

## Jurnal Penelitian Ilmu Pendidikan

Volume 18, Nomor 1, 69 – 76, 2025

# Interpreting justice in the new student admission system: A Gadamerian hermeneutic analysis

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#### **Abstract**

This article examines how justice is articulated and negotiated in Indonesia's the school admission selection system through a Gadamerian hermeneutic lens. Using qualitative hermeneutic analysis of policy documents and stakeholder perspectives, the study interprets how zoning, affirmative pathways, and merit-based selection shape understandings of distributive justice, recognition, and educational quality. The analysis shows that the school admission selection system reduces some overt forms of discrimination yet generates new grey zones, opportunities for document manipulation, and unequal school quality, so that formal equality of access does not ensure substantive justice. Justice in the school admission selection system emerges as a dynamic process in which meanings differ across social, economic, and cultural positions and must be continually renegotiated through dialogue. The article argues that policy makers and school communities need participatory, context sensitive implementation, combining equal access, recognition of diversity, and long-term improvement of school quality to realise more just admission practices. These insights inform future admission reforms.

Keywords: Gadamerian hermeneutics, meaning, justice, student admission

**How to Cite (APA)**: Diniati, R., & Sayekti, H., R. (2025). Interpreting justice in the new student admission system: A Gadamerian hermeneutic analysis. *Jurnal Penelitian Ilmu Pendidikan*, 18(1), 69 - 76. doi: https://doi.org/10.21831/jpip.v18i1.87373

Received 13-12-2024; Received in revised from 01-01-2025; Accepted 02-02-2025

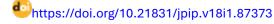
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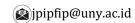


#### **INTRODUCTION**

Education stands as one of the most essential foundations for national development, and in Indonesia it is constitutionally recognized as a fundamental human right. The 1945 Constitution explicitly states that "every citizen has the right to education," thereby mandating the state to guarantee access to quality education for all. Furthermore, the Preamble underscores the national aspiration "to educate the life of the nation," affirming that expanding equitable educational opportunities is a central duty of the state. These constitutional commitments are reinforced by Law No. 20 of 2003, which requires the national education system to uphold democratic, equitable, and non-discriminatory principles while respecting human rights, cultural values, and national diversity. The philosophical foundation of this mandate is reflected in the fifth principle of Pancasila, "Social justice for all Indonesian people," which emphasizes that educational justice is inseparable from the broader pursuit of social justice. Equitable and high-quality education is thus not merely a policy aspiration but a constitutional and philosophical obligation.

To translate these normative mandates into practice, the government has implemented various educational policies, one of the most significant being the New Student Admission





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System. Under Permendikbud No. 1 of 2021, new student admission system was reorganized to promote non-discriminatory access and more equal distribution of students across schools. The regulation delineated admission quotas into four major pathways: zoning (50%), affirmative action (15%), duty transfer (5%), and academic achievement (30%). The zoning mechanism was designed to enhance equity by prioritizing students living near a school, aiming to reduce long-standing disparities between highly preferred schools and those with lower demand (Raharjo et al., 2020). In principle, zoning was expected to equalize access to educational quality and reduce concentration of students in a few elite schools. However, the policy's implementation across Indonesia has shown mixed outcomes.

Although the zoning system aimed to strengthen equity in educational access, it has been widely criticized for failing to achieve its intended objectives. Research suggests that zoning has not fully resolved systemic inequalities in educational quality, particularly between urban and rural areas (Chotimah et al., 2023). Differences in teacher competence, school infrastructure, and learning resources persist and continue to shape educational outcomes. In some contexts, the zoning system has reportedly decreased student motivation due to limited choice of schools and the perception of being "forced" into nearby institutions that may not meet their academic aspirations. Furthermore, the system has resulted in imbalanced student distribution: certain schools become overcrowded while others suffer from declining enrollment, sometimes facing the risk of closure (Winarti et al., 2023). These contradictions undermine the principle of educational justice and highlight the gap between policy design and field implementation.

