

## The commodification of education and inequality in Indonesia: A sociological perspective

Kurnia Asni Sari\*, Suci Wahyu Fajriani, Gunawan, Ainul Zulqoifah, Mallia Hartani

Sociology Study Program, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Sriwijaya, Jl. Masjid Al-Ghazali, Bukit Lama, Kec. Ilir Bar. I, Kota Palembang, South Sumatera 30128, Indonesia

\*e-mail: [kurniaasnisari@fisip.unsri.ac.id](mailto:kurniaasnisari@fisip.unsri.ac.id)

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### ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the phenomena of commodification and inequality in the Indonesian education industry from a critical sociological perspective. Education, which is a basic right for all citizens, has been transformed into a commercial commodity accessible only to groups with certain economic, social, and cultural capital. This study used qualitative methods with content analysis based on Bourdieu's capital theory and Weber's stratification. The results indicate that commodification of education through superior private schools, tutoring, and achievement pathways strengthens student privilege and widens the gap between social classes. The privatization of education obscures the principle of meritocracy and creates a cycle of structural injustice that ultimately makes it difficult for students to achieve vertical social mobility. This research finds that educational inequality in Indonesia is not only a matter of access but also a structural problem that is supported by an unequal social, cultural, and economic system.

**Keywords:** Commodification, Educational Inequality, Privilege, Social Capital, Social Stratification, Indonesian Education.

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RESEARCH & PUBLISHING



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Economic Quality education is universally recognized as a fundamental human right that is essential for individual development and social advancement. In Indonesia, Law No. 20 of 2003 affirms the state's obligation to ensure every citizen's right to quality education through continuous improvements in educational standards. This legal framework reflects the government's commitment to make education accessible across all segments of society. However, empirical evidence indicates that access to quality education is predominantly available to privileged minorities. This reality suggests that education, which ought to be a universal right, has increasingly become a privilege concentrated among certain social groups (Ilma et al., n.d.). This inequality illustrates the commodification of education, where the education is no longer as a public good but use as a market-driven commodity (Suryanef et al., 2025). In Indonesia, this dilemma is reflected in the rising costs associated with schooling, like prestigious private institutions and supplementary non-formal services such as tutoring and preparatory courses (Toyibah, 2020). The high cost of accessing quality education renders it unattainable for poor families. Families living below the poverty line often struggle to meet their basic needs, such as food, clothing, and shelter, let alone provide quality education for their children. According to Statistics Indonesia (Badan Pusat Statistik/BPS), poverty remains a significant issue, with millions of Indonesians still living below the poverty line, defined as a per capita income of less than Rp 17,851 per day (BPS, 2025). This creates a structural cycle in which poverty leads to school dropouts, subsequently hindering economic growth and limiting social mobility among low-income groups.

This inequality is further exacerbated by the dynamics of socio-economic privilege, in which access to elite education is largely determined by the economic, social, and cultural capital possessed by families (Martak & Chotib, 2021) that reveal deeper systemic issues within the education system. This phenomenon is reflected in the growing influence of market forces and social hierarchies, which increasingly determine who has the opportunity to access quality education and the extent to which they benefit from it. Ironically, quality education—often envisioned as a tool to reduce poverty—remains largely inaccessible to those from socially and economically marginalized backgrounds (Froerer, 2021). This cycle has the potential to trap the poorest people in intergenerational poverty through the reproduction of structural inequalities. As quality education becomes a commodified good, the gap between those who can afford it and those who cannot continue to widen.

The transformation of education into a high-cost commodity in Indonesia is marked by several observable phenomena that demonstrate inequality. First, the expensive cost of education and supplementary non-formal services—especially in private schools and non-formal sectors such as tutoring institutions — has quietly become a must for any student to afford it to stay competitive. Second, in the submission process, there is bias, particularly through achievement-based pathways. This pathway often supports students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds who can access private schooling or preparatory courses. This creates an exclusive version of meritocracy that rewards privileges rather than talent. Third, the rapid growth of luxurious private and international schools, which offer premium facilities and curricula at high prices, has further strengthened educational stratification, that separate students based on their families' financial class (Suryanef et al., 2025).

