

# Synergizing early childhood and child-friendly policy initiatives: Towards a holistic early education governance model in Indonesia

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## Abstract

The national early childhood education (ECE) policy and the child-friendly district policy (CFD) are two strategic initiatives aimed at achieving the well-being, protection, and development of children in a holistic manner. Despite their mutually supportive objectives, the implementation of these two policies at the regional level is often carried out separately with minimal intersectoral coordination, resulting in suboptimal implementation effectiveness. This study aims to analyze the collaboration between ECE and CFD policies in creating a comprehensive, inclusive, and sustainable early childhood education management model in Indonesia. The research method used is a qualitative comparative approach with case studies planned in four districts: Ponorogo, Wonogiri, Pacitan, and Madiun, which have implemented both policies simultaneously. Data were obtained through analysis of policy documents, in-depth interviews with education offices and women's empowerment and child protection offices, and observations of coordination and collaboration practices between institutions at the district level. Research findings indicate that the success of policy synergy is largely determined by the commitment of regional leaders, the performance of inter-sectoral coordination forums, and the existence of integrated evaluation mechanisms linking education, social services, and child protection. Districts with strong supporting regulations and community participation demonstrated better policy integration. These findings demonstrate that collaboration in evidence-based governance is a crucial foundation for strengthening a child-sensitive ECE policy ecosystem that aligns with the principles of sustainable development in Indonesia.

## Keywords

Policy integration, Child-friendly policy, Early childhood education

## Introduction

Early childhood development has become a central concern in contemporary education and social policy, as global evidence consistently demonstrates that investments in early

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childhood education (ECE) yield long term benefits for human capital formation, social equality, and sustainable development [1], [2]. In parallel, childhood protection and child well-being agendas, often institutionalized through child-friendly city or district policies, have gained prominence as mechanisms to ensure that children's rights are respected across sectors [3]. Despite sharing a common normative foundation in children's rights and holistic development, these policy domains frequently operate within fragmented governance structures [4]. As a result, early childhood education services often focus narrowly on pedagogical or administrative aspect, while child-friendly policies prioritize protection and participation, leaving gaps in coordinating planning, implementation, and evaluating at the local level.

Scholars and international organizations have long emphasized the importance of integrated early childhood systems that link education, health, nutrition, social protection, and child welfare, previous studies have examined ECE governance models, intersectoral collaboration in child development, and the implementation of child-friendly city or district initiatives in various national contexts [5], [6], [7]. Research has shown that coordination mechanisms, regulatory alignment, and leadership commitment are critical factors in improving policy coherence and service delivery. In Indonesia, existing studies have explored ECE policy implementation, decentralization effects on education governance, and the effectiveness of child-friendly district programs. However, much of this literature treats ECE and child-friendly policies as separate objects of analysis, focusing either on education outcomes or child protection indicators, rather than examining their interaction within a shared governance framework [8], [9].

What has received limited scholarly attention is how these two policy streams intersect in practice at the subnational level, particularly in decentralized governance settings. While both ECE and child-friendly district policies are implemented concurrently in many regions, the extent to which they are strategically aligned, institutionally coordinated, and jointly evaluated remains underexplored. Existing research tends to overlook how intersectoral forums function in everyday governance, how evidence is shared across education and child protection agencies, and how community participation shapes policy integration [10]. This gap is significant, as the absence of synergy may weaken policy effectiveness, create duplication of programs, and reduce the overall impact on children's holistic development.

To address this gap, this study advances the concept of a holistic early education governance model that situates ECE policy within a broader child-friendly policy ecosystem. By examining the collaboration between education offices and women's empowerment and child protection agencies, as well as the role of local leadership, coordinator forums, and integrated evaluation mechanism, this research offers a governance-oriented perspective on policy synergy. This study aims to analyze how such collaboration is constructed and sustained in practice, and how it contributes to inclusive and sustainable early childhood development. Using a qualitative comparative

case study approach in for Indonesian districts, such as Ponorogo, Wonogiri, Pacitan, and Madiun, this research seeks to generate empirically grounded insights into how integrated, evidence-based governance can strengthen child sensitive ECE policy implementation at the local level.

