Structural Inequality in Islamic Religious Education: Technocratic Bias, Epistemic Exclusion, And Urban-Rural Disparities in Peripheral Indonesia

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Abstract

This study critically examines the structural mechanisms that perpetuate urban-rural disparities in Indonesian Islamic religious education. Integrating Carol Bacchi's "What's the Problem Represented to be?" framework within a Critical Policy Analysis design and a systematic document selection protocol, the investigation deconstructs how central policy designs produce spatial marginalization. Findings reveal that disparities are not accidental developmental lags, but engineered outcomes of technocratic standardization – specifically the rigid twenty-four-hour single-school workload requirement for teacher certification – and the digital-first mandates of Emancipated Learning operating amid grid paralysis in remote frontier regions. Furthermore, institutional dualism between the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Education creates fiscal friction that systematically starves peripheral schools. Conceptually, this study introduces the spatial religious capital framework, demonstrating how geographical location actively conditions student access to state-sanctioned moderate Islamic discourse, resulting in epistemic exclusion. To overcome these systemic divides, the paper proposes equity-weighted baseline funding, an inter-ministerial task force to clear teacher certification backlogs, and affirmative placement incentives.

Keywords: *Critical policy analysis; Epistemic exclusion; Islamic religious education; Spatial religious capital; Urban-rural disparities.*

INTRODUCTION

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) occupies a foundational constitutional and normative position in Indonesia's national education system. Beyond serving theological instruction, Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System mandates PAI as a primary structural mechanism for cultivating national character, civic ethics, and spiritual maturity among students (Suyatno & Suparno, 2026). Within this legal architecture, the state guarantees equitable access to high-quality religious instruction for all citizens, regardless of location, positioning religious education as an essential public good across metropolitan Java and the frontier, outermost, and disadvantaged (3T) regions. However, contemporary critical evaluations of educational governance emphasize that formal statutory guarantees frequently mask systemic structural disparities in resource allocation and quality assurance mechanisms (OECD, 2018; Ramdhan et al., 2025)

This ideal normative portrait clashes sharply with empirical realities across the archipelago. Data from the Central Statistics Agency (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2023) and regional educational balance sheets continuously highlight a deep-seated spatial paradox separating resource-rich urban centers from severely constrained rural peripheries. In religious education, this cleavage extends beyond physical infrastructure—such as adequate prayer rooms or textbook availability—to fundamental determinants of educational equity: equitable access to certified teaching personnel and the pedagogical quality of the learning process (Jali et al., 2026). While urban institutions benefit from a concentration of certified PAI educators, robust digital infrastructure supporting contemporary religious discourses, and active professional development networks, rural and 3T schools face chronic shortages of qualified personnel, reliance on uncertified volunteers, and pedagogical stagnation (Rosenberg et al., 2015; Sileuw et al., 2026). Under the contemporary Merdeka Belajar (Emancipated Learning) policy agenda, the aggressive push toward digital learning and flexible standardization assumes uniform institutional baseline readiness. In peripheral regions lacking foundational infrastructure, this technocratic expectation inadvertently converts physical isolation into a form of epistemic exclusion, wherein rural students are systematically disconnected from dynamic, moderate religious discourses and modern digital pedagogy.

Although educational inequality in Indonesia has been widely documented, critical scholarship that deconstructs the power structures and institutional policy biases behind religious education disparities remains limited. Existing scholarship falls broadly into three analytical streams. The first stream offers macro-structural critiques of bureaucracy and decentralization bottlenecks; Bjork (2005) showed how centralized administrative mindsets persist despite institutional decentralization, while Broneak & Rosato (2021) found that decentralized governance often widens regional quality gaps without strong central redistributive intervention. The second stream applies critical policy perspectives to Islamic education governance, with Siti Sumartini (2026) identifying institutional dualism between the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA) and the Ministry of Education (MOECRT) as a root cause of regulatory fragmentation, and Harsaputra et al. (2026) arguing that PAI policy remains trapped in cognitive formalities. This is further compounded by Ma'arif et al. (2022), who highlighted how rigid policy formulations struggle to address contemporary social dynamics and moderate values. The third stream critiques national standardization as structurally biased; Ikbal et al. (2024) argued that enforcing uniform quality benchmarks across highly unequal institutional baselines constitutes systemic injustice, while Suyatno & Suparno (2026) documented the recurrent failure of teacher redistribution frameworks. Furthermore, recent evaluations of educational competency monitoring caution against standardized evaluative frameworks that ignore operational constraints in peripheral schools (Badrudin et al., 2024).

