



Transformation of New Student Admissions Policy from PPDB to SPMB: Rhetoric or Substantive Policy?

*S Latief¹, E E Putri², Khairan², R Thepmondhari³, W H Hua⁴

¹Department of Government Science, Faculty of social and political sciences, Universitas Nurdin Hamzah, Indonesia

²Islamic Religious Education Study Program, Faculty of Tarbiyah, Universitas Islam Sarolangun, Indonesia

³Public sector Development office of the Vocational Education Commission, Thailand

⁴Lu Jiang Elementary School, Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

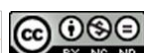
This research explores the policy transformation of student admission from *Penerimaan Peserta Didik Baru* (PPDB) to *Seleksi Penerimaan Murid Baru* (SPMB) through the lens of rhetoric or substance. It investigates whether this shift reflects genuine policy reform or merely rhetorical packaging. This study used a qualitative descriptive approach; the research collected data through observation, in-depth interviews, and analysis of policy documents related to student admission practices. This study was conducted at two public junior high schools in the central area of Jambi City. The findings reveal that the transformation from the PPDB to SPM is not fully substantive; rather, it functions largely as a rhetorical response to public pressure. Nevertheless, the SPMB policy introduces several procedural adjustments, including greater flexibility in technical guidelines and modifications to the transfer pathway. These findings suggest the need for more comprehensive reforms to ensure that policy changes meaningfully improve equity and transparency in new student admission.



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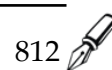
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INTRODUCTION

Access to quality education is a strategic issue in the development of education in Indonesia, as mandated by the Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia. Article 28 C of 1945 stipulates that every individual has the right to develop themselves by fulfilling their basic needs, to receive education, and to benefit from science and technology, arts, and culture in order to improve the quality of life and contribute to public welfare. Furthermore, Article 31, paragraph 1, emphasizes that every citizen has the right to receive education.

As a manifestation of this constitutional mandate, the Indonesian government has continuously reformed education policies, including the new student admission system at both the elementary and secondary levels. One such policy is the *Penerimaan Peserta Didik Baru* (PPDB) Policy, which was regulated by the Minister of Education and Culture Regulation No. 1 of 2021 during the tenure of Minister Nadiem Makarim. This policy, commonly known as the zoning system, remained in effect until 2024.

Various studies have examined the implementation of the PPDB policy, with most concluding that it represents an educational reform aimed at promoting equity in education and reducing the stigma surrounding favored schools (Uluwiyah, Fauziah, & Fariha, 2024; Anam & Rodiyah, 2024; Oktafiana, Laksanti, & Suluh, 2019). Other research has highlighted community and educational institutions' responses (Nurhayati, 2020), technical challenges in implementation (Chaniago, Cahya, Hasanah, et al., 2024; Putri, Budiarti, & Liestyasari, 2023;



Iriany, Adnan, & Rachmawati, 2020; Purwanti, Irawati, Adiwisastra, & Bkti, 2019), the dynamics of policy implementation (Nurman, Kumalasari, Erlina, & Yuli, 2024), and critical analysis of the PPDB policy (Wahyuni, Roesminingsih, Riyanto, 2022; Ariani, 2021; Bakar, Supriyati, & Hanafi, 2020).

In 2025, following the change of government, the ministry overseeing primary and secondary education was restructured into the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE), led by Minister Abdul Mu'ti. One of the significant changes was the replacement of PPDB with *Sistem Penerimaan Murid Baru* (SPMB), as stipulated in the Regulation of the Minister of Primary and Secondary Education Number 3 of 2025.

According to the report by Azizah (2025) on the Detik Jogja portal (2025), there are three main reasons behind this transformation:

- 1) To eliminate the perception that student admission occurs only through the zoning route, despite the existence of others, namely achievement, affirmation, and transfer.
- 2) To align the policy with the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education vision of providing quality education for all, free from zoning barriers,
- 3) To address the technical and structural weaknesses of the previous PPDB system.

In substance, both the PPDB and the SPMB Policy share the same objectives: promoting educational quality and reducing disparities among schools. However, in practice, the PPDB policy encountered numerous issues, including practices across all admission pathways, as reported by the Ombudsman of the Republic of Indonesia (ORI) in the 2024 Zoning PPDB White Paper on PPDB implementation across 34 provinces (Napitupulu, 2024).