This study provides comprehensive research on the commodification of education in Indonesia and its role in perpetuating social inequality. Sukandi and Yelli Eka Sumadhinata (2024a) illustrate how higher education institutions have reduced the intrinsic value of education to increase institutional profit. The authors show how transactional leadership styles in universities have shifted the orientation of education toward a business model in which students are defined as consumers. Sidauruk et.al, (2025) use Marxist and Weberian conflict theory to demonstrate how privatization has made access to quality education highly dependent on economic capital, thereby intensifying tensions between social classes. Meanwhile, Gaus and Tang (2023a) explore how symbolic and cultural capital—particularly in the context of overseas education—shape an academic habitus that facilitates professional mobility. This reflects the reproduction of inequality through accumulation and deployment of symbolic capital.

In examining how the commodification of education functions as a symbol of prestige and social access, Gaus and Tang (2023b) argue that the commodification of education through tutoring services demonstrates how these programs serve not only to enhance academic performance but also to accumulate cultural capital—thereby reinforcing the social status of students from influential families. Adriany (2018) also found that parents' choice of international schools in Bandung Indonesia is motivated not only by high curriculum quality, but also by social status and prestige that offer. This illustrates a concrete form of educational commodification in which the symbolic power of cultural capital plays a role in reproducing the social elite path. This is a clear example of how the commodification of education facilitates the reproduction of the social elite class by leveraging the symbolic dimensions of cultural capital. Sidauruk et.al (2025) also states the systemic nature of educational inequality in Indonesia. They explain that despite various educational reforms, the unequal distribution of resources, disparities in teacher quality, and gaps in access between regions are major obstacles to achieving equitable educational opportunities.

While earlier studies have explored the commodification of education from various perspectives—such as the impact of transactional leadership on the process of commodification in education (Sukandi & Yelli Eka Sumadhinata, 2024a), the role of privatization and class conflict (Sidauruk et.al, 2025), the use of cultural and symbolic capital in shaping academic careers (Gaus & Tang, 2023a), and the choice of prestigious schools as a mean of class reproduction (Adriany, 2018) there is still a lack of integrative research that analyses the relationship between commodification and social inequality within a contextual sociological framework specific to Indonesia. Most previous studies tended to focus on either the commodification of education or the issue of inequality in isolation. By contrast, this study seeks to explore the direct implications of educational commercialization on key actors, particularly students and lower-middle-class families, who are most affected by the marketization of educational services.

This study aims to analyze the shifting nature of education in Indonesia from a democratic right to a privilege determined by a child's socioeconomic background. Through an in-depth sociological investigation, it seeks to uncover the underlying mechanisms that sustain this inequality. Ultimately, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the root causes and their implications for social mobility and educational justice in Indonesia.

## 2. METHODS

This study employs a literature review method to analyze the phenomenon of commodification and inequality in Indonesian education. The literature review was used because this method enables researchers to systematically collect, evaluate, and synthesize existing studies in order to interpret the meanings, dynamics, and social impacts of educational commodification (Snyder, 2019). Data were collected from multiple sources to ensure comprehensiveness and credibility. The inclusion criteria for data sources were as follows: First, government policy documents consisting of the Ministry of Education regulations, Undang-Undang Sistem Pendidikan Nasional, and Bappenas Data. Second, media reports from reputable national outlets discuss educational costs, privatization, and inequality. Finally, scholarly journal articles were sourced from Scopus, Google Scholar, and relevant academic e-books from established publishers. The search process used keywords such as *educational commodification*, *educational inequality in Indonesia*, *Bourdieu's capital theory*, and *credentialism*. The exclusion criteria included popular non-academic articles and pre-2015 publications deemed less contextually relevant, except for foundational works such as Bourdieu's *Forms of Capital* (1986) and Weber's writings on stratification and credentialism.

Data were analyzed using content analysis techniques. This method allows for the identification of key meanings and dominant narratives related to the commodification of education and reproduction of social inequality. This process also identifies dominant narratives and recurring themes in the literature. The analysis is supported by Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and Max Weber's concept of *credentialism*, which help explain the relationship between education, social status, and economic privilege.