## Method

This study employed a qualitative comparative case study design to examine how early childhood education (ECE) policies and child-friendly district (CFD) initiatives are synergized within local governance structures in Indonesia, addressing the research question of how policy integration is operationalized at the subnational level. Four districts-Ponorogo, Wonogiri, Pacitan, and Madiun-were purposively selected based on their concurrent implementation of ECE and CFD policies and their variation in administrative capacity and socio-geographical context. Data collection was conducted sequentially and systematically to ensure logical alignment with the result section, beginning with a documentary analysis of national and local policy instruments, including regulations, strategic plans, and official guidelines related to ECE and child-friendly governance, to map formal policy alignment and institutional mandates.

This was followed by in-depth semi-structures interviews with key stakeholders, including officials from district education offices, women's empowerment and child protection offices, and members of intersectoral coordination forums, to capture perspectives on coordination mechanisms, leadership commitment, and implementation challenges; interview protocols were developed based on established qualitative governance research approaches to ensure consistency and replicability. Non-participant observations were then conducted during coordination meetings and collaborative activities to document actual practices of inter-institutional interaction and decision-making processes beyond formal policy narratives.

Data analysis followed a thematic and comparative procedure, involving coding, categorization, and cross case comparison to identify recurring patterns and contextual differences in policy synergy across district. Established qualitative analysis techniques were applied, drawing on widely used comparative case study and governance analysis frameworks, with references provided to methodological literature rather than repeating procedural details. Methodological rigor was ensured through triangulation of data sources, transparent documentation of analytic steps, and iterative validation of findings cross case, allowing the approach to be replicated or adapted in similar decentralized governance contexts while maintaining its capacity to address the research objectives effectively [11], [12].

## Results

The first set of findings, derived from policy document analysis, shows that all four districts formally implemented both early childhood education (ECE) and child-friendly district (CFD) initiatives through separate regulatory instruments, such as district regulations, strategic plans, and sectoral guidelines. The document analysis covered eighteen policy instruments, including four district regulation, eight strategic planning document (such as Regional Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMD), Regional Action Plan - Child-Friendly City (RAD-KLA), and sectoral strategic plans), and six sectoral guidelines related to early childhood education, child protection, health, and cross-sectoral coordination.

However, the degree of formal policy alignment varied considerably across cases. Ponorogo and Madiun demonstrated clearer linkages between ECE objectives and child protection principles within planning documents, including references to child rights, inclusion, and intersectoral coordination, whereas Wonogiri and Pacitan tended to frame ECE and CFD as parallel programs with limited cross-referencing. This variation indicates that while policy coexistence was evident in all cases, policy integration at the regulatory level was uneven and largely dependent on how local governments translated national mandates into district-level instruments.

The second set of result, based on in-depth interviews, highlights differences in intersectoral coordination mechanisms across districts. In Ponorogo and Madiun, coordination forums involving education offices, women's empowerment and child protection offices, health services, and community representatives were reported to meet regularly and function as platforms for joint planning and problem-solving. Informants described clearer role delineation, shared performance indicators, and routine communication between sectors. In contrast, stakeholders in Wonogiri and Pacitan reported periods or external evaluations, resulting in fragmented implementation and limited shared ownership of outcomes related to early childhood development.

Observational data further discrepancies between formal coordination structures and actual collaboratives practices. In districts with stronger synergy, coordination meetings involved substantive discussion of program overlap, data sharing, and joint monitoring activities, particularly in relation to early childhood services, parenting education, and child protection interventions. In districts with weaker synergy, meetings were more procedural, focusing on administrative reporting rather than substantive integration of ECE and CFD agendas. These observations suggest that the effectiveness of coordination forums was determined not merely by their existence, but by the quality of interaction, leadership facilitation, and follow-up mechanism embedded within them.

Finally, cross-case comparison identified three recurring factors associated with stronger policy synergy: leadership commitment at the district level, the presence of integrated evaluation mechanism, and active community participation. Districts with

committed leaders were more likely to issue supporting regulations, allocate cross-sectoral budgets, and encourage collaboration among agencies. Integrated evaluation practices—such as shared indicators and joint reporting—enabled education and child protection sectors to align their objectives and assess collective outcomes. Community participation, particularly through early childhood service providers and local civil society organizations, strengthened policy implementation by bridging institutional boundaries and ensuring responsiveness to local needs.

