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Rethinking Ideal Education from Prospective Teachers' Perspectives: Systemic Challenges and Educational Policy Implications in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary educational reform in Indonesia has largely emphasized policy design and teacher implementation, yet limited attention has been given to how prospective teachers conceptualize ideal education and interpret systemic challenges. Addressing this gap, this study explores how pre-service teachers articulate their vision of ideal education and critically assess current educational conditions. Employing a qualitative case study design, data were collected from 33 fifth-semester students in an Islamic Education program through open reflective essays and analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. The findings reveal five interrelated dimensions shaping prospective teachers' conceptualization of ideal education: (1) learner-centered and meaningful pedagogy, (2) critique of assessment-oriented culture, (3) recognition of structural educational inequality, (4) awareness of professional pressures on teachers, and (5) integration of character education with 21st-century competencies. These themes demonstrate that prospective teachers' perspectives extend beyond classroom technique and reflect an emerging structural and professional consciousness. The study proposes an Ideal Education Framework that integrates pedagogical commitment, structural awareness, and systemic support as interconnected dimensions of educational transformation. This study contributes to the discourse on Indonesian educational reform by repositioning prospective teachers as reflective epistemic actors whose perspectives bridge pedagogical ideals and policy realities. The findings offer policy-relevant insights for strengthening teacher education, promoting equitable resource distribution, and balancing accountability with professional autonomy in national education reform.

Keywords*: *educational policy, ideal education, prospective teachers, 21st century learning

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INTRODUCTION

Educational reform in many countries has increasingly emphasized the importance of teacher participation in shaping curriculum design, policy implementation, and systemic transformation (Tatto, 2021). Within contemporary policy discourse, teachers are no longer viewed merely as technical implementers of centrally designed reforms, but as professional actors whose experiential knowledge contributes to policy relevance and sustainability (Ramírez-Montoya et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2022). Comparative evidence suggests that education systems characterized by substantive teacher involvement in policy formulation tend to demonstrate stronger coherence between policy design and classroom practice, as seen in Finland, Japan, and South Korea (Ahtiainen et al., 2021; Kim & Lee, 2020). These cases indicate that policy quality is closely linked to the integration of professional pedagogical insight into decision-making processes.

In the Indonesian context, educational reform has undergone significant transformation over the past decade, including curriculum restructuring, assessment reform, and ongoing discussions surrounding the Draft National Education System Law (RUU Sisdiknas). While the government has introduced consultative mechanisms such as public policy testing, teacher forums, and pilot programs like Sekolah Penggerak, empirical studies indicate that teacher participation remains more prominent at the implementation stage rather than at the philosophical and structural levels of policy formulation (Rasmitadila et al., 2025; Shadri et al., 2023). This structural pattern potentially creates a gap between reform aspirations and pedagogical

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realities in schools. Persistent challenges such as regional educational inequality, assessment-oriented practices, and tensions surrounding teacher professionalism further illustrate the complexity of systemic reform in Indonesia (Espinosa Andrade et al., 2024; Ismail et al., 2022). These conditions raise critical questions regarding whose perspectives are represented in shaping the future direction of national education.

While considerable attention has been devoted to the role of in-service teachers in implementing and responding to reform, less scholarly focus has been directed toward prospective teachers, individuals currently undergoing professional formation who simultaneously observe, interpret, and internalize systemic dynamics. As teacher education students engage with pedagogical theory, field practice, and academic discourse, they occupy a unique epistemic position that bridges normative ideals and structural realities (Klassen & Kim, 2019; Yavuz Tabak et al., 2021). Their perspectives potentially offer reflective insights into how future educators conceptualize ideal education and interpret existing systemic challenges. However, their voices remain largely absent from national policy discourse.

Existing research on teacher education students in Indonesia has predominantly examined motivation to teach, professional readiness, pedagogical competence, and attitudes toward the teaching profession (Saito, 2024; Sindiani & Tsuk, 2025). Although these studies provide valuable insights into professional preparation, limited attention has been given to how prospective teachers conceptualize ideal education and critically evaluate structural issues within the national education system. More importantly, teacher education students are often positioned as objects of pedagogical development rather than as reflective subjects capable of articulating policy-relevant perspectives. This omission represents a significant research gap. Without empirical exploration of prospective teachers' critical orientations, discussions of educational reform risk overlooking the perspectives of the very cohort that will sustain and enact future policies.

