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Education for All or Quality for All? Rethinking Free-School Policy and Nutritional Support in Indonesia

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified a longstanding debate in Indonesian education policy: whether it is more important to widen access to schooling or to improve the quality of learning. This article examines the relationship between two major policy instruments in Indonesian education—free schooling and nutritional support, specifically the Free Nutritious Meals Program *Makan Bergizi Gratis* (MBG). Using a systematic literature review combined with interpretive policy analysis, the study draws on evidence from Scopus- and Web of Science-indexed international journals, reports from major global institutions, and Sinta 1- and Sinta 2-accredited national journals. The findings are notable: free schooling has successfully increased enrollment, particularly among children from low-income families, but has not automatically translated into better learning outcomes. School feeding programs, by contrast, show measurable impact—students attend more regularly, concentrate better in class, and achieve higher scores—although the effectiveness of these programs depends heavily on implementation quality. This article rejects the framing that pits access against quality, arguing that the two are not mutually exclusive. Drawing on human capital theory, social protection scholarship, and systems-based policy analysis, the article proposes an integrated policy model that simultaneously expands access, delivers nutritional intervention, and raises education quality. Three elements are emphasized: cross-sectoral coordination, data-driven monitoring, and mutually reinforcing policy design. These findings are relevant not only to Indonesia but also to other developing countries facing similar challenges.

Keywords: free schooling; school feeding; education quality; policy integration; Free Nutritious Meals Program.

1. Introduction

Education is one of the most important foundations of a nation's development. Through education, individuals can experience social mobility, participate in democracy, and contribute to economic growth [1]. In developing countries, access to education is not merely a matter of rights — it is also a long-term investment in building quality human resources. As the world's fourth most populous country and Southeast Asia's largest economy, Indonesia has been seriously committed to expanding access to education since the early 2000s.

This commitment aligns with the global agenda, particularly UNESCO's Education for All (EFA) initiative and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 4, which targets inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all by 2030 [2], [3]. In the Indonesian context, this global commitment has been translated into several concrete programs: the Poor Student Assistance Program (BSM), the Smart Indonesia Program (PIP), and the official mandate for free basic and secondary education [4].

Yet despite these programs, one crucial question remains: are children who attend school actually learning? The World Bank describes this as a global "learning crisis" — a condition in which millions of children spend

years in school yet leave without being able to read, count, or think critically [5]. Indonesia is no exception to this crisis. PISA results have consistently placed Indonesia below the OECD average, even as school enrollment rates continue to rise, revealing a persistent gap between “schooling” and “learning” [20].

This gap raises an important debate: should education policy focus more on access, or on quality? Research by Hanushek and Woessmann provides a clear answer: what truly drives long-term productivity and economic growth is not years spent in school, but the actual skills students acquire [8]. In other words, if policy stops at enrollment figures, the underlying problem remains unsolved.

This is where the Free Nutritious Meals Program *Makan Bergizi Gratis* (MBG) becomes worth examining. This program provides free nutritious meals to students from elementary through senior high school, based on the premise that good nutrition is a prerequisite for optimal brain function during learning [9]. Experience from Brazil, India, and several African countries shows that school feeding programs can meaningfully improve attendance, concentration, and academic performance [10].

Naturally, this is not without debate. Some experts worry that budgets allocated to nutrition programs could divert funds that should go toward core education needs such as teacher quality, curriculum, and school infrastructure [11]. Others argue the opposite: if children arrive at school hungry and malnourished, no amount of teaching will help them learn. Nutritional intervention, in this view, is not merely complementary but a core component of serious education policy [12].

This article seeks to answer three questions simultaneously: How do free-school policy and nutrition programs each affect education outcomes in Indonesia? What are the structural weaknesses of each policy? And how can the two be integrated into a more coherent policy framework to advance both access and quality of education?

This article makes three contributions. First, it presents a synthesis of international and national evidence on the relationship between access, nutrition, and learning outcomes. Second, it challenges the framing that pits access against quality as though one must be chosen over the other. Third, it offers a realistic and context-sensitive integrated policy model for Indonesia.

2. Literature Review

Human Capital Theory and Investment in Education

The theoretical foundation of this article is human capital theory: investment in education, health, and nutrition generates compounding benefits, both for individuals and for the economy as a whole. Carneiro and Heckman show that early investment — particularly in cognitive and social skills — yields substantially higher returns than interventions made later in life [14].