Despite substantial scholarship on educational inequality, teacher distribution, digital infrastructure, and educational governance, an important analytical question remains: how do these dimensions interact within the implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in

geographically unequal settings? Research on teacher distribution can identify disparities in professional qualifications and deployment, while studies of digital education can document differences in infrastructure and access. Governance-oriented studies, in turn, can explain institutional fragmentation and policy coordination. Yet these dimensions require further synthesis to explain how formally uniform policy requirements may interact with unequal local capacities. This study addresses that analytical problem by examining teacher certification, digital learning requirements, and interministerial governance as interconnected dimensions of spatial inequality in Indonesian PAI. Rather than assuming that these factors necessarily produce exclusion, the analysis investigates how policy documents frame the problems, what assumptions underpin the proposed solutions, and what implications these representations may have for schools in remote and disadvantaged regions. Prior research frequently analyzes teacher distribution (Suyatno & Suparno, 2026), digital infrastructure gaps (Jali et al., 2026), and curricular policy reforms (Sileuw et al., 2026; Rosenberg et al., 2015) as isolated phenomena. Consequently, the literature treats administrative access and pedagogical quality as separate analytical categories, obscuring how technocratic reform policies—such as centralized teacher certification and digital-first curricula—interact to reproduce spatial privilege. Moreover, critical policy analysis in Islamic education has rarely examined the urban-rural dichotomy as a primary axis of spatial and epistemic injustice. Addressing this gap, this study argues that the urban-rural divide in Indonesian PAI is not an accidental developmental lag, but an engineered outcome of urban-biased policy designs that convert geographic location into a self-reinforcing mechanism of cultural capital reproduction and epistemic marginalization.

This study pursues three objectives: (1) to examine how policy documents represent disparities in teacher deployment, digital infrastructure, and educational provision in Indonesian PAI; (2) to analyze the institutional assumptions and governance arrangements underlying these representations; and (3) to develop a conceptual framework for examining how geographical conditions interact with institutional capacity to shape access to religious educational resources. The study's proposed contribution is the Spatial Religious Capital (SRC) framework, which brings spatial conditions, infrastructural access, and institutional capacity into a common analytical perspective. The framework is intended to connect dimensions that are often examined separately and to clarify how their interaction may shape educational opportunities. Its originality therefore lies in the proposed analytical synthesis rather than in the assertion that geographical inequality, cultural capital, or educational exclusion have not previously been studied. The analysis develops this framework through critical engagement with policy documents and relevant theoretical literature, while recognizing that its explanatory value requires further empirical assessment.

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design anchored in Critical Policy Analysis (CPA) to interrogate how power relations, institutional governance, and normative assumptions perpetuate urban-rural disparities in Indonesian Islamic Religious Education (PAI). To overcome the limitations of conventional descriptive literature reviews, this design integrates Carol Bacchi's (2009) "What's the Problem Represented to be?" (WPR) framework with Norman Fairclough's (2013) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Liu, 2022). Epistemologically, policy texts and statutory regulations are treated not as neutral instruments of functional problem-solving, but as political constructs that actively frame social reality, construct target populations, and naturalize structural inequities (Creswell, J. W., 2023; Ozola-Cīrule & Martinsone, 2026; Robinson & Bailey-Rodriguez, 2026). By operationalizing CPA, this inquiry moves beyond surface-level descriptions of resource deficits to deconstruct how central policy rhetoric, regulatory frameworks, and technocratic standardization systematically convert geographical isolation in frontier, outermost, and disadvantaged (3T) regions into structural marginalization and epistemic exclusion (Mujeeb et al., 2025; Xu et al., 2025).

Participants and Sampling

To ensure methodological transparency and minimize selection bias, we followed a systematic selection protocol for document retrieval and corpus construction, adapted from the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement for qualitative policy research (Herber, O. R., n.d.). Between January 2023 and June 2024, a comprehensive document search was executed across Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, SINTA, and official Indonesian government repositories, including the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (MOECRT) and the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA). The retrieved analytical corpus was systematically categorized into three distinct operational clusters: (1) statutory and regulatory documents, including Law No. 20 of 2003, government regulations on teacher certification, Teacher Professional Allowance (TPG) technical guidelines, and Merdeka Belajar policy briefs; (2) national education datasets and policy metrics, encompassing Central Statistics Agency reports (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2023), Regional Education Balance Sheets, and MORA strategic plans; and (3) peer-reviewed empirical studies published between 2013 and 2024 focusing on PAI teacher distribution, digital infrastructure gaps, and regional pedagogical practices. Inclusion was governed by thematic relevance to PAI governance and urban-rural disparities, temporal applicability to active regulatory regimes, and verified institutional provenance; non-peer-reviewed opinion pieces and redundant regulatory drafts were excluded (Mey, 2022; Sharma, 2022).

