

Exploring the Politics of Expertise: The Indonesian Teachers' Union and Education Policy, 2005-2020

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Abstract

Research on education politics often uses interest group pressure to explain the policy influence of teachers' organizations. While acknowledging the power teachers' unions have to articulate interests and shape labor policy, we explore how a less-studied variable—expertise (or the credibility of the claims they make to expertise)—shapes the policy process. In many low- and middle-income countries, teacher organizations struggle to demonstrate policy expertise and professional competence in core areas related to teaching and learning. Focusing on Indonesia from 2005-2020, we examine how the largest teachers' organization influenced labor policy but was marginal in debates about professional standards, training, and evaluation due to its limited technical capacity and struggles to propose viable policy alternatives. Expertise is a critical policy input, and it deserves more attention in the education politics subfield. It is central for setting the agenda for policies to improve the quality of education and it has normative value for improving policy design overall.



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1. Introduction

Scholars who analyze the influence of teachers on education policy tend to focus on interest group pressure, specifically the ability of teachers' unions to advocate for their own narrow economic interests ([Moe and Wiborg 2017](#); [Schneider 2022](#)). As large interest groups, teachers' unions undeniably have political clout, and this clout can translate into major policy, regulation, and process victories, usually related to labor issues. At the same time, in many countries teachers' unions are rarely seen as experts on improving the quality of education and often defer to experts on significant swaths of policy related to professional standards, teacher training, and evaluation. If teacher organizations restrict their advocacy to labor issues, they may focus less on developing proposals to improve the education system overall, based on pedagogical and management expertise, classroom experience, and an understanding of how students learn.

While recognizing the critical role that teachers' unions play in influencing teacher labor policy, we introduce a less-studied variable that in some cases hinders the influence of teacher organizations on education policy: expertise. Interest group pressure is a rather blunt instrument; expertise is crucial for understanding how the details of policy are hammered out, designed, and ultimately implemented. Our central claim is that where teachers' unions struggle to claim expertise and have a limited policy agenda on teacher professionalization, their capacity to pressure policy makers may be more attenuated than existing studies acknowledge.

Expertise is a concept that is widely used to analyze politics in policy arenas that demand technical skills, where specialists have authority stemming from scientific knowledge, professional networks, and reputations for competence. Teachers' organizations that cannot successfully engage in policy debates about how to improve the performance and efficacy of the teaching force become widely regarded as unreliable partners who are ill-equipped to support policy implementation. In cases where the overall reputations of teachers' organizations are tarnished due to inadequate professional competence and a dearth of knowledge related to teaching, influence on policy is likely to be limited.

Whether union leaders demonstrate expertise over education policy, specifically policies that affect teachers, beyond labor relations, and how expertise (or a limited capacity to demonstrate expertise) helps to explain cases where teachers' unions have organized ineffective opposition to new policies. Our approach complements research on interest groups, by demonstrating that well-organized groups may have political liabilities when they narrow their policy agenda, while leaving other issue areas to experts.

We demonstrate our argument through a case study of Indonesia and efforts by the oldest and largest teachers' organization, *Persatuan Guru Republik Indonesia* (PGRI), to shape a raft of policies related to teacher professional development, training, and assessment. We do this by highlighting key policies adopted over the last two

decades and examine how PGRI articulated proposals, leveraged knowledge, and made claims related to these policies. PGRI is widely regarded as a powerful interest group. With 2.4 million members and representation across all of Indonesia's 514 cities and districts, it has threatened to protest, lobbied policy makers, and secured high-ranking political appointments in the education bureaucracy ([PB PGRI, 2021](#)).

PGRI prioritized defending labor rights and teacher welfare, espoused Indonesian nationalism, and established strong ties to regional and national politicians. However, PGRI did not set high standards for the teaching profession, nor did it develop specialized knowledge in pedagogy. Because of this focus on political and economic interests rather than expertise, in policy debates related to improving the quality of education, reform-minded officials in the Ministry of Education (MoE)¹ demonstrated expertise, while union leaders struggled to do the same. As a result, PGRI exerted limited influence over reforms to teacher professional development and evaluation.

2. Expertise in education policy

Interest group pressure is the dominant way political scientists analyze education politics. Scholars have closely examined how teachers' unions, as "vested interests," influence policy by pressuring policy makers ([Moe 2015](#)). Teachers' unions have organizational power, such as large memberships, resources from membership dues, and centralized structures; political institutions, such as off-cycle elections and linkages to political parties, may amplify this power ([Anzia 2014](#); [Bruns and Luque 2015](#); [Chambers-Ju 2021](#)). According to this approach, if policy makers go against the interests of unions, aggrieved teachers will mobilize disruptive protests or vote *en masse* for the opposition. Teachers' unions, as well-resourced, organized groups, can push education policy in line with their narrow economic interests, effectively blocking policies that they oppose ([Moe and Wiborg 2017](#); [Schneider 2022](#)).