This situation illustrates that the implementation of new student admission policies is highly dependent on social, geographic, and infrastructure contexts. In Jambi City, for instance, Ombudsman, an independent public service oversight body, identified cases of maladministration (Press Release, Ombudsman RI representative Jambi, 2024). In response, the Jambi Provincial and City implementation of the SPMB policy established a complaints focal point and strengthened transparency in its implementation through a digital registration system. The SPMB policy accommodates four admission pathways: domicile, achievement, affirmative action, and transfer.

To further clarify the distinctions between the PPDB and SPMB policies, the following table outlines the comparison of the respective pathways and admission requirements:

Table 1. Pathways for new elementary and secondary student admissions based on the PPDB policy

New student admission policy	Track	Explanation
PPDB	Zoning	The zoning pathway is designed for prospective students residing within the zoning area determined by the regional government.
	Achievement	The achievement path is based on the students' report card accompanied by a letter certifying the student's grade ranking from the school of origin and/or achievements in academic and non-academic fields.
	Affirmation	The affirmation pathway is intended for prospective students from economically disadvantaged families and students with disabilities, whether residing within or outside the school's designated zoning area.
	Parental Transfer	The parental transfer pathway applies to students whose parents are transferred.

Source: Regulation of the Minister of Education and Culture Number 1 of 2021



In Table 1, the new student admissions during Minister Nadiem Makarim's tenure consisted of four pathways: zoning, achievement, affirmative action, and parental transfer. The four pathways were determined by the admission quotas stipulated in Article 13 of the Regulation of the Minister of Education and Culture Number 1 of 2021, namely:

1. The zoning pathway for elementary schools must cover at least 70% of total capacity, while for junior high schools and senior high schools, it must cover at least 50%.
2. The affirmative action pathway accounts for 15% of capacity.
3. The parental transfer pathway accounts for 5% of capacity.
4. The achievement pathway is not explicitly regulated in this provision.

Based on this regulation, each district/city is required to develop technical guidelines for implementing the new student admissions policy.

Table 2. Pathways for new elementary and secondary student admission based on SPMB policy

New student admission policy	Track	Explanation
SPMB	Domicile	The domicile pathway is designated for prospective students residing within the admission area determined by the regional government.
	Achievement	The achievement pathway is intended for prospective students with accomplishments in academic and/or non-academic fields.
	Affirmation	The Affirmation Pathway is designated for prospective students from economically disadvantaged families and for students with disabilities.
	Mutation	The mutation pathway is intended for prospective students who changed domicile due to parental or guardian job transfer, as well as children of teachers registering at the educational unit where their parents teach.

Source: Regulation of the Minister of Primary and Secondary Education Number 3 of 2025.

Table 2 describes that the new students' admission during the tenure of Minister Abdul Mu'ti consisted of four admission pathways, namely, the domicile, achievements, affirmations, and mutation, with quota provisions as outlined in Article 30, namely:

- 1) The domicile pathway covers at least 70% of elementary school capacity, at least 40% of junior high school, and at least 30% of senior high school capacity.
- 2) The affirmation pathway covers at least 15% of elementary school capacity, at least 20% of the capacity of the junior high school education unit, and at least 30% of senior high school capacity.
- 3) The achievement pathway covers at least 25% of junior high school capacity and 30% of senior high school capacity.
- 4) The mutation pathway accounts for a maximum of 5% of the capacity of elementary, junior high schools, and senior high schools.

Structurally, the SPMB policy appears to be a continuation of the PPDB policy. However, the differences in terminology and quota allocation raise the critical question of whether the policy shift from PPDB to SPMB constitutes substantive reform or merely rhetorical changes that reframe terminology without producing meaningful impacts on access to quality education. Rhetoric originates from the Greek word *rhetorike*, meaning the art of speaking or eloquence. According to Aristotle (2018), rhetoric is both the art and science of using language to influence, entertain, or persuade audiences, comprising three core elements: ethos, pathos, and logos. Syamsudin and Kuswanjono (2014) state that rhetoric is the art of impressively using words, both orally and in writing. Saputra (2024: 5) defines rhetoric as the art or science of



effective communication to influence audiences through persuasive language. Furthermore, Saputra (2024) emphasizes that the rhetoric can be applied through speeches, writing, advertisements, podcasts, debates, and other forms of communication that allow the message sender structure the message discourse effectively according to specific needs.

