

## People's School: Educational Equalization Strategy and Pedagogical Significance in Indonesia

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### Abstract

*This study examines the social and pedagogical significance of the Sekolah Rakyat program launched by the Indonesian government in 2024–2025 as a comprehensive strategy to expand educational access for marginalized communities. Using qualitative documentary analysis, this research explores policy documents, media reports, and scholarly literature to understand how the program effectively addresses structural inequality. The findings reveal that Sekolah Rakyat significantly strengthens social capital, promotes distributive justice, and cultivates critical consciousness through contextual and dialogic learning approaches. The program aligns theoretically with Rawls' principle of justice, Freire's critical pedagogy, and Bourdieu's social capital concept. However, implementation faces significant challenges related to infrastructure limitations, teacher preparedness, and public perception. These constraints underscore the critical need for robust institutional support and meaningful community engagement to ensure program sustainability and long-term effectiveness. Overall, Sekolah Rakyat demonstrates considerable potential as a transformative community-based education model that bridges educational gaps and empowers disadvantaged social groups.*

### Abstrak

Penelitian ini menganalisis makna sosial dan pedagogis Program Sekolah Rakyat yang diluncurkan pemerintah Indonesia pada 2024–2025 sebagai strategi komprehensif perluasan akses pendidikan bagi kelompok yang marginal dan terpinggirkan. Menggunakan analisis dokumenter kualitatif, penelitian ini menelaah dokumen kebijakan, pemberitaan media, dan literatur ilmiah untuk memahami bagaimana program secara efektif mengatasi ketidaksetaraan struktural. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa Sekolah Rakyat secara signifikan memperkuat modal sosial, mendorong keadilan distributif, dan membangun kesadaran kritis melalui pendekatan pembelajaran kontekstual dan dialogis. Program ini sejalan secara teoritis dengan prinsip keadilan Rawls, pendidikan kritis Freire, dan konsep modal sosial Bourdieu. Namun, implementasi menghadapi tantangan signifikan terkait keterbatasan infrastruktur, kesiapan pendidik, dan persepsi publik. Tantangan ini menekankan kebutuhan mendesak akan dukungan kelembagaan yang kuat dan pelibatan komunitas bermakna untuk memastikan keberlanjutan dan efektivitas program jangka panjang. Secara keseluruhan, Sekolah Rakyat menunjukkan potensi besar sebagai model pendidikan transformatif berbasis komunitas yang menjembatani kesenjangan pendidikan dengan efektif dan memberdayakan kelompok sosial tertinggal.



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## A. INTRODUCTION

### 1. Background

Educational access inequality remains a fundamental issue in national development. Multiple reports demonstrate that inequitable educational access negatively impacts social mobility and perpetuates intergenerational cycles of poverty. The 2025 BPS data affirm that lower school enrollment rates are predominantly observed among low-income families, particularly in disadvantaged, frontier, and outermost region.<sup>1</sup> This situation demonstrates that education has not yet become an equitable right accessible equally to all segments of society.

From a sociology of education perspective, economic, social, and cultural factors constitute critical determinants of educational success. Bourdieu emphasizes that economic, social, and cultural capital determine individual opportunities in education; consequently, the inequalities observed are not merely matters of infrastructure and facilities, but are fundamentally connected to social structures and societal habitus.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, educational equity cannot be adequately addressed through the provision of physical infrastructure alone, but must take into account the social contexts that influence access to and participation in learning.

In response to this issue, the government launched the People's School Program, which was designed to expand educational access for marginalized groups.<sup>3</sup> This program exemplifies the state's affirmative intervention to mitigate inequities in educational opportunities. Within a Rawlsian framework, such policies embody the principle of distributive justice, namely the prioritization of the most disadvantaged populations.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, within a Freirean framework, the People's School can be conceptualized as a site of critical pedagogy that facilitates learners' development of critical consciousness through dialogical pedagogical praxis grounded in their lived realities.<sup>5</sup>

Extant scholarship has investigated alternative educational models in Indonesia, including Natural Schools, Community Learning Centers, and community-based

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<sup>1</sup> Badan Pusat Statistik, *Statistik Pendidikan Indonesia 2025* (Jakarta: BPS, 2025).

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," dalam *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 241–258.

<sup>3</sup> Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi, *Dokumen Kebijakan Program Sekolah Rakyat* (Jakarta: Kemendikbudristek, 2024).

<sup>4</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

<sup>5</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970).

educational initiatives.<sup>6</sup> However, empirical scholarship that specifically examines the People's School Program as an emergent government policy remains notably scarce. This study contributes to the literature by synthesizing Rawls's theory of distributive justice, Freire's framework of critical pedagogy, and Bourdieu's conceptualization of social capital to elucidate the social and pedagogical dynamics inherent in the program's implementation.