Interest group politics has clear observable implications. Organized groups with narrowly defined interests (i.e., teachers' unions) win out over less organized ones with diffuse interests (i.e., parents and students). Organized groups control the education agenda and veto policies that they oppose. This approach is used to analyze the politics of obstruction, and to explain why elected leaders maintain policies that are suboptimal from the standpoint of improving learning outcomes. Elected leaders routinely ignore the recommendations of technocrats – and are unwilling to address structural problems that produce poor learning outcomes – because political pressure from teachers results in short-sightedness ([Corrales 1999](#)).

This interest-based approach, however, is not well suited to account for cases of significant shifts in policy, especially those not aligned with the interests of organized teachers. The literature on expertise and policy paradigm ideas has shown that technocrats and other policy experts have influenced policies, notably the shift from Keynesianism to neoliberalism in economics ([Babb 2004, ch. 1](#)). In education,

¹ The name of the ministry that oversees public, non-religious education has changed several times during the timeframe of our study, and thus we use the generic term "Ministry of Education" or MoE to refer to this ministry. Its names have been: Department of National Education (1999-2009), Ministry of National Education (2009-2011), Ministry of Education and Culture (2011-2021), and Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology (2021-present).

international organizations like the World Bank have transformed policy agendas in many aid agencies but also in countries receiving international aid using expertise, scientific knowledge, and research ([Verger et al., 2014](#); Edwards 2016). In the 1970s and 1980s, education policy prioritized increasing enrollment, improving teacher salaries, and creating pay scales to retain teachers and reward them for professional development. In the early 21st century, the “learning crisis” in many countries highlighted how improvements in school enrollment and rules for promoting teachers, based largely on seniority and earned degrees, have not produced better educational outcomes ([World Bank 2018b](#)). The new model focuses on measuring performance, improving learning, and shifting incentives. A key concept is the idea of teacher accountability or aligning professional incentives with measurable learning outputs.

If the politics of interests were more compatible with increasing enrollment and setting rules for the teaching profession, then the politics of expertise came to the fore as policy objectives turned towards promoting learning outcomes and designing interventions to achieve this goal. While the organizational resources associated with interest groups can shape policy decisions, ideational resources, i.e., expertise, can influence other aspects of the policy process. Expertise is socially constructed, and it can take various forms. It is often defined as the characteristics of experts or specialists who have technical or scientific knowledge and the capacity to solve complex problems.

Expertise is often a political attribute of technocrats who claim a certain reputation, status, or authority ([Boswell 2008](#)). Technocrats are regarded as competent and credible problem solvers, and their proposals gain legitimacy because they are backed by scientific research. Expertise can also be defined by the characteristics of professions or networks, since this quality inheres in the social connections among experts who claim a monopoly in knowledge production in a particular domain ([Azocar and Ferree 2016](#)). Claims of expertise have shaped various policy areas, including energy, urban planning, health, and corporate governance, where scientists, planners, doctors, and corporate managers have leveraged specialized knowledge and professional competence to set policy ([Berridge 1997](#); [Alcañiz 2016](#); [Collier and Gruendel 2022](#); [Culpepper 2011](#)). Our working definition of expertise is that it is a political attribute of professional groups that affords them leverage in the policy process based on specialized knowledge.

In education, technocrats claim scientific expertise, often stemming from their status as policy experts with advanced training in research methods and analysis from elite universities. Their policy proposals, which are backed by research and international best-practices, have gained credibility in many countries. Indeed, in Indonesia “innovative technocrats” have become successful politicians who, by relying on expertise, have claimed credit for delivering concrete improvements in the well-being of citizens ([Hatherell 2019, ch. 1](#)).

Teachers, as professional educators, also have policy-relevant knowledge. They may claim expertise rooted in grassroots knowledge, classroom experience, innovations in specific subject areas (e.g., literacy, mathematics), as well as understandings of students, culture, and place. They may develop broad-based networks that connect educators in primary and secondary schools to universities. Building ties to professors

at universities and teacher colleges may help teachers to produce high-profile research and articulate coherent policy proposals, drawing on new practices developed in the classroom and knowledge of how specific groups of students learn.

Teachers' unions can cultivate this kind of expertise, through either the initiative of leaders, research units, or other collaborations. For instance, in some countries, a type of organization called "reform unionism" or "professional unionism" has emerged, with teachers and union leaders working with management to improve teaching ([Kerchner and Koppich 2007, 351-5](#)). In some high-income countries, teacher organizations have embraced high professional standards and proposed innovative pedagogical models, such as in Finland, to establish their authority over the policy process (Furuhagen and Holmén 2021). In low-and middle-income countries, there are fewer instances we know of in which teachers have touted their pedagogical expertise. In the 1980s, Colombian teachers joined forces with university professors and organized the Pedagogical Movement. This movement developed a set of teaching practices that were appropriate for Colombian students and schools, posing a challenge to technocratic reforms proposed in the 1970s ([Gallego 2000](#)). In the cases of both Finland and Colombia, teacher organizations used their experience and knowledge to craft policy proposals and gain political leverage by demonstrating expertise.