Another major challenge arises from administrative manipulation. Concerns about falsified residential documents, manipulated academic records, and misrepresented socioeconomic information have cast doubt on the integrity of the new student admission system. Such fraudulent practices not only distort fairness but also disadvantage students who genuinely qualify for specific pathways. Public perception further complicates the situation: many parents continue to hold strong preferences for certain "superior" schools, reinforcing historical hierarchies within the education system. Despite zoning's intention to distribute students more evenly, these social perceptions remain influential and contribute to structural inequalities.

In response to these persistent criticisms and implementation challenges, the Indonesian government introduced a significant policy transformation as the school admission selection system, regulated under Permendikdasmen No. 3 of 2025. This new system represents a shift from a primarily zoning-based approach toward one that integrates equal access with merit-based evaluation. The school admission selection system aims to broaden pathways for student admission by combining domicile considerations with assessments of academic achievement and talents (Mareta et al., 2021; Nurlailiyah, 2022; Safarah & Wibowo, 2018). Unlike the zoning system, which relied heavily on geographic proximity, the school admission selection system adopts a more holistic perspective on student potential. The quota distribution allocates 30% each for the domicile pathway, achievement pathway, and affirmation pathway, while the duty transfer pathway remains at 5% (Chotimah et al., 2023). This structure is intended to foster both equitable access and sustained educational quality.

The emergence of the school admission selection system is widely recognized as a policy response to public concerns that zoning alone was insufficient to address inequality and, in some cases, inadvertently reinforced it (Chotimah et al., 2023; Sabrina & Ishak, 2019). By integrating academic potential and student talents into the admission criteria, the school admission selection system seeks to provide fairer opportunities, especially for high-achieving students or those with special skills who were previously constrained by zoning boundaries. Furthermore, the school admission selection system underscores the importance of local government involvement. District and municipal administrations are required to assess school capacity, manage student distribution, and ensure transparent implementation (Raharjo et al., 2020; Winarti et al., 2023). Clear communication with the public, accountability in the selection process, and effective coordination among educational stakeholders are key to the system's

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success. Digital information systems and communication technologies are also central to this reform, helping reduce opportunities for fraud and ensuring that the admission process remains transparent and verifiable.

Despite these policy improvements, the meaning of "justice" in education remains deeply contested and context-dependent. The diversity of Indonesian society spanning variations in regional development, cultural traditions, socioeconomic conditions, and historical experiences requires a nuanced interpretation of educational justice. In this context, the philosophical perspective of Hans-Georg Gadamer provides a valuable lens for interpreting justice within education policy. Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics emphasizes that understanding is not a purely objective or technical process but a dynamic dialogue between text and context, shaped by historical and cultural horizons. For Gadamer, interpretation involves the fusion of horizons between the interpreter and the text, meaning that the values, assumptions, and experiences of stakeholders inevitably influence their understanding.

Applied to New Student Admission System and the school admission selection system, Gadamerian hermeneutics encourages viewing justice not as a fixed universal standard but as a concept negotiated within specific socio-historical conditions (Fatah, 2023). Evaluating fairness in admission policies thus requires examining how different stakeholders students, parents, teachers, school administrators, and policymakers understand justice based on their own horizons of experience (Anam & Rodiyah, 2024). For example, a parent living in a densely populated urban area may interpret fairness differently from a student in a rural region with limited school options. Policymakers may view justice through administrative efficiency, while teachers may perceive it through classroom dynamics and academic readiness. Gadamerian hermeneutics highlights these diverse interpretations and underscores the importance of dialogue in reconciling them.

In analyzing the the school admission selection system policy, Gadamer's framework also requires attention to the long historical trajectory of student admission systems in Indonesia, from early post-independence structures to the zoning-based era and the current domicile-merit hybrid model (Anam & Rodiyah, 2024; Raharjo et al., 2020; Winarti et al., 2023). This historical awareness challenges technocratic assumptions that policy outcomes are solely determined by formal regulations. Instead, it brings to light the broader social, political, and cultural dynamics that shape how policies are understood, implemented, and contested. Gadamerian hermeneutics thus enables a more critical and reflective evaluation of educational justice, revealing tensions that may otherwise remain obscured behind administrative procedures.

