Towards a New Vision of Quality Early Childhood Education

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I demonstrate the insufficiency of developmental knowledge as the framework of early childhood education quality. For this purpose, I analyse two documents that currently govern the practice of Indonesian early childhood education, the early childhood education standard and early childhood education Curriculum 2013 (the latest Indonesian curriculum), focusing on their sections on developmental indicators and learning outcomes. Drawing on critical policy analysis scholarship, I argue that an over-reliance on developmental knowledge to frame the notion of quality is insufficient and problematic. Its presence has led to the absence of learning contents and outcomes that represent Indonesia's national identity, disconnected the policy notion of quality early childhood education from the transformative vision of education in general, as well as obscured the vision of technological advance that supposedly is a core ingredient of the notion of quality early childhood education.

Keywords: Developmental knowledge, Indonesia, policy analysis, quality

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I demonstrate the insufficiency of developmental knowledge as the sole framework of quality within the context of Indonesian early childhood education. For this purpose, I analyse two documents that currently govern the practice of Indonesian early childhood education, namely the Early childhood education standard (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2014a), hereafter the Standard, and Early childhood education Curriculum 2013 (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2014b), hereafter, the Curriculum 2013. More specifically I focus my analysis on their sections on developmental indicators and learning outcomes respectively. My argument is that while developmental knowledge is globally the dominant theoretical orientation that shapes the notion of "good" early childhood education, its uses in Indonesian policy, as the rest of this paper will further discuss, is problematic.

The analysis in this paper is mainly informed by critical policy analysis (Olssen, Codd, & O'Neill, 2004; Taylor, 1997, 2004). A critical approach to policy is focused on what a given policy leaves behind and/or does not speak about amid its intention to address it. It also could be seen an analysis that is directed to reveal the unattended inconsistencies and tensions either within the internal body of a policy texts or in terms of its relation to the different policy texts. It should be noted here, that as a government product, a given policy, in this case early childhood education policy, never stands alone. Its presence, execution, and delivery are always in a relational state with other policy of the same or of different sector (Hogwood & Gunn, 1984; Howlett & Ramesh, 2003).

Considering this relational nature of policy, my analysis in this paper is done in two layers. The first layer is focused on what is left in the Standard and Curriculum 2013. This, as Taylor (2004) suggests was done by attending to and searching for keywords and vocabularies representing the goals and quality of Indonesian national education. The second layer of analysis is intended to reveal possible tensions, contradiction, and/or disjuncture between the Standard and Curriculum 2013 and other policy documents governing Indonesian national education. Seeking for disjuncture between policies as a way for critical policy analysis is suggested, for example, in the work of Pillay, Smit, and Loock (2013). Before discussing these policy tensions and disjuncture in the Standard and Curriculum 2013, the following sections will firstly provide a brief overview of developmental knowledge.

2. DEVELOPMENTAL KNOWLEDGE

Generally speaking, developmental knowledge is the thoughts and knowledge about children and their learning and education drawn from the discipline of developmental psychology. Its uses in early childhood education and studies is often called 'developmentalism' (Blaise, 2005; Edwards, Blaise, & Hammer, 2009; Walkerdine, 1993). As a perspective, its core idea is the belief that "all children will undergo a similar pattern of development" (Adriany, 2018, p. 95). In other words, it assumes that there is a universal course through which children, regardless their social and cultural differences, will proceed towards maturity.

Developmental knowledge is currently the dominant discourse that shapes the practice of early childhood

education (Soto & Swadener, 2002) in many parts of the world. Especially in the so-called developing countries, its emergence and adoption are driven by and part of international funding bodies' and/or philanthropic organisations' assistance to help their governments rolling out mass preschool education (Penn, 2002). International support for developmental knowledge is clearly stated, for example, in the World Bank's Early childhood counts: A programming guide on early childhood care for development (Evans, Meyers, & Ilfeld, 2000).

> "As it is currently used internationally, early childhood is defined as the period of a child's life from conception to age eight… this time frame is consistent with the understanding within developmental psychology of the ways in which children learn. Children below the age of eight learn best when they have objects they can manipulate, when they have chances to explore the world around them, and when they can experiment and learn by trial-and-error within a safe and stimulating environment" (Evans et al., 2000, p. 2).