In many low-and middle-income countries, however, teacher organizations have not developed or claimed expertise as professional educators because they have not traditionally needed it. When governments prioritized enrollment or promoting a form of civic education to instill a sense of national identity in citizens, there was little expectation of either high standards in schools or high professional standards for teachers. Many teacher organizations were founded in response to irregular labor conditions and low salaries, and these organizations have maintained a narrow focus on these issues. In countries like Mexico where teachers' unions operate like political machines, which "have more organizational resources, generally ally with one political party, and have influence over how members engage in politics" ([Schneider 2022, 85](#)), expertise is unlikely to develop. In these unions, "union leaders have discretion over resources, personnel, and especially individual careers," and therefore promotions are based more on political connections rather than professional merit (*ibid*, 92).

Teachers' unions – if their primary function is as political machines, interest groups, or some hybrid of both – are unlikely to develop the technical capacities to establish professional standards, develop pedagogical or policy expertise, and formulate viable policy proposals. Without these capacities, unions may struggle to respond to new problems in schools related to professionalizing teachers and promoting learning. Unions may be stigmatized by their association with political patronage and corruption, have diminished authority, and play a marginal role in reforms. Analyzing how unions developed, the problems they initially confronted, and the issues they prioritized reveals how they engaged in contemporary policy debates.

We analyze the politics of expertise in education policy, focusing on how professional competence and specialized knowledge enters the policy process. Expertise can set or keep certain proposals off of the policy agenda and bolster certain claims with credibility, if policymakers value expertise. Other proposals that are based

on political expediency and economic interests lack a clear framing. They are unlikely to prevail in a technocratic setting. To understand expertise, then is to look at concrete problems that need to be addressed, how rival proposals are presented, and how argumentation takes place. Such a perspective can help to explain why organized unions have a marginal role in reforms to teacher careers, training, and evaluation.

3. Interviews and research methods

Our analysis centers on examining policy processes from 2005 to 2020 in Indonesia. We examine how PGRI participated in policy decisions and how policy makers responded to PGRI demands. We completed 19 interviews with high-level officials in the MoE, international policy experts, current and former leaders of PGRI, members of parliament, journalists, and other observers – all of whom had first-hand knowledge of policy decisions (see Table 1). We selected interview subjects who had diverse perspectives on PGRI, on the policy process, and on the politics of Indonesia. Interviews were conducted in late 2020 and early 2021, over video or phone due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Table 1: Interview respondents

Position	Titles	Number
Regional education officials	Local government leadership Local district education office staff	4
National education officials	Directors of the bureaus in MoE	6
National PGRI officials	High-ranking PGRI official Former PGRI leaders	3
Other experts	Former members of parliament (DPR) Journalists Education policy experts	6

Most interviews were conducted in Indonesian; only a few were in English. Interviews were recorded and then inputted notes into a structured notes template in English. Our protocols focused on semi-structured questions that we modified depending on the position, experience, and roles of each respondent. We asked respondents to describe PGRI’s role in politics, its influence on policy, and the significance of specific education laws and policies. Through interviews, we obtained a detailed account of the history of PGRI, the development of education policy in Indonesia, the role PGRI played in policy decisions and implementation, and how policy makers responded to union demands.

We discovered through interviews that both government officials and leaders of PGRI mentioned words related to expertise when describing education politics. In the interview notes, there was a clear pattern of language that indicated efforts to claim expertise. We compared the language of MoE reformers and PGRI leaders and coded the interviews based on key words that connected to core concepts. For expertise, we looked at mentions of words related to scientific knowledge and technical capacities,

such as “research,” “qualifications,” “profession,” “evidence,” and “competence.” For interest group politics, we looked at words like “rights,” “welfare,” “labor,” and “interests.” Our interviews with PGRI leaders were particularly important, as they revealed what positions PGRI took prior to policy decisions and how it defended those positions. In this way, we assessed the clarity and coherence of policy proposals made by reformers and PGRI, reputations for competence, and credibility in education reform. Process tracing our analytic strategy, and we followed the steps outlined by Ricks and Liu (2018) to make inferences about how expertise shaped policy decisions.

4. Why PGRI prioritized interests over expertise

The development trajectory of PGRI illuminates the interests it articulated and why it could only claim limited expertise. Given labor problems and the political environment, PGRI prioritized teacher labor rights and welfare but did not develop policy proposals related to pedagogy or competence in teacher professionalization.

PGRI had its roots in a teacher movement that supported the anti-colonial struggle (Rosser and Fahmi 2018, 23). When PGRI was founded and officially recognized in 1945, after independence, PGRI was registered as a trade union (Education International 2008). Teacher loyalty to PGRI remained associated with anti-colonialism, the struggle for independence against the Netherlands, and popular nationalism. Following the centralizing political project of post-colonial leaders, Indonesian teachers were used to promote nation building and a sense of nationalism, unifying the disparate islands in the archipelago (Rosser et al. 2022, 17). This association with nationalism remains firmly in place, even today (high-ranking PGRI official).