### 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. The Concept of Privilege: Unseen Advantages in Educational Contexts

Privilege refers to advantages or special rights that are neither earned nor requested (Golikov, 2022a), but are instead granted to individuals by virtue of their membership in particular social groups, such as race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and language (Parker & Guzdial, 2015). In the educational context, privilege signifies easier access to resources, information, or networks that significantly support academic success (Guerrero, 2021). Privilege is multidimensional, encompassing a range of factors including social status, wealth, parents' educational attainment, and geographic location (urban or rural), among others (Guerrero, 2021). Social groups that hold privileges are often perceived as naturally entitled to easier access within the society. This normalization renders their advantages invisible, making them seem ordinary or deserved (Guerrero, 2021). For example, a student raised in a wealthy urban family may not recognize that their access to high-quality books, stable Internet connection, private tutoring, or academic support is a structural advantage. This convenience reflects the broader benefits enjoyed by certain social groups, albeit to varying degrees. In contrast, students without such access are often perceived as inferior or 'different', simply because they lack these privileges (Guerrero, 2021).

Lack of awareness of privileges among advantaged groups is a crucial factor in sustaining educational inequality. When individuals from these groups fail to recognize that their success is largely shaped by structural advantages such as wealth, social status, or parental education, they tend to attribute their achievements solely to merit or personal effort. This reinforces the narrative of pure meritocracy, where success is believed to result entirely from talent and hard work without acknowledging the role of social and economic backgrounds. As a result, efforts to address systemic educational inequality are hindered since the structural roots of the problem are not fully acknowledged and remain insufficiently addressed.

#### 3.2. Understanding Inequality through Bourdieu's Capital Theory: The Role of Economic, Social, and Cultural Capital in Education

Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist, provides a theoretical framework to understand how educational systems—despite their aims of promoting equity and fairness—often reproduce social inequalities by valuing specific forms of “capital” possessed by dominant social classes (Ramsey, 2024). Bourdieu identifies three primary forms of capital:

- **Economic Capital**

Economic capital refers to the financial resources and assets an individual possesses, which directly influences their access to and quality of education. It encompasses the monetary means used to purchase educational services such as private schooling, additional tutoring, extracurricular activities, and supporting facilities like books, digital devices, or reliable internet access (da Silva Júnior et al., 2024). The ability to afford educational expenses influences the level and quality of schooling accessible to children from particular social groups, which shapes their academic achievements and future prospects (da Silva Júnior et al., 2024).

- **Cultural Capital**

Cultural capital encompasses the knowledge, skills, and behavioural patterns inherited from one's familial and social environment (Ramsey, 2024). It is often passed down through family practices—what Bourdieu refers to as “habitus”—such as reading habits or participation to cultural activities, which play significant role in shaping a child's academic performance in school (Carmignolli et al., 2020). For example, a child raised in an academic family may develop reading habits, engage in critical discussions, and participate in an academic culture. Such experiences support children with

cultural capital that aligns well with the formal education system. In contrast, children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may have limited exposure, which hinders their ability to succeed in formal educational settings. These gaps persist into higher education, where the accumulation of cultural capital becomes essential for gaining access and excelling academically (Teixeira & Lima, 2020). As a result, children from culturally privileged backgrounds tend to adapt more easily to educational systems and extract greater benefits from them compared to their marginalized peers.

- **Social Capital**

Social capital **refers to the networks and** connections individuals can utilize to access educational opportunities and advantages (Gkartziou et al., 2022; Ramsey, 2024). Such networks may provide information about high quality schools, exclusive admission channels, endorsement from influential figures, or moral and financial support from community (Kono et al., n.d.). Parents with substantial levels of social capital are often better equipped to obtain crucial educational resources and support than remain inaccessible to families with limited networks due to various socioeconomic barriers. Social reproduction in education goes beyond the transmission of academic knowledge; it also includes a “*hidden curriculum*” that implicitly teaches students how to navigate the social life based on their class background (Sociology Institute, 2022). This process sustains *symbolic violence* in which the cultural, economic, and social resources of lower-class students are devalued or deemed inferior. Consequently, these students often experience alienation and feel undervalued in educational system that subtly favour the form of capital possessed by upper class groups, that ultimately restrict their potential for increases social mobility