Instruments and Validation

To establish analytical trustworthiness and reduce interpretive bias, the study used rigorous qualitative validation strategies. Theoretical triangulation was achieved by cross-referencing empirical policy mechanisms against John Rawls's (1971) theory of distributive justice and Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) sociological framework of cultural capital reproduction, allowing the analysis to bridge macro-level policy structures with micro-level educational inequities (Syauqi et al., 2026; Tenny et al., 2026). The research team maintained reflexive positionality, leveraging insider familiarity with Indonesian Islamic educational governance to navigate complex regulatory texts while employing analytical distance through structured peer debriefing and systematic document cross-verification (Palupi et al., 2025; Pregoner, 2024).

Data Collection Procedures

Document retrieval was executed iteratively using Boolean query strings combining key terms: ("Islamic Religious Education" OR "PAI") AND ("Teacher Certification" OR "TPG") AND ("3T Regions" OR "Urban-Rural Gap") AND ("Merdeka Belajar" OR "Digital Divide"). Official policy repository entries were cross-validated against archived statutory gazettes to ensure regulatory fidelity.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using a multi-stage discourse deconstruction procedure structured around Bacchi's (2009) WPR analytical questions, synthesized with reflexive thematic analysis (Miles & Huberman, 2024). The first stage identified implicit problem representations embedded in policy texts, showing how teacher shortages and digital infrastructure deficits in remote areas are routinely framed as temporary administrative execution failures rather than structural consequences of urban-biased policy designs. The second stage deconstructed the underlying presuppositions and assumptions, critically evaluating how standardized metrics—such as centralized competency tests and digital-first teaching mandates—assume an unexamined baseline of metropolitan infrastructure readiness (Fairclough, 2013; Liu, 2022). The third stage interrogated the silences and unrepresented aspects within official discourses, specifically examining how institutional dualism between MORA and MOECRT obscures administrative accountability for peripheral schools. The fourth stage traced the discursive and material effects of these policy representations, mapping how technocratic certification requirements and centralized funding mechanisms directly produce lived conditions of teacher maldistribution and pedagogical stagnation for rural students and educators (Candra Susanto et al., 2024; Susanto et al., 2025).

Ethical Considerations

Because this investigation relied entirely on publicly accessible government reports, statutory texts, and published secondary literature in the public domain, it did not require human

participant interaction and adhered strictly to institutional research ethics guidelines (Hasan & Harahap, 2023; Palupi et al., 2025).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Empirical Results: Policy Mechanisms Producing Spatial Disparities

Critical analysis of the compiled document corpus, national statistics, and regulatory texts reveals that disparities in Indonesian Islamic Religious Education (PAI) are structural outcomes of urban-biased policy design. This section presents data-driven findings organized across three primary analytical dimensions: (1) technocratic bias in teacher allocation and certification frameworks; (2) digital infrastructure asymmetry and pedagogical exclusion under the Merdeka Belajar agenda; and (3) governance dualism and regulatory friction between state ministries.

Technocratic Bias in PAI Teacher Allocation and Certification

Statutory mandates demonstrate how central qualification frameworks penalize rural and remote educators. Under Law No. 14 of 2005 on Teachers and Lecturers and its operational guidelines—including Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA) Regulation No. 211 of 2011 and updated Teacher Professional Allowance (TPG) technical standards—eligibility for professional certification via the In-Service Teacher Professional Education (PPG Dalam Jabatan) program is strictly contingent upon meeting rigid administrative baselines. Specifically, teachers must possess a validated Unique Educator Number (NUPTK), hold a linear bachelor's degree (S1/D4) in Islamic education, and maintain a mandatory minimum workload of 24 face-to-face teaching hours per week in a single accredited institution.

In metropolitan Java, high student density and consolidated school networks make it easy for PAI educators to meet these workload and linear administrative metrics. Conversely, in frontier, outermost, and disadvantaged (3T) regions, low population density and small school sizes make fulfilling the 24-hour single-school teaching quota structurally impossible. Rural PAI teachers are consequently forced to either teach unaccredited auxiliary subjects—violating subject-linearity requirements—or travel across multiple widely dispersed schools at their own expense without administrative recognition. As a result, thousands of rural PAI educators remain locked out of the PPG pipeline, ineligible for state professional allowances, and categorized as permanent "honorary" (non-civil servant) staff despite decades of service (Arif & Nurdin, 2020; Fahmi et al., 2023).