During the New Order period (1966–1998), after the coup that installed the authoritarian regime led by Suharto, PGRI’s legal status changed from a trade union to a professional association, due to the regime’s hostility towards labor unions (Education International 2008). Leaders of PGRI became allies of Suharto’s administration as part of a strategy to survive in a political context that was intolerant of dissent. PGRI established close ties with Golkar, the ruling party. Rosser and Fahmi (2018, 14) note: “under the New Order, teachers and lecturers who had civil servant status were required to support the ruling Golkar Party and both take and teach compulsory courses in the state ideology.” PGRI, as an ally of the regime, informally distributed benefits in a discretionary way to maintain political control (Rosser et al. 2022). They had sway over teaching positions, promotions, and transfers. Patronage politics and political favoritism deeply infused the education sector, and so they infused PGRI. In exchange for collaboration, union leaders were given special privileges and pursued political careers in parliament (former PGRI leader 1).

Even though PGRI was formally registered as a professional association, it operated de facto as a union, interest group, and political machine. During the New Order, with widespread patronage politics and political favoritism, PGRI established itself as an educational institution. PGRI began to operate teacher training colleges, accounting, and technological colleges. Today, the teacher association operates 50 such institutions. However, these institutions supported PGRI and served as a way to

generate income and employment for regional affiliates, especially for retired PGRI leaders who are employed by the colleges ([PB PGRI 2018](#)). Through these institutions, PGRI received block grants from MoE and regional governments, which were earmarked to the teachers' association, to train teachers and principals ([Sari 2017](#); [Niat 2020](#)). PGRI also operated a large network of private secondary schools. Overall, PGRI expanded its role in training teachers because of its political ties, rather than its status as a competent and autonomous professional association.

PGRI, the largest teachers' association in Indonesia, has been consistently focused on labor-related problems. By the 1970s, the rapid expansion in school construction and increasing student enrollment, combined with contracting education budgets, created teacher shortages and salary payment delays. The government also hired contract teachers, who do not have civil servant status. From 1973 to 1979, Indonesia constructed 62,000 schools and hired about 191,000 teachers ([Gelander 2012, 13](#)). This massive hiring push meant that many teachers earned low salaries and faced irregular labor relations involving delayed salary payments and arbitrary firings. It also resulted in low standards for teacher training, credentials, and professionalism. As PGRI became more organized, it functioned to address these issues rather than demonstrating expertise over education policy. One former government official (1) noted:

PGRI prioritized the issues of welfare and teacher labor rights instead of teacher competencies and professionalism... Issues related to the quality of education such as the implementation of the National Examination are not the focus of PGRI. Unlike the Indonesian Medical Association, which is intended to improve the professionalism of medical professionals and ensures their members use professional ethics and reach a certain standard.... Teachers do not agree that teachers need to be recertified if they have worked as teachers for a long time.

Rather than upholding high-professional standards for teachers, PGRI sought to defend the labor interests of its member base.

Since the beginning of the democratic transition in 1998, PGRI remained a political ally of the national government, albeit with some flashpoints of disagreement. In many ways, PGRI resembles a "legacy union" where there are important continuities with how it operated during authoritarianism and after democratization ([Caraway et al 2015](#)). With more political parties, PGRI's congresses at the national and regional levels often became a platform for political candidates to campaign for elected office (former PGRI leader 2). PGRI has had some but not prominent representation in MoE; the current chairwoman of PGRI since 2017, Unifah Rosydi, served as a sub-director at MoE from 2011 to 2015. While in the early 2000s, the union was known for its ability to mobilize demonstrations, Rosydi has shunned this approach, branding PGRI as the government's "strategic partner," meaning the union supports the government to persuade the government to respond to teacher demands. In seeking a strategic partnership, the union avoids open confrontation and highlights its closeness with the government. It holds an anniversary celebration yearly on the same day as national teacher day, November 25th, a massive event that high ranking government officials, including the president, regularly attend ([Supriatin 2018](#)).

As a de facto labor union that was strongly associated with machine politics, PGRI has not established strong credentials for expertise. In our interviews, there was broad agreement that the union does not have technically sophisticated proposals to improve teaching. Mainly, PGRI claims that improving the salaries of all teachers will improve the quality of education, albeit without much evidence to support this claim. One former PGRI leader (2) who worked closely on research noted: “PGRI does not have a conceptual framework on education,” meaning that it does not seriously address issues of teaching. An education policy expert (3) pointed out that “PGRI has always been strong on the issue of welfare, acknowledgment, and teacher protection since the New Order era. That has been the issue they stood on. But as the issues in education develop, they are unable to keep up with more substantive issues.” Another former official described PGRI’s professional development expertise and technical capacity as follows:

Their professional development activities were not balanced with their militancy so there was a lack of substantive contributions from PGRI. They could have conducted research to map issues regarding education and pressure the government with evidence straight from the field. But the wide network of PGRI has never been used for that purpose. Studies on teacher professionalism are done by other NGOs or foreign organizations (former government official 1).

This narrow focus on labor issues has meant that PGRI had a limited capacity to reset the education policy agenda, in terms of the quality of education.

5. Policy episodes: interests, expertise, and policy influence

To explore the role of interest group politics and expertise in policy, this section uses process tracing to analyze education reform episodes. We aim to establish the significance of the policy – in terms of the magnitude of the proposed changes and the broader debate – and the main problems to be addressed. We then analyze how interest group pressure and expertise entered the policy process, noting whether PGRI ultimately shaped policy, or not.