Furthermore, this interpretive perspective contributes to conflict mitigation by enabling stakeholders to engage in deep dialogue about their differing expectations and experiences of fairness. As Fatah (2023) argues, dialog grounded in hermeneutic reflection opens avenues for shared understanding, which is crucial for addressing social tensions arising from policy implementation. Evaluating educational programs through this lens requires active participation from governments, educators, communities, and families, ensuring that interpretations of justice reflect collective aspirations rather than top-down directives (Herdha et al., 2024). Through these inclusive interpretive practices, educational justice becomes a lived, evolving, and contextually responsive value.

#### **METHODS**

This study employs Gadamerian philosophical hermeneutics within a qualitative interpretive approach. The method focuses on developing a deep understanding of Permendikdasmen Number 3 of 2025 by interpreting it as a policy text situated within the historical evolution of student admission regulations in Indonesia. The analysis includes the transition from the zoning system regulated by Permendikbud Number 1 of 2021 to the domicile-based the school admission selection system model. Interpreting these regulatory shifts requires understanding the social and political circumstances that shaped them, consistent with

the hermeneutic emphasis on historical context.

The study is grounded in ontological and epistemological assumptions of hermeneutics. Ontologically, educational policy is understood as a historically embedded construct whose meaning emerges through interpretation. Epistemologically, the research relies on the hermeneutic circle, which involves continuous movement between parts and whole, between the text and its context, and between the researcher's horizon and the historical horizon of the policy. Interpretation is understood as dialogical rather than mechanical. The hermeneutic process centers on three elements: the policy text, the historical transformation of new student admission system to the school admission selection system, and the researcher's prejudice. Prejudice, in Gadamer's formulation, refers to pre-understandings and values that shape interpretation. Rather than eliminating prejudice, the researcher engages with it reflectively to enable deeper understanding (Hasanah, 2017). Meaning therefore emerges through interaction between interpreter and text, not solely from the author's intention. The study also incorporates secondary data, including stakeholder interview summaries, to expand the interpretive horizon. These sources help enrich the analysis without serving as positivistic evidence. As noted by Interpretation involves reconstructing and producing meaning, allowing the text to remain open to new understandings. The Gadamerian hermeneutics workflow according to Hasanah shows in figure 1.

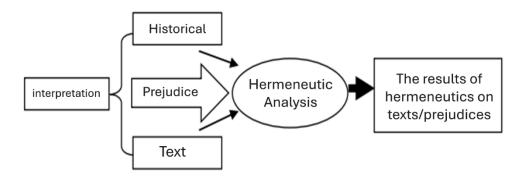


Figure 1. Gadamerian hermeneutics flowchart (Hasanah, 2017)

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **Results**

The school admission selection system emerged in response to various longstanding problems in previous admission mechanisms, including discrimination, nepotism, and grade manipulation (Jatmiko & Putra, 2022). The zoning policy, which serves as the central feature of the school admission selection system, was introduced to equalize access to education and to dismantle the hierarchy of favorite schools that have often been considered as a structural source of inequality. However, the implementation of zoning has also produced new challenges, such as the emergence of areas of ambiguous classification, the manipulation of family registration documents, and the declining quality of several schools due to limited resources and reduced interest from high achieving students (Winarti et al., 2023). These realities show that justice within the school admission selection system is not only formal but also substantive. The active involvement of the entire school community, including students, teachers, parents, and the wider society, is essential for cultivating a culture that respects diversity and rejects discrimination (Chairu et al., 2023).

From a Gadamerian hermeneutic perspective, the understanding of justice is not a static concept. Instead, it is a dialogical process that unfolds continuously through the interaction between the policy text and the sociocultural context in which it operates. The hermeneutic circle illustrates that interpreting a policy such as the school admission selection system involves

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movement between parts and wholes, as well as between the preconceptions of interpreters and the meanings that emerge through engagement. Within the school admission selection system, hermeneutic engagement demonstrates that understandings of justice are shaped by the social, economic, and cultural backgrounds of stakeholders. A student from an affluent family may view zoning as a restriction on the right to choose the best school, while a student from a low income family may see it as an opportunity to gain better access to education. These contrasting perspectives indicate that justice in the school admission selection system cannot be understood from a single standpoint. Instead, it must be negotiated through ongoing dialogue and critical reflection.