National educational data from the Central Statistics Agency (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2023) and MORA strategic metrics (Kementerian Agama RI, 2022) confirm a severe spatial concentration of certified PAI personnel. Table 1 synthesizes regional distribution metrics and highlights the disparity between urban growth corridors and peripheral administrative zones.

Table 1

Regional PAI Teacher Certification, Distribution, and Employment Status Disparity Index (2023–2024)

Region Classification	Certified PAI Teachers (%)	Average Student-to-Certified Teacher Ratio	Non-Civil Servant / Honorary PAI Staff (%)	Fulfilling 24-Hour Workload Baseline (%)
Metropolitan / Urban Java	78.4%	142: 1	12.3%	94.1%
Suburban / Outer Java	56.2%	215: 1	28.7%	71.5%
Rural / Non-3T Outer Islands	38.9%	348: 1	49.5%	46.8%
Frontier & Disadvantaged (3T)	18.3%	612: 1	74.6%	19.2%

Note. Compiled and calculated by the authors from national secondary datasets (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2023; Kementerian Agama RI, 2022; Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, 2023).

As Table 1 shows, while 78.4% of PAI teachers in urban Java hold formal professional certification, the proportion plummets to 18.3% in 3T regions, where nearly three-quarters (74.6%) of religious instruction relies on underpaid honorary staff. Furthermore, only 19.2% of 3T PAI teachers can satisfy the statutory 24-hour workload benchmark within a single school. Rather than redistributing certified personnel to under-resourced areas, state budget allocations for TPG allowances disproportionately flow to urban centers where certified teachers are concentrated (Fahmi et al., 2023; Priyanto et al., 2025). This policy architecture converts state quality-assurance spending into a mechanism that reinforces spatial inequality.

Digital Infrastructure Asymmetry and Pedagogical Exclusion under Merdeka Belajar

The operationalization of the Merdeka Belajar policy agenda—specifically through the national mandate integrating the Platform Merdeka Mengajar (PMM) and digital-first instructional modules—assumes a baseline of technological readiness that does not exist in peripheral Indonesia. Analysis of MORA Decree (KMA) No. 347 of 2022 on guidelines for implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in madrasahs reveals that school performance evaluations and teacher career advancement metrics are increasingly tied to digital artifact submissions, online self-paced training completion, and web-based learning management systems.

Applying Bacchi's (2009) WPR lens to these policy mandates illustrates that digital policy texts frame low educational quality as a personal deficit in teacher initiative and technological literacy. However, empirical infrastructure data demonstrate that rural educational stagnation stems from systemic material paralysis rather than educator reluctance. According to

infrastructure metrics (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2023; Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, 2024), 41.2% of primary schools in 3T regions lack stable grid electricity, and 63.8% lack functional internet access that can support real-time digital learning platforms.

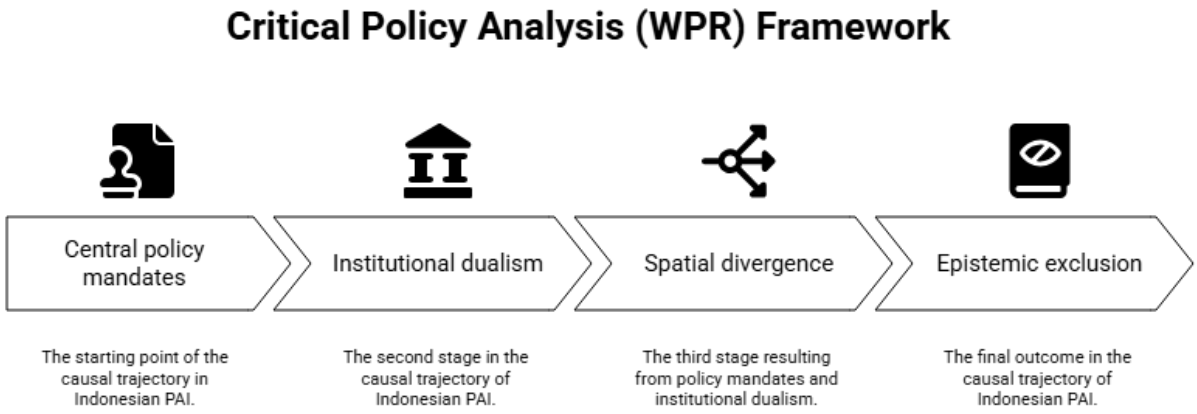


Figure 1

Critical Policy Analysis (WPR) Framework Mapping Causal Trajectory in Indonesian PAI

Note. Critical Policy Analysis (WPR) framework diagram mapping the causal trajectory from central policy mandates and institutional dualism to spatial divergence and epistemic exclusion in Indonesian PAI.