5.1 Interest group politics prevail: the Teacher and Lecturer Law of 2005

The Teacher and Lecturer Law of 2005 was arguably the most significant teacher-related reform in recent Indonesian history because it provided teachers an opportunity for a dramatic salary increase. Before the reform, teacher pay was near the 50th percentile in college graduates’ salary distribution; after the reform, with allowances, it rose to nearly the 90th percentile ([De Ree et al. 2018, 1002](#)). These allowances are contingent on certification. A certified teacher receives a professional allowance equivalent to double base pay, while a remote-area allowance and other allowances afford teachers even more of a pay increase ([World Bank 2015, 13](#)).

Prior to 2005, teacher salaries had been the singular priority of PGRI for decades. Hundreds of thousands of teachers were hired during the schooling expansion of 1975-1987 under President Suharto. This rapid growth resulted in poorly trained and

poorly paid teachers ([Chang et al. 2014, 14](#)). Low pay led to high absenteeism, often due to teachers working second jobs ([Usman et al. 2004, 212](#)) and hampered efforts to attract high-quality candidates. The profession lacked standards for performance and recruitment, leading to a reliance on patronage and nepotism for hiring, placement, and advancement. Prior to the law, there was no professional certification system for teachers. Even though teachers were required to have a two-year, post-secondary diploma before the law, only a third of teachers did so ([Chang et al. 2014, 18](#)). The problem of raising teacher pay, then, had festered for decades, through the authoritarian regime of Suharto. With democratization this issue landed squarely in PGRI's wheelhouse, and it was well positioned to set policies around teacher pay.

The influence of PGRI on the Teacher Law demonstrates how PGRI effectively used interest group pressure to improve teacher pay. Longstanding grievances combined with the recent transition to democracy made the early 2000s a propitious political environment for PGRI to shape major reforms. PGRI capitalized on these conditions by organizing lobbying efforts to pressure the president and the parliament. President Megawati Sukarnoputri (2001-2004) asked PGRI Chairman Muhammad Surya in 2003 to prepare a bill focused on teacher welfare ([Mappiasse 2014, 140](#)). Subsequently, Surya met with 70 members of parliament, many of whom had themselves been teachers, urging them to support a bill ([KOMPAS 2005](#)), promising that their support would earn them teacher votes ([Chang et al. 2014, 29](#)). High-ranking union leaders in PGRI were involved in drafting the law ([NusaBali 2018](#)). A former PGRI leader (1) claimed that PGRI's pressure ultimately led to its passage: "By 2005, we came to all the House of Representative members and the President, and we threatened them. If there was no law by 2005, PGRI would organize massive demonstrations in all provinces and in Jakarta and a national teacher strike... But in the last second, we were ensured by the Parliament that the President would pass this law and that it had been approved by the House of Representatives."

PGRI, defending the interests of its members, fought for low standards for teacher certification to make it easier for teachers to get the pay raise. The education system needed highly trained teachers, and reformers in MoE wanted this law to upgrade standards for teacher qualifications, preparation, and in-service training. MoE proposed setting conditions to certification: a bachelor's degree, written tests for teachers, students' standardized test scores, years of experience, and high ratings on a classroom observation; along with a requirement for teachers to be re-certified every five years (former government official 1). PGRI fought to make pay increases broadly accessible without being contingent on measures of teacher quality.

In the end, PGRI prevented teacher certification from being tied to performance. Indeed, the law increased requirements for newly hired teachers, from a two-year professional degree to a four-year bachelor's degree. But overall, standards for certification were low. Teachers who already had a bachelor's degree were automatically certified. Teachers without a four-year degree could submit a portfolio of documents showing their teaching experience and credentials; and most teachers who did so passed and became certified. Teachers who failed the portfolio review were

required to take a short (nine-day) remedial training course or re-submit their portfolio. This policy set low standards for certification and was criticized for not improving student learning ([De Ree et al. 2018, 1001–2](#)). Thus, after the Teacher Law was adopted, Indonesia still faced significant quality challenges.

Even as PGRI prevailed in setting low standards for teacher certification, its reputation for limited technical capacity was apparent. For example, PGRI's teacher colleges and higher education institutions did not qualify to certify teachers when certification began in 2006 (government official 4). Instead, the MoE chose to allow only public teacher training colleges, which were not operated by PGRI, to manage the portfolio process and in turn certify teachers. MoE determined that PGRI did not have the requisite technical capacity to take on the responsibility of teacher credentialing; the institutions operated by PGRI were widely regarded as low quality. The decision to not include PGRI in certifying teachers was an affront to the teachers' association, which had expected to play a major role in certifying professional educators, since Indonesian professional associations in medicine and law were solely responsible for certifying doctors and lawyers.

5.2 The politics of expertise: Professional standards, teacher training, and evaluation

The 2005 Teacher Law, which PGRI exerted strong influence on, was criticized for setting low professional standards for teachers. Certification effectively doubled the pay of civil servant teachers and had massive impacts on the national budget ([Kurniawati et al. 2018, 3](#)). However, even as teacher pay improved, Indonesian students performed poorly on international assessments. Indonesia scored 7th from the lowest among the nearly 80 countries or states taking the mathematics portion of the 2018 PISA ([OECD 2019, 18](#)); and there is evidence that in mathematics learning is declining ([Beatty et al. 2021](#)). There was growing government support for placing conditions on certification to ensure that certified teachers had more training and meaningful skills to bring into the classroom.

