

The Illusion of Meritocracy: State Hegemony and the Discourse of Exclusion in Indonesia's Teacher Recruitment Policy

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Abstract: The recruitment of government employees with work agreements (PPPK) is often seen as a space of hope for senior honorary officials who no longer meet the age requirements to participate in the civil servant candidate recruitment process. However, in reality, the policy is not supported by the regulatory apparatus, which sides with their position, thus placing senior honorary officers in a structural injustice. This study aims to critically examine the construction of meritocracy and state hegemony in the PPPK recruitment policy for senior honorary teachers in Lebak Regency, Banten, and to explore how they interpret their experiences and perceptions of the policy. This research used a qualitative-critical approach through the analysis of critical discourse, drawing on the thinking of Michel Foucault, or Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA), developed by Kendall & Wickham. The power of meritocracy discourse works by ignoring the appreciation of age and work experience in the 2024 PPPK recruitment, prioritizing technocratic-procedural logic, normalizing uncertainty through overlapping and inconsistent regulations, and reproducing structural gaps due to limited formation and fiscal capacity. The repeated failures experienced by senior honorary teachers give rise to a sense of disrespect and exclusion by a system perceived as more favorable to young teachers. For them, the PPPK recruitment is not a fair meritocratic mechanism, but a process that ignores devotion while increasing the uncertainty of life. The PPPK recruitment policy operates through a meritocratic discourse that prioritizes objective standards. The state positions meritocracy as the fairest means of assessing the quality of PPPK-civil servants. The state maintains its hegemony by making senior honorary teachers accept the logic of meritocracy, even though it is detrimental to them, because it is presented as the only legal route to obtaining PPPK-civil servant status.

Keywords: hegemony, honorary teachers, meritocracy, PPPK recruitment.

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■ INTRODUCTION

The polemic of justice for teachers has been a long debate, not only in Indonesia but also in various other parts of the world (Bracho, 2024; Gandolfi & Mills, 2022; Gupta & Zhao, 2023; Karnovsky & Gobby, 2024; Purbiyati & Riyanto, 2022; Saltini et al., 2014). In Indonesia, the implementation of education is still trapped in the issue of teacher governance, especially the status of honorary teachers and bureaucratic reforms that tend to be cosmetic, without touching the real root of the problem (Andina & Arifa, 2021; Fauzan, 2021). This situation has caused a

structural imbalance between the growing number of honorary teachers and the limited recruitment of civil servants (ASN) (Sabon, 2022). In response to these conditions, the government introduced a more systematic ASN recruitment mechanism through Law Number 5 of 2014 and the Government Employees with Work Agreements (*Pegawai Pemerintah dengan Perjanjian Kerja*, PPPK) scheme as a milestone in updating ASN management standards, as well as strengthening the role of the state in defining the ideal teacher figure constructed through specific competency standards in its recruitment.

However, ironically, the policy that was initially designed to enable senior teachers hindered by age factors to participate in the Civil Servant Candidates (*Calon Pegawai Negeri Sipil*, CPNS) recruitment has actually become an exclusion mechanism. The recruitment mechanism has the potential to eventually give birth to a new form of injustice. In the narrative of efficiency and competition, PPPK shows the face of an increasingly mechanistic bureaucracy, while eroding the humanistic values that should be the foundation of education policy.

Although their roles and contributions are so important, honorary teachers are often marginalized in education policy. Born out of an urgent situation of need for educators, they are recruited by institutions at a lower level that actually do not have the authority or structural capacity to formally appoint teachers (Andina & Arifa, 2021; Sabon, 2022). As a result, they are simply an instant solution to the shortage of educators and put them at a disadvantage economically, socially, and professionally. Vulnerable working conditions with uncertainty of status and welfare. Forcing them to continue to dwell on structural injustices in the education system in Indonesia (Azzahra, 2023; Fauzan, 2021).

The complexity of the problem of honorary teachers is actually not completely ignored by the state. It is evident from the government's various policies, formulated in response to demands for justice and professional recognition for honorary teachers, including PPPK recruitment, that these efforts are intended to provide structural solutions. The Ministry of Education and Culture agreed with the Ministry of State Apparatus Empowerment and Bureaucratic Reform and the Ministry of Finance to change the recruitment system for government employees from the civil servant (*Pegawai Negeri Sipil*, PNS) to PPPK (Afrizalni et al., 2024; Andina & Arifa, 2021). Based on Law Number 5 of 2014 concerning

the civil servant, which expressly directs the implementation of the merit system in civil servant management, including in the PPPK recruitment policy. The explanation of the system is contained in Law Number 20 of 2023, Article 26, Paragraph 2, which states that the merit system, or meritocracy, is a principle of human resource management based on qualifications, competence, potential, and performance, as well as integrity and morality as the main basis. The implementation is carried out fairly regardless of differences in ethnicity, race, religion, skin color, origin, gender, marital status, age, or disability status. The mechanism is intended to uphold professional standards and eliminate the practice of nepotism in teacher appointments as part of bureaucratic reform and accountable governance (Afrizalni et al., 2024).

However, the double-edged sword of the PPPK policy seems to offer not only hope of improved status and professional recognition for honorary teachers, but also to give rise to a battle arena among honorary teachers themselves (Afrizalni et al., 2024; Fauzan, 2021). The reality on the ground shows that honorary teachers over 40 are forced to compete in the same recruitment system as younger teachers (Afrizalni et al., 2024). The reason is that the requirements and recruitment mechanism for computer-based PPPK (CAT) represent the state version of the meritocratic paradigm, which technocratically standardizes competencies without considering the diversity of social backgrounds, ages, and access limitations experienced by honorary teachers, especially those who have served for a long time. This recruitment system ultimately only holds new exclusionary potential, further weakening the most structurally vulnerable group, senior honorary teachers (Afrizalni et al., 2024; Fauzan, 2021). Recent critical studies have shown that meritocracy in public policy often functions as a legitimacy discourse rather than a truly fair mechanism, especially through

standardized score-based recruitment systems that hide structural inequalities (Bruni & Santori, 2021; Cobbe & Douglas, 2024; Cunningham & Samson, 2021). Instead of being a priority group, senior honorary teachers are marginalized by a recruitment mechanism that focuses solely on cognitive abilities and digital literacy, which are not commensurate with their work experience (Andina & Arifa, 2021). When the recruitment is based on a technology-based system and issues that are no longer relevant to the context of their service in the field, this policy slowly loses the social justice dimension that should be the main foothold in PPPK policy reform (Afrizalni et al., 2024; Fauzan, 2021; Marto et al., 2023).

The state designs the PPPK policy with a Durkheimian framework, where honorary teachers are placed as part of a system that must be subservient in order to maintain bureaucratic order, not to realize distributive justice (Fauzan, 2021). Through the discourse of meritocracy and professionalism, the state sets technocratic eligibility standards based on certification, academic achievement, and CAT exams, which systematically ignore the long experience and structural conditions of senior honorary teachers (Marto et al., 2023). In Foucault's (1972-1977) perspective, it is the form of knowledge and the production of power that determines who is recognized as a "*professional educator*", whereas the devotion of honorary teachers is discursively considered invalid (Foucault, 1980a). Meanwhile, according to Gramsci (1976), the PPPK policy is a state hegemony that works not through direct coercion, but through an ideological consensus that seems neutral and fair, even though it subtly excludes senior honorary teachers and makes them accept dominance that is not in favor of their reality (Patria & Arief, 2015).

The analysis of the PPPK policy for honorary teachers shows various perspectives from previous studies, both those that emphasize

its benefits in improving the efficiency of governance, professionalism, welfare, and teachers' work motivation, and those that criticize its impact, such as the inequality of the distribution of teachers in private and public schools, and weak policy socialization (Afrizalni et al., 2024; Andina & Arifa, 2021). Most of these studies are still normative-descriptive, focusing on the technical aspects of implementation without providing sufficient space for the voices of senior honorary teachers who are directly affected, especially those marginalized by technocratic and meritocratic recruitment systems. In addition, a metadata analysis using the bibliometric approach in VOSviewer shows that the number of studies explicitly linking critical discourse and the concept of state hegemony to the PPPK recruitment policy remains limited. Seeing these gaps, this study offers a new contribution by adopting a critical approach grounded in the theories of Foucault and Gramsci to dismantle power relations, meritocratic discourse, and state hegemony in the recruitment of PPPK, and to explore the experiences, resistance, and subjectivity of senior honorary teachers.