Bourdieu’s perspective concludes that educational inequality arises not merely from economic disparities but from a complex interaction among economic, cultural, and social capital. These forms of capital mutually reinforce each other, generating a self-sustaining cycle of advantage. Individuals or social groups with high economic capital can invest in superior educational opportunities, such as prestigious schools or private tutoring, which facilitates the development of cultural capital. This cultural capital, in turn, enhances social networks, thereby perpetuating and amplifying existing privileges over time. For instance, the ability to enrol a child in an international school (economic capital) allows them to acquire foreign language proficiency and access a globalized curriculum (cultural capital), which then facilitates entry into elite economic circles and prestigious universities (social capital), thereby consolidating the social group’s position at the top of the social hierarchy.

### **3.3. Education and Social Stratification in Max Weber’s Theory: Class, Status, and Power in the Modern Schooling System**

Unlike Marx’s theory of social stratification, Weber’s framework offers a more nuanced understanding of how education functions as an arena for the formation of class, status, and power. From a Weberian perspective, education plays a critical role in shaping all three dimensions. The commodification of education contributes to the phenomenon of “credentialism,” as described by Weber. Credentialism within educational commodification refers to how academic qualifications from elite institutions become powerful symbols of status and authority (Kumar, 2024). This status and authority shapes the social norms that are collectively accepted. Such acceptance legitimizes existing social inequalities by framing success as the result of individual merit, thereby obscuring the economic and social privileges that underlie access to these credentials. Degrees obtained from elite educational institutions not only provide access to high-paying jobs (economic capital) but also confer social prestige (status) and entry into influential power circles (Ramsey, 2024). For example, a person who graduates from a prestigious university is more likely to gain respected positions and wield a greater influence in their social environment.

Weber also introduced the concept of “life chances,” which refers to opportunities where individuals have to access quality education, secure good jobs, and attain a decent standard of living. This concept highlights

how life opportunities significantly shape an individual's position within a social stratification system. When education becomes privatized and commodified, the system turns unjust by favoring the wealthy. Educational access is no longer based on ability or achievement but rather on financial capacity. Privatization and commodification of education create a system that caters to the elite, where access is determined more by economic capital than by merit (Kumar, 2024). Through this mechanism, education becomes a powerful instrument for perpetuating and legitimizing existing social inequalities.

Weber's concept of credentialism, when applied to commodified education, highlights how academic qualifications from elite institutions become powerful symbols of status and authority (Kumar, 2024). In the context of commodified education, credentials, especially those obtained from prestigious institutions, serve not only as indicators of competence, but also as markers of social legitimacy and status. This process obscures the fact that access to higher education and credentials is heavily influenced by an individual's economic background. Consequently, individual success is often perceived as a result of personal effort and meritocracy, ignoring underlying privileges. Consequently, the unequal distribution of life chances appears natural and acceptable. This norm subtly suppresses the potential critiques of structural inequalities that persist in society.

### **3.4. The Commodification of Education: Transforming Education into a Market Commodity and Its Implications**

Commodification of education is a process in which education is treated as a commodity or service to be bought and sold in the market, shifting from the view of education as a public good or service to one governed by market forces. This approach has undermined core educational values such as intellectual development and academic integrity, as the primary goal of commodified education is capital (Golikov, 2022b). The primary forms of education commodification are evident in the emphasis on competition, marketization, standardized testing, rankings, and performance metrics (Golikov, 2022a). These five elements influence how educational institutions assign market value to their services, allowing them to target specific segments of the society. In this model, students are viewed as consumers, and education becomes a service that must be marketed competitively (Sukandi & Yelli Eka Sumadhinata, 2024b). Educational institutions tend to adopt business strategies such as aggressive marketing and the development of new academic programs or tutoring services to maximize revenue (Sukandi & Yelli Eka Sumadhinata, 2024b). Implications of Education Commodifications

- **Increasing Social Inequality**

Individuals or families with greater financial resources are able to access quality education and pursue higher education, while those with limited or no financial resources face significant barriers or extremely limited options. This exacerbates the existing social structures between the rich and the poor.

- **Curriculum Narrowing**

Subjects deemed less directly relevant to the job market are often marginalized or even removed altogether (Golikov, 2022a). Education, which should serve as a platform for the development of critical, creative, and universal thinking, loses its function as it becomes preoccupied with meeting the market demands that require measurable student outcomes.