Addressing this gap is particularly important in contexts characterized by rapid curriculum shifts, evolving assessment paradigms, technological transformation, and ongoing legislative reform. Debates surrounding learner-centered education, formative assessment, social justice in education, and 21st-century competencies have become central to global educational discourse (Morris et al., 2021; Voogt & Roblin, 2012). However, how these paradigms are interpreted by prospective teachers within the Indonesian context remains underexplored. Understanding their perspectives is essential not only for teacher education development but also for ensuring long-term policy coherence between reform ideals and classroom enactment.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to analyze prospective teachers' conceptualizations of ideal education and to identify systemic challenges within the Indonesian education system as perceived from the pre-service stage. Specifically, the study explores how teacher education students articulate their aspirations, critiques, and expectations regarding learning orientation, assessment practices, educational inequality, teacher professionalism, and future-oriented competencies.

Theoretically, this study contributes to educational policy scholarship by repositioning prospective teachers as epistemic actors within reform discourse, extending beyond conventional approaches that frame them solely as recipients of pedagogical training. Empirically, it provides contextualized qualitative evidence from Indonesian teacher education, enriching bottom-up perspectives in policy analysis. Practically, the findings offer policy-relevant insights for teacher education institutions and for ongoing national discussions concerning systemic reform, including the development of a more participatory and context-responsive education framework. Through this approach, the study seeks to bridge the space between pedagogical idealism and structural realities, positioning prospective teachers not merely as future implementers of policy but as reflective contributors to its direction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of ideal education in this study is not treated as a purely normative aspiration, but is situated within established traditions of educational philosophy and critical theory. To analytically interpret prospective teachers' perspectives, this research draws upon three complementary frameworks: Dewey's

Jurnal PAJAR (Pendidikan dan Pengajaran)
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progressive education, Freire's critical pedagogy, and Biesta's theorization of the purposes of education. These perspectives provide an interpretive lens for examining how pedagogical ideals, systemic critiques, and policy expectations are articulated by prospective teachers.

John Dewey's progressive education emphasizes learning as experiential growth grounded in democratic participation and reflective inquiry (Sadovnik et al., 2017). Education, for Dewey, is not the passive transmission of knowledge but the reconstruction of experience that enables learners to interact meaningfully with their social world (Vaughan, 2018). Learner-centeredness and contextual engagement, therefore, become central characteristics of quality education (Ye & Shih, 2021). Within this framework, prospective teachers' emphasis on meaningful learning and student voice can be understood as an internalization of progressive educational philosophy.

Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy offers a structural critique of technocratic and authoritarian models of schooling (Giroux, 2010). Freire famously challenged the banking model of education, in which learners are treated as passive recipients of deposited knowledge (Mclaren, 2020). Instead, he advocated dialogical education that fosters critical consciousness and challenges oppressive structures. Critiques expressed by prospective teachers regarding exam-oriented systems, memorization practices, and structural inequalities resonate with Freirean concerns about education functioning as a mechanism of reproduction rather than transformation (Nugraha et al., 2024).

Gert Biesta's framework on the purposes of education provides a contemporary lens for analyzing educational aims beyond measurable achievement (Coelho et al., 2025). Biesta distinguishes among qualification, socialization, and subjectification as three fundamental purposes of education. An overemphasis on measurable outcomes risks marginalizing the formation of autonomous, responsible subjects. Prospective teachers' emphasis on character development, ethical responsibility, and holistic growth reflects concerns aligned with Biesta's argument regarding the narrowing of education under performative accountability regimes (Biesta, 2015).

Through the integration of these perspectives, "ideal education" in this study is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing experiential learning (Dewey), critical consciousness (Freire), and holistic human formation (Biesta). This framework strengthens the analytical depth of the study by situating empirical findings within broader theoretical discourses on educational purpose, justice, and transformation.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a case study design. A qualitative approach was selected to explore in depth how prospective teachers conceptualize ideal education and interpret systemic challenges within the Indonesian education system. The case study design was considered appropriate because the research focused on a specific bounded system of students of the Islamic Education Study Program (PAI) within a particular institutional and academic context. Unlike phenomenology, which seeks to distil the essence of lived experience, or narrative inquiry, which centres on life stories, this study aimed to analyze collective perspectives situated within a defined educational setting. Therefore, a case study approach enabled contextualized and holistic examination of shared meanings and systemic interpretations.