### Discussion

The findings of this study confirm core assumptions in policy implementation theory that education policies do not operate as neutral technical instruments, but are actively interpreted, negotiated, and reshaped by local actors within multilevel governance systems [13], [14]. Across Ponorogo, Madiun, Wonogiri, and Pacitan, national early childhood and child-related policies are implemented through distinct local governance logics. Ponorogo and Madiun demonstrate stronger vertical alignment with national mandates, reflecting what Matland conceptualizes as administrative implementation [15], where clarity of policy goals and bureaucratic capacity reduce ambiguity. In contrast with adaptive implementation in territorially constrained regions, where local discretion becomes a necessary policy mechanism rather than a deviation from formal rules.

From the perspective of multilevel and collaboration governance, the variation among the four districts illustrates how local policy outcomes depend on the interaction between institutional design and actor networks [16], [17]. In Ponorogo, intersectoral coordination between education offices, child protection agencies, and community-based organization reflects a networked governance arrangement that enhances policy coherence. Madiun, by contrast, relies more heavily on hierarchical coordination and performance management, aligning with findings that urban districts often prioritize accountability and standardization to meet national benchmarks. Meanwhile, Wonogiri and Pacitan depend more on horizontal collaboration with non-state actors to overcome geographic and fiscal constraints, supporting arguments that collaboration governance is particularly crucial in peripheral regions with limited administrative reach.

The study's results also resonate with policy translation theory, which emphasizes that local governments do not merely “implement” policies but translate them into locally meaningful practice [18], [19]. In Wonogiri and Pacitan, national education such as community-based early childhood services and flexible service delivery models. This aligns with recent international evidence showing that policy translation is a productive process that allows global or national norms to be reconciled with local realities, rather than a source of policy distortion. In Madiun, however, the lower degree of translation suggests a preference for policy fidelity, which strengthens administrative control but may limit responsiveness to contextual diversity.

A critical policy issue emerging from the comparison of the four districts concerns equity and policy sustainability [20]. While adaptive governance in Pacitan and Wonogiri enhances access for marginalized and remote populations, such approaches often rely on project-based funding and informal coordination, raising concerns about long-term institutionalization. This finding reflects broader debates in education policy literature regarding the trade-off between flexibility and sustainability in decentralized systems [21]. Ponorogo's approach combining formal local regulations with participatory mechanism suggests a middle path that balances national policy coherence with contextual adaptation. Madiun's standardized mode, although administratively efficient, risks reproducing spatial inequalities if uniform indicators fail to capture diverse local needs.

The contribution of this study lies in advancing a policy-sensitive understanding of early education governance by demonstrating that the effectiveness of national child and education policies depends on how local governments configure governance modes across different territorial contexts. By comparatively analyzing Ponorogo, Madiun, Wonogiri, and Pacitan, this research extends existing implementation and governance theories by showing that local variation is not simply a capacity deficit but a strategic policy response to structural conditions. This finding complements recent international scholarship that calls for moving beyond binary assessments of decentralization success or failure toward more nuanced analyses of policy hybridity and governance diversity. In the sense, the study contributes empirically and conceptually to debates on education governance in middle-income and decentralized countries, where policy integration and child-sensitive governance remain critical but unevenly realized.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the effectiveness of early childhood education governance in Indonesia is strongly shaped by how national early childhood education and child-friendly district policies are translated and integrated within local governance contexts. By examining the experiences of Ponorogo, Madiun, Wonogiri, and Pacitan, the research shows that policy synergy is not determined solely by the presence of formal regulations, but by the interaction between leadership commitment, intersectoral coordination mechanism, and locally adaptive governance strategies. The discussion highlights that different districts adopt distinct governance configurations—ranging from more standardized administrative approaches to flexible, community-oriented models each with implication for policy coherence, equity, and sustainability. Collectively, these findings contribute to the field of education policy by advancing a governance-based perspective that move beyond linear models of policy implementation and emphasizes policy translation, collaboration, and hybridity in decentralized systems. This study enriches current international debates on early education and child-sensitive governance by providing empirical evidence from a middle-income, decentralized context, and suggests that future research should

explore longitudinal impacts of policy integration and examine how integrated evaluation frameworks can further strengthen sustainable and equitable early childhood education systems.

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