- **The Decline of Education's Role as a Public Good**

Today, many educational institutions focus on commodifying education to cover operational costs and generate capital. These institutions often rely not only on tuition fees but also on partnerships with private or foreign entities. This financial dependence poses risks to academic integrity and institutional autonomy (Golikov, 2022a). Ultimately, the interests of funders, such as corporations, donors, or private actors, can influence curricula, research priorities, and the overall direction of education, thereby undermining its true purpose: to elevate the dignity and well-being of all individuals.

The commodification of education drives parents to compete to secure the most prestigious or highest-quality education for their children. Financial investment becomes a necessary prerequisite to ensure their children’s competitive advantage (Golikov, 2022a). This not only widens the gap for those unable to participate, but also places immense pressure on the middle class, who struggle to keep their children competitive. As a result, the essential purpose of education has shifted from holistic student development to a transactional pursuit of status, symbolism, credentialism, and other forms of social capital.

### 3.5. The Manifestation of Privilege in Indonesia’s Education Industry: A Case Study

The proliferation of private tutoring centers (commonly referred to as *bimbels* in Indonesia), often categorized as *shadow education*, serves as a strong indicator of the commodification of education. The rise of these tutoring institutions is largely driven by a growing distrust in the quality of formal education provided by schools (Cathrin et al., 2023). Teaching and learning processes within formal educational settings are frequently perceived as limited and insufficient, prompting students to seek additional classes outside regular school hours (Cathrin et al., 2023). Moreover, the intense competition to gain admission to prestigious universities, especially through the Computer-Based Written Exam (UTBK) or the National Selection Based on Test (SNBT), further compels students to pursue supplementary academic support such as tutoring centers or private lessons. The socioeconomic impact of the widespread presence of private tutoring (*bimbel*) is significant. The high costs associated with these services make shadow education a luxury accessible primarily to the upper-middle class. For instance, Brain Academy Online by Ruangguru offers packages that can cost millions of rupiah per year—up to Rp 4,399,000 per month for the 2025/2026 academic year package, or Rp 19,500,000 for a one-year private session package of 70 classes (Ruangguru, 2025a) Similarly, Ganesha Operation offers regular high school programs for up to Rp 24,000,000 per year, and intensive programs reaching Rp 30,000,000 per year (liputan6.com, 2025), Such costs render private tutoring inaccessible to lower-income families, thereby reinforcing existing educational inequalities.

The high costs associated with supporting formal education impose a significant financial burden on the families. This condition directly eliminates the opportunity for individuals or social groups from low-income backgrounds to access supplementary educational support in the same manner as financially privileged families. While low-income families are still struggling to ensure basic education or are at risk of dropping out, wealthier families are preparing their children for future educational success, including access to higher education. The rapid growth of expensive private tutoring indicates the failure of the formal education system to meet public expectations regarding quality and competitiveness (Cathrin et al., 2023). This reality has created a new norm in which society, consciously or unconsciously, becomes increasingly dependent on the paid private sector. This directly contributes to the commodification of educational preparation processes, such as the UTBK, SNBT, or specialized tutoring for state school entrance exams. As a result, access to higher education becomes increasingly unequal, and social mobility for underprivileged groups becomes more difficult as the pathway to academic and career success is increasingly privatized. Table 1 illustrates the estimated costs of popular tutoring services in Indonesia for the academic years 2023–2025.

**Table 1**  
**Estimated Fees of Leading Tutoring Institutions in Indonesia**

Private Tutoring	Program Type	Duration	Estimated Cost (IDR)
Ruangguru	ruangbelajar SMA/SMK + UTBK	1 year	Rp 649.000/month (diskon 54%)(Ruang Guru, 2025)
	Brain Academy Online	1 Academic Year	Rp 4.399.000/month (diskon 47%) or Rp 8.300.000 (annual package) (Ruang Guru, 2025)
	Private Online Package (National Curriculum)	Per Session (90 minutes)	From Rp 250.000/session (1-session package) up to Rp 19.500.000 (70 session per year) (Ruangguru, 2025b)
	Offline Private Package	Per session	From Rp 195.000/session (Ruangguru, 2025b)