The participants consisted of 33 fifth-semester students enrolled in the Islamic Education Study Program (PAI) at the State Islamic University of North Sumatra (UINSU). Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure information-rich cases relevant to the research objectives. The inclusion criteria were: (1) active enrollment in the PAI program, (2) completion of foundational pedagogical courses, and (3) willingness to provide reflective written responses. Fifth-semester students were chosen because they had acquired sufficient theoretical grounding and had begun developing professional reflections regarding educational practice.

Data were collected through open reflective essays written as part of a Teaching Profession course assignment. The reflective prompt functioned as a research instrument, designed to elicit participants' perspectives on two focal questions: (1) how they conceptualize ideal education, and (2) what systemic issues

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they perceive within the Indonesian education system. The prompts were intentionally open-ended to allow participants to articulate nuanced reflections without restrictive response categories. Although the essays were course-based assignments, students were informed in advance that their reflections would be used for research purposes, and participation was voluntary. Written informed consent was obtained prior to data inclusion.

Data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis following the procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis involved six stages: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading, (2) initial coding to identify meaningful units, (3) searching for patterns across codes, (4) reviewing and refining themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the analytical narrative. Coding was conducted manually to maintain close engagement with the data. The analysis was primarily inductive, allowing themes to emerge from participants' narratives rather than being imposed from pre-existing theoretical categories. However, during the interpretation stage, findings were contextualized using established educational theories to enhance analytical depth.

To ensure trustworthiness, several strategies were implemented. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the data and peer debriefing with academic colleagues. An audit trail was maintained to document coding decisions and theme development processes, ensuring transparency and dependability. While member checking was not conducted due to the collective and course-based nature of the data, participants' statements were presented verbatim to preserve authenticity. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the analysis process by critically reflecting on the researcher's positionality as both educator and investigator.

Ethical principles of voluntary participation, confidentiality, and non-maleficence were strictly observed. Participants' identities were anonymized, and data were used solely for research purposes. Ethical clearance was obtained from the institutional research ethics committee of Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara Medan. The research did not influence students' academic evaluation, and the lecturer responsible for grading was not involved in the analytical process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Student-Centered Education as an Ideal Pedagogical Orientation

The findings indicate that prospective teachers consistently conceptualize ideal education as learner-centered and humanistic in orientation. Participants emphasized that education should prioritize students' needs, meaningful engagement, and holistic development rather than rote memorization or grade accumulation. One participant stated:

> "*As a prospective teacher, I envision a future education system that focuses on the needs of each student. Schools should be enjoyable places where children not only memorize lessons, but truly understand how that knowledge can be applied in everyday life. The role of teachers will also evolve into that of mentors who guide students in discovering their talents, rather than simply giving them grades*." (NAP)

Similarly, other participants highlighted the importance of emotional safety, recognition, and student voice in learning environments. Education was described not merely as an evaluative mechanism but as a space for growth, dignity, and personal development:

> "*I want the world of education to be a place where students can learn and grow without fear or pressure. Education should develop children's full potential, not just assess their academic abilities*." (DRR)

> "*In my opinion, good education is education that makes every student feel valued and heard. School should be a comfortable place, not a place that makes students feel afraid or depressed*." (NRP)

From a theoretical perspective, these articulations reflect a strong alignment with Dewey's conception of progressive education, which positions learning as experiential growth rooted in interaction and reflective inquiry (Dar, 2021). Dewey argued that education should reconstruct experience in ways that enable learners to participate meaningfully in democratic life, rather than passively receive predetermined knowledge. The

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emphasis expressed by prospective teachers on meaningful understanding, contextual application, and mentorship echoes Dewey's principles of learner-centred pedagogy and education as lived experience (Matusov, 2022).

At the same time, participants' concern with emotional safety and recognition can be interpreted through Biesta's framework of educational purposes, particularly the dimension of subjectification (Thompson, 2024). Biesta warns against the reduction of education to qualification alone, the acquisition of measurable competencies, arguing that education must also support the formation of autonomous, responsible subjects. The prospective teachers' insistence that students should feel valued and heard suggests an implicit critique of performative educational cultures that prioritize measurable achievement over human development.

Importantly, these perspectives do not emerge in isolation from systemic realities. Participants contrasted their pedagogical aspirations with what they perceived as standardization-oriented and administratively driven educational practices. This tension reveals an early formation of pedagogical identity grounded in humanistic and progressive values, while simultaneously recognizing structural constraints within the education system (Korostenskiene, 2022). Rather than merely expressing idealistic preferences, prospective teachers demonstrate reflective awareness of the gap between learner-centered philosophy and technocratic implementation (Riyanto & Sugiharto, 2026).