Three main dimensions of educational justice emerge from this hermeneutic understanding. First, distributive justice emphasizes equitable access to facilities and physical opportunities to attend school. The school admission selection system seeks to ensure that learners across different regions receive comparable access to school placement. This form of justice focuses on the proportional allocation of educational resources. Second, justice as recognition prioritizes acknowledging the diversity of students backgrounds, talents, and interests. Through performance based and potential based selection pathways, the school admission selection system recognizes the uniqueness of each learner and provides opportunities for development based on fair competition. Third, quality justice requires that every school uphold meritocracy, academic standards, and institutional efficiency, all of which contribute to an equitable educational environment (Harefa & Lase, 2024). Through the hermeneutic circle, interpretations of justice are continually renewed by incorporating societal experiences, cultural values, and reflections on policy implementation. Thus, justice in the school admission selection system is a dynamic and contextual process.

Social justice asserts that all individuals must have equal access to education. Meritocracy refers to a system in which opportunities are granted on the basis of ability or achievement rather than wealth or social origin (Sabani et al., 2024). Rawls (1971) explains that justice in education requires the provision of equal opportunities for every individual to develop without discrimination. This principle forms the philosophical foundation of the school admission selection system in ensuring that every child has the right to quality education in an equitable setting. Similarly, Nussbaum (2011) highlights the need for equal opportunities for all students to develop the basic competencies necessary to participate fully in social life. Through the capabilities approach, the school admission selection system is expected to address the diverse needs of students and to provide appropriate support for maximizing their potential.

From a Gadamerian perspective, the understanding of justice within the school admission selection system cannot be separated from the principle of equal opportunity. Gadamer argues that our concept of justice is shaped through the interaction between policy and public interpretation. The domicile based zoning system represents the government's effort to achieve equal access by ensuring that all children, regardless of socioeconomic background, can attend schools near their homes. However, interpretations differ. The government views zoning as an instrument of distributive justice, as described by (Rawls, 1971), with the aim of reducing educational disparities. Meanwhile, many parents from more privileged social groups perceive zoning as unfair because it appears to disregard merit and limits school choice. According to Gadamer, this divergence is a natural aspect of the process through which the meaning of justice is continually debated and reshaped through social interaction.

Hermeneutic analysis also reveals that equal opportunity in the school admission selection system is not merely a technical issue such as proximity to school. Rather, it is linked to deeper structural inequalities. Significant disparities in school quality mean that formal equality of access, where all students may enroll, does not guarantee substantive justice, which refers to actual equality in experience and outcomes as explained by (Sen, 2009). Gadamer's concept of historical consciousness is relevant here. Present educational inequalities reflect historical injustices that must be considered in the interpretation of the school admission

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selection system. Without efforts to improve teacher quality, school infrastructure, and resource distribution, claims of equal access may remain superficial.

These findings support the argument that justice as equal opportunity must be understood as an ongoing process. If the school admission selection system is implemented fully, continuous evaluation is required based on local conditions, such as differences between urban density and rural remoteness, as well as community feedback. Gadamerian hermeneutics teaches that the meaning of justice emerges through sustained dialogue among policymakers, schools, parents, and students. Therefore, the school admission selection system cannot rely solely on technical regulations and must also build participatory mechanisms to respond to the complex meanings of justice in practice.

#### **Justice as Recognition of Differences**

The principle of justice that emphasizes acknowledging differences is increasingly relevant in Indonesia's diverse educational environment. Drawing on Gadamer's concept of the horizon of understanding, justice must reflect awareness and acceptance of students diverse backgrounds, including economic status, geographic context, cultural heritage, and varying abilities. Affirmative policies within the school admission selection system, such as quotas for students from low income families, students with disabilities, and students from remote regions, illustrate efforts to achieve meaningful justice by addressing diverse needs rather than focusing solely on formal equality (Fraser, 1995).

