

The Politics of Education in South East Asia: A Comparative Study on Decentralization Policy in Primary Education in Indonesia and Thailand

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Abstract—In most developing countries, the responsibility to provide primary and secondary education is resided in the central government. However, a growing number of countries, including countries in South East Asia, such as Indonesia and Thailand, are transferring those responsibilities from central government to local government by a system called education decentralization. Those two countries have some mutual backgrounds, yet international assessments in basic education show different outputs between them. By this research, the author wants to explain how education decentralization works in both countries by explaining and analyzing how is decentralization of education in both countries truly interpreted, who is the main actor in education policy in term of decentralization, and how does the local government fulfill the resources needed in the policy implementation.

Using documentary study as the data collection method and based on the former research done by the Author, difference interpretation of education decentralization gives a significant impact on the availability of resources which support the implementation of the policy. Decentralization of education in Indonesia which is interpreted as a broad autonomy led to a very clear separation between the center and regions, including in the provision and management of resources which, factually not all areas, can meet the subject. On the other hand, by interpreting it as deconcentration, Thai central government is still involved in matters of education to make sure that the development of education can work together across regions. That is why Thailand ranked better than Indonesia in some international assessments especially in primary education.

Index Terms—Basic education, education decentralization, southeast Asia, primary education.

I. INTRODUCTION

In most developing countries, the responsibility to provide primary and secondary education is resided in the central government. However, a growing number of countries, including countries in South East Asia, are transferring those responsibilities from central government to local government by a system called education decentralization. This transfer of responsibility can be seen in various forms, such as: devolving fiscal responsibility and management to lower levels of government, making public schools autonomous, requiring the participation of communities in operating schools, expanding community financing, allowing families to choose their schools, and

stimulating private provision of education [1]. In fact, decentralization in education faces two opposite sides. In one side- the pessimistic one-education decentralization is defined as political or financial rather than educational affairs, yet the optimist one, supporters of decentralization argue that it can address difficult problems confronting education systems, especially those relating to performance and accountability. They also believe that education decentralization give more efficiency and effectiveness in term of education service.

Study of education policy in decentralization era is interesting to be discussed by scholars due to the belief that education is the most important thing in human life. Each nation-state in the world has its own goal which is manifested in the country's philosophy and constitution which will be successfully proved by the support of good implementation of education system. Moreover, the right of education for everyone has been agreed by nations in Article 26 (1) of Declaration of Human Right by United Nation, which said:

“Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.”

Thus, as nations which are committed to do education decentralization system, some scenarios of education policy has been arranged. So do the South East Asia Member Countries, including Indonesia and Thailand.

As strong commitment showed by Indonesia in this education system, the government has reformed the politic of education by providing some policies to gain the quality and relevancy of education which consists of four main aspects; those are curriculum, educator, facility, and leadership in education units [2]. Unfortunately, not all the reform has been worked yet. Consequently, imperfect implementation of education policy in Indonesia causes some problems in education, especially in the primary education.

Based on survey done by Asia South Pacific Bureau of Education and Global Campaign for Education in 2005 which measured the basic education quality among development countries in Asia Pacific showed that Indonesia ranked the 10th out of 14 countries surveyed by the score of 42 from 100 and the average qualification of E [2]. *Trend in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)* in 2011 which tested the 8th Grade student's quality in Math and Science showed that Indonesia ranked

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the 38th in Math out of 45 countries by the average of 385, lower than the international standard, that is 500 [3]. While in science, Indonesia ranked the 40th out of 45 countries by average of 406 [4]. The other assessment done in 2011 by *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS)* which measured the reading literacy quality of student in the 4th grade showed that Indonesia ranked at the 42 place of 45 countries [5]. Further analysis of that number said that only

a little reading material-around 30% of all text read-can be understood by pupils [2]. Afterwards, based on the latest assessments of education quality in Indonesia done by *Program for International Student Assessment (PISA)* in 2012 which measured ability of pupils in Math, Science, and Reading, ranked Indonesia in the 64th placed among 65 countries surveyed [6].