These findings extend previous research indicating that pre-service teachers often internalize humanistic pedagogical values during professional formation (Abidin et al., 2024; Elfert, 2023; Maulidi et al., 2025). However, this study suggests that such values are not only pedagogical preferences but also function as normative commitments that shape how prospective teachers interpret systemic reform. In this sense, student-centered education is conceptualized not simply as a methodological choice, but as a moral orientation toward education as holistic human growth.

Critique of Assessment-Oriented Learning and the Narrowing of Educational Meaning

The findings reveal that prospective teachers express strong concern regarding the dominance of exam-oriented and grade-centered practices within the Indonesian education system. Participants repeatedly described learning as being reduced to the pursuit of scores and short-term memorization rather than deep understanding or practical relevance. One participant stated:

> "*As a prospective educator, my biggest concern is that our education system still focuses too much on test scores and memorization. Many students are only taught to answer test questions, without truly understanding the meaning of the lessons or how to apply them in real life*." (NAP)

Other participants emphasized that such assessment practices shift students' motivation from intrinsic curiosity to instrumental compliance:

> "*Education today is still too focused on grades and exams. Many students study only to get good grades, not because they really want to understand*." (NRP)
>
> "*There are still many learning programs that focus solely on grades and exams, rather than on critical thinking and problem solving*." (MZH & MS)

At a descriptive level, these statements reflect dissatisfaction with exam-centred culture. However, when interpreted through Freire's critical pedagogy, they represent a deeper structural critique (Valls-Carol et al., 2022). Freire's concept of the banking model of education describes educational systems in which knowledge is deposited into passive learners, emphasising memorisation, control, and compliance (Barros et al., 2024). The participants' rejection of rote memorization and score-driven learning resonates with this critique, suggesting an emerging awareness that assessment regimes can function as mechanisms of standardization rather than empowerment.

Furthermore, Biesta's analysis of performative accountability provides an additional interpretive lens. Biesta argues that contemporary education systems increasingly prioritize measurable outputs, reducing educational success to quantifiable indicators (Guillemin, 2025). Within such performative cultures, the purpose of education risks being narrowed to qualification alone, while the broader aims of subjectification

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and democratic formation are marginalized. The participants' concern that students study only for grades reflects precisely this narrowing of educational meaning. Their critique implies a desire to restore balance between measurable achievement and deeper human formation.

This perspective also aligns with scholarship on formative assessment, which emphasizes assessment as a process that supports learning rather than merely evaluating outcomes (Black & Wiliam; Morris et al., 2021). The participants' emphasis on meaningful understanding, critical thinking, and problem-solving suggests an implicit preference for assessment for learning rather than assessment of learning. Importantly, their critique does not reject evaluation per se; rather, it questions assessment systems that prioritize accountability metrics over pedagogical growth.

The tension articulated by prospective teachers thus extends beyond personal frustration. It reflects an early formation of critical pedagogical consciousness, in which assessment practices are interpreted not simply as technical tools but as structurally embedded mechanisms shaping learning culture. This indicates that prospective teachers are already negotiating their future professional identities in relation to systemic pressures, anticipating the challenge of balancing institutional accountability with meaningful pedagogy.

In this study, assessment-oriented learning emerges as a central site where pedagogical ideals confront systemic structures. While participants advocate learner-centred and meaningful education, they simultaneously recognize that dominant evaluation regimes may constrain such aspirations. This dynamic reinforces the need to analyze ideal education not merely as a pedagogical preference but as a negotiation between humanistic commitments and policy-driven accountability systems.

As implications, these findings emphahaidsize the need for a paradigm shift in assessment within the education system towards a more humanistic and learning-oriented approach. Assessment should be positioned as a means to support the learning process, provide constructive feedback, and encourage the overall development of students (Sari et al., 2021). For teacher education, these findings underscore the importance of equipping prospective teachers with an understanding of and skills in formative assessment so that they are able to design learning evaluations that are not only administratively accountable but also pedagogically meaningful.

Educational Inequality as a Structural Constraint on Educational Ideals

The findings indicate that prospective teachers do not perceive educational inequality merely as isolated or incidental disparities, but as structural challenges embedded within the national education system. Participants highlighted gaps between urban and rural schools, unequal distribution of qualified teachers, and disparities in access to learning facilities and technology. These concerns reflect an awareness that social, economic, and geographical conditions deeply shape educational quality.