Policy can be understood as both a text and a discourse (Ball, 2012) and as a planned program embodying particular goals, values, and practices that the government aims to achieve (Laswell, 1951). Dunn (2019) defines policy as a deliberate pattern of actions undertaken by public actors to address public problems. Latief and Samsuddin (2022) state that policy is a written rule that provides general directives regarding scope determination by setting boundaries and guidance for implementers, serving as a benchmark for actions, regulating behavior in pursuit of objectives, and establishing a new order originating from official decisions.

Concerning policy rhetoric, Majone (1989) argues that the policy process inherently involves rhetoric in decision-making. Fischer and Forester (1993) maintain that policies are formed through discourse, narrative, and political rhetoric. Policymaking employs logical appeals (logos), ethical appeals (ethos), and emotional appeals (pathos) to build legitimacy (Gittweis, 2016). Policy is a political arena imbued with rhetoric, requiring rhetorical strategies to shape meaning and convince the public (Stone, 2012; Green & Zinke, 1993).

Policy rhetoric represents one dimension in policy formulation, expressed through the narratives that build legitimacy, guide opinion, and create the impression of responsiveness and problem-solving orientation. As Majone (1989) asserts, policy is not only a rational decision based on evidence but also a persuasive argument emerging from rhetorical interactions among various actors involved in policy making (Fischer & Forester, 1993).

In the context of the transformation from the PPDB policy to the SPMB policy, rhetoric helps determine whether changes genuinely address substantive issues or function merely as communication strategies to manage public perception. If changes focus primarily on new terms and labels without significantly altering the objectives, instruments, and impacts, the policy is likely rhetorical rather than substantive.

In the Indonesian Dictionary, the term substantive is defined as relating to the essence or core of an issue. Substantive policy thus refers to a typology of policies emphasizing societal needs and addressing root problems. Anderson (2006) characterizes substantive policy as prioritizing issues essential to society, while Dye (2002) explains that its content is oriented toward solving pressing public problems.

According to Howlett and Ramesh (2003), substantive policy change is marked by shifts in content and orientation rather than by mere technical adjustments or terminological replacements. They identify three levels of policy change, that is, instrumental (tools), structural (institutional), and substantial (core policy). Similarly, Hall (1993) categorizes policy change into three levels, with substantive change occurring at the third level, namely changes in the policy paradigm, including how the problems are defined, objectives are selected, and solutions are designed.

Furthermore, Sabatier and Smith (1993), through the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), emphasize that a policy achieves substantive change when there is a shift in the core beliefs of policy actors, such as moving from a geographic zoning orientation to a broader social justice approach. Without this shift in foundational values, policy change tends to remain cosmetic or symbolic. In this study, this framework is employed to assess empirically whether the SPMB policy in Jambi City introduces fairer and more effective values and strategies or merely repackages the PPDB policy while maintaining its existing structure and orientation. Based on the above discussion, the central question is whether the policy change from PPDB to SPMB represents rhetoric or substantive reform. Accordingly, this research aims to analyze the transformation from PPDB to SPMB in terms of policy rhetoric versus substance.



RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to examine the transformation of the PPDB policy into SPMB as either a rhetoric or substantive policy, based on empirical data at the Junior High School (JHS) level in Jambi City. The qualitative approach was chosen because it was considered the most appropriate method for exploring in depth the experiences of policy implementers and for understanding the dynamics of policy implementation in a unique local context. Data were collected through three main techniques, namely direct observation of the policy implementation process in schools, in-depth interviews with various stakeholders directly involved in policy implementation, and document analysis, including a review of the Technical Instructions for PPDB policy implementation, ministerial regulations related to new student admissions, and other supporting documents relevant to the policy context. Informants were selected purposively, based on their direct involvement in the implementation of PPDB and SPMB policies in Jambi City.

The primary informants consisted of two junior high school principals in Jambi City, designated as KS1 and KS2, where the number one (1) indicates the first school, and the number two (2) indicates the second school. Additional informants include two SPMB committee members, identified as P1 and P2, where the numbers correspond to the first and second schools, respectively. Furthermore, two school operators responsible for managing new student registration were involved, coded as O1 and O2, with O1 representing the operator from the first school and O2 representing the operator from the second school.