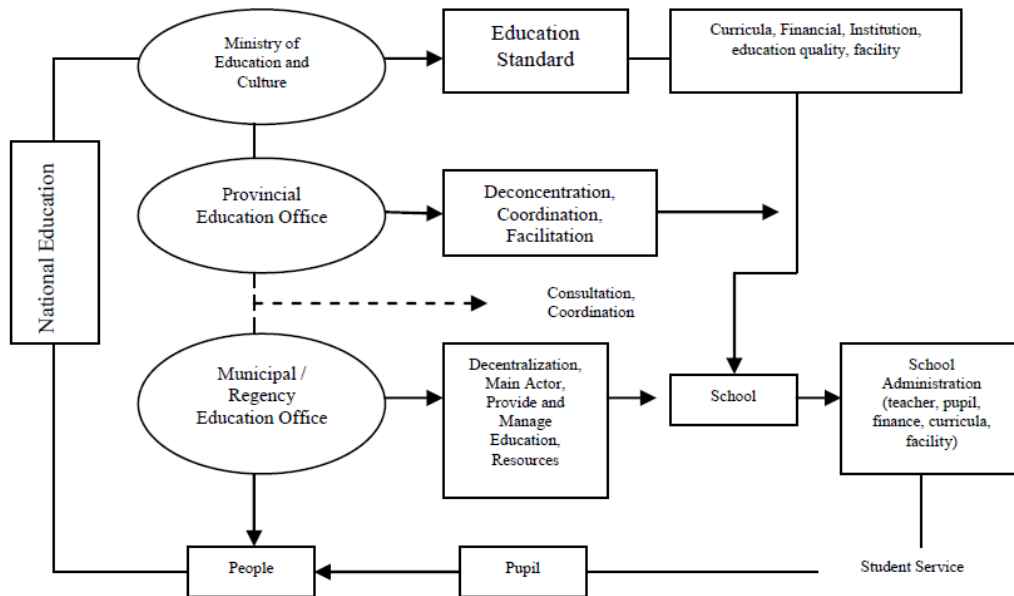


Fig. 1. Structure and management of educational administration in Indonesia and distribution of authority each structure. Source: Mukhtar and Iskandar, *Orientasi Baru Supervisi Pendidikan*, 1st Ed, Jakarta: Gaung Persada Press, 2009.

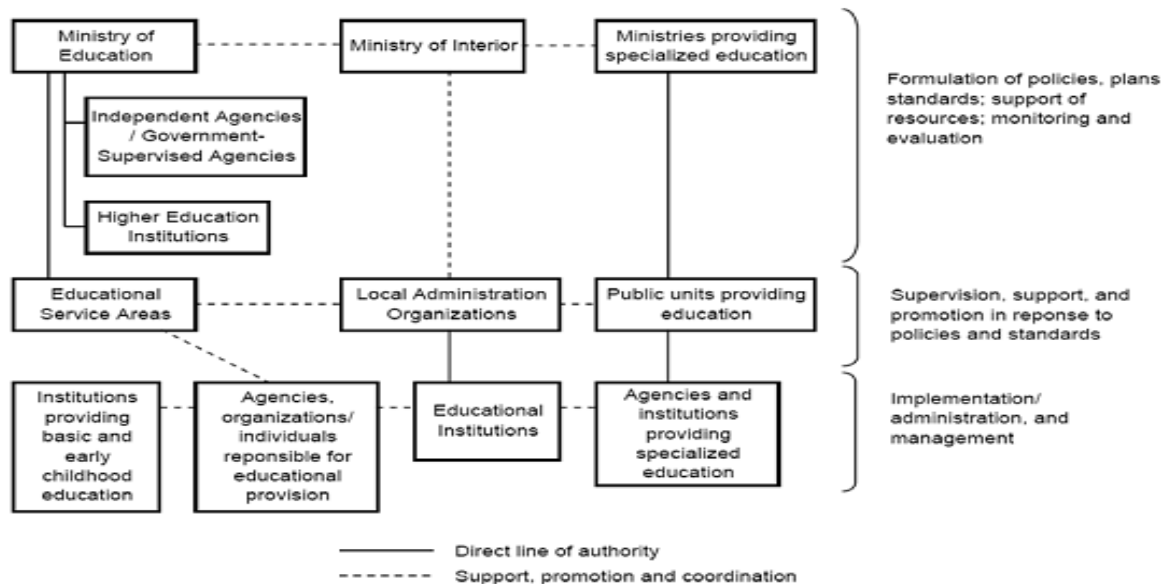


Fig. 2. Structure and management of educational administration in Thailand and distribution of authority each structure. Source: Secondary Education Regional Informat on Base: Country Profile Thailand Pg. 6.