Rather than attributing disparities to individual student effort or school management alone, participants framed inequality as systemic. This perspective suggests that prospective teachers recognize education as operating within broader structural arrangements that condition opportunities and outcomes. Such recognition moves beyond a meritocratic interpretation of educational success and instead situates learning within socio-political realities.

From a theoretical standpoint, this structural awareness resonates strongly with Freire's understanding of education within relations of power. Freire argued that education systems often reproduce existing social hierarchies when structural inequalities remain unaddressed (Misoczky, 2024). When access to resources, infrastructure, and qualified educators is unevenly distributed, education risks functioning as a mechanism of social reproduction rather than transformation. The participants' reflections on regional disparities, therefore, can be interpreted as an emerging critique of structural injustice rather than dissatisfaction with local inefficiencies.

This perspective can also be situated within social justice frameworks in education, which emphasize that equality of access does not automatically translate into equality of opportunity (Cazden, 2012). Scholars such as Tikly and Barrett argue that justice-oriented education requires attention to material resources,

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recognition of cultural difference, and participatory inclusion (Gümüş et al., 2021). The concerns expressed by prospective teachers, particularly regarding infrastructure gaps and unequal technological access, align with this multidimensional understanding of educational justice.

Importantly, the participants' views suggest that their conceptualization of ideal education includes an equity-oriented dimension. Ideal education is not imagined solely as learner-centered at the classroom level, but also as structurally fair at the systemic level. This expands the meaning of ideal education beyond pedagogy into the realm of policy and resource distribution.

Moreover, the awareness of inequality shapes prospective teachers' anticipated professional roles. Recognizing that teaching does not occur in a neutral environment, participants implicitly acknowledge that educators must navigate and respond to contextual constraints. This awareness reflects an early formation of what can be described as socially responsive professional identity, an orientation that considers not only instructional technique but also social context.

The findings therefore, suggest that educational inequality functions as a structural tension within prospective teachers' educational vision. While they advocate for humanistic and learner-centered education, they simultaneously recognize that such ideals cannot be fully realized without systemic equity. In this sense, ideal education is conceptualized as dependent not only on pedagogical transformation but also on policy-level redistribution and structural reform.

Teachers' Professional Roles under Systemic Pressures

The findings demonstrate that prospective teachers position educators as central actors in shaping educational quality, while simultaneously recognizing that the teaching profession operates under significant systemic constraints. Participants expressed concern that teachers are increasingly burdened by administrative tasks, curriculum changes, and external scrutiny, potentially limiting their capacity to focus on meaningful pedagogy. One participant noted: "*As a prospective educator, what worries me is that teachers will end up being more preoccupied with administration than focusing on meaningful learning*." (AD)

On the other hand, other prospective teachers highlighted welfare issues and declining professional authority:

"*The suboptimal welfare of teachers also needs attention, because the quality of education is highly dependent on the quality of the teaching staff*." (MHRA)

"*Many teachers hold back in their teaching methods for fear of being reported or going viral*." (SQ)

At a descriptive level, these concerns reflect awareness of professional challenges. However, when interpreted through theoretical lenses, they reveal deeper tensions between pedagogical autonomy and systemic regulation.

Biesta's discussion of teacher professionalism is particularly relevant here. Biesta argues that education systems driven by performative accountability and managerial governance often reduce teachers' roles to implementers of externally defined standards (Siegel & Biesta, 2022). In such contexts, pedagogical judgment and professional discretion may be constrained by administrative compliance and fear of sanctions. The participants' concern about administrative overload and reduced authority reflects precisely this tension between professional responsibility and bureaucratic control.

Similarly, Tatto emphasizes that teacher professionalism depends not only on individual competence but also on systemic conditions that enable autonomy, recognition, and sustained professional development (Tatto, 2021). The participants' reflections on teacher welfare and legal vulnerability suggest that prospective teachers are already aware that educational quality cannot be separated from structural support for the profession.

From the perspective of teacher agency theory, agency is understood not as an individual trait but as an ecological achievement shaped by cultural, structural, and material conditions (Priestley et al., 2012). The narratives in this study demonstrate that prospective teachers recognize the ecological nature of teacher agency: teachers' capacity to innovate, mentor, and build meaningful relationships is contingent upon

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supportive institutional frameworks (Cathcart et al., 2026). When administrative pressure and public scrutiny dominate, pedagogical agency risks being diminished.