The case study of PPPK recruitment in Lebak Regency, Banten, was chosen as the main focus in this study because the area reflects the complexity of teacher recruitment policy problems at the local level. Lebak Regency is recorded as one of the regions with the highest number of honorary teachers, reaching around 3,500 people. At the same time, the quota for PPPK Phase I and Phase II formations in 2024 in Lebak Regency is allocated to only around 131 formations. In addition, most honorary teachers in this area receive very low wages, ranging from Rp 150,000 to Rp 500,000 per month, and lack adequate welfare protection. This condition is exacerbated by limited technology infrastructure and access to professional training, given that many schools in Lebak Regency are categorized as 3T (*Tertinggal* (disadvantaged), *Terluar*

(outermost), and *Terdepan* (border)). Lebak Regency is a significant representation of the other 3T areas in Indonesia. In this context, the analysis of the discourse of meritocracy and state hegemony in the PPPK recruitment policy becomes particularly relevant for exposing the practice of structural injustice.

■ **METHOD**

Research Design

This study used a qualitative-critical approach within the case study research design. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to delve deeply into social experiences, meaning construction, and the actions taken by senior honorary teachers in response to the PPPK recruitment policy. Meanwhile, a critical approach was used to examine the power relations hidden in policy discourse and to uncover the structure of injustice underlying the narrative of meritocracy-based recruitment objectivity. Epistemologically, this approach holds that social reality, including knowledge and truth, is not neutral or objective, but is formed through the social, political, economic, and cultural context that surrounds it (Musahwi, 2013). In the context of the PPPK recruitment policy, a critical approach enables researchers to understand how the policy's construction reflects the dominance of certain discourses while marginalizing others, such as senior honorary teachers.

Data Search Strategy

Interview

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, so that the researcher developed questions based on the dynamics of the informant's answers. Interviews take place naturally, resembling *a long, open-ended dialogue*, allowing for richer data exploration and the emergence of additional questions tailored to

the informant's response. The determination of informants in this study begins with *the purposive sampling technique*, which involves recruiting the main informants based on specific criteria, such as in-depth knowledge, direct involvement, and high relevance to the research focus. After that, the informant recruitment process is expanded through *snowball sampling*, in which the initial informant recommends other informants with relevant experience, perspectives, and information to enrich the research data.

Documentation Studies

This documentation study was conducted to obtain data from various official and public texts that shape and reproduce the discourse of meritocracy in the context of the PPPK recruitment policy. The documents analyzed serve as the legal basis for the implementation of the PPPK teacher recruitment Phases I and II in the Lebak Regency government in 2024. The documentation in this study is not limited to formal regulations but also includes public statements from state officials published through various online media. Analysis of these sources revealed how policy discourse and public opinion regarding the PPPK recruitment were constructed, reproduced, and debated in a discursive space.

Observation

In addition to in-depth interviews and document analysis, this study also uses an open, participatory observation (overt) technique, in which the researcher clearly reveals the identity and purpose of the research to the informants. The informant gave voluntary consent so that the researcher could observe various activities, such as the Deliberation of the Lebak Regency State Honorary Teacher Forum for 10 Years More (GHN10+) on August 23, 2025, with full awareness that their actions were part of the research process. In the forum activities,

researchers are involved to a limited extent and remain mainly observers. Observations include not only observations of formal interactions, but also symbolic expressions that represent the response of senior honorary teachers to the questions given by the researcher during interviews, especially related to the discourse of meritocracy, state hegemony, PPPK recruitment policy, both through language, informal narratives, and visual representations in institutional spaces.

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria for Informant Recruitment

The subject of this research was focused on senior honorary teachers who failed to pass the recruitment of PPPK for teachers Phase I and II in 2024, especially those who are members of the Lebak Regency State Honorary Teacher Forum for 10 Years (*Guru Honorer Negeri 10 Tahun Lebih/GHN10+*) and are directly involved in the agenda of the Hearing Meeting (*Rapat Dengar Pendapat/RDP*) with the Lebak Regency DPRD Commission III on December 27, 2024. The recruitment of informants was carried out by a *purposive* technique and continued through *the snowball sampling* method, taking into account the following criteria:

1. Honorary teachers in the R2 or R3 category (THK-II) who are registered in the BKN database;
2. Have a minimum of 10 years of service in a public school under the local government;
3. Over 35 years old or classified as a senior teacher approaching retirement, with an age limit to take part in the CPNS recruitment;
4. Not passing the PPPK Phase I and II recruitment in 2024;
5. Have experience participating in the recruitment or recruitment of ASN-PPPK more than once;

6. Being an active member of the 10-Year-Old State Honorary Teacher Forum (*Guru Honorer Negeri 10 Tahun Lebih/GHN10+*), Lebak Regency, Banten;

The informants in this study include various parties with a direct relationship to the case study. Key informants are senior honorary teachers who meet the recruitment criteria as described earlier. In addition, this study involved other informants who provided perspectives on the construction of meritocratic discourse in PPPK recruitment policies, as well as additional informants selected to enrich and confirm the findings from interviews with key informants. Overall, the number of research informants was 12 people, which included: 6 senior honorary teachers, 1 Chairman of the GHN10+ Forum of Lebak Regency, 2 representatives of the Lebak Regency Education Office, 1 representative of the Lebak Regency, Human Resources Development and Personnel Agency (*Badan Kepegawaian dan Pengembangan Sumber Daya Manusia, BKPSDM*), 1 member of the Lebak Regency Commission III DPRD, and 1 school principal.

Data Analysis

To answer the first research question, namely “*How is the construction of the discourse of meritocracy and state hegemony in the PPPK recruitment policy for senior honorary teachers in Lebak Regency?*”, the researcher uses a critical discourse analysis approach based on Michel Foucault’s thinking or *Foucauldian Discourse Analysis* (FDA). This approach highlights how the relationship between knowledge and power operates in shaping and regulating dominant discourses in public policy, such (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). The analysis was based on the five stages developed by Kendall & Wickham within the framework of Foucauldian discourse analysis (Neuman, 1997), can be seen in Figure 1.

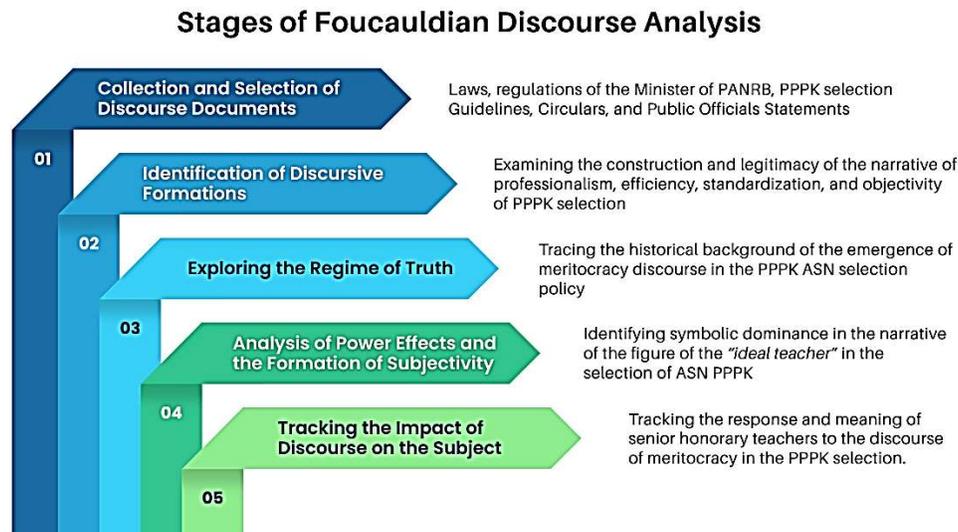


Figure 1. Five stages of foucauldian discourse analysis in this study version by kendall & wickham (1999)

Collection and Recruitment of Discourse Documents

The researcher collected relevant primary and secondary sources, including the Law, PANRB Ministerial Regulation, technical instructions for PPPK recruitment, circulars, subject matter for the recruitment of CAT-based technical competencies, statements of public officials, and informant statements from interview results. All of these sources serve as the legal basis for implementing PPPK recruitment in Lebak Regency and represent the construction of meritocracy as a norm and an ideological principle that justifies the recruitment mechanism. The collected discourse documents are then processed

in NVivo 15 for coding and data classification. Through this process, each piece of data is categorized into three main themes, namely: (1) the discourse of meritocracy as a regime of truth in the recruitment of PPPK, (2) the rationality of the state and the production of submission.