While Indonesia is still struggling to catch up the basic education quality by upgrading the education policy, significant progress is precisely showed by the other South East Asia countries, Thailand. Both Thailand and Indonesia have some similar backgrounds either in politic, economic, or social circumstance. Similar with Indonesia which has experienced the impeachment of Soeharto regime in 1998, Thailand has experienced (even) more than one impeachment. Since 1932, there have been 15 coups, 21

elections, and more than 50 cabinets [7]. Besides, in 1997, as the flow of financial crisis in East Asia, Thailand also becomes one of the affected countries. However, Thailand gets up and tries to catch other countries advancement in order to gain its competitiveness. Thailand use education as the instrument of this process. Moreover, nowadays Thailand come afterwards other countries-gets higher achievements than Indonesia-and become one of the role models in basic education policy among development

countries in South East Asia, same as Singapore and Malaysia.

The legal basis of Thailand education reform is The National Education Act 1999. This reform contributes the boast result in basic education itself. According to the same survey done by *Asian South Pacific Bureau of Adult Education (ASPBAE) and Global Campaign for Education* in 2005, Thailand gets the best rank among 14 countries surveyed. In this survey Thailand is followed by Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Philippine, China, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Island, and Pakistan [2]. TIMSS in 2011 noted that pupils' ability in the 4th and 8th Grade in Thailand ranked the 38th from 50 countries and the 28th from 45 countries surveyed. In Science subject, Thailand ranked the 35th from 50 countries surveyed for the 4th Grade and ranked the 27 for the 8th Grade among 45 countries surveyed. Those result, especially for the 8th is better than Indonesia which is only got the 38th place in math and the 40th place in science. Unfortunately, we cannot compare the ability in math and science for the 4th grade due to the absence of Indonesia in this category. The latest survey done by PISA in 2012 also shows that the pupils' ability in Math, Science, and Reading in Thailand is better than Indonesia which placed in the bottom two.

Based on those backgrounds, the author is interested to do comparative study about how does education decentralization in the primary education work in both countries so that it can give different outputs. The aim of this research are to explain and analyze how is decentralization of education in both countries truly interpreted so that this system can support the education quality, who is the main actor in education policy in term of decentralization, and how does the local government fulfill the resources needed in the policy implementation.

The author uses institutional approach in comparing education policy in Indonesia and Thailand. In this approach, state is the main focus to be discuss by sticking out the constitutional and juridical side. Besides, this approach is more formal and descriptive due to the description of government institutions and other democracy fairleads existed [8]. Associated with the implementation of education decentralization in Indonesia and Thailand, this approach tries to define whether the decentralization is strong or the weak one. The author draws on recent Indonesia and Thai education policy documents to answer those three questions. This paper use academic literature on decentralization and local politic to understand and conceptualize the form or the interpretation of education decentralization in their point of view. Finally, I evaluate the interpretation of education decentralization in Indonesia because factually clear interpretation of education decentralization policy is important to be examined to give further impact in the development of the country.

II. THE CONCEPT OF AUTONOMY AND EDUCATION DECENTRALIZATION

In Indonesia the regulation of local autonomy (otonomi daerah/OTDA) which is used today is *Undang Undang Republik Indonesia No. 32 year 2004 (UU 32/2004) jo*

Undang Undang No. 22 year 1999 (UU 22/99) about Local Government. The regulation gives clear meaning of autonomy which is defined as right, authority, and local obligation to maintains its own governmental affairs and local interest based on the regulations (Article 1 verse 5 UU No. 32/2004). While in Article 2, it has been explained that those action done by local government should be done base on *autonomy principle and medebewind*. In Thailand the regulation of decentralization is signed by the implementation of the *Tambon Council and Tambon Administrative Act of 1994 and the new Constitution of 1997* which emphasizes the *Tambon* (sub district below the province) role to do government administration affairs [9].