After the 2005 Teacher Law, reformers in MoE worked to change policies to place more conditions on certification and raise professional standards, bolster teacher training, and establish a system of teacher evaluation. They relied on technocratic expertise, marshalling policy evaluations, research, and analysis to make a case for higher professional standards and better teacher training. PGRI leaders sought to shape policy in these areas as well and some PGRI leaders used language to signal PGRI's expertise over education policy, citing "research units" and "evidence" (high-ranking PGRI official 1). However, PGRI did not demonstrate expertise. While PGRI voiced opposition to policies to raise the professional standards of teachers, it focused solely on the negative effects on teachers while downplaying potential benefits to students; it presented vague critiques, and it lacked clear counterproposals. PGRI continued to prioritize teacher welfare issues, specifically certifying as many teachers as possible, while resisting higher standards. The union remained marginal to policy debates related to teaching quality. Below we discuss several cases of policy

negotiations, design, and implementation that demonstrate the consequences of PGRI's difficulty in using expertise to affect policy.

Teacher professionalism in MoE: Education Minister Mohammad Nuh (2009-14) appointed a PGRI member inside MoE but the PGRI leader struggled to maintain the position due to lack of a clear agenda. In 2010, in an effort to eliminate redundant departments, Minister Nuh disbanded a directorate that was created by the Teacher Law, the "Directorate General of Quality Assurance for Educators and Education Personnel." PGRI opposed this change, arguing that it represented the elevated status of teachers, and organized a series of peaceful demonstrations in each province and one of around 10,000 people in Jakarta ([Tempo.co 2010](#)). Pressure from the protests along with lobbying by PGRI ultimately led Minister Nuh to create a new directorate for teachers, the "Agency for Human Resources Development, Education and Culture, and Quality Assurance." Under this sub-directorate was a center dedicated to teacher professionalization, the Center for Teacher Competency Development and Education, led by Unifah Rosyidi (2011-15), a leader in PGRI. This center was responsible for crafting policies to guide the training and professional development of teachers.

However, PGRI's representation in the ministry was short-lived because of perceptions that leaders of PGRI did not have clear proposals. PGRI leaders remained wedded to improving the welfare of teachers and disconnected from policies for teacher excellence. A former government official (1) questioned Rosyidi's ineffectiveness in advancing teacher professionalization.

Her work [Rosyidi] was not satisfying even though she had the opportunity and control to improve both teachers' welfare and competency. There was no groundbreaking policy or improvement in teachers' professionalism. PGRI was given the power and resources since one of their leader is now heading the teachers unit. But what was the result? Nothing. To my recollection the issue on teachers remained the same.

While Rosyidi's position was to craft policies to professionalize teachers, she maintained her allegiance to PGRI and defended teacher welfare.

Ultimately PGRI lost its role in MoE. In 2015, Education Minister Anies Baswedan (2014-2016) undertook further restructuring of MoE and created a new teacher directorate, Directorate General of Teachers and Education Personnel. However, this new directorate had no role for PGRI leaders (government official 2). PGRI leaders left the MoE discredited, having not strengthened the teaching profession. PGRI had some capacity to exert pressure on how MoE was structured but leaders of PGRI were unprepared to propose new programs to improve teacher professional development. As a result, policy makers turned to other officials who claimed expertise to advance teaching excellence.

Teacher assessments: PGRI opposed teacher competency assessments, but its opposition took place too late and it did not propose clear alternatives. In 2012, Minister Nuh introduced teacher assessments with the objective of measuring teacher knowledge to inform an improved teacher professional development program. The 2012 assessments were only administered to civil servants, certified teachers, and private

school teachers who were permanent staff ([Napitupulu 2012](#)). The 2015 assessments, administered under Minister Baswedan, were expanded to include more categories of teachers, in total approximately 3 million teachers – the largest in terms of the number of teachers assessed (government official 3).

PGRI was marginal to the teacher assessments in 2012. In 2015, PGRI mounted several demonstrations of around 20,000 teachers in front of the parliament to express opposition. One education policy expert (2) noted: “teachers were instructed by PGRI to block UKG [*uji kompetensi guru*, teacher competency assessments].” The demonstrations drew attention to the assessments, and members of parliament requested information from MoE about how the assessments were to be used ([Liputan6.com 2015](#)). PGRI voiced this opposition late, after the assessments were already well under way, having not been included in the early stages of policy planning.

The demands that PGRI made in this protest further demonstrate its struggle to demonstrate expertise. PGRI did not protest the content or goals of the assessments, but rather protests were based on unfounded rumors that Minister Baswedan planned to use them as a condition for certification ([Wardani 2015](#)). PGRI defended certification allowances that were not conditional on a performance-based measure, a position they had taken since the 2005 Teacher Law. Officials responded by explaining that there was never an intention to link assessments to certification ([Jawa Pos 2015](#)). Meetings between MoE and PGRI, in which officials explained the policy to union leaders, and public statements by Baswedan dispelled the rumors and demobilized the protests. MoE officials, specifically Syawal Gultom, a senior MoE official, met with regional leaders of PGRI to clarify the purpose of the assessments (government official 4). This shows that political action by PGRI was reactive, based on misinformation about what MoE officials were doing, and not effective in pressuring policy makers to shift course.