Drawing on this analysis, this study positions the People's School Program as a significant phenomenon meriting rigorous examination within the broader discourse of educational equity in Indonesia. The inquiry examines how this initiative generates social outcomes, instantiates transformative pedagogical practices, and navigates multifaceted implementation challenges within real-world contexts.

## **2. Research Questions**

The research questions guiding this inquiry are designed to center the analysis on the social and pedagogical dimensions of the People's School Program as a state-sanctioned alternative educational model. Grounded in the foregoing discussion, this study proposes three primary research questions: (1) How can the social significance of the People's School Program be understood within the discourse of educational equity in Indonesia, particularly in relation to state initiatives aimed at broadening educational access for marginalized populations; (2) How does the pedagogical importance of the People's School Program manifest when analyzed through a critical pedagogy framework that prioritizes dialogical pedagogy, critical consciousness, and learners' capacity for reflexivity, as theorized by Freire; (3) What implementation barriers characterize the People's School Program, and what are the implications of these challenges for alignment with established alternative educational paradigms in Indonesia, including Natural Schools, Community Learning Centers, and community-based educational initiatives.

## **3. Research Methods**

This research employs a qualitative approach utilizing document analysis methodology to understand the social and pedagogical meaning of the People's School Program based on policy documents, media reports, and scholarly literature.<sup>7</sup> This methodological approach was chosen because it facilitates the investigation of contextual

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<sup>6</sup> Muhammad Habibi, "Pendidikan Alternatif dan Akses Pendidikan Bagi Kelompok Marginal di Indonesia," *Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan* 19, no. 2 (2022): 101–115.

<sup>7</sup> John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2018).

factors, interpretive dimensions, and social dynamics that resist quantitative measurement. Data collection encompassed literature review, systematic examination of official government documentation, critical analysis of national media discourse, and engagement with academic scholarship concerning alternative education models and educational equity.<sup>8</sup>

Data analysis is guided by the Miles and Huberman model, which delineates three interconnected stages: data reduction (identifying and coding salient themes and patterns), data display (organizing and presenting the reduced data in accessible formats), and conclusion drawing (interpreting findings and developing analytical insights).<sup>9</sup> Data reduction was executed by identifying salient information across multiple sources and excluding data extraneous to the research objectives. Data presentation was achieved through the development of narrative descriptions that systematically contextualize research findings. Conclusion drawing entailed interpreting the significance of data through the theoretical lenses of distributive justice, critical pedagogy, and social capital theory. To strengthen the validity and credibility of findings, this study implemented source triangulation, synthesizing data across three distinct sources: policy documentation, academic scholarship, and media discourse to mitigate potential interpretive bias.<sup>10</sup>

Consequently, this methodological approach facilitates the investigation of the People's School Program not simply as an educational policy initiative, but as a multifaceted social phenomenon that illuminates the complex interplay between state institutions, civil society, and the evolving landscape of alternative education in Indonesia.

## **B. DISCUSSION**

### **1. The Social Meaning of the People's School Program**

The People's School Program represents a state-led affirmative intervention designed to ameliorate inequities in educational access among marginalized populations. This initiative is predicated upon the premise that education serves as a mechanism for social mobility, thereby enabling the disruption of intergenerational poverty cycles.

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<sup>8</sup> Syarif Hidayat, "Implementasi Model Pendidikan Berbasis Komunitas," *Jurnal Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan* 25, no. 3 (2020): 341–354.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> Creswell; Miles and Huberman.

Nevertheless, the continued inequities in educational access evident across diverse regions of Indonesia underscore that education remains incompletely institutionalized as a public right capable of ensuring equitable enjoyment and benefit.<sup>11</sup> This initiative embodies the state's endeavor to ameliorate social inequalities through policy mechanisms that operate concurrently as both distributive and compensatory interventions, thus positioning educational equity within a comprehensive social justice framework.

## **2. The Perspective of Distributive Justice**

The state's initiatives embodied in the People's School Program are amenable to analysis through a Rawlsian framework of distributive justice, specifically the difference principle, which stipulates that public policies ought to be structured to maximize benefits for the most disadvantaged members of society.<sup>12</sup> This policy framework recognizes the subordinated position of economically disadvantaged populations within the broader social hierarchy, alongside the imperative to enhance their access to educational services. Understood in this manner, the People's School Program transcends a narrowly conceived educational initiative to embody the state's ethical obligation to ensure education as a fundamental right constitutive of citizenship.

## **3. The Perspective of Critical Pedagogy**

Beyond its emphasis on distributive justice, the People's School Program incorporates pedagogical dimensions consonant with Freire's critical pedagogy framework. This approach theorizes education as a liberatory process in which learners are constituted as agentic subjects capable of cultivating critical consciousness through iterative cycles of reflection, dialogical engagement, and praxis.<sup>13</sup> This pedagogical model transcends the narrow objective of knowledge transfer, instead fostering learners' capacity to critically interpret the systems of oppression they experience and to develop agency for social transformation. Consequently, the People's School Program functions not as merely an alternative educational institution, but as a site of knowledge production wherein learners are enabled to comprehend and critically problematize social issues through analytical praxis.