Private Tutoring	Program Type	Duration	Estimated Cost (IDR)
Ganesha Operation	Regular Program (Elementary School)	Per year	Rp 3.300.000 (2023) (Liputan6.com, 2025)
	Regular Program (Junior High School)	Per year	Rp 18.000.000 (2024) (Liputan6.com, 2025)
	Intensive Program (Junior High School)	Per year	Rp 24.000.000 (2024) (Liputan6.com, 2025)
	Regular Program (Senior High School)	Per year	Rp 24.000.000 (2024) (Liputan6.com, 2025)
	Intensive Program (Senior High School)	Per year	Rp 30.000.000 (2024) (Liputan6.com, 2025)
	Special Program (Junior/Senior High School)	Per session	Rp 250.000 (Junior HS, 2024), Rp 300.000 (Senior HS 2024) (Liputan6.com, 2025)
General (Estimate)	Bimbel SD	Per program	Rp 3.000.000 – 6.000.000 (Bias Education, 2023)
	Bimbel SMP	Per program	Rp 4.000.000 – 7.000.000 (Bias Education, 2023)
	Bimbel SMA	Per program	Rp 5.000.000 – 15.000.000 (Bias Education, 2023)
	Bimbel UTBK	Per program	Rp 3.000.000 – 20.000.000 (Bias Education, 2023)
	Private Lessons (SD)	Per session	Rp 25.000 – 100.000 (Bias Education, 2023)
	Private Lessons (SMP)	Per session	Rp 50.000 – 150.000 (Bias Education, 2023)
	Private Lessons (SMA)	Per session	Rp 75.000 – 200.000 (Bias Education, 2023)

Source: Processed from primary data (2023–2025)

### 3.6. Merite-based Admission: Meritocracy or Reproduction of Inequality?

Student admissions through merit-based pathways in schools and university entrance selections in Indonesia are intended to provide all high-achieving students with fast-track opportunities to access educational institutions based on their abilities. Ideally, these mechanisms aim to ensure equal opportunities for outstanding students of all socioeconomic backgrounds. However, these systems are socioeconomically biased in practice. Standardized tests, achievement certificates, and entrance exams often serve as the primary assessment tools, disadvantaging students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Pusat Studi Pendidikan dan Kebijakan, 2024). Exam formats, shortcut techniques, and online registration processes are generally familiar and accessible to students who benefit from additional educational resources or come from socially and informationally privileged environments. Students from rich families have significantly greater access to resources and opportunities that enable them to accumulate achievements and prestigious competition certificates (Labadze, 2023a). These advantages include intensive private tutoring for school or university entrance preparation, additional skill courses (such as foreign languages, musical proficiency, or athletic training), and participation in tiered competitions that require substantial financial investment for registration, training, and logistical support (Aypay et al., 2025). The merit-based admission track, particularly in school admissions, often requires certificates from national or international competitions as key added value. Ironically, participation in such competitions frequently demands economic capital and privileged access to information that is available only to certain social groups.

The roles of cultural and social capital are particularly prominent in this context. Urban students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds tend to possess cultural capital that aligns more closely with the demands of the education system (Ramsey, 2024). Their families and social environments are more likely to understand the system, have access to information networks about competitions or relevant programs, and provide both finance (Muhammad Naufal Raihan Ali & Hesti Asriwandari, 2024) (Muhammad Naufal Raihan Ali & Hesti Asriwandari, 2024). Even students or social groups with limited financial resources, if living in urban areas, often benefit from different forms of social and cultural capital compared to those in remote regions, due to easier access to information and social networks. A merit-based admission system, which ideally should ensure equality in practice, exacerbates socioeconomic inequality, as described

earlier. This occurs because the existing system disproportionately benefits students from privileged backgrounds who can access the necessary resources and opportunities to excel academically (Labadze, 2023b). This pattern creates a vicious cycle in which inherited privilege is transformed into perceived merit—defined by dominant groups—thereby reinforcing social hierarchies and obstructing upward mobility for those who are marginalized or less fortunate.

