Department of Education of the regency/city and the provincial Department of Education. Upon gaining local approval the application is submitted to the MONE, which is responsible for verification and evaluation of the applicant school. Following the initial round of accreditation, RSBI schools must work to achieve SBI status. While the processes of obtaining SBI accreditation are laid out in various policy documents created by the MONE, when actually discussing this process and the steps necessary with those involved such as teachers and staff at RSBI schools, the difficulties and lack of understanding associated with this process become clear.

A few of the stipulations necessary to achieve SBI accreditation include a partnership (formed individually by each school) with an institution abroad that uses some type of international standard curriculum such as IB or Cambridge, math and science classes taught in English, and more complete facilities (i.e. full computer labs, Internet, and air-conditioning in each classroom) than regular national standard schools. In order to achieve such standards RSBI schools are granted additional funding from the MONE for three years following RSBI accreditation. However, both the amount of money a school receives in a given province as well as what happens after three years if a school is not yet SBI remains unclear.

As stated previously at this point in my research I am focusing on the experiences of three RSBI schools and one school that hopes to soon apply for RSBI status. Having had experience teaching at a RSBI school in Majene, West Sulawesi I have chosen this province as my first comparative site in relation to the Special Region of Yogyakarta (*Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta*) or DIY. As part of one of Indonesia's newest provinces, Majene serves as an interesting comparative site for a number of reasons. Formerly part of the province of South Sulawesi the *kabupaten* or regencies of Polewali Mandar, Majene, Mamasa, Mamuju and North Mamuju became the province of West Sulawesi in 2004. These regencies which, comprise West Sulawesi remain considerably less developed in comparison with DIY.

In addition, DIY serves as a strong example of an area with high education standards largely a result of the number of prominent universities located in the city of Yogyakarta. As has been stated by teachers at both research sites in DIY, schools in Yogyakarta are doing fine in comparison with other regions of Indonesia (Sugianto, personal communication, October 10, 2011). Yet, despite the fact that Majene remains both rural and less developed in comparison with DIY the *Bupati* or Regent of Majene has stated his primary goal for this region is the development of education.

Thus one can say that both DIY and the regency of Majene within West Sulawesi serve as examples of two areas, which place a strong importance on the growth of education. I argue that this will be an important detail in examining the trajectory of educational development in Majene in comparison with other more remote areas of Indonesia, which I intend to add later in my research as additional sites of comparison.

In the province of DIY my research is focused at SMAN 1 Kasihan, Bantul and SMKN 6 Yogyakarta. SMAN 1 Kasihan has held accreditation as an RSBI school for five years. Located in very close proximity to the city of Yogyakarta, SMAN 1 Kasihan was the first school in the regency of Bantul and the third school in the province of DIY to achieve accreditation as an RSBI school. The second research site in DIY is SMKN 6 Yogyakarta located within the city of Yogyakarta. This school has not yet received accreditation as a RSBI school; however, this has been set as a goal for the development of SMKN 6.

Upon entering SMAN 1 Kasihan the high standard of this school is apparent. All classrooms are equipped with LCD projectors and air-conditioning while wireless Internet is generally available in most classrooms. Science and math classes have implemented the usage of bilingual textbooks and teachers talk eagerly of their desire to have stronger ability to teach these subjects solely in English.

At SMKN 6, a vocational high school, which offers students the option to study computer technology, tailoring, beauty, or tourism - staff, teachers, and students are proud to point out the active hotel, which serves as part of this schools facilities. While SMKN 6 does not tout air conditioning and LCD projectors in each classroom, wireless Internet is available and there is talk of implementing bilingual instruction in additional classes besides general English language classes. Taking a quick look at the facilities available at these schools in the province of DIY it can be said that they have achieved relatively high standards of instruction and facility management that is in comparison with schools in Majene, West Sulawesi.

In Majene, West Sulawesi my research is focused in two schools that have each held accreditation as RSBI schools for three years. These schools include SMAN 2 Majene and SMKN 1 Majene. In contrast to the schools in DIY with wireless Internet and other forms of technology in many or most of the classrooms, the majority of classrooms at both SMAN 2 and SMKN 1 Majene do not have electricity. In 2008 when I began teaching at SMAN 2 as a Fulbright English Teaching Assistant it was generally impossible to find a fast Internet connection anywhere in the town of Majene. While now three years later Internet cafes are popping up throughout Majene, Internet facilities are not yet available at Majene's RSBI schools.

Touching on English instruction in these schools bilingual instruction books have not yet been implemented and at times it can be said that English teachers continue to struggle with their levels of fluency. In pointing out these contrasts between basic characteristics at RSBI schools in DIY and Majene it is not my intention to criticize the efforts or abilities of teachers. In general when speaking to teachers at both SMAN 2 and SMKN 1 Majene there is a high level of motivation to improve standards of instruction, however, they are also quick to point out that the resources necessary to achieve higher standards are not always available.