Informants were selected by considering the diverse perspectives of policy implementers and service recipients, thereby providing comprehensive data on the transformation of the new student admission policy from PPDB to SPMB, whether rhetorical or substantive. Data collection was conducted from June 23 to 26, 2025, at several junior high schools in Jambi City, where both PPDB and SPMB were implemented. Thematic analysis was employed to identify key themes emerging from observations, interviews, and documents. This analysis sought to reveal patterns of similarities and differences in the experiences of implementers, as well as to uncover the strengths and weaknesses of implementing both policies in the local context. The analytical process was conducted iteratively through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Based on observations at two public junior high schools in Jambi City, SPMB policy has been implemented in accordance with the regulations set out in the Regulation of the Minister of Primary and Secondary Education No. 3 of 2025. Registration is conducted through a digital application for new student admission, which operates across four channels: domicile, achievement, affirmation, and mutation. Observations indicated that the admission process generally proceeded smoothly, with only a small number of parents of prospective students visiting the schools to seek clarification regarding admission procedures.

During these observations, it was noted that the operators of the new student admission application engaged directly with parents of prospective students, particularly when applications were delayed due to verification issues. Common problems included errors in data entry by applicants and mismatches between the name of the head of the household listed on the family card and the students' birth certificate.

Interviews with two state junior high school principals in Jambi City further revealed differences in the interpretation of new students' admission policies at the provincial and municipal levels, both under the PPDB and SPMB policies. At the state of the junior high school level, however, these differences were not considered significant. Informant KS1 emphasized that:



"The PPDB policy and SPMB policies in relation to the zoning and domicile pathways show no significant differences at the junior high school level because their implementation resembles a mosquito coil pattern; students residing closest to the school are accepted first, followed by those farther away. In this domicile pathway, eligibility is verified with a family card with a minimum issuance of at least one year. However, at the senior high school level, differences arise, as under the PPDB policy, the zoning pathway is divided into three parts with different percentage allocations, which has led to various problems in new student admissions. In contrast, under the SPMB policy, the domicile pathway has been implemented in a manner similar to a mosquito coil pattern."

In addition, KS 1 explained the differences between PPDB and SPMB policies in another pathway, namely the mutation pathway:

"In the PPDB policy, the mutation pathway was referred to as the parental moving pathway, while in the SPMB policy, it is called mutation pathways, with two notable changes. First, in the SPMB policy, the timeframe was extended – if a parental transfer family card was unavailable within one year, a domicile certificate from the sub-district was sufficient. Second, a special mutation pathway was added, allowing children to be admitted to the school where the parents work."

Both KS1 and KS2 stated that the PPDB and SPMB policies provided a more comfortable and secure environment for them as school principals in the admission process. KS1 stated that:

"For us in junior high school, the two policies are not significantly different; there are only a few changes in terminology and the addition of required document attachments."

KS2 expressed a similar view, stating that:

"The PPDB and SPMB policies are essentially the same; previously the term 'student' was used, and now the term 'pupil' is applied."

The new student admissions committees from both junior high schools in Jambi City also stated that there was no significant difference between the PPDB and SPMB policies in their implementation at the junior high schools. Overall, the systems functioned the same, with only minor differences in the family card requirements for the domicile pathway, which had to be issued at least one year prior, and the addition of provisions for mutation pathways for teachers and education staff with children, allowing them to enroll in the school where they were assigned even if their domicile was not within the school's designated area. As noted by P1:

"As the committee member for new student admissions last year during the PPDB policy period and this year under the SPMB policy period, I observed no major differences. Everything is managed through the same new student admissions system, where prospective students register and submit the required documents online. The only difference we noticed was in the specific document requirements for each pathway."

The interviews with school operators in the new student admissions process under both the PPDB and the SPMB policies at the junior high school level showed no significant difference. One of the operators (O2) stated:

"From both the PPDB and SPMB policies, there are no major difficulties for us as operators when verifying prospective student registrations. If Family Card documents that are less than one year old and do not clearly show the relationship between prospective students and the head of the household listed, we contact the applicant using the phone number provided and request them to register with the corrected document."

Discussion

The transformation from PPDB to SPMB policies in Jambi City shows that despite changes in terminology and technical regulations, the essence of the policies implemented has not undergone a profound substantive shift. Based on observations, interviews, and document analysis, the implementation of both policies at the junior high school level tends to display similarities in principles, procedures, and constraints.



Theoretically, Majone (1989) argues that rhetoric in policy functions as an instrument to build legitimacy and public acceptance of change. In this context, the shift in terminology from PPDB to SPMB along with the simplification of the admissions process reflects more on the communication strategy rather than a substantive policy changes. Field implementers, including principals, committee members, and school operators, consistently reported that no fundamental differences were observed in practices, apart from administrative and terminology adjustments.