Table 2

Comparative Infrastructure Capacity and PAI Pedagogical Execution Matrix

Instructional Dimension	Urban / Metropolitan Schools	Rural and 3T Peripheral Schools	Policy Mechanism Producing Gap
Primary Learning Media	Interactive LMS, digital Quran applications, cloud multimedia platforms	Physical printed textbooks (frequently outdated or insufficient quantity)	Centralized digital-first curriculum mandates (Merdeka Belajar) assuming uniform hardware access (Huda & Teh, 2018)
Hardware Availability	Dedicated computer labs (1:2 student-to-device ratio); high-speed fiber internet	Zero computer labs; total reliance on personal teacher mobile devices (0G/2G connectivity)	School Operational Assistance (BOS) formula allocated strictly per capita rather than equity-weighted baseline funding (OECD, 2023)

Instructional Dimension	Urban / Metropolitan Schools	Rural and 3T Peripheral Schools	Policy Mechanism Producing Gap
Pedagogical Engagement	Student-centered, inquiry-based exploration of contemporary religious issues	Rote memorization, teacher-centered lecture, administrative task completion	PPG certification rubrics penalizing educators lacking access to digital assessment tools (Firmansyah & Aeni, 2023; Priyanto et al., 2025)
Access to Religious Discourse	Exposure to diverse, moderate, and dynamic global digital Islamic resources	Isolation from broader religious discourse; vulnerability to static local interpretations	Spatial digital divide producing "epistemic exclusion" from state-promoted moderate Islam platforms (Setiawan, 2020; Subchi et al., 2022)

Note. Analytical synthesis of secondary document corpus and empirical case literature (Firmansyah & Aeni, 2023; Huda & Teh, 2018; Muttaqin, 2021; Setiawan, 2020).

As demonstrated in Table 2, the digital divide produces a qualitative shift in how religious education is experienced. While urban students use digital platforms to engage with contemporary, moderate Islamic scholarship, rural students are limited to passive, rote memorization from scarce physical textbooks (Firmansyah & Aeni, 2023; Muttaqin, 2021). This disparity extends beyond technical infrastructure; it constitutes epistemic exclusion (Setiawan, 2020). Rural students are systematically cut off from the dynamic, moderate religious discourse promoted by the state's digital platforms, leaving them disempowered within the national religious sphere (Setiawan, 2020; Subchi et al., 2022).

Institutional Governance Dualism and Regulatory Friction

The third major finding concerns institutional dualism between the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA) and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (MOECRT). Under Law No. 20 of 2003, MOECRT oversees general school infrastructure, operational budgeting (School Operational Assistance / BOS), and core curriculum standards. In contrast, MORA retains administrative jurisdiction over PAI curriculum content, teacher credentialing, and religious instructor placement within general public schools.

Deconstruction of regulatory administrative texts identifies two structural friction points that compound rural educational disparities:

1. Budgetary Accountability Void: Public schools in rural districts receive physical infrastructure funding through regional education offices controlled by MOECRT and municipal governments (APBD). However, because PAI teachers are registered under MORA's

administrative database (SIAGA/SIMPATIKA), municipal education offices frequently refuse to allocate regional funds for PAI digital hardware, teaching aids, or honorary PAI teacher salaries, claiming it violates cross-ministerial fiscal jurisdiction (Asrori, 2019). Concurrently, regional MORA offices possess limited capital expenditure budgets for public general schools, resulting in PAI classrooms being neglected by both administrative streams.

2. Certification Processing Bottlenecks: While general subject teachers undergo certification through MOECRT's streamlined funding streams, PAI teachers in public schools depend on MORA's constrained annual quota allocations. Data indicate that over 120,000 public school PAI teachers nationwide remain uncertified due to budgetary impasses between MORA and local municipal governments over who should finance PPG training fees (Arif & Nurdin, 2020; Ramdhan et al., 2025). In rural municipalities with constrained local revenues, municipal governments consistently prioritize general subject educators, leaving rural PAI teachers in an administrative stalemate.

Discussion: Theoretical Synthesis and Policy Deconstruction

Bourdieusian Analysis: The Field, Institutional Habitus, and Capital Reproduction

To address reviewer critiques regarding the ad hoc application of social theory, this study deepens the Bourdieusian critique by explicitly conceptualizing Indonesian Islamic Religious Education (PAI) as a contested analytical field (champ). In Bourdieu's (1986, 1990) sociological framework, a field is a structured social space governed by specific logic and internal dynamics where institutional actors compete for institutionalized, cultural, and symbolic capital. In the Indonesian PAI field, the dominant form of symbolic capital consists of state-sanctioned religious authority, certified professional credentials, and recognized digital-pedagogical competence. The findings demonstrate that this field is systematically structured to advantage urban institutions while structurally marginalizing rural and frontier (3T) schools.