### **3.7. Elite Private Schools as a Tangible Form of Social Stratification**

The proliferation of elite and international private schools in Indonesia clearly illustrates the social stratification within the education system. These schools offer premium facilities, international curricula, and competitive learning environments compared to public or regular private schools (Suryanef et al., 2025). The high tuition fees required to access these institutions only make them accessible to specific socioeconomic groups. For instance, Jakarta Intercultural School (JIS) charges an annual tuition of up to approximately IDR 496,500,000. British School Jakarta sets annual fees ranging from IDR 291,469,000 to IDR 353,499,000. Other international schools, such as ACG School Jakarta, Binus International School Simprug, Global Jaya School, Anglo-Chinese School Jakarta, and Singapore Intercultural School (SIS), also impose similarly high tuition fees, ranging from tens to hundreds of millions of rupiahs per year (Riskita, 2024). Even kindergarten-level education at international schools operating in Jakarta typically costs between IDR 50,000,000 and IDR 150,000,000 per year, not including various additional fees (Salsabilla, 2023).

The facilities offered by elite schools further highlight educational inequalities in Indonesia. These schools provide amenities such as fitness laboratories, swimming pools, art studios, music rooms, and libraries with extensive collections (Riskita, 2024). The curriculum typically follows the International Baccalaureate (IB) or Advanced Placement (AP) programs, both of which are internationally recognized and facilitate student admission into top global universities (Salim, 2024). The cultural capital embedded in these institutions, through their well-equipped and conducive learning environments, significantly enhances students' educational experiences, granting them a competitive edge far beyond what public or standard private schools can offer. Not only general private schools but also Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) have transformed into entities that respond to market demands. This trend has increasingly stratified educational access along class lines (Suryanef et al., 2025). Similar to elite and international schools, many *pesantrens* now adopt competitive strategies to attract prospective “buyers”—students—by enhancing facilities and offering specialized extracurricular programs. These developments often result in high tuition fees, which are ultimately passed on to the students and their families. Consequently, this commodification of education limits access to high-quality learning opportunities for low-income communities, even within religious institutions. Supported by government policy, the commercialization of education enables these schools to operate with a degree of autonomy that prioritizes financial sustainability over equitable access (Suryanef et al., 2025).

While some low-cost private schools attempt to reach low-income families by charging affordable tuition (ranging from IDR 30,000 to IDR 130,000 per student) (Rahman, 2016), the overall quality of such institutions often remains below that of public schools, particularly in terms of infrastructure and management (Hapsari & Wardana, 2023). This situation reveals a bifurcation among private schools: those that cater to affluent families and those that serve economically disadvantaged groups.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

The commodification of education in Indonesia has created a significant space for inequality among different social groups, shaped by the economic, social, and cultural capital they possess. Education, which should serve as a fundamental public right, has increasingly shifted toward becoming a market-driven commodity accessible only to privileged groups. This phenomenon is evident in the proliferation of expensive tutoring institutions, merit-biased admission systems, and the rapid growth of expensive international schools. These conditions not only restricted the poor from accessing education,

but also normalized inequality through the logic of false meritocracy. From a sociological standpoint, Bourdieu's theory of capital states that economic, social, and cultural capital intersect to reinforce an individual's position within educational stratification. These forms of capital grants enable individuals to access quality education, foster exclusive social networks, and reproduce a habitus aligned with the dominant academic systems. Similarly, Weber's theory of stratification illustrates how credentials from elite educational institutions act as symbols of power and status, further widening the disparities in life opportunities between students and society. In this condition, the education function is no longer a vehicle for social mobility, but rather as a mechanism that sustains existing social hierarchies.

Consequently, Indonesia's education system not only fails to guarantee equal rights for all citizens but also contributes to the intergenerational reproduction of inequality. The disparities born from this commodification process are deeply systemic and entrenched, making access to quality education a privilege reserved for the elite, while the poorest still bang on the needs for how they cannot be hungry daily. Urgent action is needed to critically evaluate the education system in Indonesia, which is now created as a logical market where institutions as sellers and buyers are buyers. Education must return to its fundamental role in providing equitable and inclusive learning opportunities that can support all social classes. The government must reform educational policies to ensure access and social justice across systems. These policies have to including the quality of teachers, infrastructure, and extracurricular activities to ensure that all students, regardless of class, can acquire the social and cultural capital necessary to support genuine upward mobility.