Indication for the Standard's and Curriculum 2013's reliance on developmental is abundantly scattered. The Standard, for example, introduces the concept of 'standard of children's level of developmental achievement' (*standar tingkat pencapaian perkembangan anak*), which in many ways resembles the notion of 'developmental tasks' in developmental psychology, and is further detailed in the Curriculum 2013. Moreover, four out of six aspects of development regulated in these documents represent the domains commonly used in numerous handbooks of developmental psychology, namely, physical, cognitive, emotional-social, and linguistic domains (Berk, 2006; Shaffer & Kipp, 2013). Both documents also classify children based on their age in a way that correspond to children's stages of development. Not least, in line with the developmentalists' notion of normality and universality of development, the Standard and the Curriculum 2013 stipulate developmental assessment and early detection of developmental problems respectively. These screening techniques are employed to ensure that children proceed towards normal developmental direction.

> "The Standard of Assessment is the criterion for the assessment of children's learning process and outcomes [carried out] to meet the standard of children's level of developmental achievement" (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2014a, p. 8).

As the dominant, global governing discourse of early childhood education, Indonesian policy alignment with developmentalism may look understandable. Indeed, it has come along with the flow of global financial assistance. A critical look at its basic tenets, however, will show that it carries internal characteristics that potentially harm the practice and field of early childhood education in general. Previous studies on the use of developmental knowledge in early childhood education, for example, have problematised its tendency to see children as dependent and inadequate subjects (Burman, 2016; Penn, 2005). An

emphasis on children's relative dependency and inadequacy may lead to a pedagogical practice that positions children as subjects incapable of reasoning and/or performing complex, ethical actions. Consequently, as will be discussed in the next sections, reasoning and ethical actions are stripped from both children's learning outcomes and list of early childhood education quality indicators in general. In addition, previous studies have also problematised the developmentalists' claim of universal patterns of development. This claim may result in conflicts between the universally-perceived patterns of development with the local children developmental expectation and construction of childhood in general (Adriany, 2018; Formen, 2018). In this case, the religio-nationalistic nature of Indonesian societies and education system is a good example. These characteristics shape public aspirations on children, and therefore the practices of early learning, which are particularly religious in nature, an attribute that is not found in traditional developmentalism. For example, one of the ultimate outcomes of early learning is to foster the development of belief in God and piety (Directorate of ECE, 2011; Government of the Republic of Indonesia, 2003; Ministry of Education and Culture, 2014b). Complicating this situation is developmentalist-oriented early childhood education's glorification of play as the vehicle of learning while for many, some aspects of religion, such as the doctrines and rituals, could not simply be taught through play-based pedagogy, such as the widely practiced rote memorisation of Quranic verses (Lubeck, 1998). As a result, a number of Indonesian early learning practices, might be considered to go against the notion of quality when measured on a developmentalist standard.

In the following sections, the insufficiency of the use of developmentalist thoughts to frame the construct of quality will be further elaborated. Nevertheless, as this topic might cover an endless list of interest, the analysis is focused on three issues that the Indonesian education sector often refers them to as both the justification and ultimate goal of their campaign for early childhood education (Directorate of ECE, 2011; Ministry of Education and Culture, 2015; Ministry of National Education, 2010; National Coordination Forum, 2003), namely national identity, sustainability, and technological advance.

3. THE INSUFFICIENCY OF DEVELOPMENTAL KNOWLEDGE

The insufficiency of developmentalism as the framework of quality can be seen first of all in the obscurity, lack, and absence of the three identified issues: national identity, transformative vision of education, and technological advance, in the Standard and Curriculum documents. It should be noted here, that the level of this obscurity is different between the two documents and between the three issues. Yet, it could be inferred that generally both documents ignore or do not take into account seriously those issues in their sections on learning outcomes. In the

following sections, I will further demonstrate this in sufficiency in more detail.

3.1. National Identity, much Aimed but Less Pointed

The term 'nation' (Indonesian bangsa) and its derivate such as 'national' (Indonesian, nasional) and 'nationhood' (Indonesian kebangsaan) are abundantly used in Indonesian education policy documents of different periods (Government of the Republic of Indonesia, 1950, 2003). They are used in concert with their associative terms such as 'country' (Indonesian negara), 'homeland' (Indonesian tanah air), and/or phrases such as 'national culture' and 'national values' (Indonesian, budaya bangsa and nilai-nilai kebangsaan respectively). Indeed, historically, education was the tool and vehicle through which the idea of Indonesia as a nation and country was initially developed (Mangunpranoto, 1978) during the colonial era, a role that has been maintained since the early independence to the present time (Sirozi, 2004). The first, post-independent education law for example defined the aim of education as to produce "citizens who are responsible for the welfare of [their] societies and homeland" (Government of the Republic of Indonesia, 1950). Similarly, the second education law, stipulated the aim of education as to create citizens "with stable personality, self-reliance as well as (a sense of) social and national responsibility" (Government of the Republic of Indonesia, 1989).