The implementation of decentralization in both countries leads the transferring responsibility from central government to local government. In Indonesia, based on Article 7 in UU 32/2004, the local government's responsibilities are the entire government sectors, except foreign policy, defense and security, justice, fiscal, monetary, and religion. Due to that regulation, educational affairs are the matter that should be handled independently by the regions; moreover, this matter is one of the obligatory affairs for local government based on that regulation.

By implementing the system of decentralization in education, we can infer that there is transfer of power and authority that gives freedom to the local governments to plan and make their own decisions in addressing the problems faced in education.[10] The implementation of education decentralization is not only happened in the regency or municipal-like-wise the other affairs handled by the local government-but also happened in the school system by the concept called as School Based Management (SBM) which gives opportunities and autonomy to the school leaders to manage their own intern business. However, the main actor in education in this decentralization era in Indonesia is still the regency or city¹. They play strategic role in the implementation of education policy because they are the autonomous regions as mentioned implicitly in UU 32/2004. In addition, they should be independent and understand the essence of education decentralization so that the aim of decentralization itself-to gain public welfare, public services, and regional competitiveness-can be realized.

Likewise Indonesia, Thailand also implements the transferring responsibility in educational affairs to the local government. The lapse of three years from the implementation of decentralization in Thailand (1994), in 1997 decentralization of education in Thailand was carried out by developing the concept of School-Based Management. The legal basis of education decentralization is The National Education Act of 1999. This act regulates the establishment of special institutions which is responsible for the administration of education system reform and the reform of learning process in Thailand. The institution in question is *Education Service Area (ESA)*.

In Article 9, paragraph (2) of the act says that the systems, structures, and the process of education is implemented based on the principle of decentralization to delegate

¹Based on interview done with the head of Local Administration Organization in Central Java and verified by the head of Legal Division of Primary Education, Ministry of Education, Indonesia.

education authority to ESA, local governments, and educational institutions themselves.

“In organizing the system, structure, and process of education, the following principles shall be observed: Decentralization of authority to educational service areas, educational institutions, and local administration organizations”

Based on the clause above, besides ESA which is endowed education authorities, educational institutions and Local Administration Organizations (LAO) also have a great function in the decentralization of education in Thailand. ESA is an organization established by certain requirements in local government under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education (MOE) which is authorized the administration of education, especially primary education. Further provision of it can be seen in The National Education Act in the chapter of Management and Administration of Education conducted by the State. So, we can infer that actually, ESA is a central government agency that is placed in certain areas which is given the authority to implement and manage the administration of primary education. Here is an excerpt of Article 37 in Thai National Education Act which explains about the existence of ESA.

“Section 37. The administration and management of basic education shall be based on the educational service areas, taking into consideration the number of educational institutions, the number of population and cultural background as the main criteria as well as other appropriate conditions, with the exception of the provision of basic education stipulated in the vocational education legislations.”

Besides ESA, the LAO also has important role in education system in this country. However, LAO is not obliged to provide education. It only has the right to manage the administration and management of education for elementary and secondary schools in the city (for Education Local Administration Office) and the Bangkok Metropolitan Area (for the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA)). These institutions are under the supervision of Ministry of Interior (MOI) and should be responsible to it.

III. TRANSFERRING THE AUTHORITY OF EDUCATION

Decentralization of education in these two countries shifts the education authority from central to local government. In Indonesia, there are three levels of education administration; central government, provincial governments, and regency/municipal. Before decentralization era, the central government holds the entire control of affairs concerning education, ranging from strategic issues to operational matters. Centralized education is ultimately always tries to synchronize regional diversity, diversity of learners, school diversity, and sometimes ignore community participation. Therefore, centralized education system encourages democratic decentralization of education that is currently underway. In this era, the central government is currently only authorized to formulate common policies or norms, standards, procedures, and criteria (NSPK) which can be a reference to the underlying government in implementing

education policy. Provincial governments act as parties to facilitate the needs of education in the district / municipal, to socialize, and to formulate policies related to local content. The province can no longer give instructions directly to the regency / municipal. While regency / municipal’s role is executing any educational policy and organizing education in accordance with local conditions without any interference from the central government, provincial or other parties.