Within this framework, nutrition is not merely a health issue — it is a critical input into the learning process. Grantham-McGregor and Baker-Henningham demonstrate, through neuroscientific evidence, that early-life malnutrition impairs attention, memory, and language acquisition — three foundations of school learning [12]. Research from Indonesia confirms this: a significant positive correlation exists between children's nutritional status and their academic achievement [15]

Free Schooling: Expanding Access, but Quality Has Yet to Follow

The impact of Indonesia's free-school policy has been widely studied. Pradhan et al. found that combining financial support with active community involvement can improve learning outcomes — though the gains

tend to be modest [16]. A more explicit finding comes from Suryadarma et al.: increasing school budgets without improving governance and accountability produces diminishing cognitive returns over time [17].

Duflo, Dupas, and Kremer, through a field experiment in Kenya, reinforce this argument: providing resources — including free schooling — must be paired with improved teacher incentives and classroom governance to meaningfully affect learning [18]. In other words, access alone is not enough; policy that stops at the school gate will not bring about meaningful change.

In Indonesia itself, the surge in enrollment following the free-school policy has created new problems: overcrowded classrooms, teacher shortages, and sharp quality gaps between schools in Java and those in eastern Indonesia [19]. Indonesia's 2022 PISA score — ranked 68th out of 81 countries — illustrates how stark this gap remains, even as enrollment rates have climbed [20]. National research records a 42-point score gap in basic competency assessments between schools in Java and those outside it [6], [7].

School Feeding Programs: A Growing Body of Evidence

Scientific evidence on the benefits of school feeding programs has grown substantially over the past two decades. Bundy et al. identify three main pathways of impact: direct nutritional improvement affects cognitive ability, feeding programs attract more children to enroll, and meal incentives improve attendance [9].

Alderman, Gilligan, and Lehrer evaluated a school feeding program in Uganda and found a 9.3-percentage-point drop in absenteeism, along with a 0.16 standard-deviation increase in cognitive test scores among beneficiaries [21]. Reviews of comparable supplementary feeding schemes in developing-country school systems similarly report measurable gains in attendance and in-class concentration among beneficiaries [22].

In terms of cost, school feeding programs are remarkably efficient. Kristjansson et al. calculate that every dollar invested generates an average of nine dollars in benefits, once gains in education, health, and future labor productivity are combined [23].

However, the effectiveness of these programs is uneven. Raveenthiranathan, Ramanarayanan, and Thankappan, in a systematic review of school feeding programs in India, find that nutritional interventions work far better when embedded within a broader social protection system — one that includes health services, parental education, and conditional cash transfers. The quality of governance and targeting accuracy are also key determinants [24].

Integrated Policy: More than the Sum of Separate Programs

The limitations of standalone policy approaches have prompted many researchers to examine integrated models that combine education, nutrition, and social protection within a single system. Beblavý, Thum, and Veselkova, comparing education and social-protection arrangements across OECD countries, found that policies combining income support, school-based services, and early childhood development produced far greater educational impact than programs operating in isolation, though the effect depended heavily on how well the underlying social-stratification patterns were addressed [25].

Behrman, Parker, and Todd tracked Mexico's PROGRESA/Oportunidades program over five years and found that the benefits of integrated investment persisted long-term — even five years after the program ended, its effects on educational attainment and employment opportunities remained detectable [26]. In Indonesia, research shows that community social capital moderates the effectiveness of cash-transfer-based programs — meaning local context matters considerably [27].

3. Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach that combines a systematic literature review (SLR) with interpretive policy analysis. This method is well suited given that the research questions are complex and multidimensional — not amenable to experimental design — and the goal is theoretical synthesis and policy-framework development rather than causal hypothesis testing. The systematic review follows PRISMA guidelines to ensure transparency and procedural rigor. Policy analysis is conducted using a systems-thinking approach, examining how policy instruments interact within the broader education governance ecosystem [19].

Data Sources and Search Strategy

Literature was collected from three main databases: Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), and Google Scholar. Searches combined keywords such as “free schooling,” “school feeding,” “education quality,” and “Indonesia.” The time range was limited to 2005–2025 to remain relevant to current policy contexts. In addition to journal articles, this study also drew on reports from the World Bank, UNESCO, UNICEF, Indonesia's Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, and official statistics from Statistics Indonesia (BPS). All national journals used are accredited Sinta 1 or Sinta 2. From 187 initially identified sources, 64 met the inclusion criteria after screening by title, abstract, and full text.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

A source was included if it met three criteria: (1) indexed in Scopus or WoS, or published in a Sinta 1/Sinta 2 accredited national journal; (2) directly addressed education access, school feeding, nutrition, or education quality in developing countries; and (3) used a clearly defined research method — quantitative, qualitative, or mixed. Sources were excluded if they were grey literature without institutional attribution, opinion pieces without empirical grounding, or studies relevant only to high-income countries without transferable implications.

Analytical Framework

Analysis proceeded in four stages: first, classifying policies into access-oriented and quality-oriented categories; second, synthesizing findings across studies, including reported effect sizes; third, identifying factors that moderate impact and context dependency; and fourth, integrating these findings into a hybrid policy framework. Validity was strengthened through triangulation across different source types and cross-verification of key claims.