The influence and traces of nationalist thoughts are also found in the present early childhood education policy documents. They are used to justify the practices of early childhood education while at the same time to frame children ideal subjectivities. For example, a section in the Curriculum 2013 document states that "education is rooted in the nation's culture to build the life of the nation today and in the future" for whose purpose children, who are seen as the "heirs of the nation", are expected to be "creative and caring the problems (faced by) their societies and nation" (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2014b, p. 3). Furthermore, as the heirs of the nation, so the Curriculum 2013 mandates, children should be exposed to and inspired by the "nation's past achievement in various fields" thereby developing their pride of their culture and nation (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2014b, p. 3).

With these emphases, knowledge and skills, which are associated with or believed to facilitate the development of children's pride of Indonesia as a nation, should logically at the heart of the both the Standard's and the Curriculum 2013's learning contents and/or learning outcomes. This supposedly logical flow, however, is not present both in the Standard and the Curriculum 2013 documents. The Standard document does not even once mention the term 'nation' (bangsa). The term does appear in the Curriculum 2013 document, yet, none of its mentions are in its sections on learning outcomes. In other word, while at the conceptual level the curriculum aims at producing nationalist children's subjectivity, the learning outcomes it offers does not point to that end. A further apparent obscurity of the nationalist aim of education at the hand of the Standard and Curriculum 2013 developers is the absence Pancasila-Indonesia's official philosophy outlining five principles of belief in one God, humanitarianism, national unity, democracy, and social justice (Hosen, 2005; Sukarno, 1964). As a matter of fact, Pancasila is generally a compulsory content of higher-level Indonesian education, including the past preschool system (Curriculum Centre, 2002; Department of Education and Culture, 1987).

As with knowledge and skills related to national identity, the Standard and Curriculum 2013 also have no clear message on 'culture' (budaya). The term for example appears only once across the Standard's developmental indicators. It appears in 16 places in the Curriculum 2013 document, of which six mentions directly link to children's learning outcomes. Nevertheless, even in the last six mentions, 'culture' (budaya) is given a narrow and unclear meaning, for example simply by referring it to habits in the family, manner, and/or etiquette. The Standard presents the term 'culture' (budaya) as an adjective in one of its prosocial behaviour learning outcomes, stating that children (aged 5-6) should be able to "recognise manner in accordance to the local social and cultural values" (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2014a, p. 29). Yet, as the term appears only once across the Standard, no explanation is available on what it means by 'cultural values' (nilai budaya) in this indicator.

The presentation of 'culture' in association with places such as home of preschool is also found in the Curriculum. It states that after completing preschool, children are expected to be competent to "identify themselves, families, peers, teachers, surrounding environment, religion, technology, and the culture at home, play-center, and ECE center" (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2014b, p. 5). Furthermore, the Curriculum sets that children's identification of those aspects should be done through specific ways, called the five-step of scientific approach (lima langkah pendekatan saintifik), namely, by "observing with the five-senses… questioning, information gathering, reasoning and communicating through play-activities" (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2014b, p. 7). As it with the Standard, no explanation is found about what 'culture' means in this knowledge dimension of preschool core competency. Yet, considering its presentation along with a list of different places, it seemingly referred to what is acceptable or otherwise unacceptable for children to do or not to do in those places. In other word, again, culture is defined more as manner and behavioral regulation. This limited meaning of culture might blur the Curriculum vision to encourage children celebrating and developing their pride of Indonesia's "cultural excellence" (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2014b, p. 3).

3.2. Transformation, much Interested but Less Cared for

Transformation and progress are the two notions that shape Indonesia's campaign for early childhood education. Under whatever frameworks—economic, religious, cultural, psychological, philosophical—early childhood education has been promoted as a tool of transformation and solution to many problems. A Ministry of Education curriculum development road map, for example, claims that the Curriculum was specifically developed "as an effort to prepare the Indonesian generation 2045" and to ensure that the future productive-aged population will provide "a demographic dividend and not a demographic disaster" (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2014c, p. xviii). The transformative role early childhood education was much emphasized; a national education plan document called early childhood education as "an emergent need and priority in order to prepare excellent humans" (Department of National Education, 2005a, p. 25). Accordingly, over the past decade, early childhood education had been associated with and considered as Indonesia's "national strategy" to achieve both Education For All and Millennium Development Goals targets (Ministry of National Development Planning, 2013). With these visions in mind, the Indonesian government has further envisioned that its early childhood education system is the one that of "high-quality and gender equality as well as has education for sustainable development as its orientation" (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2015, p. 96).