The assessments went ahead – as a diagnostic tool. Teachers performed poorly. The average score was 53 on a 100-point scale; MoE deemed a score of 55 as passing ([World Bank 2018a, 43](#)). Moreover, research by MoE showed that certified teachers were no more likely to have better scores than non-certified teachers ([Hidayat 2016](#)). But as Minister Baswedan promised, there were minimal consequences for poor results. Only in some districts did certified teachers with failing scores need to attend a professional development remediation program (and this was a district-led not national policy). Overall, this policy episode shows PGRI’s lack of information about what officials were planning; the union was not consulted on the substance of the assessment policy. PGRI prioritized labor issues without engaging in substantive discussions that would affect system quality; and union leaders downplayed the poor assessment results.

Teacher professional development: In 2016, a year after the results from the teacher competency assessment were made public, MoE launched a new teacher professional development program, *Pendidikan Profesi Guru* or PPG. This was another attempt to strengthen the conditions for certification. PPG marked a significant change to teacher training. For in-service teachers with more than five years of experience hired after 2006, PPG includes two modules that take six months total: three months of online courses (while still teaching) and “classroom practice” for another three months. PPG is

not a requirement, but teachers who take PPG by being nominated and who pass are granted certification. Moreover, teachers who pass PPG get a high score on one aspect of the civil servant application, so PPG provides incentives to teachers who aspire to become civil servants. PGRI's opposed this policy, arguing that PPG would make it more difficult for teachers to become certified and receive the certification bonus. Ultimately, this opposition did not prevent MoE officials from raising standards for teachers.

In cases of "reform unionism," teachers' unions have supported more training for teachers because this would strengthen professionalism and justify higher salaries. Indeed, in Indonesia, some teachers supported more professional development, including some members of PGRI and other teachers' unions ([Jawa Pos 2018](#)). However, PGRI focused on the adverse effects of additional training on older teachers. Leaders of PGRI argued that new requirement to submit evidence to document teaching practices were unduly onerous for older teachers and teachers in remote areas, who faced difficulties using the online platform and performing tasks in English (high-ranking PGRI official 1). PGRI ignored the potential benefits of better-trained teachers and focused instead on how PPG would hinder teachers' ability to become certified ([JPNN 2017](#)). Ultimately, officials in the MoE avoided working with PGRI, instead relying on the Ministry of Research and Technology (MoRT), which oversaw higher education, to advance PPG.

PGRI complaints about professional development had little consequence; the teacher's association was marginal to policy debates. MoRT and MoE did not change the format for PPG, and this new policy was widely regarded as a setback for PGRI. First, officials linked PPG to certification allowances – in other words, they raised standards for certification. Moreover, PGRI played a minor role in administering PPG. PPG is currently offered in 75 teacher training institutions. While PGRI operates 10 teacher training colleges and 29 universities, in 2019 only 5 were invited to administer PPG. In other words, officials in MoE questioned the technical capacities of PGRI, casting doubts on the teachers' association competence to certify teachers. PGRI's fixation on labor issues and limited technical capacities prevented it from implementing professional development policies.

Teacher and principal training: The union's challenges in demonstrating expertise hindered its role in policymaking related to teacher and principal training. PGRI's teacher training colleges did not qualify to certify teachers until 2019 and did not qualify to train teachers when PPG was introduced in 2017. Moreover, PGRI's limited technical capacity was evident in 2020, when a competitive bidding process for teacher and principal training contracts replaced block grants that had previously been earmarked to PGRI ([Raharjo and Aranditio 2020](#)). Although district-level PGRI affiliates were awarded small grants, the national-level PGRI association was not awarded any grants, a major setback after having received grants in the past.

In 2019, President Widodo appointed Nadiem Makarim as Minister of Education. He is widely regarded as a competent technocrat who was not beholden to interest

groups.² Under Makarim, MoE allocated US\$40 million per year for two years for teacher and principal training contracts under a project called Program Organisasi Penggerak (POP). MoE ran a competitive bidding process: it put out a call for proposals, hired an independent research organization to blindly review proposals,³ and awarded contracts based on an independent review. This marked a departure from the traditional practice of offering large block grants to well-known, politically-connected service providers, such as PGRI (government official 1). “POP is perhaps the first time in history that government assistance has been opened to all organizations and they are directed to solve the problem of student learning outcomes together” (government official 1).

Initially PGRI did not object to the competitive bidding process. However, after PGRI learned that it had not been awarded grants, it along with other civil society organizations that had expected to receive grants mounted opposition to POP, arguing the selection process was biased and non-transparent ([Dinisari 2020](#)). These organizations expected to receive contracts because of longstanding political connections. However, Minister Makarim adopted a new, merit-based process for allocating grants. A government official (1) stated: “The thing is that we are not working with the old way in which if group X is close to MoE, it means that they will get more assistance. This includes PGRI. In the past, when PGRI was close to anyone at MoE, it would get a lot of assistance and sometimes the mechanism and objectives were unclear.”