Importantly, the participants do not frame teachers as the primary cause of educational problems. Instead, they conceptualize teachers as professionals navigating systemic complexity. This distinction is significant. It suggests that prospective teachers adopt a structural rather than individualistic understanding of professional challenges, reinforcing the broader theme of systemic awareness identified throughout the study.

The tension identified here also contributes to the evolving conceptualization of ideal education. While earlier findings emphasized learner-centered growth and critical awareness, this subtheme highlights the necessity of professional support systems. Ideal education, from the perspective of prospective teachers, requires not only pedagogical transformation but also structural reinforcement of teacher autonomy, welfare, and protection.

Thus, teachers' roles under systemic pressures function as a mediating dimension within the broader framework of ideal education. Pedagogical ideals can only be realized when teachers operate within systems that recognize and sustain their professional agency.

Integrating Character Education, Technology, and 21st-Century Competencies

The findings indicate that prospective teachers conceptualize ideal education as forward-looking and adaptive to contemporary global dynamics. Participants emphasized the importance of integrating character education, digital literacy, and 21st-century competencies such as critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity. In their view, education must prepare students not only for academic achievement but also for ethical participation in an increasingly complex and technology-driven world.

Importantly, technology was not perceived as an end in itself, but as a pedagogical instrument that ethical considerations must guide. Participants expressed concern that technological advancement without moral grounding could lead to superficial learning and reduced human interaction. Thus, character formation was consistently positioned as a foundational dimension that should accompany technological integration.

From a Deweyan perspective, this orientation reflects the idea that education must remain responsive to social change while preserving its democratic and experiential core. Dewey viewed education as inherently connected to societal transformation; therefore, adapting to technological advancement is consistent with progressive education, provided that learning remains grounded in reflective experience rather than mechanical skill acquisition.

Biesta's framework further clarifies the multidimensional nature of these aspirations. The emphasis on digital competencies corresponds to the function of qualification, equipping students with relevant skills. However, the insistence on character education and ethical awareness reflects the dimensions of socialization and subjectification. Prospective teachers appear concerned that rapid technological modernization could overshadow these broader purposes if education becomes overly instrumental (Biesta, 2023).

These findings also resonate with previous research showing that the integration of technology in learning will be effective if accompanied by character building and the role of teachers as learning facilitators (Alshammary & Alhalafawy, 2023; Wu, 2024). Various studies reveal that the use of technology without a clear pedagogical and ethical framework has the potential to result in superficial and instrumentally oriented learning (Fütterer et al., 2022; Wekerle et al., 2022). Therefore, the views of teacher education students reinforce the argument that future education requires a balance between technological innovation and the strengthening of character values.

The integration of 21st-century competencies within participants' narratives also resonates with international frameworks emphasizing critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity (Nurhaliza et al., 2026). However, unlike purely technocratic interpretations of such competencies, prospective teachers in this study interpret them holistically. Competence development is not framed merely as economic preparation but as preparation for responsible citizenship and lifelong learning.

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This synthesis reveals that prospective teachers do not perceive a dichotomy between tradition and modernization (Kurniaman et al., 2025). Rather, they envision an education system that harmonizes technological innovation with ethical grounding and character development. Such a perspective reinforces the earlier themes of human-centred growth and structural awareness, suggesting that ideal education must balance adaptability with moral responsibility (Biesta, 2021).

In this study, the integration of character education, technology, and future-oriented competencies functions as a forward-looking dimension of the ideal education construct. It highlights the necessity of aligning pedagogical philosophy, structural equity, professional agency, and technological adaptation within a coherent educational vision.

Table 1. Thematic Synthesis and Theoretical Interpretation

Main Dimension	Key Themes	Subthemes	Theoretical Lens
Pedagogical Orientation	Student-Centered Learning	Meaningful learning; Emotional safety; Student voice	Dewey (Progressive Education); Biesta (Subjectification)
Assessment Culture	Critique of Exam Orientation	Memorization, Grade-centered motivation, Psychological pressure	Freire (Banking Model); Biesta (Performativity)
Structural Context	Educational Inequality	Regional disparities; Resource imbalance, and technological gaps	Freire (Structural oppression); Social Justice Theory
Professional Dimension	Teacher Agency & Support	Administrative burden; Welfare concerns; Reduced autonomy	Biesta (Professional autonomy); Priestley (Teacher agency)
Future Orientation	Character & 21st-Century Competencies	Digital literacy; Ethical grounding; Critical thinking	Dewey (Adaptive growth); Biesta (Qualification & Subjectification)

Conceptual Model: The Ideal Education Framework from Prospective Teachers' Perspectives

The synthesis of findings and theoretical interpretation in this study leads to the formulation of an Ideal Education Framework that conceptualizes how prospective teachers envision educational transformation within systemic realities. Rather than understanding ideal education as a singular pedagogical aspiration, the framework reveals a layered and dynamic construct in which pedagogical commitments, structural awareness, and systemic conditions interact reciprocally. Ideal education is thus conceptualized not as an abstract norm but as a negotiated vision situated between humanistic values and institutional constraints.