In understanding the development of RSBI schools and their role in the development of education in Indonesia it is important to touch on what types of attitudes are held towards the existence of RSBI schools in both DIY and Majene. As I am just beginning my field research on this topic the information presented here can be considered preliminary data that will be used as a basis from which to formulate further questions for families and community groups in both DIY and Majene.

Touching first on DIY it is important to consider both the size of the city of Yogyakarta and the long tradition of educational excellence that is an important defining characteristic of this province. In the city of Yogyakarta there are a number of options available for educational advancement, namely the presence of private courses covering subjects such as language, science, math, and music. In addition, as a much larger area than Majene, there are a great deal more schools to choose from at all levels of education. Looking only at SMA (*sekolah menengah atas*) or general secondary schools within the province of Yogyakarta there are a total of fifteen SMA with RSBI accreditation. In terms of higher education Yogyakarta is also home to Indonesia's oldest and one of its most prestigious universities – Gadjah Mada University or UGM.

In contrast West Sulawesi, a significantly larger province than DIY presents a much different context in terms of educational opportunity. While in larger cities such as Majene and Mamuju courses are available for subjects such as language instruction, most commonly English, these courses are generally run by community groups or individuals and thus do not have the same facilities or resources available as those in DIY. In addition, throughout the province of West Sulawesi there are not as many options for varying levels of secondary school instruction. In comparison to DIY, which has fifteen SMA with RSBI accreditation West Sulawesi has only two SMA with RSBI accreditation. Comparing the different opportunities available in DIY and West Sulawesi one can say that the “education market” is much larger and diverse in DIY.

In Yogyakarta when discussing RSBI education with general community members who are not affiliated directly with my two research sites I have gotten a general impression that individuals are both unimpressed with such schools and do not necessarily see that RSBI is what sets certain schools above others. Rather, it is a longstanding reputation of certain

schools even prior to RSBI accreditation, which is described by many individuals as more significant than status as RSBI.

In DIY individuals generally respond that while a RSBI school may provide the opportunity for a higher standard of education this is not the only option available for educational advancement. In addition, it is not seen as necessary for a student to attend a RSBI school if they hope to attend a prestigious university in Indonesia or seek opportunities abroad. Many individuals have commented that if a certain school, which holds RSBI accreditation does not have a longstanding reputation of excellence the requirements of a RSBI curriculum, specifically more subjects taught in English may negatively affect the experience of a student.

In contrast in Majene when having general discussions regarding RSBI education and the RSBI schools in Majene there seems to be a passive acceptance that simply because these schools are RSBI they are the best schools in Majene. There is also a perception held that these schools provide each student with a RSBI education. However, in contrast to the RSBI schools in DIY, which do in fact provide a RSBI curriculum to every student and class at that school, in Majene the RSBI accreditation is in reality only applied to a select few classes. Yet, when talking to general community members about this fact very few individuals are aware of this detail.

In addition, many individuals in Majene are generally unaware of what a RSBI school is supposed to provide to its students. A general statement regarding students at Majene's RSBI schools is that they are "smarter". While it is not necessarily negative that these schools have afforded students the reputation as smart, I do argue that the effect this has had on other schools in Majene is negative. With such a large focus of the local government placed on the development and prestige of these two schools attention has been taken away from the success and efforts of other schools in Majene. This has created a certain amount of tension between students, teachers, and staff of RSBI schools and non-RSBI schools in Majene.

At that point in my research I argue that the smaller education market in Majene creates a great deal more competition between RSBI status and non-RSBI status and the importance placed on these RSBI schools. Finally, one could also argue that this focus on developing RSBI classes within particular

schools is influencing the continuation of uneven development throughout the province of West Sulawesi.

At this point these are preliminary thoughts and details regarding schools in the two areas where research is initially being focused. In expanding my research in each site interviews will be conducted in order to provide a more in-depth understanding of the views that both staff and teachers at schools hold towards the development of RSBI education as well as the perceptions of community members towards internationalized education in Indonesia.

I am eager to gain a better understanding of the way that other initiatives are framing the educational context in remote areas such as Majene. During my time in this area I was continually amazed at the initiative of community members in creating their own educational activities and opportunities. On one side the development of RSBI or international standard education has provided a positive impetus for competition in these areas and a desire to improve educational standards, however, it has also created a situation for the uneven disbursement of funding.

Thus when looking at the influence of neo-liberal economic policies and globalization on the development of Indonesia I argue that it is important to consider the effect and influence of an initiative such as the RSBI project. As is argued by Ag Kustulasari (2009) this project can be seen as a result of globalization and a desire of the Indonesian government to compete on a global scale (Ibid, 63). Yet, the lack of clarity in policy documents, which explain the process and requirements necessary to achieve SBI accreditation following a period of development as a RSBI school has created a situation in which a large number of schools have applied for RSBI status, received funds, and now stand largely where they were before.

In areas such as Majene I argue the presence of RSBI schools has the potentially to take attention away from the development of other schools or educational initiatives perpetuating uneven development. While more areas in Indonesia are now being influenced by the necessity to internationalize and become globalized due to the presence of “international” standard schools I argue that it is important to step back and take a closer look at what impact this is having on local communities.

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