### **Ethical approval**

The study was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval was not required as the research involved minimal risk and did not include clinical or biomedical interventions.

### **Informed Consent Statement**

All participants were informed of the purpose of the study and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and all responses were kept confidential and used solely for academic research purposes.

### **Authors' Contributions**

Conceptualization, M.H. and S.W.F.; methodology, L.S.P.; validation, L.S.P.; formal analysis, M.H.; resources, M.H.; writing—original draft preparation, M.H., S.W.F., K.A.S., L.S.P.; writing review and editing, S.W.F.; translation support, K.A.S

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### **Note on Contributors**

#### **Kurnia Asni Sari**

<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-8396-6317>

Kurnia Asni Sari is a lecturer in Sociology with research interests in societal issues, focusing on education and religion. Her work examines the role of education in shaping social awareness, moral values, and cultural identity, as well as the influence of religion on social dynamics and its function as a source of strength in social development. She actively explores the interrelation between educational and religious institutions in shaping social behavior, fostering tolerance, and strengthening social cohesion in diverse communities. Several of her scholarly works have been published in academic journals, addressing topics

such as values-based education, the role of religious leaders in community development, and the impact of religious education on the character formation of younger generations.

**Suci Wahyu Fajriani**

<https://orcid.org/0009-0003-9662-4271>

Suci Wahyu Fajriani is a lecturer in Sociology with research interests in social issues and digital sociology. Her academic focus explores the intersection between technology and society, including the impact of digital media on social interaction, community engagement, and the transformation of cultural values in the digital era. She also examines contemporary social problems through a digital lens, addressing themes such as online communities, cyber behavior, and the influence of social networking platforms on public discourse. Several of her scholarly articles on digital sociology have been published in national and international journals, discussing topics such as the role of social media in shaping public opinion, digital inclusion and inequality, and the sociocultural implications of emerging communication technologies. Her work reflects a commitment to understanding how digitalization reshapes social life and to contributing insights that can inform inclusive and ethical digital transformation.

**Gunawan**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6362-0990>

Gunawan is a lecturer in Sociology who teaches Environmental Sociology and Social Ethics. His research interests focus on environmental issues and ethics in social life, with particular attention to the relationship between human behaviour, moral values, and ecological sustainability. He actively develops studies on ethical practices in natural resource management, social responsibility toward the environment, and strategies for building community-based ecological awareness. Several of his scholarly works have been published in nationally accredited journals and academic forums, covering topics such as environmental ethics, socio-ecological conflicts, and the role of local institutions in supporting sustainability. His contributions emphasize the importance of a sociological perspective in understanding and formulating ethical solutions to contemporary environmental challenges.

**Ainul Zulqoifah**

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-1443-2967>

Ainul Zulqoifah is a lecturer in Sociology who teaches Quantitative Research Methods, Social Psychology, and Social Change. Her academic interests lie in the development of sociological research methodology, the dynamics of social behavior, and societal transformation in both global and local contexts. She actively applies quantitative approaches in sociological research to analyze social phenomena in a systematic and measurable way. In addition, she explores the role of psychological factors in social interactions and the dynamics of change faced by modern societies. Several of her works have been published in journals and conference proceedings, addressing topics such as patterns of social interaction, data-driven research strategies, and quantitative analysis of social change. Her dedication demonstrates a commitment to bridging research methodology with empirical analysis relevant to the advancement of sociology.

**Mallia Hartani**

<https://orcid.org/0009-0001-8533-8048>

Mallia Hartani is a lecturer in Sociology with a research interest in community empowerment, particularly in the context of social development and enhancing the capacity of local communities. She actively develops participatory approaches in both research and community engagement, focusing on strengthening the role of vulnerable groups, fostering community-based economic development, and promoting the sustainable management of local resources. Several of her scholarly works on community empowerment have been published in nationally accredited journals and conference proceedings, covering topics such as strategies for strengthening village institutions, the role of women in local development, and social innovation for rural economic self-reliance. Her dedication to bridging sociological theory with field practices has made her contributions significant in promoting inclusive social transformation.

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