At its core, ideal education is grounded in a human-centered orientation that prioritizes holistic development, meaningful engagement, and the formation of autonomous individuals. This central dimension reflects a progressive educational philosophy in which learning is understood as experiential growth and reflective participation rather than passive knowledge transmission. Prospective teachers consistently articulate the importance of emotional safety, student voice, contextual relevance, and character formation. Interpreted through Dewey's conception of education as growth and Biesta's emphasis on subjectification, this core dimension positions education as an ethical and developmental process aimed at nurturing responsible and reflective subjects.

Surrounding this pedagogical core is a layer of structural awareness that reflects prospective teachers' critical recognition of systemic constraints. Participants demonstrate sensitivity to exam-oriented cultures, performative accountability regimes, educational inequality, and governance pressures affecting teachers' autonomy. Through a Freirean lens, this dimension can be understood as the emergence of critical consciousness regarding how education systems may reproduce inequality and reduce learning to measurable outputs. Rather than perceiving educational challenges as isolated technical issues, prospective teachers interpret them as structurally embedded tensions that shape pedagogical possibilities. This layer, therefore, mediates between ideal aspirations and lived realities.

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Enveloping these dimensions is the systemic support layer, which highlights the enabling conditions necessary for the realization of educational ideals. Prospective teachers emphasize the importance of professional autonomy, equitable resource distribution, teacher welfare, and balanced integration of technology. Drawing on teacher agency theory and Biesta's multidimensional framework of educational purposes, this layer underscores that pedagogical transformation cannot be sustained without institutional reinforcement (Biesta, 2024). Human-centered education requires structural fairness and professional protection; otherwise, progressive aspirations risk being constrained by administrative overload and technocratic governance.

Taken together, the Ideal Education Framework illustrates a dynamic interplay between pedagogical philosophy, structural critique, and systemic reinforcement. Ideal education, from the perspective of prospective teachers, is not merely about improving instructional techniques. It entails aligning learner-centered growth with structural justice and professional agency within a coherent policy environment. This integrated vision positions prospective teachers not as passive recipients of reform but as reflective actors capable of articulating a multidimensional and future-oriented educational paradigm.

Policy-Level Implications: Relevance to the Draft National Education System Law (RUU Sisdiknas)

The findings of this study indicate that teacher education students' views on ideal education are not only pedagogical and professional in nature, but also have direct relevance to the direction of national education policy. Students' aspirations regarding education are centered on learner-centered education, meaningful learning, educational equity, strengthening the teaching profession, and integrating character and 21st-century competencies, reflecting the need for a regulatory framework that is more responsive to the dynamics of contemporary education. In this context, the research findings can be interpreted as relevant empirical input for the formulation and refinement of the Draft Law on the National Education System (RUU Sisdiknas).

First, students' emphasis on humanistic education oriented towards learners indicates the importance of the National Education System Bill, affirming the humanistic pedagogical paradigm as the foundation of the national education system. Education regulations should not only regulate structural and administrative aspects, but also explicitly guarantee learning principles that respect the diversity of learners' needs, potential, and development. This finding reinforces the urgency for the National Education System Bill to provide greater space for dialogical, contextual, and adaptive learning practices, so that education policy is in line to develop well-rounded individuals.

Second, student criticism of the dominance of value orientation, examinations, and memorization has important implications for the regulation of the education evaluation system in the National Education System Bill. These findings indicate the need for a paradigm shift in assessment from an approach that focuses on final results to an evaluation system that supports meaningful and sustainable learning. In the context of policy, the National Education System Bill is expected to not only position assessment as an instrument of accountability but also as a pedagogical tool that encourages the development of critical thinking, creativity, and psychological well-being among students.