This aligns with Hall's (1993) framework, which states that substantive policy changes require a paradigm shift in defining problems, setting policy objectives, and determining strategies for resolution. In the case of SPMB, there has been no such paradigm shift in addressing the structural roots of inequality in educational access and quality. The observed changes remain at the first level of adjustment (instrumental), not at the paradigmatic level of reform.

Howlett and Ramesh (2003) further emphasize that substantive policy changes should go beyond altering technical procedures by restructuring objectives and orientation. Although the SPMB policy introduced a more flexible mutation pathway and expanded the affirmative action quotas at the high school level, these adjustments do not appear to significantly address the structural inequalities that had been a major criticism of the PPDB policy.

From a rhetorical perspective, however, the change has been relatively successful in shaping public perception that the system had improved. This aligns with Stone's (2012) argument that many policy changes rely on symbolic strategies to manage public expectations and reduce resistance. The terminology change from student to pupil and the rebranding of the new student admission as SPMB can be seen as pragmatic communication strategies rather than substantive reforms.

Nevertheless, several positive aspects of the SPMB should be acknowledge, such as the digitalization of the registration process, greater mutation flexibility for teachers ease of transfer for teachers, and the expansion of affirmative action and achievement quotas at the high school level. However, these improvements remain largely administrative and short-term. A longitudinal study is required to assess whether such changes contribute meaningfully to reducing inequities in educational distribution and improving access to different regions.

In sum, based on empirical findings and theoretical perspectives, the transformation from PPDB to SPMB in Jambi City can be categorized as a rhetorical rather than substantive policy change. While it has success in rebranding and improving administrative mechanisms, it has not adequately addressed the fundamental issue of disparities in educational access and quality. Therefore, a more comprehensive policy reformulation is needed, one that engages regional policy makers and pays closer attention to the local context.

CONCLUSION

The transformation of the new student admission policy from PPDB to SPMB in Jambi City demonstrates that the changes introduced are more rhetorical than substantive. Variation in terminology, the formulation of admission pathways, and adjustments to quota percentages have not been accompanied by a paradigm shift capable of addressing the root causes of inequality in educational access and quality.

Empirical findings from field observations, interviews, and document analysis reveal that policy implementers, school principals, committees, and operators do not perceive significant differences between the two policies, apart from administrative requirements. This highlights that the transformation has been more prominent in symbolic communication and public messaging rather than the substance of educational policy reform.

Nevertheless, the SPMB policy has introduced certain improvements, such as the digitization of the registration process, flexibility in mutation pathways for teachers' children, and an increase in affirmative action and merit-based quotas at the high school level. While

these adjustments provide administrative advantages, they remain insufficient to resolve the structural challenges of educational equity.

Therefore, a more comprehensive policy reformulation is necessary, one that is rooted in local contexts and actively involves local education stakeholders. Such reformulation should prioritize equitable access, strengthen the quality of educational institutions, and ensure stricter oversight to curb irregular practices in new student admission. Only through such substantive changes can the transformation of new student admission policies go beyond rhetorical shifts and become an effective instrument for enhancing educational equity in Indonesia.

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Author (s):

* Suryawahyuni Latief (Corresponding Author)

Department of Government Science, Faculty of social and political sciences,
Universitas Nurdin Hamzah,

Jl. Kolonel Abunjani Rt 25, Jambi 36124, Indonesia

Email: suryawahyunilatief@unh.ac.id

Elza Eka Putri

Islamic Islamic Religious Education Study Program, Faculty of Tarbiyah,
Universitas Islam Sarolangun,

Jalan Lintas Sumatera KM. 18, Sarolangun, Jambi 37481, Indonesia

Email: elzaekaputri@gmail.com

Khairan

Islamic Islamic Religious Education Study Program, Faculty of Tarbiyah,
Universitas Islam Sarolangun,

Jalan Lintas Sumatera KM. 18, Sarolangun, Jambi 37481, Indonesia

Email: khairan.eska@gmail.com

Rangsan Thepmondhari

Public Sector Development office of the Vocational Education Commission,
319 Ratchadamnoen Nok Rd, Dusit District, Bangkok 10300, Thailand

Email: rangsanthepmondhiri@gmail.com

Wu Hui Hua

Lu Jiang Elementary School,

Luzhou District, New Taipei City, Taiwan

Email: wuhuihua5381@gmail.com