4. Results and Discussion

Free Schooling in Indonesia: Rising Access, Lagging Quality

Data show that the free-school policy has significantly boosted education participation rates. The gross enrollment ratio at the elementary level has climbed to near-universal levels, with the most pronounced gains among children from low-income families. The Smart Indonesia Program, which reaches roughly 20 million students annually, has been shown to reduce dropout rates by 14.3% in target districts [4].

Unfortunately, gains in participation have not been matched by equivalent improvements in learning quality. Indonesia's 2022 PISA results ranked the country 68th out of 81 participating nations, with average scores of

366 in mathematics and 359 in reading — far below the OECD averages of 472 and 476, respectively [20]. This closely mirrors the "learning crisis" the World Bank warned of: children are present in school but not necessarily learning anything meaningful [5].

Several structural factors explain why this is the case. First, the enrollment surge has strained school infrastructure: the student–teacher ratio at the elementary level averages 27:1, well above the OECD standard of 15:1. Second, teacher quality varies considerably — rural schools and those in eastern Indonesia face shortages of qualified teachers. Third, accountability mechanisms within the free-school framework remain weak, leaving little real pressure to improve teaching practice [28].

Free Nutritious Meals: Strong Nutritional Logic, Real Implementation Challenges

The MBG program is among the most ambitious in Southeast Asia: targeting 82.9 million students from elementary through senior high school with nutritious meals meeting 30% of their daily energy needs. Its rationale is clear — there is substantial scientific evidence linking nutrition to brain development and learning readiness [9].

The neuroscientific pathway linking nutrition to learning is well documented. Iron deficiency — affecting an estimated 26% of school-age children in Indonesia — is associated with impaired attention and working memory. Early-life malnutrition also leaves lasting effects on hippocampal development, which plays a key role in memory consolidation and language comprehension [12]. National research confirms this: in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.67$) was found between nutritional status and exam scores among 840 elementary school students [15].

International evidence also supports MBG's potential. Drake et al.'s meta-analysis of 66 school feeding program evaluations found average attendance gains of 4–8 percentage points and cognitive score increases of 0.12–0.27 standard deviations in low- and middle-income countries [10]. MBG pilot programs in NTT and Papua have already shown early positive signs: attendance rose by approximately 6 percentage points, and teachers reported students appearing more engaged in class.

Nevertheless, implementation challenges are far from trivial. The decentralized food procurement system has created substantial disparities in food quality across regions. Remote areas — which need nutritional intervention the most — face the heaviest logistical barriers [29]. National research identifies weaknesses in local food procurement and monitoring systems as critical obstacles for MBG across the 12 districts studied [13].

Structural Tension: Access vs. Quality vs. Budget

Beneath these two programs lies a real structural tension. Free-school policy operates at the systemic level lowering financial barriers so more children can enroll. Nutrition programs operate at the individual level — ensuring each child's body and brain are ready to learn. The two are not conceptually at odds, but fragmented governance and separate budget streams make it difficult for them to work in synergy on the ground.

This tension is especially visible in budgeting. Indonesia's constitutional mandate allocates 20% of the state budget to education — a substantial funding base. But how that funding is divided between access-oriented programs (infrastructure, scholarships) and quality investment (teacher development, curriculum, nutrition) remains a persistent debate [28]. The introduction of MBG, with an annual budget requirement of roughly Rp 71 trillion, further complicates this calculation.

Leroy et al. offer an instructive picture: child-development programs that integrate nutrition, education, and health within a single governance structure prove far more effective than programs run separately through

disconnected bureaucratic channels [30]. In Indonesia, research on integrating the School Health Program (UKS) with nutrition programs confirms this potential, recommending the UKS–*Posyandu* platform as a realistic integration vehicle for services [31].

Four Key Findings

Across the full analysis, four findings stand out as most important. First, access and quality are mutually dependent. A child who does not attend school cannot learn anything; but a child who attends school without learning is simply wasting time and resources. The right policy does not choose between the two, but integrates them intelligently [4].

Second, nutritional status is a modifiable factor. Unlike factors such as family income or parental education, which are difficult to change in the short term, children's nutritional status can be improved quickly and at scale through school feeding programs. This makes nutritional intervention a strategic entry point for raising education quality [10].

Third, governance quality determines nearly everything. Both free schooling and nutrition programs produce far greater impact in places with strong institutional capacity, accountability, and effective monitoring systems [32]. National research confirms that increasing education budgets without improving governance does not translate into meaningful learning gains [28].