Identification of Discursive Formations

The researcher examines how the narrative of teacher professionalism, bureaucratic efficiency, national standardization, and recruitment objectivity is constructed and justified in PPPK recruitment documents and practices. Foucault calls these ‘*rules of formation*’ or ‘*rules of discourse production*,’ as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The rules of discourse production

Element	Guiding Questions
Object of discourse	What is being talked about?
Subject of discourse	Who speaks and is given authority?
Valid statement	Whose statement is considered valid?
Discourse Spaces	Where does this discourse come from?

Exploring the Regime of Truth

The researcher traces the historical background of the emergence of meritocracy discourse in the PPPK-ASN recruitment policy,

including post-New Order bureaucratic reform, the 2014 ASN Law, the shift from a patronage system to an objective, score-based system, and global pressure on the efficiency of public services.

Analysis of Power Effects and the Formation of Subjectivity

The researcher identified a form of symbolic dominance disguised in the narrative construction of the ‘ideal teacher’ figure in the recruitment of ASN-PPPK. This dominance is reflected in the practice of Computer Assisted Test (CAT)-based recruitment and certification, which implicitly limits the access and opportunities of senior honorary teachers to succeed in the recruitment process.

Tracking the Impact of Discourse on the Subject

The researcher tracked how senior honorary teachers responded to and interpreted the meritocratic discourse in the PPPK recruitment policy. Through the forum of the Lebak Regency State Honorary Teacher Forum for More than 10 Years, they articulate resistance in various forms, such as building collective solidarity, protesting in the agenda of Public Hearing (*Rapat Dengar Pendapat*, RDP) with the Commission of the Lebak Regency Regional Representative Council, and negotiating with the government. However, some teachers remain in a submissive position and experience subordination to the hegemonic policy logic.

To improve transparency and replicability, the analysis is conducted through a systematic, multi-stage coding process in NVivo 15. *First*, all interview transcripts, policy documents, official statements, and observation notes were imported into NVivo 15. An initial open coding process was conducted, reading the data line by line to identify repetitive expressions, keywords, problematizations, and normative claims related to PPPK recruitment, meritocracy, professionalism, fairness, age, experience, and

competence. The code at this stage is descriptive and remains close to the language used by the informant and the policy text (e.g., “*pure CAT*”, “*no calculation of tenure*”, “*fair due to direct score*”, “*project failed*”, “*age not considered*”).

Second, the initial code is subject to a focused, axial coding process, in which related codes are conceptually grouped and linked analytically. At this stage, the researcher examines the relationships between the codes to identify patterns of meaning, contradictions, and discursive regularity. For example, codes referring to CAT objectivity, certifications, and national standards are grouped under broader analytical categories related to procedural meritocracy. In contrast, codes regarding length of service, age, and exceptions are grouped under seniority and experience devaluation.

Third, these grouped codes are further abstracted into three main discursive themes, which represent the dominant discursive formations in the context of PPPK policies: (1) meritocracy as a regime of truth, (2) state rationality and technocratic governance, and (3) the production of submission and marginalization of senior honorary teachers.

NVivo 15 is used not only for data organization but also to systematically track code frequency, co-occurrence, and relationships across various data sources. This allowed researchers to compare how similar discourses emerged across policy texts, official statements, and informants’ life experiences. The NVivo 15 frequency word results for meritocracy and hegemony discourse in PPPK recruitment policy are shown in Table 2, and the visualization is shown in Figure 2.

Table 2. Data of the Nvivo 15 frequency word results on meritocracy and hegemony discourse in PPPK recruitment policy

Word	Length	Count	Weighted Percentage (%)
<i>nilai</i> (value)	5	27	2.90
<i>Lulus</i> (pass)	5	24	2.58

<p>"... guru di instansi pusat memulila sertifikat pendidik..."</p> <p>"... kemaren mah sudah pada lului karna terbanu pnyu Sertifikat Pendidik 50% itu banvak vang lulus..."</p>	<p>demonstrate the teacher's objective ability.</p> <p>Discourse Room: ASN regulations, BKN policy documents, PANRB, and public education media.</p>	<p>sought to curb the patronage and nepotism of civil servants. In addition, there is a globalization of public management that encourages digital objectivity and transparency (Katharina, 2019)</p>
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RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The discussion of the results of this research departed from an effort to understand the PPPK recruitment policy not only as an administrative mechanism, but as an arena for the production of discourse and power relations. The analysis process involves identifying patterns of repetitive

experiences, narratives, and justifications, thereby allowing researchers to map key themes that reflect the tension between procedural justice and substantive justice, and between technocratic rationality and pedagogical experience. These themes are presented in the following Table 4.

Table 4. Themes, subthemes, and discourse patterns in the PPPK recruitment for senior honorary teachers

Main Theme	Subtopic Analytics	Discursive Meaning	Actor/ Informant	Examples of Key Quotes
The paradox of meritocracy: Procedural Justice vs Substantive Justice	Meritocracy as procedural justice	Reduced fairness in scores, rankings, and CAT mechanisms	Dinas Pendidikan, BKPSDM, Principal, UU No. 5/2014, PP No. 49/2018, Permen PANRB No. 14/2023 & Kepmen PANRB No. 347/2024, Kepmen PANRB No. 348/2024, Public Officials	"... <i>Everything is pure CAT... The value is live... You can't lie.</i> "
	Pedagogical experience is eliminated	Service and service period are eliminated from the definition of competence	Senior Honorary Teacher	"... <i>It's been a long time since we've been teaching like this.</i> "
Devaluation of Senior Honorary Teacher Service	Long-term devotion loses value	Decades of work are considered administratively irrelevant	Senior Honorary Teacher, Dinas Pendidikan	" <i>If I explain it, everything is purely CAT. There is no calculation of the working period, there is no</i>
	Certifications and scores replace devotion	Professionalism is defined technocratically	Senior Honorary Teacher	"... <i>having a 50% Educator Certificate, many of them graduate...</i> "
Meritocratic Distortion and Nepotism Practices	Phenomenon 3D (<i>Duit, Deukeut, Dalam</i>)	Meritocracy hijacked by informal power relations	Senior Honorary Teacher	" <i>Maybe it's because he's so close to the principal.</i> "
	Observation: PPPK Recruitment as a "Failed Project"	The mechanism of affirmation turns into a tool for reproducing injustice	BKPSDM, Senior Honorary Teacher	"... <i>While the older ones are still alive... Observation that the project failed</i> "
Data Manipulation and Normalization	"Stealth Teacher" in the Dapodik system	State technology is used for administrative manipulation	Senior Honorary Teacher	" <i>Well, yes, maybe it's called stealths, there are a lot of people, officials.</i> "

of Fraud	Data validation is just a formality.	Digital systems lose the accountability function	Senior Honorary Teacher	"... They 'play' for only 1 (one) year and 2 (two) years, making their working period long. They 'play'"
Hegemony of State Meritocracy	Meritocracy is accepted as the only way	Negara memonopoli jalur legitimasi ASN	Senior Honorary Teacher, Dinas Pendidikan, BKPSDM, Public Officials	"For the test, according to the mandate of the law, CAT, everywhere, CAT too..."
	Failure is interpreted as self-fault	Power works hard internalizing guilt	Senior Honorary Teacher	"It's okay, let's admit it, I said my brain was 'mintul' (Blunt)."
Ritualization of Injustice	Failure as destiny	Structural injustice is shifted to the religious realm	Senior Honorary Teacher, Principal, BKPSDM	"... there is no good luck to be appointed as a PNS."

Based on the themes in Table 4, the following discussion elaborates on the research's findings by placing empirical data within a critical analysis framework. Each theme was analyzed to uncover the relationship between meritocratic policies, institutional practices, and the subjective experiences of honorary teachers.