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<sup>11</sup> Badan Pusat Statistik, *Statistik Pendidikan Indonesia 2025* (Jakarta: BPS, 2025).

<sup>12</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

<sup>13</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970).

#### 4. Social Capital and Community Participation

The efficacy of the People's School Program is contingent not exclusively upon state provision, but equally upon the availability of social capital within communities. Such social capital comprises social networks, normative frameworks of trust, and collective participation mechanisms that enable communities to participate substantively in educational governance. Community engagement contributes to resource mobilization, social legitimacy, and cultural endorsement of pedagogical processes. Consequently, social capital operates as a catalytic force that facilitates program integration into the social fabric of communities, whilst simultaneously ameliorating resistance to alternative educational paradigms that are frequently perceived as departing from conventional educational modalities.<sup>14</sup>

#### 5. Comparison with Alternative Educational Models

To situate the People's School Program within Indonesia's alternative education landscape, comparative analysis with other educational models exhibiting analogous characteristics is warranted. Alternative educational initiatives in Indonesia typically constitute responses to the formal education system's capacity constraints in addressing heterogeneous educational requirements. Significantly, the People's School Program shares overarching objectives with Natural Schools, Community Learning Centers, and homeschooling arrangements specifically, ensuring educational access for populations experiencing structural and cultural marginalization. The substantive distinctions, however, pertain to institutional legitimacy, funding mechanisms, pedagogical approaches, and the demographic composition of learner populations, as delineated in the subsequent table.

**Table 1. Comparison of Alternative Educational Models in Indonesia**

Aspect	People's School Program	Natural Schools	Community Learning Centers	Homeschooling
Legitimacy	State Policy	Private and community-based	Local government support	Family-Based Education
Target Learner Population	Economically disadvantaged and marginalized groups	All socioeconomic groups	School dropouts and out-of-	Flexible and individualized

<sup>14</sup> Rizky Hasbuna, "Modal Sosial dalam Pengembangan Komunitas Pendidikan," *Jurnal Sosiologi Pendidikan* 5, no. 1 (2020): 45-57.

Curricular Approach	Contextual community-based	and	Nature-based exploratory	and	Structured curriculum packages (Levels A/B/C)	school youth	Parent-designed and autonomous
Funding Sources	State budget		Community help funding	self-	Local government budget		Families with parental choice

*Source: Adapted from various scholarly sources (2024-2025)*

## **6. Implications for Educational Equity**

The People's School Program constitutes a substantive contribution to initiatives advancing educational equity in Indonesia through the provision of educational access for economically disadvantaged and marginalized populations. Such contributions are evident across two principal dimensions: social and pedagogical. At the social level, the program enhances learners' capacity to access educational opportunities heretofore unavailable, with potential implications for augmenting social mobility trajectories and disrupting the intergenerational reproduction of structural inequality.<sup>15</sup> At the pedagogical level, the adoption of participatory and dialogical instructional approaches establishes conditions enabling learners to cultivate critical consciousness, engage in reflexive analysis, and develop capacities for problem-solving situated within real-world social contexts.<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, these ostensibly positive implications are contingent upon the capacity of state and community actors to strategically manage resources, cultivate social networks, and operationalize pedagogical practices consonant with local contextual demands. The program's structural dependence on community mobilization and state institutional infrastructure renders programmatic sustainability inherently vulnerable to exogenous policy perturbations and sociocultural dynamics. Moreover, sustained implementation necessitates integrated cross-sectoral policy frameworks encompassing resource allocation, educator professional development, curricular innovation, and community-responsive educational assessment mechanisms. Thus, the achievement of

<sup>15</sup> Badan Pusat Statistik, Statistik Pendidikan Indonesia 2025.

<sup>16</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

educational equity through the People's School Program is conceptualized as a multifaceted endeavor demanding collaborative strategic engagement among state apparatus, civil society actors, and alternative educational institutional actors.

### **C. CONCLUSIONS**

The People's School Program represents a deliberate state intervention designed to broaden educational access among structurally marginalized populations through the implementation of participatory and contextually grounded pedagogical approaches. Empirical research findings demonstrate that programmatic effectiveness is contingent upon multiple interdependent variables: the mobilization of community social capital, the professional capacity of educators, and the availability of adaptive and institutionally sustained policy frameworks. Educational equity cannot be realized through technocratic policy mechanisms operating in isolation; rather, its achievement requires substantive collaboration among state institutions, community actors, and transformative pedagogical practice. Therefore, the People's School Program constitutes a promising alternative educational model with demonstrable potential for facilitating the amelioration of social inequality and the expansion of epistemologically meaningful learning opportunities for structurally vulnerable populations.

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