Fourth, integrated approaches outperform single-track ones. Programs that combine free schooling, nutrition, health services, and parental involvement consistently produce larger effects than programs targeting a single problem in isolation [25]. National research on integrating child-protection and social-protection services for vulnerable children likewise supports bringing protective and welfare interventions — including school-based nutrition support — under a single coordinating framework to maximize their long-term impact on human capital [33].

Toward an Integrated Policy Framework for Indonesia

Based on all the findings above, this article proposes a four-pillar integrated policy framework for Indonesia — designed to remain realistic within the country's existing decentralized system and fiscal architecture.

Pillar 1: Universal Access with More Precise Targeting. Indonesia should maintain its commitment to universal free schooling while improving targeting mechanisms so that the most marginalized students — particularly in underdeveloped, frontier, and outermost (3T) regions, conflict-prone areas, and disaster-affected areas — receive more proportionate support. To this end, the PIP data system needs strengthening to more accurately identify educational vulnerability [4]. Impact evaluations of PIP in 3T regions show an 8.4-percentage-point increase in school participation rates, demonstrating the program's potential once targeting is improved [4].

Pillar 2: Integrated Nutrition and Health Services. MBG should not stand alone but should be institutionally integrated with the School Health Program (UKS) and the existing *Posyandu* (community health post) network. This integration would enable data sharing, logistical coordination, and cross-referral services among nutrition, health, and education sectors [34]. Research on parental involvement in Indonesian schools shows that active parental engagement significantly enhances children's academic achievement, a mechanism that plausibly extends to participation in school nutrition programs as well [35].

Pillar 3: Serious Investment in Teachers and Curriculum. Free schooling and nutrition programs need to be complemented by sustained investment in teacher professional development and curriculum renewal. Hanushek calculates that a one-standard-deviation improvement in teacher quality is equivalent to roughly

US$400,000 in lifetime benefits per student — a return on investment that few other education interventions can match [11]. Survey-based assessments of Indonesian teachers reveal significant pedagogical competency gaps that must be prioritized through targeted professional-development programs.

Pillar 4: Governance Reform and Evidence-Based Monitoring. This framework cannot function without institutional reform at the district/municipal level: strengthening accountability, curbing procurement leakages, and building real-time monitoring systems for both enrollment and learning-quality indicators. Viner et al.'s research confirms that governance quality is the strongest institutional predictor of the effectiveness of education and health programs in middle-income countries [32].

5. Conclusion

This study set out to answer three questions: how free-schooling policy and the Free Nutritious Meals Program (Makan Bergizi Gratis, MBG) each affect education outcomes in Indonesia, what structural weaknesses limit each policy on its own, and how the two can be integrated into a single, coherent framework capable of advancing both access and quality. The evidence assembled through this systematic review and interpretive policy analysis supports one central conclusion: treating “education for all” and “quality for all” as competing priorities is a false dichotomy, unsupported by the evidence and, in practice, self-defeating for policymakers.

The findings show that free schooling and nutritional support are complementary rather than substitutable instruments. Free schooling has succeeded in bringing children into the classroom, particularly from low-income households, but enrollment gains have consistently outpaced improvements in what students actually learn. MBG addresses a different, equally binding constraint: it improves attendance, concentration, and academic performance by ensuring that children arrive at school able to learn, though its benefits are conditional on the quality of governance, targeting, and logistics behind delivery. Neither instrument, deployed in isolation, is sufficient; each corrects a failure the other cannot.

This complementarity is the basis for the four-pillar integrated policy framework proposed here: universal access sharpened by more precise targeting, nutrition and health services institutionally linked rather than run in parallel, sustained investment in teacher quality and curriculum, and governance reform anchored in evidence-based monitoring. The framework is deliberately structural rather than aspirational — it is built to operate within Indonesia’s decentralized fiscal and administrative architecture, and it converges with both the inclusive-and-quality mandate of SDG 4 and the human-capital priorities of Indonesia’s National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN) 2025–2029.

These conclusions should be read alongside several limitations. The analysis rests on secondary literature and program reports rather than original primary data, which restricts causal inference; the sources synthesized span diverse national and institutional contexts, which limits how far the findings can be generalized to any single setting; and because MBG is a recent program, no rigorous, program-specific impact evaluation yet exists to confirm the pilot-level signals reported here. Closing this gap should be a priority for future research, particularly through quasi-experimental and randomized evaluations of MBG’s effect on learning outcomes, together with comparative cost-effectiveness studies of integrated versus siloed program models within Indonesia’s institutional setting.

For Indonesia, and for other developing countries confronting the same tension, the practical implication is a shift in what education policy is designed to optimize: not enrollment counts, but learning itself. Nutrition programs such as MBG are not a substitute for that shift, but, implemented with strong governance and

integrated with complementary investments in teachers and accountability, they can help drive it — turning access into the foundation for learning rather than an end in itself.

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Conflict of Interest

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