Framed within these national and global aspirations, both the Standard and the Curriculum should ideally offer knowledge and skills that mirror them. Surprisingly, those visionary images of early childhood education, are not clearly mirrored both in the Standard and the Curriculum. To illustrate no mention is made in both documents of the terms associated with those visions and/or commonly used in transformation-oriented education (Moss, 2014), and global agendas. Such basic terms and ideas in transformative education as 'justice', 'equality' and 'sustainability' are apparently absent across the documents' sections on developmental indicators and learning outcomes. In fact, not only they are central ideas in contemporary education agendas, but more critically they are among the reasons for investment in early childhood education (United Nations of Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, 2005; United Nations Children's Fund, 2002; World Education Forum, 2000). This absence undoubtedly is related to the documents' over-reliance on developmental knowledge, under whose lens "children are incapable of understanding complex issues such as social justice" (Solehuddin & Adriany, 2017, p. 2).

3.3. Technological Advance, much Wanted but Over-Simplified

Generally, technology and technological advance are seen as a double-edged sword in Indonesian education policy documents. On the one hand, education is aimed at advancing public mastery of technology; yet, on the other hand technology is seen as a threat to society (Department of National Education, 2005b; Ministry of Education and Culture, 2015). This is a common view, especially, when it comes to early childhood education (Yelland, 2005; Yelland, Lee, & O'Rourke, 2008). Therefore, the question to ask here is not whether or not technology should be included into or otherwise excluded from early childhood practice, but, given the unavoidable penetration of technology in contemporary education and human life in general, how the inclusion of technology fits early childhood education. In fact, a section in the Curriculum indicates that technology as an important aspect stating that "curriculum is developed to provide children with learning experience by considering and utilising science and technology" (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2014b, p. 5). In scenario, Indonesian children should have enjoyed technology-assisted learning and/or learning that is towards technological literacy. This, as the next section will show, is not the case.

Overshadowed by the overreliance on developmental knowledge and blurred by the double-edged sword view on technology, both the Standard and the Curriculum are apparently lack of technological vision. To illustrate, the term 'technology' (Indonesian, teknologi) is not found across the Standard document. The term appears in 15 places across the Curriculum document. Yet when it comes to learning outcomes the term is used in rather superficial level and does not reflect technological advances. The Curriculum has two basic learning outcomes on technology, namely "recognizing simple technology (mengenal teknologi sederhana)" and "utilizing simple technology (menggunakan teknologi sederhana)" (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2014b, p. 25). The superficial technological vision of the Curriculum could be seen in its reference of "simple technology" to such tools and appliances as "scissor, shovel, hammer, hoe, knife, nail cutter, tooth brush, bottle opener…" (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2014b, p. 25). To consider this list of simple technology as trivial does not mean to undermine its important to children life. Yet, this simplification has led to the exclusion of supposedly advanced technology. As a matter of fact, a number of Indonesian macro education policy documents are abundantly scattered with terms representing the development of the latest technology, such as 'information technology' or 'digital'. Not least, Indonesian education has been infected with the discourse of 'industrial revolution 4.0', 'artificial intelligence' and 'automation'. Yet ironically, the Curriculum has no even one mention of the term 'computer'.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

As the rest of this paper has shown, Indonesian early childhood education is challenged by its policy internal disjuncture between what it aims at what it really offers. Overreliance of reductionist developmental knowledge generally the main root of this problem. It is therefore important for Indonesian policy makers to consider alternative quality framework that is more sensitive to address the three issues identified in this paper.

As many countries of the world, Indonesia's investment in early childhood education is targeted to transform today's children into future brighter generation. To do so, a careful forecast and look at what the future may look like is critical. To conclude, the following statement by Piaget's question long time ago is perhaps relevant to consider: "what is the goal of education…are we forming children who are only capable of learning what is already known… or should we try to develop creative and innovative minds, capable of discovery from the pre-school age on, throughout life" (Davidson Film Inc, 1968).

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