Behind the Contestation of the PPPK Recruitment in Lebak Regency

The recruitment of PPPK for 2024 is considered the most crucial phase in the state's management policy for the civil apparatus in Indonesia. This urgency is inseparable from the mandate of Law Number 20 of 2023 concerning the State Civil Apparatus (Aparatur Sipil Negara/ASN), which emphasizes that the settlement of the status of honorary (non-ASN) personnel must be completed no later than December 2024. With these provisions, the central and local governments face demands to immediately address the longstanding issue of honorary personnel who have been in an ambiguous position for more than two decades. In line with the dynamics across various regions in Indonesia, Lebak Regency also conducted PPPK recruitment in 2024. This recruitment mechanism is arranged in several stages, namely Phase I and

Phase II, as well as additional stages or reservoirs intended to fill residual formations.

Prior to the introduction of the PPPK policy, honorary or non-permanent employees were in an ambiguous status, worked for long periods without legal certainty, did not receive guarantees such as pensions or clear promotion prospects, and often experienced wage uncertainty. The launch of the PPPK policy at the beginning of its implementation served as a 'symbolic legitimacy mechanism' for those who had long dedicated themselves to the state but were hindered by the age requirement to take part in the CPNS recruitment. The narrative built was full of hope, namely, providing certainty about status and state recognition for the dedication of honorary teachers.

However, revealing the reality of the implementation of the PPPK recruitment not only leaves the sweet promise but also reveals deeper structural problems. This problem concerns how central policies are implemented at the regional level, how local bureaucracies manage data and recruitment processes, and how honorary positions are situated within the power relations among the state, local governments, and professional organizations. The PPPK recruitment cannot be understood solely as an

agenda for the recruitment of apparatus, but rather as a reflection of how public policies are negotiated and implemented in an asymmetrical socio-political space. Problems that not only persist within a single recruitment period but also

permeate the entire PPPK recruitment policy. Based on the informants' accounts, at least three fundamental issues reveal the workings of the PPPK recruitment policy at the local level.

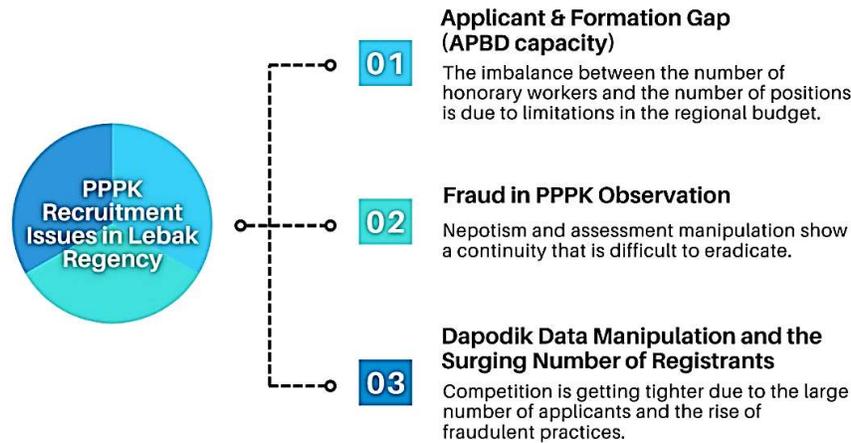


Figure 3. Three main problems of PPPK recruitment in lebak regency

Gap in Applicants and Formations in Fiscal Structure

The limited regional fiscal capacity is the main structural factor that causes a sharp disparity between the number of PPPK formations and the number of applicants in Lebak Regency. Based on Mr. Hartono's information, the PPPK formation for teachers in 2024 will only amount to 131 people, while the number of honorary teachers with a working period of more than 10 years exceeds 100 people, not including new young teachers. This inequality is not just a technical problem of quotas, but also reveals the region's limitations in financing the education apparatus sustainably. This condition creates an unhealthy climate of competition among honorary teachers. It reinforces the perception that PPPK policies tend to ignore distributive justice, especially for senior teachers who have served for a long time but do not have a guarantee of being appointed as ASN-PPPK. Furthermore, this situation shows how policies that depend on regional fiscal capacity can create new inequalities between individuals and regions.

The above statement shows that the implementation of PPPK recruitment at the regional level depends not only on the needs of formations but also on regional fiscal capacity. In the context of Lebak Regency, the limitation on Regional Original Revenue (*Pendapatan Asli Daerah*, PAD) is a structural factor that limits local governments' ability to bear the burden of PPPK salary payments. This shows a structural imbalance between central policies and regional realities, where fiscal decentralization has not been fully matched by an equitable distribution of financial capacity. Sociologically, this condition reflects how public policy often has implications for socio-economic dilemmas at the local level, where local governments must compromise and "sacrifice" other budgetary posts in the APBD to fulfill their obligations to PPPK personnel. The gap between applicants and formations is not solely due to administrative factors, but also reflects the inequality of economic and political resources between regions.

The responsibility for appointing PPPK personnel is, in fact, handed over to the local

government without an in-depth evaluation of each region's real capacity and socio-economic complexity. This pattern of decentralization creates a policy paradox, where regions are required to meet the needs of education workers without adequate fiscal support from the central government. As a result, many senior honorary

teachers who have served for decades still fail to be appointed as ASN-PPPK, not because of a lack of competence, but because of limited regional fiscal capacity. This condition shows that PPPK policies are not fully sensitive to regional economic disparities and tend to reproduce structural inequalities between rich a poor regions.

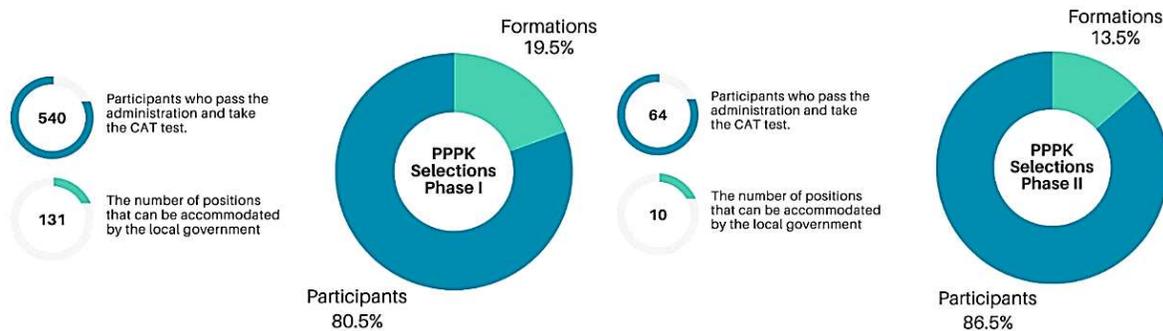


Figure 4. Gap in the participants and formations in the 2024 PPPK recruitment, the impact of budget limitations in lebak regency, banten

The 3D Phenomenon (*Duit (Money), Deukeut (Close), Dalam (Inside)*) as a Distortion of the PPPK System that Perpetuates Nepotism

One of the policies implemented to accommodate senior honorary teachers is the PPPK Observation system, also known as suitability recruitment. The suitability recruitment mechanism or observation in PPPK recruitment is an alternative form of competency recruitment, which is enforced, especially in teacher functional positions in 2021–2022, in response to the large number of honorary teachers who have served for a long time but have difficulty passing through a Computer Assisted Test (CAT)-based test. Based on the Kepmen of PANRB No. 1127 of 2021 and the Surat Edaran Dirjen (Circular Letter of the Director General) of GTK No. 4757/B/HK.04.01/2022, this mechanism assesses the suitability between the qualifications, experience, and performance of teachers with the position applied for, not through a written exam, but through a field assessment (observation) by an

assessment team consisting of school principals, supervisors, and senior teachers.

Although it is considered more humanistic and contextual because it assesses real experiences at school, the implementation of suitability recruitment or observation raises various problems. Instead of being a means of appreciation for devotion and professionalism, this mechanism actually opens the door to the manipulation of values, the intrusion of personal interests, and hidden nepotism behind social and structural closeness. This situation undermines the transparency and credibility of the recruitment process, thereby failing to ensure substantive justice for senior honorary teachers once again. At this point, the suitability recruitment or observation system no longer functions as a corrective to the inequality of test-based recruitment. However, it has become an instrument for reproducing new injustices in the PPPK recruitment policy. As a result of these various obstacles, the government finally abolished the observation mechanism and, from

2023–2024, again established a CAT-based PPPK recruitment system. Even Mr. Iwan (pseudonym), one of the BKPSDM employees, revealed that the PPPK recruitment with the suitability recruitment mechanism or observation was a “*projek gagal*” (failed project).