Third, students' awareness of disparities in access to and quality of education confirms that the principles of fairness and equity must be the main foundation in the formulation of the national education system. The findings of this study indicate that uniform education policies have the potential to ignore diverse social and geographical contexts. Therefore, the National Education System Bill needs to be designed with an approach that is more sensitive to structural inequalities, particularly in terms of resource distribution, the placement and strengthening of teachers in disadvantaged areas, and the provision of adequate educational infrastructure. Education regulations oriented towards social justice are a prerequisite for education to function as a means of equalizing opportunities and social mobility.

Fourth, the views of teacher education students regarding the role of teachers and the challenges of professionalism have direct implications for strengthening the position of teachers in the national education

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system. These findings confirm that teacher professionalism cannot be separated from systemic support, which includes simplifying administrative burdens, improving welfare, and providing fair and proportional legal protection. In the context of the National Education System Bill, this shows the importance of regulations that explicitly guarantee pedagogical autonomy and protection of the teaching profession, so that teachers can carry out their strategic role without being under excessive structural pressure.

Fifth, findings regarding the importance of integrating character education, technology, and 21st-century competencies imply that the National Education System Bill needs to accommodate future educational demands in a more systematic manner. Education regulations are expected to not only be responsive to technological developments, but also to ensure that the use of technology in education remains based on character values and ethics. These findings emphasize the need for national education policies that promote a balanced integration of technological innovation, character building, and the development of students' capacity as lifelong learners.

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that the National Education System Bill has strategic opportunities to respond to the aspirations and pedagogical awareness of the future generation of teachers. Integrating the perspectives of teacher education students in the formulation of national education policy can strengthen the legitimacy and relevance of education regulations while bridging the gap between educational idealism and structural realities in the field. Thus, the National Education System Bill is expected to become a regulatory framework that is not only normative but also rooted in empirical findings and the real needs of education actors.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

This study demonstrates that prospective teachers conceptualize ideal education as a multidimensional and dynamic construct that integrates learner-centred growth, structural awareness, and systemic support. Rather than perceiving education solely as knowledge transmission, participants articulate a vision grounded in holistic human development, ethical formation, and critical engagement with systemic constraints. Interpreted through progressive education, critical pedagogy, and the multidimensional purposes of education, the findings indicate that prospective teachers possess an emerging pedagogical consciousness that bridges classroom practice, structural justice, and policy-level considerations.

Theoretically, this study contributes by repositioning prospective teachers as epistemic actors within educational reform discourse. While prior research has often framed pre-service teachers as recipients of pedagogical training, this study demonstrates that they actively construct reflective interpretations of educational ideals shaped by both philosophical commitments and systemic critique. The proposed Ideal Education Framework extends existing discussions by integrating pedagogical orientation, structural consciousness, and professional agency into a coherent conceptual model. In doing so, the study advances a more holistic understanding of how educational transformation is envisioned from the pre-service stage.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the research was conducted within a single institutional context and involved participants from one study program, which may limit the transferability of findings across different regions, disciplines, or educational cultures. Second, data were collected through reflective essays rather than in-depth interviews, which may have constrained opportunities for probing deeper into participants' lived experiences and contradictions. Third, the qualitative design prioritizes interpretive depth over statistical generalization; therefore, the findings should be understood as contextually situated rather than universally representative.

Future research may expand this inquiry in several directions. Comparative studies across multiple teacher education institutions could explore whether similar conceptualizations of ideal education emerge in different sociocultural settings. Longitudinal research tracking prospective teachers into their early professional careers would also provide insight into how pedagogical ideals evolve when confronted with institutional realities. Additionally, mixed-method approaches combining qualitative narratives with quantitative measures of pedagogical beliefs could strengthen the empirical robustness of this line of inquiry.

From a policy perspective, the findings underscore the importance of integrating prospective teachers' voices into educational reform processes. Teacher education institutions should systematically cultivate reflective spaces that encourage critical engagement with assessment practices, inequality, and professional identity formation. At the systemic level, policymakers are encouraged to design reforms that balance accountability with pedagogical autonomy, strengthen teacher welfare and legal protection, and ensure equitable resource distribution across regions. Embedding such principles within national education strategies would help align reform initiatives with the human-centred and justice-oriented aspirations articulated by future educators.

Credit authorship contribution statement

First Author: Conceptualization; Methodology; Data Curation; Formal Analysis; Investigation; Visualization.
Second Author: Writing, Review & Editing; Validation; Supervision.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Ethical declaration

Participation in this study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were clearly informed about the objectives of the research, the methods involved, and their autonomy to discontinue participation at any stage of the study without any obligation or penalty.

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