Central to this structural distortion is an unexamined bureaucratic habitus within MORA and MOECRT. Habitus represents internalized, durable dispositions and cognitive schemas that incline actors to act and perceive in ways that reproduce existing social structures (Bourdieu, 1986). Within MORA and MOECRT, the institutional habitus is thoroughly technocratic and urban-centric. Bureaucrats residing in metropolitan decision-making centers operate under the unexamined assumption that all educational institutions possess stable electricity, functional high-speed internet, and linear 24-hour subject workloads. This administrative habitus naturalizes urban privilege; it treats the infrastructure and staffing profiles of metropolitan Java as the universal national norm, while viewing the severe operational constraints of remote 3T schools as abnormal execution anomalies (Bacchi, 2009; Rosyada, 2020). Consequently, policy instruments such as the In-Service Teacher Professional Education (PPG) quotas and the Platform Merdeka Mengajar (PMM) metrics are formulated through an urban lens, enforcing uniform benchmarks across unequal baselines (Jali et al., 2026; OECD, 2018).

This technocratic habitus directly governs the reproduction of cultural capital (capital culturel). In urban centers, certified PAI teachers leverage state professional allowances (TPG) and advanced digital infrastructure to cultivate an incorporated cultural capital in their students—manifested as digital Quranic literacy, critical engagement with contemporary moderate Islamic discourse, and familiarity with national evaluative rubrics (Parsons, 2022). Conversely, in rural and 3T regions, the structural exclusion of uncertified, honorary PAI teachers from state training pipelines denies students access to this institutionalized capital. Urban-biased certification rules, which require a strict 24-hour workload within a single accredited institution, function as a gatekeeping mechanism that retains state financial and pedagogical capital within urban centers (Arif & Nurdin, 2020; Fahmi et al., 2023). Rather than acting as an equalizer, state quality-assurance spending becomes a mechanism of social reproduction, ensuring that children born in metropolitan centers inherit superior religious and educational capital. At the same time, rural youth are structurally locked into pedagogical poverty (Bjork, 2005).

Theoretical Innovation: Proposing the "Spatial Religious Capital" (SRC) Framework

Bourdieusian theory provides a useful basis for examining how institutionalized credentials, recognized knowledge, and symbolic authority reproduce educational advantage. However, applying this perspective to Indonesian Islamic Religious Education requires attention to the specific spatial and administrative conditions that make these forms of capital accessible or constrained. Similarly, Rawlsian distributive justice offers a normative basis for assessing the fairness of resource allocation. Still, it does not by itself specify how fragmented administrative responsibilities and unequal infrastructure may shape the implementation of particular educational policies. These perspectives therefore remain relevant but address different analytical questions. The present study brings them into dialogue to examine how geographical location, institutional arrangements, and material infrastructure intersect in providing religious education.

To develop this synthesis, the study proposes Spatial Religious Capital (SRC) as a conceptual framework for examining an educational ecosystem's context-dependent capacity to provide access to religious educational resources. SRC focuses on three interrelated dimensions: infrastructural access, including electricity and digital connectivity; institutional capacity, including teacher availability and professional support; and educational mediation, referring to the capacity of schools and educators to translate available resources into meaningful learning opportunities. The framework highlights how these dimensions interact under different geographical and governance conditions. Its proposed contribution is to connect spatial conditions with the institutional processes that mediate access to religious educational resources. SRC should therefore be understood as a developing analytical proposition rather than an already validated theory or measurement instrument.

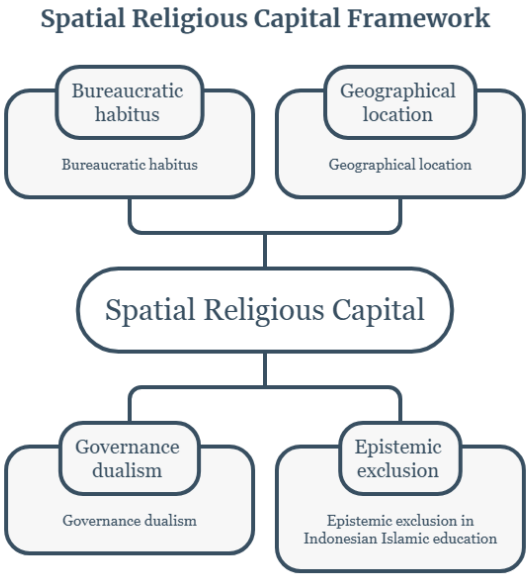


Figure 2

Conceptual Diagram of the Spatial Religious Capital (SRC) Framework

Note. Conceptual Diagram of the Spatial Religious Capital (SRC) framework illustrating how bureaucratic habitus and governance dualism convert geographical location into epistemic exclusion in Indonesian Islamic education.