The above phenomenon seems to indicate that the suitability or observation recruitment system not only fails to bring justice, but also indirectly strengthens the hierarchy of power in schools and educational institutions. The mechanism that should objectively assess teachers’ performance and dedication has become a legitimacy tool for the practice of proximity and patronage. As a result, the meritocratic ideal of the PPPK policy shifted to a form of “nepotocracy”, a system that places social relations, loyalty, and closeness to authority as the main factors determining graduation, rather than professional competence. This condition not only erodes the sense of justice among honorary teachers but also undermines the integrity of the educational institution itself. In the long run, this kind of practice has the potential to create an unproductive work culture, where personal loyalty is valued more than performance quality and commitment to educational quality.

The Mushrooming of “*Guru Siluman*” (Stealth Teachers) in the Dapodik Data System

The next problem that emerged in this study was the alleged data manipulation in the Basic Education Data system (*Data Pokok Pendidikan/Dapodik*). In the PPPK recruitment process, Dapodik serves as the primary basis for administrative verification, determining the eligibility of applicants, including length of service, employment status, and task force. However, in Lebak Regency, informants found various irregularities that indicated intervention in the validity of the data. Some new teachers who should not have met the requirements for the term

of service were suddenly recorded as having a three-year working period in the system. This phenomenon not only reveals weak oversight of data input but also demonstrates how digital systems that are supposed to ensure transparency are actually used to perpetuate unethical practices. Dapodik lost its primary function as an accountability instrument and became a new arena for administrative manipulation that benefited certain parties. As a result, the credibility of the PPPK recruitment is again questioned, especially by teachers who feel disadvantaged by the data inconsistency.

The phenomenon of data manipulation causes double losses for senior honorary teachers. *First*, they are sidelined by fictitious applicants or new teachers who normatively have not met the administrative eligibility criteria. *Second*, the growing number of applicants due to invalid data tightens competition and reduces the chances of graduation for truly qualified teachers. This phenomenon shows the weak control system and verification mechanism at the Education Office level, where the data validation process is often only a formality, with no field checks. More than that, this condition opens the door to transactional practices in data management, where access to the Dapodik system can be used by certain parties for personal or group interests. This kind of situation not only harms senior honorary teachers individually but also undermines the institutional integrity of the Education Office as an organ of public administration. From the government’s point of view, digital systems like Dapodik do not work as neutral tools; instead, they work as ideological technologies that normalise certain ways of managing things, discipline actors, and make policy interventions legitimate through data, rankings, and administrative visibility (Avgerou & Bonina, 2020; Crome, 2022; Myers et al., 2020). In a broader context, this data manipulation reflects bureaucratic governance problems that are neither fully transparent nor

accountable at the regional level. Some studies also argue that digital administrative systems often act as governance technologies that create inclusion and exclusion rather than as neutral tools for transparency (Avgerou & Bonina, 2020; Crome, 2022).

Discourse on Meritocracy and State Rationality on PPPK Recruitment Policy

Through the recruitment of PPPK, the state is not only seeking professional educators but also constructing the ideal figure of modern ASN teachers: rational, competent, technologically adaptable, and measurable through performance indicators. CAT tests, educator certification, and digital competencies have become new symbols of institutional fairness that combine bureaucratic efficiency with work morality. This process gives rise to a symbolic hierarchy between ‘deserving’ and ‘less deserving’ teachers, between those considered ‘modern’ and those still ‘*traditional*’. Therefore, the analysis of this discourse on policy does not solely concern administrative regulations, but also power mechanisms that shape and naturalize inequality through the language of meritocracy and the rationality of modernity. Furthermore, the analysis explores how the discourse of meritocracy and the regime of truth operate in PPPK recruitment as a power practice that organizes knowledge and shapes the subject of teachers within the rationality of modern government.

The principle of meritocracy is not a new concept in governance. The idea that public office should be filled by competent and accomplished individuals has long been a guiding principle in many state administrative systems worldwide. This system has been applied in several countries, such as Singapore, China, Canada, Australia, the United States, and Japan, as well as in historical contexts by the Ottoman Dynasty (Sabani et al., 2024a). In Indonesia itself, the practice of meritocracy was tried in the early days of

independence through the policies of several prime ministers, such as Sutan Sjahrir and Agus Salim. During the leadership of Sutan Sjahrir (1945–1947) and Agus Salim (1947–1949), the principle of meritocracy was used as a basis for selecting ministers who were considered to have the ability and expertise in their fields (Sabani et al., 2024a). They strive to implement an apparatus recruitment system based on capacity, integrity, and work achievement as a form of professionalism in the administration of government.

The principle of meritocracy then became a major idea in Indonesia’s post-1998 bureaucratic reform. It was born out of the spirit of anti-Collusion, Corruption, and Nepotism (*Kolusi, Korupsi, Nepotisme*; KKN) and aspirations to create a clean, efficient, and performance-based public administration system (Sabani et al., 2024a). Meritocracy is seen as a rational means of ensuring that every state apparatus is recruited and promoted based on ability, not social connections or background. This idea was then institutionalized through the ASN Law No. 5 of 2014 and various derivative regulations, which affirm that the ASN procurement process must be carried out in a competitive, fair, objective, transparent, and free manner, free from KKN practices.

In the Indonesian context, meritocracy is not implemented in a completely value-free space. Considering that he grew up in a social landscape that remains uneven, with access to training, education, and professional resources unequally distributed. In areas such as Lebak, senior honorary teachers often face limitations in developing the formal competencies required for PPPK recruitment. On the other hand, the practice of KKN is still widespread in PPPK recruitment, further widening the gap between the ideals of meritocracy and recruitment practices in the field. However, sadly, over the past few years, they have continued to accept the logic of meritocracy as something natural and fair. They

assessed graduation in the PPPK recruitment as a result of 'self-ability' rather than a restrictive structure.

The discourse on national efficiency and standardization in the implementation of PPPK recruitment is legitimized by Ministerial Regulation of PANRB No. 14 of 2023 and Ministerial Decree of PANRB No. 347 of 2024, which regulate the recruitment mechanism for CAT-based ASN in a simultaneous, integrated, and standardized manner at the national level. This policy is part of the government's broader agenda to digitize ASN management, which has been rolled out since the implementation of the *Sistem Seleksi Calon ASN* (SSCASN). The main goal is to create uniformity in procedures, accuracy in assessment, and transparency in the recruitment process across regions. The 'live score' mechanism, which can be witnessed directly, creates the impression of objectivity and public accountability while, at the same time, removing space for human intervention practices that have been considered to hinder bureaucratic efficiency. The recruitment process integrated with the *Badan Kepegawaian Negara* (BKN) data center demonstrates an increasingly centralized form of bureaucratic control, in which each stage of recruitment is monitored and regulated through the national digital system.

The CAT test, as a computer-based recruitment mechanism, is not only interpreted as a tool to assess ability but also as a manifestation of the ideals of bureaucratic meritocracy. In policy discourse, this system is considered capable of removing collusive, nepotistic, and subjective practices that have been overshadowing ASN recruitment. Through the logic of technology and numbers, the state seeks to present itself as a rational and fair institution. The truth built here is the technocratic truth that one's ability can and should be measured through data and digital systems uniform for all citizens.

Meanwhile, the educator certificate emphasizes another dimension of the discourse

on professionalism, namely the moral and legal recognition of a teacher's quality. Educator certification is part of a significant education modernization project, in which teachers are positioned as professionals who must meet national competency standards. When the PPPK recruitment policy provides additional value or priority to these certificate holders, the state indirectly establishes a new hierarchy: those who are 'certified' are considered more qualified, more professional, and more deserving of entry into the ASN bureaucracy. An educator's certificate serves as a sign of institutional correctness, a formal legitimacy that determines who is recognized as a true professional.