Gadamerian analysis highlights tensions between the universal nature of national education policies and the particular needs of local communities. Uniform zoning rules often fail to account for fundamental differences between urban and rural areas. The concept of the fusion of horizons is particularly relevant here. A just policy must emerge from dialogue between the broad horizon of policymakers and the localized horizon of community members who understand the contextual reality of their region. In several regions, successful implementation of the school admission selection system has occurred when local authorities exercise flexibility in interpreting national regulations so that they align with local circumstances.

Findings also show that recognizing diversity within student admissions requires more than formal affirmative programs. It demands structural changes within the education system as a whole. Following Gadamer, this process represents a shift in the horizon of understanding and requires schools, teachers, and communities to rebuild their awareness of justice in a way that supports all groups. Practical initiatives such as inclusive teacher training, adaptive curricula, and guidance programs for disadvantaged students illustrate concrete applications of recognition based justice that go beyond the symbolic level.

#### **Conflicts of Meaning Arising from Differing Viewpoints**

Differences in interpreting justice within the school admission selection system arise because stakeholders hold varied social, economic, cultural, and experiential backgrounds. Students from affluent families, who possess financial resources and access to information, tend to interpret justice as the freedom to choose high quality schools without zoning restrictions. In contrast, students from low income families view zoning as an affirmative mechanism that provides equal opportunities for access to education. This divergence reflects competing interests in the school admission selection system implementation and illustrates that justice is not a universally agreed concept but is tied closely to social and economic position (Anam & Rodiyah, 2024). Additional complexities also influence perceptions. Many parents associate favorite schools with higher quality, which motivates them to pursue admission to specific schools even though zoning seeks fairness. Fierce competition can encourage unethical practices such as manipulating domicile data, harming other students and undermining justice. Cultural differences also shape interpretations. Communities with collectivist values may support equity oriented policies such as zoning, while communities with more individualistic leanings prioritize competition and personal achievement.

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Previous educational experiences further influence how justice in the school admission selection system is understood. Different regions prioritize different concerns. Rural regions with limited facilities prioritize distributional fairness, while urban regions emphasize competition and academic excellence. Through dialogue and critical reflection as recommended in Gadamerian hermeneutics, differing perspectives can be reconciled to produce more comprehensive and inclusive interpretations of justice. These conflicts highlight the complexity of Indonesia's diverse society and underscore that justice within the school admission selection system is the outcome of negotiation among multiple values and interests. Gadamerian hermeneutics emphasizes continuous dialogue as essential for aligning interpretations, ensuring that policy implementation remains effective and socially accepted. Justice in the school admission selection system is therefore understood as a multidimensional issue that involves equal access, educational quality, and recognition of diversity (Harefa & Lase, 2024). The hermeneutic framework thus provides a meaningful way to understand how justice is interpreted and negotiated within the implementation of the school admission selection system.

#### CONCLUSION

The analysis demonstrates that justice within the New Student Admission System is not a fixed or uniform principle, but an interpretive and context dependent process shaped by the diverse social, economic, and cultural positions of stakeholders. Although the school admission selection system and zoning policies aim to reduce discrimination and expand access, the findings indicate that formal equality alone cannot resolve longstanding structural disparities across schools. Through a Gadamerian hermeneutic lens, justice is revealed as a continuous dialogue between policy intentions and lived realities, in which meanings evolve through reflection, negotiation, and the fusion of different horizons of understanding. The study concludes that a more substantive form of justice in the school admission selection system requires three commitments. First, ensuring equitable access by addressing persistent inequalities in school quality and resources. Second, recognizing student diversity through flexible and context sensitive admission mechanisms. Third, fostering sustained dialogue among policymakers, schools, parents, and communities so that the interpretation and practice of justice remain responsive to local conditions. Strengthening these dimensions can support a fairer and more inclusive admission system that aligns with broader educational equity goals.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

The author would like to express his appreciation and gratitude to Mr. Agus Sembodo, Mr. Septiyan Angga Saputra, and Mr. Sumarno for their contributions as sources during data collection and analysis.

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