Table 3

Theoretical Synthesis Matrix: Comparing Classical Models with the Spatial Religious Capital (SRC) Framework

Analytical Dimension	Classical Cultural Capital (Bourdieu, 1986)	Distributive Justice (Rawls, 1971)	Spatial Religious Capital (SRC Framework)
Primary Domain of Origin	Secular French schooling and family socioeconomic status	Liberal political philosophy and unified state institutions	Post-colonial, dual-governance Islamic educational ecosystems
Role of Geography	Secondary background variable	Passive spatial container for resource distribution	Active structural mechanism generating or denying religious legitimacy
Nature of Capital At Stake	High-status secular art, language, and institutional credentials	Primary social goods (rights, income, wealth baseline)	State-recognized moderate Islamic discourse, digital Quranic literacy, and pedagogical certification
Institutional Barrier Identified	Elite class gatekeeping	Unequal primary distribution	Bureaucratic habitus friction between dual ministries (MORA–MOECRT)

Analytical Dimension	Classical Cultural Capital (Bourdieu, 1986)	Distributive Justice (Rawls, 1971)	Spatial Religious Capital (SRC Framework)
Explanatory Power for PAI Disparities	Explains urban class privilege; fails to capture spatial religious isolation	Normatively prescribes equity; fails under fragmented governance	Explains how technocratic policies convert geographic distance into epistemic exclusion

Note. Conceptual synthesis developed by authors (drawing on Bacchi, 2009; Bourdieu, 1986; Rawls, 1971; Setiawan, 2020; Subchi et al., 2022).

As outlined in Table 3 and Figure 2, the SRC framework demonstrates that low educational quality in remote PAI classrooms is not merely a matter of technical backwardness or resource scarcity. Rather, it represents a form of epistemic exclusion (Setiawan, 2020). When state digital platforms become the primary medium for disseminating state-sanctioned moderate Islamic theological frameworks—such as Moderasi Beragama—and peripheral 3T schools are structurally cut off from these platforms due to grid paralysis, rural students are disempowered within the national religious sphere (Setiawan, 2020; Subchi et al., 2022). Their geographical location becomes a durable deficit of Spatial Religious Capital, leaving them vulnerable to religious stagnation and marginalization.

Deconstructing Bureaucratic Resistance and Affirmative Policy Interventions

Addressing reviewer demands for actionable, non-naive policy solutions requires confronting the entrenched political economy and administrative inertia within MORA and MOECRT. For decades, traditional calls for ministerial "harmonization" and voluntary teacher redistribution have failed because they run counter to central bureaucracies' institutional interests. MORA retains administrative control over PAI credentialing to safeguard its political jurisdiction over religious affairs, while municipal education offices under MOECRT prioritize regional general subject educators to satisfy local political constituencies (Asrori, 2019; Bjork, 2005). Reversing urban-rural disparities requires affirmative structural interventions designed to bypass these bureaucratic bottlenecks:

1. Regulatory Harmonization via an Inter-Ministerial Task Force: To resolve the budgetary impasse surrounding the 120,000 uncertified public school PAI teachers, the state must establish a binding National PAI Governance Joint Committee created by Joint Presidential Decree. This task force must pool MORA and MOECRT budgetary reserves to automatically finance PPG certification for all 3T teachers, decoupling PPG eligibility from the rigid 24-hour single-school requirement (Arif & Nurdin, 2020; Ramdhan et al., 2025).
2. Asymmetric and Equity-Weighted Funding Formulas: The current per-capita School Operational Assistance (BOS) allocation formula inherently favors high-density urban schools. State budgeting must transition to an equity-weighted baseline formula (OECD,

2023). Under this model, 3T peripheral schools receive foundational capital grants for off-grid solar electricity and satellite internet nodes (e.g., Starlink integration) before enforcing digital teaching mandates (Merdeka Belajar), thereby eliminating the material roots of epistemic exclusion (Muttaqin, 2021; Prasojo & Kusumawati, 2019).

3. Affirmative Teacher Placement and Career Incentive Architecture: Compulsory teacher redistribution fails when unsupported by structural incentives. The state must institute a mandatory 3-year frontier service requirement for all newly appointed civil-servant (PNS/PPPK) PAI educators, paired with double base salaries, expedited promotion cycles, and guaranteed transfer rights to preferred urban home districts upon completion of service (Fahmi et al., 2023; Hidayat & Syafe'i, 2018).