If the discourse of meritocracy shapes a way of thinking about justice and competence, then the rationality of the state plays a deeper role: it organizes how society receives, understands, and recognizes power as natural. Through the PPPK recruitment policy, the state appears not only as a regulator but as a producer of truth about what is considered rational, efficient, and legitimate. This rationality does not work through coercion but rather through the mechanism of legitimacy, in which policy appears scientific and undeniable. Teachers, local officials, and the wider community unconsciously become part of the logic of government that wraps obedience in the language of modernity and administrative justice.

Honorary teachers who did not pass the PPPK recruitment did not interpret their failure as a manifestation of structural inequality or an unfair policy design, but rather as destiny, fate, or part of the divine will. This perspective shows how power operates subtly; it encourages individuals to internalize the experience of injustice, so that structural problems are reduced to personal moral and spiritual problems. Failure is not read as a result of a policy configuration, but as a test or lifeline that must be accepted.

This narrative shows the most subtle form of the production of submission when the

individual accepts the structure of injustice as divine decree. Some informants have even gone through the recruitment process multiple times, with most participating in more than 7 recruitments, ranging from the scheme for appointing civil servants to PPPK. Although their long efforts did not result in a change in structural position, the failure was not read as a consequence of an unequal policy design. Instead, religious and spiritual discourse serves to normalize the experience, positioning it as a destiny or lifeline that must be accepted. This perspective shows how power works through the internalization of meaning, so that systemic inequality is diverted into personal moral and spiritual issues.

This is where the power mechanism works subtly: the state does not appear as an explicitly ruling authority, but rather constructs a discursive terrain that shapes how social actors think, feel, and assess applicable policies. Efficiency, competence, and digitalization are used as universal measures that eliminate the diversity of social contexts and life experiences of honorary teachers. Local government became an extension of the central bureaucracy, losing reflective space and moral independence. While teachers who fail the recruitment turn frustration into religious beliefs, calling it *'fate'*, *'not yet sustenance'*, or *'a test from God'*. All of this shows how power works through rationality and morality, making obedience appear to be a personal choice, rather than the result of a hegemonic structure.

Behind the acceptance of honorary teachers due to unfavorable recruitment results lie emotional dynamics more complex than mere spiritual surrender. At this point, it is important to examine how teachers' subjective experiences are shaped by the relationships among emotions, professional identity, and their positions within educational power structures. Identity as a *'teacher'* encompasses not only a social role but also a set of moral values, such as patience,

sincerity, and devotion, which indirectly serve as a mechanism for taming potential resistance. These values work as a moral frame that holds back anger, so that structural injustices do not develop into criticism of state policies.

The internalization of these values is not only rooted in society's culture but is also strengthened by the moral narrative put forward by public officials. One example can be found in the statement by the Minister of Religious Affairs at the opening of the Teacher Professional Education (*Pendidikan Profesi Guru*, PPG) activity for Batch 3 of 2025. In his remarks, he emphasized that the main task of teachers is to educate the nation's children and that this profession should not be carried out with a focus on material profit, as in trading activities. He placed the teaching profession as a field of blessings and charity with long-term spiritual value.

Discourse on Meritocracy as a State Truth Regime

In the rationality of modern government, state policy is rarely legitimized through ideological or moral authority, but rather through the language of efficiency, rationality, and technocratic competence. The legitimacy of government no longer relies on normative values such as social justice or moral truth, but rather on the extent to which such policies can be proven to be effective and measurable in achieving the set goals. This kind of rationality pattern is evident in the PPPK recruitment policy. The government emphasized that competency-based recruitment is the primary instrument for building a professional, adaptive, and performance-oriented bureaucracy. Through the narrative of efficiency and meritocracy, the PPPK recruitment is positioned not only as a mechanism but also as a symbol of the bureaucratic paradigm shift from a patrimonial system and personal loyalty to one that prioritizes expertise and accountability. Before examining how the state creates a formal

truth about the figure of teachers in its own eyes, it is important to understand that the ASN-PPPK recruitment policy rests on the government's prioritization of technocratic rationality, grounded in the principle of merit or meritocracy. Recruitment based on individual qualifications, competencies, and performance, without the influence of social status, heredity, wealth, or social privilege (Sabani et al., 2024b; Young, 1961). Field findings show that the recruitment process, digital tools, and objective criteria such as the best ranking or CAT scores are positioned as neutral and scientific instruments. Although it is read through the lens of Foucault's theory (1980), what appears to be objectivity is actually a mechanism of truth production that allows the state to define certain standards as the only measure of professional legitimacy for teachers who participate in the ASN-PPPK recruitment.

This construction of recruitment objectivity is in line with the findings of Sabani et al. (2024), who show that meritocracy often operates as an *illusion of neutrality*, which is a mechanism that appears to be procedurally fair but actually hides structural bias through the language of efficiency, qualifications, and technical standards (Sabani et al., 2024b). This finding aligns with research indicating that achievement is seldom regarded as entirely objective in practice, as the recruitment process is influenced by institutional fit, insider knowledge, and performative indicators that marginalise experience and social context (Steed et al., 2021; TAN, 2024). As for Foucault, the illusion of neutrality is part of the production of a *regime of truth* that shapes the subject to accept state standards as the only measure of professional legitimacy (Foucault, 1974, 1980a, 2002a). The construction of who deserves to be considered a 'competent and professional teacher' in the context of the ASN-PPPK recruitment policy is not a natural category but a historical product of the power/knowledge relationship, as Foucault (1980) explains. The

state does not merely set administrative standards; it produces a regime of truth that determines what can be said to be true about the teaching profession (Foucault, 1980a, 2005). The truth regime in the PPPK recruitment policy was then institutionalized through the ASN Law, PermenPANRB, KepmenPANRB 348/2024, as well as digital recruitment tools such as CAT, Dapodik, and national ranking-based assessments. In this case, legal and administrative standards act as a hegemonic construction, where legality and professionalism are politically produced through state-centered definitions that push aside local practices and alternative forms of competence (Brogger, 2019; Joseph, 2017; Myers et al., 2020).

These policy documents frame 'competent teachers' as figures who meet technocratic indicators, possession of educator certificates, excellent performance in competency tests, a digitally validated track record, and the ability to operate within the government-owned information technology infrastructure. This definition may at first glance seem objective and value-free. However, it is actually a discursive construct that filters and centralizes certain types of knowledge while eliminating or downplaying the significance of practical knowledge, local wisdom, and the long pedagogical experience of many senior honorary teachers. In other words, what is called 'competence' is more the result of knowledge and political choices than a comprehensive reflection of teachers' abilities in the field.

In the framework of Foucault's (2002) knowledge archaeology, the state not only describes teachers' competence but also regulates the knowledge dispositif that determines which aspects of the profession are valued and which are excluded from the structure of truth. Decades of service, teaching experience in disadvantaged areas, contextual pedagogical skills, adaptability to conditions of limited facilities, and social

relations with students are not recognized as elements of 'competence' if they cannot be translated into the country's digital format. Official standards are not just about assessing, but producing teacher subjects that conform to bureaucratic logic. As a result, pedagogical practices that grow out of experience and social relations are slowly losing epistemic legitimacy in the education policy landscape.

The study's findings further clarify how the state is redefining competence through a fully technocratic recruitment mechanism. In an interview, one of the employees of the Education Office emphasized that *"If I explain it, everything is purely CAT. There is no calculation of the working period"*. This statement does not merely affirm administrative procedures but reveals an epistemological shift in what is considered 'competence' itself. Through the logic of score-based recruitment, the state reduces the professional meaning of teachers to quantitative indicators that can be measured, compared, and standardized. If explored sociologically, this kind of logic is a form of technical rationality that marginalizes the relational, historical, and moral dimensions of teaching work, which are precisely the basis of the symbolic authority of senior teachers (Bourdieu, 1991). This kind of meritocratic logic reflects market rationality, reproduces class-based hierarchies, and hides structural inequalities behind stories of efficiency, professionalism, and individual achievement (Barak & Shoshana, 2025; Bruni & Santori, 2021).

As a result, the long experience of senior honorary teachers is not only sidelined but also structurally marginalized because it does not conform to the form of knowledge recognized by the state administrative regime. Pedagogic competencies that were previously attached to practice, experience, and community recognition are now positioned as legitimate only when converted into CAT scores. In other words, the

statement of one of the employees of the Dinas Pendidikan is a representation of the formal discourse of the state that works to normalize a new way of understanding professionalism, while reducing the depth of teacher experience to just a variable that is 'not calculated' in bureaucratic calculations.