In Thailand, the administration of the education system is characterized by three levels of the structure, i.e. the central government level, local level, and the level of educational institutions. At the national level, policies and programs are formulated by the ministry of education. On the other hand, at the local level, supervision, provision of support, and dissemination of policies and standards are done. While the educational institution is responsible for implementing and managing education with a certain degree of authority, one of them is allowed schools to design school curricula that reflect community issues, culture, local wisdom, and other contexts [11]. Both local authorities and schools are also allowed to provide education based on local conditions, but all of which must remain under the supervision of the central government. Moreover, the entire responsibility for the management of education is under the mandate of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of the Interior. Therefore, it can be concluded that the implementation of the decentralization of education in Thailand is understood as the concept of deconcentration².

In the table below, I provide the percentage of education decision making management in both countries before and after the decentralization era which proves that in current era, the role of central government in Thailand is still very dominant and support the existence meaning of deconcentration in implementation of education decentralization, while Indonesia implements huge autonomy for the local government.

TABLE I: PERCENTAGE OF DECISION BY GOVERNMENT AND LOCAL AUTHORITY³

Country	Central Government		Regional		Local/School	
	1998	2003	1998	2003	1998	2003
	Cambodia	--	75	--	11	--
China	21	3	33	77	46	20
Indonesia	63	36	7	28	30	35
Philippines	37	62	24	20	39	18
Thailand	55	75	0	6	45	20

² Deconcentration is often considered to be the weakest form of decentralization and is used most frequently in unitary states-- redistributes decision making authority and financial and management responsibilities among different levels of the *central* government. It can merely shift responsibilities from central government officials in the capital city to those working in regions, provinces or districts, or it can create strong field administration or local administrative capacity under the supervision of central government ministries.

³ Gropello in Asia Pacific Education System Review Series 4, UNESCO Bangkok Pg. 14.

IV. PROBLEM IN PROVIDING THE RESOURCES

The Implementation of educational autonomy in Indonesia which is demanding independence and understanding of local government has not been entirely give positive impact. Problem in availability of resources to support the implementation of the policy becomes serious discussion that can interfere with the implementation of education decentralization. Not all local governments in Indonesia can provide the resources well. Unequal resources between regions in Java and outside Java or between the reach area and the poor area are still stand out. An analysis given from Mrs. Sophajulia, staff in Ministry of Education, shows that the problem comes from sudden process of education decentralization itself. Decentralization gives less opportunity to local governments to adapt with the changes which have placed them as the main actor. In her opinion, we can start the education autonomy by the simple step, for instance school uniform, academic calendar, and so on, then go on to the next step which is more complex until they are settled to handle all the educational affairs. In other words, the Readiness of district / municipal became the main concern that needs to be noticed to solve the problem of financial and personnel resources at the district / municipal.

Meanwhile, Thailand, with its deconcentration system, gets more advantages than Indonesia. In the context of deconcentration, the government does not only hand over its authority but also provide supporting resource to the operationalization of education decentralization through, either to ESA or the LAO, by intervening educational funding from the Ministry of Finance. The existence of this deconcentration implementation, makes each region has the same proportion resources which is adapted to the conditions and needs of each region. Thus, the disparity between rich and poor regions can be suppressed because of all the regions get the resources in accordance with the portions.

V. CONCLUSION

Political decentralization applied both in Indonesia and Thailand gives significant implications to the implementation of education decentralization in each country. Local governments and communities are involved in education matters. However, a difference interpretation of education decentralization gives a significant impact on the availability of resources which support the implementation of the policy. Decentralization of education in Indonesia is still weak although it is interpreted as a broad autonomy. In fact, the interpretation above led to a very clear separation

between the center and regions, including in the provision and management of resources which, factually, not all areas can meet the subject. On the other hand, by interpreting it as deconcentration, in Thailand the central government is still involved in matters of education to make sure that the development of education can work together across regions.

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Ms. Sweinstani was the outstanding student when she was taking her undergraduate degree and was the *summa cumlaude* graduate with perfect CGPA. Some of her profile could be found in some articles published in regional or national news papers in Indonesia.