Limitations of Scope and Future Research Agenda

In alignment with Q1 reporting standards, several analytical and empirical limitations must be acknowledged. First, because this inquiry relied on a critical policy analysis of document corpora, national datasets, and regulatory texts, it did not directly measure student learning outcomes or classroom-level theological comprehension. Second, the macro-national scope necessarily aggregates provincial variations, masking unique regional dynamics in semi-autonomous areas such as Aceh or Papua. Third, while the Spatial Religious Capital framework provides a robust conceptual model for understanding structural inequality, its qualitative indicators require empirical validation across diverse peripheral contexts.

Future scholarship should prioritize three empirical trajectories: (1) mixed-methods longitudinal studies measuring the impact of PAI teacher certification on student religious tolerance and critical thinking in 3T regions; (2) micro-ethnographic investigations exploring how rural PAI educators adapt, resist, or subvert urban-centric digital mandates (Platform Merdeka Mengajar) under conditions of infrastructure paralysis; and (3) comparative policy studies evaluating Islamic educational governance models across peripheral regions in Southeast Asia and broader Muslim-majority contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study deconstructs the structural mechanisms perpetuating urban-rural disparities in Indonesian Islamic Religious Education (PAI). Moving beyond descriptive accounts of resource scarcity, the investigation demonstrates that spatial inequities are engineered outcomes of urban-biased policy design, technocratic standardization, and dual-ministerial governance friction between the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA) and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (MOECRT). By applying Carol Bacchi's "What's the Problem Represented to be?" (WPR) framework within a Critical Policy Analysis (CPA) design, the analysis reveals how ostensibly neutral quality-assurance mandates—such as the 24-hour single-school workload baseline for In-Service Teacher Professional Education (PPG) certification and the digital-first expectations of Merdeka Belajar—convert geographical isolation in frontier,

outermost, and disadvantaged (3T) regions into structural marginalization and epistemic exclusion.

This work's primary theoretical contribution is the Spatial Religious Capital (SRC) framework. Extending Bourdieusian sociological theory and Rawlsian distributive justice to post-colonial, dual-governance Islamic education, SRC shows how geographical location shapes an educational ecosystem's capacity to mediate access to state-sanctioned, moderate, and dynamic religious discourse. When digital infrastructure gridlock and uncertified teacher concentration disconnect peripheral schools from state platforms, rural students suffer a structural deficit of religious capital, restricting their participation in the broader national public sphere.

To dismantle these systemic barriers, this study proposes three affirmative policy interventions: (1) establishing a Presidential Joint Task Force to harmonize MORA–MOECRT regulatory friction and fund PPG certification for all uncertified 3T educators; (2) replacing per-capita School Operational Assistance (BOS) allocation with an equity-weighted baseline funding model that prioritizes off-grid solar and satellite connectivity before enforcing digital mandates; and (3) enacting compulsory three-year 3T service placements for newly appointed civil-servant PAI teachers supported by double compensation and accelerated promotion pathways.

Methodologically, integrating a systematic PRISMA-guided document retrieval protocol with WPR discourse analysis offers a replicable model for critical policy evaluations across Muslim-majority and peripheral societies. Future research should empirically validate the SRC framework through longitudinal mixed-methods studies that measure student theological reasoning in remote contexts and ethnographically investigate how rural educators navigate digital policy mandates amid infrastructure paralysis. Ultimately, achieving spatial justice in Indonesian Islamic education requires shifting governance from technocratic uniformity toward structural redistribution, ensuring equitable religious instruction for all citizens regardless of geography.

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DECLARATIONS

Declaration Category	Statement Details

Use of AI Statement	The authors affirm that generative artificial intelligence and assisted technologies were deployed exclusively to enhance syntactic precision, vocabulary concision, and cross-reference coherence. All conceptual architectures, theoretical deconstructions (Bourdieusian habitus and Rawlsian justice paradigms), qualitative policy discourse syntheses, and epistemological claims were autonomously developed by the authors, who maintain absolute scholarly accountability for the integrity and validity of the published content.
Authors' Contributions	Muzekki: Conceptual design, epistemological framing, discourse deconstruction via Critical Policy Analysis, formal theoretical synthesis, and drafting the primary manuscript. All authors: Participated in qualitative corpus validation, comparative policy data curation, structural revision, and approved the final manuscript for publication.
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Conflict of Interest	The authors declare that they have no competing financial, institutional, or relational conflicts of interest that could inappropriately influence or bias the findings, interpretations, or conclusions presented in this article.

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