In this perspective, the category of 'competent teachers' cannot be understood as an objective fact that stands alone, but rather as a social construct formed through state power relations. Through its policies, regulations, and administrative apparatus, the state produces a definition of competence that seems to be universal and neutral, even though it substantively reflects the interests of the rationality of the modern bureaucracy, namely a system that upholds efficiency, standardization, measurability, and administrative control over the bodies and practices of teachers. So what is called competence no longer reflects pedagogic quality in general, but rather results from a categorization process that aligns the subject of education with the needs of bureaucratic management. This aligns with the findings of Andina & Arifa (2021), who show that the PPPK recruitment policy actually fosters a highly competitive climate among teachers.

Formal truth gains its power not only because it is forced, but because it is accepted as reasonable. It works through an internalization mechanism in which the education bureaucracy considers it a standard of professionalism, the public interprets it as a form of state objectivity, and some teachers themselves begin to treat it as a measure of legitimacy. Competency construction is part of the knowledge structure that regulates what can be thought of, assessed, and determined as 'professional' in the world of education, while at the same time getting rid of alternative forms of competence that are not in accordance with the logic of state administration (Bahasoan & Kotarumalos, 2014).

It is at this point that the mechanism of power works not only through formal assessment, but also through what can be termed structural gaslighting, that is, situations of systematic injustice framed as personal failures (Darke et al., 2025). Senior honorary teachers who fail the recruitment are ultimately directed to see themselves as “*less competent*” or “*unable to compete*”. At the same time, age-biased policy structures, experience, and access to technology are masked by the discourse of objectivity. The meritocratic regime in PPPK recruitment not only establishes standards but also shapes how teachers understand their own failures. This shows the strength of the meritocracy idea, where tests are used to create conformity, loyalty, and self-blame instead of judging someone’s administrative or pedagogical abilities (Ezeudu & Yau, 2023; Peng, 2025; TAN, 2024). Internalising this failure echoes a critical argument that views meritocracy as an ideological mechanism that fosters self-blame and conformity rather than acknowledging structural injustice (Peng, 2025; TAN, 2024).

Furthermore, the failure of senior honorary teachers in the PPPK recruitment can no longer be understood as an individual or purely technical problem, but as a manifestation of the work of the truth structure that normalizes one type of measure as the sole parameter of professional feasibility. Through uniform recruitment mechanisms and competency standards, states set boundaries for who is considered “*normal*”, “*deserving*”, and “*competent*”, while also marking who is categorized as “*lagging*” or “*not meeting standards*”. In this logic, senior honorary teachers are placed in positions of subjects deemed less competent, not because of a lack of pedagogical ability or experience, but because the definition of competence itself has been formulated to prioritize certain types of teachers. These teachers align with the state’s vision for modernizing education.

In the end, the position of senior honorary teachers becomes vulnerable not because of

personal weakness, but because of the engineering of knowledge that produces a hierarchy of values. Practice-based competencies, long experience, and social relations that have long been a source of teacher authority in local communities have no place in state-designed assessment frameworks. Their failures reflect how the state’s regime of truth shapes the subject of education through a process of classification, normalization, and exclusion, so that the model of teachers who do not conform to technocratic standards is slowly removed from the imagination of legitimate professionalism (Foucault, 2002b; Haryatmoko, 2025).

The mechanism of state hegemony also runs through what Marx (1867) called ‘false consciousness’, a condition in which the dominated group fails to recognize the structural roots of the injustice they experience and instead interprets the inequality as the result of personal shortcomings (Fromm, 2004; Ordonez, 2024). In Marx’s logic of false consciousness, meritocracy that appears to be objective becomes an ideology that masks inequality by transferring structural responsibility to the individual level, so that teachers are not only administratively subject, but also mentally, accepting state domination as something natural and natural (Ordonez, 2024; Suseno, 1999). Sandel (1953), who delves into the principle of meritocracy, also admits that meritocracy’s discourse contains an internal paradox: it is not a neutral principle. However, it carries an ideological content that subtly benefits certain groups and excludes others (Sandel, 2020). Meanwhile, in Young’s (1961) view, meritocracy paradoxically gives rise to a new hierarchical structure that justifies inequality through a narrative of ‘objective ability’ (Young, 1961).

This internalization of meritocratic logic weakens resistance. Incompetence is not recognized as a political issue born from the state’s decision, but rather reduced to ‘self-fault’. Hegemony works most effectively when it

prevents the emergence of criticism, silencing objections, and closing the possibility of rereading their experiences as part of a broader structure of inequality (Musahwi, 2013). At this point, it becomes clear that the acceptance of senior honorary teachers' failure is proof that state power shapes how individuals understand themselves.

State hegemony in Gramsci's framework of thought does not only work through formal political institutions, but also through the ideological apparatus/hegemony, namely institutions outside the state that function to produce values, norms, and meanings that support dominant interests (Gramsci, 1976; Patria & Arief, 2015; Simon, 1999). Gramsci referred to this region as civil society, which includes the media, professional organizations, families, schools, religions, and other cultural networks (Faruk, 2013). Hegemony is only effective when the values produced by the state are reproduced by these institutions so that they appear to be 'common sense' at the societal level (Patria & Arief, 2015). In the context of the PPPK recruitment in Lebak Regency, the ideological apparatus is seen to work through two main channels, namely (1) local bureaucracy as a producer of technocratic narratives, and (2) professional organizations and school institutions as an extension of the ideology of competence. Both produce a hegemonic effect, leading senior honorary teachers to accept an unequal structure as natural and logical.

Paradox of Meritocracy: The Dialectic between State Discourse and the Subjectivity of Senior Honorary Teachers

For Foucault, submission does not primarily operate through visible coercion but rather through the subtle operation of institutionalized knowledge. Such knowledge produces a set of norms, categories, and standards of truth that individuals take for granted. Through internalization, individuals learn to supervise,

assess, and regulate themselves to be in harmony with the institution's boundaries. Power does not exist as a coercive external pressure, but as a logic of truth that penetrates consciousness and shapes everyday behavior, so that submission arises spontaneously, naturally, and even as a personal choice (Foucault, 1977, 1980b, 2021; Musahwi, 2013).

This study's findings clearly show the mechanism of submission as senior honorary teachers understand their failures in the PPPK recruitment. Instead of seeing the recruitment process as a product of power configurations, such as formation limitations, regulatory inconsistencies, unequal access to training, or certain bureaucratic practices, they interpret these failures as personal shortcomings. This pattern shows that the knowledge regime embedded in the PPPK recruitment policy has succeeded in shifting from structural to individual explanations. Gramsci's logic in this case reflects cultural hegemony, i.e., voluntary acceptance of the dominant ideology (meritocracy as an objective measure of competence). Hegemony works because the state discourse, spread through the education bureaucracy, school principals, regulations, and the media, wraps the recruitment standards in a neutral narrative of professionalism and fairness. Teachers remain obedient to the recruitment mechanism, even though they are aware of the inequity in the formation process, the limitations of the regional budget, and repeated fraudulent practices. Their submission is not because they do not see injustice, but because the discourse of meritocracy has taught them how to judge themselves. Again, power succeeds in producing the truth, making teachers voluntarily conform and accept their position in the structure without questioning the design of the recruitment system itself (Musahwi, 2013).

Although state hegemony operates strongly through competency standards, recruitment mechanisms, and truth regimes that govern how

teachers understand themselves, this study also finds a space of subjectivity that is not fully absorbed by the state's logic. Senior honorary teachers, with long experience and consistent social involvement, build an identity rooted in teaching practices in remote areas, proximity to the community, and moral legitimacy as educators who have been performing the school's social functions for many years. The identity they built serves as a counter-narrative that aligns with the state's definition. When the state constructs them as 'incompetent' based on technocratic scores and indicators, teachers respond by emphasizing that education is a humanitarian practice that cannot be reduced to numbers or recruitment algorithms. At this point, a power-subjectivity dialectic emerges in which the state seeks to produce the subject through formal truth. However, the subject also produces itself through subtle rejections, grievances, experiential narratives, and moral claims that expand the boundaries of the identity the state offers.