Pressure from PGRI and others led the Parliament to ask Minister Makarim for more transparency about the review process. Because of PGRI pressure, there was an audit of the POP budget and review process, however this audit did not find any evidence of corruption. This review delayed the grant payments by nearly a year. PGRI and other traditional organizations withdrew from the first round of funding. Overall, PGRI and allies failed to end POP. PGRI has struggled to transition from the political changing environment, in which patronage politics are being replaced with more merit-based methods for promoting learning.

5. Conclusion

This paper has been an exercise in concept formation and theory building. The education politics literature has focused on a class of arguments centered on interests, material resources, and organizational power to explain the adoption of new education policies. Our goal is to elevate another class of arguments based on ideational factors, specifically expertise. Expertise, as a crucial input for policy influence, has gained currency in sociology and in the politics of specialized and technical policy domains. In the education literature, expertise has been analyzed as a characteristic that inheres in technocrats ([Verger et al., 2014](#)). Business leaders and philanthropic organizations

² Makarim was the first education minister not affiliated with civil society organizations Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) or Muhammadiyah, which traditionally occupy MoE’s leadership.

³ SMERU was chosen as the reviewer. No authors involved in this paper conducted any reviews. Pramana is employed by SMERU and SMERU is the lead research organization on the RISE Indonesia grant.

seek to “philanthropize consent” by using material resources, knowledge production, media power, and informal and formal networks to build political support for a particular public policy ([Tarlau and Moeller 2020, 338](#)). In other words, expertise enables technocrats or business groups to apply technical solutions or render technical education politics to political questions and problems (*ibid*, 350).

We explore how teachers succeed or fail to demonstrate expertise in education policymaking by examining their demands, policy proposals, and opposition. Our central claim is that the expertise teachers exhibit can in some cases explain how much influence they have over policy reforms. Beyond its analytic utility, the concept of teacher expertise has normative value. For both supporters and critics of teachers’ unions, cultivating pedagogical expertise, developing technical capacity, and proposing alternative education policy proposals could have multiple benefits. For instance, teacher expertise would benefit teachers’ unions by raising their professional status and strengthening their demands for salaries that are in line with those of other highly skilled professionals. Teacher expertise would benefit policy experts by enriching reforms to public schools and establishing a shared language of higher professional standards and better learning outcomes.

Expertise may help to explain cases of ineffective opposition by teachers’ unions to certain types of education reforms, especially related to merit-based reforms to teaching careers. The character of union opposition is often studied as resulting from fragmentation among teachers’ organizations or power struggles among rival union leaders ([Murillo 1999](#)); the kind of organization teachers’ unions are, whether political machines or interest groups ([Schneider 2022](#)); or the political alignment of unions with the ruling party ([Murillo and Ronconi 2004](#)).

Expertise may be another way to explain ineffective opposition to merit-based reforms to teacher careers. Teachers’ unions may not have expertise relevant to the problems that policy makers are facing (i.e., improving the quality of education). If so, they will struggle to frame proposals that solve these problems and protect teachers’ interests. They may not be effective in promoting teachers interests since, without expertise relevant to the new challenges, they develop a reputation for obstruction. Teachers’ unions that are unable to articulate alternative proposals to solve problems that gain broader public attention are likely to become politically isolated and ignored.

Future research could systematically examine the conditions that promote teacher expertise in different contexts. Most teachers’ unions aspire to act as both labor unions and professional associations. As labor unions, teachers are interest groups that prioritize economic self-interest. As professional associations, teachers establish pedagogical expertise, set professional standards, and develop proposals to improve the education system overall, based on classroom experience and understandings of how students learn. Teachers’ unions develop differently depending on the problems their members confront when unions are founded and the priorities that governments set for public education. One implication of this research is that in low- and middle-income countries, where patronage politics are endemic, teachers’ unions may have little incentive to develop professional expertise. In the case of the Indonesian teachers’

organization PGRI, while it was nominally a professional organization, it acted only as a union.

Less is known about the origins of reform unionism, and why it develops in some places but not others and the conditions that facilitate teachers setting higher professional standards for themselves. One hypothesis is that state capacity and bureaucratic autonomy help to establish professional competence and ethics among teachers. Another is that a strong middle class that demands excellence in public schools creates pressure for teachers to exhibit greater professionalism and expertise. Comparative research is needed to evaluate these hypotheses and develop others.

A final question to explore is whether teachers' unions, that were founded in response to labor problems, can switch paths and transform into robust professional associations. Scholars should examine how and why teacher organizations develop research units and centers that focus on improving teaching and developing technical capacity. In the United States the American Federation of Teachers established a [Center for School Improvement](#) which "provides technical assistance, professional development, and information to state, district, and school educators." In Mexico the Foundation for Teacher Culture has articulated policy proposals and tried to insert itself into political debates. Whether these foundations make serious proposals to reform education or whether they are more of a public relations ploy deserves more attention because expertise plays a vital role in the policy process.

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