If read through Bourdieu's framework, the contradiction that arises can be understood as a clash between the habitus of senior honorary teachers, formed by decades of teaching experience and moral legitimacy as grassroots educators, and the field of educational bureaucracy, governed by technocratic logic and state-produced competency standards. Habitus oriented towards pedagogical practice and long-term devotion carries a series of cultural and symbolic capitals that should have value in the educational arena. However, in the PPPK recruitment, these capitals are delegitimized because the state only recognizes capital that aligns with the definition of technocratic competence, CAT test scores, digital capabilities, and administrative competence (Serdik). This is where a form of symbolic violence comes into play, in which the imposition of state standards is the only objective measure of professionalism. At the same time, the teacher's long experience

is deemed 'irrelevant'. This is in line with the findings of Marto et al. (2023), which highlight that the PPPK recruitment shows a tendency to 'impose' policies and procedural exclusivity, especially because it does not consider local needs and the characteristics of human resource management in each region (Marto et al., 2023).

Although there is a dialectic between the state discourse and the narrative constructed by honorary teachers, the relationship has never been equal. The state discourse remains dominant, while the narrative of honorary teachers is subjugated to knowledge, namely knowledge that is oppressed, recognized, but never given space as a policy basis. This shows how power works through the normalization and delegitimization of experience (Foucault, 1980b). Their knowledge is marginalized, reduced to personal grievances or opinions, rather than as a valid epistemic basis. This inequality shows how power works subtly through the mechanism of normalization. The state determines what is considered rational, objective, and worthy of measurement, while at the same time delegitimizing the long experience of teachers who do not fit within the technocratic framework it has built. The practice of power not only organizes behavior, but also determines which knowledge is allowed to speak and which must remain in silent territory (Foucault, 1977, 1980b, 2002a).

At the end point, we are shown the face of meritocracy itself, where meritocracy in public policy, such as in the PPPK recruitment policy, often operates only as a normative slogan that promises justice, but is not fully realized as a mechanism that is truly fair and sensitive to the social context (Bruni & Santori, 2021; Cobbe & Douglas, 2024; Cunningham & Samson, 2021). Instead of strengthening the position of vulnerable groups, the logic of meritocracy applied has the potential to deepen exclusion, as it ignores the conditions of inequality they have experienced before. In the body of the PPPK recruitment

policy, the emphasis on an exam score-based system produces a pattern similar to the practice of higher education recruitment in the UK, where individual achievement is required as the main indicator of success without considering structural factors such as age, service experience,

socioeconomic background, and the typical vulnerability of honorary teachers. As a result, meritocracy does not work as an instrument of correction of injustice, but rather as a mechanism of legitimacy for existing inequality (Cunningham & Samson, 2021).

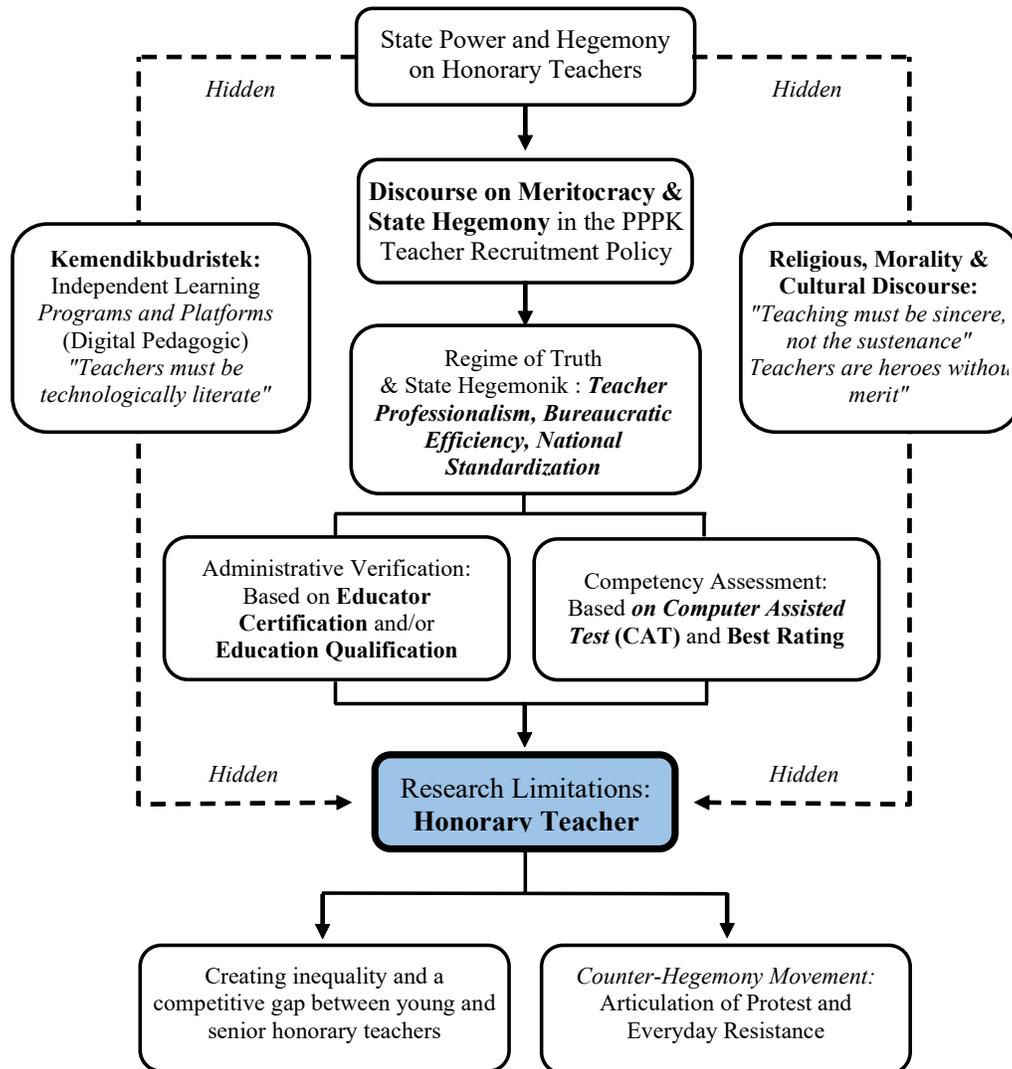


Figure 5. Foucauldian and gramscian theory dialogue on PPPK teacher recruitment policy

■ **CONCLUSION**

The PPPK recruitment policy operates through a meritocratic discourse power mechanism that prioritizes objective standards such as CAT scores, diploma linearity, PPG certificates, and administrative procedures.

Discursively, the state positions meritocracy as the “*fairest way*” to improve the quality of the civil servant (ASN). However, this study shows that meritocracy is actually an instrument of state hegemony that produces inequality for senior honorary teachers. The state maintains its

hegemony by making senior honorary teachers accept the logic of meritocracy, even though it is detrimental to them, because it is presented as the only legal route to obtaining ASN-PPPK status. The meritocracy discourse works in the following ways: 1) Removing the affirmation of age and working period in the 2024 PPPK recruitment, so that the long experience of honorary teachers is reduced to irrelevant in the recruitment; 2) Prioritizing technocratic-procedural logic, such as CAT and digital administration systems that structurally benefit young teachers; 3) Normalize uncertainty through changing, overlapping, and inconsistent regulations, so that honorary teachers are in a position subordinate to state decisions; 4) Reproducing the structure of the gap, due to the limitations of regional formation and fiscal capacity, many teachers remain in a contextual status, including through the Part-Time PPPK scheme. The results of the study reinforce the criticism that meritocracy has never been neutral. It is influenced by age, technological access, geography, and regional economic structure, so that the PPPK recruitment produces more inequality than it creates justice. The PPPK recruitment functions as a form of Foucault-style subtle power, not through coercion, but through normalization and discipline that shape the way honorary teachers understand themselves and their positions. These findings confirm the Foucauldian view that public policy is not just a rule, but a technology of power that shapes the subject, creates new hierarchies, and normalizes inequalities in education. The state needs to re-evaluate PPPK policies, especially aspects that ignore social dimensions such as working period, age, and geographical context. Local governments should establish a transparent data verification system to prevent Dapodik manipulation and administrative incompatibilities. The recruitment process needs to take regional disparities into account, especially regarding technology, distance to test locations, and limited infrastructure.

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