

Poverty as a Structural Barrier to Educational Equity in Indonesia

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Abstract

Poverty remains a fundamental structural barrier to achieving educational equity in Indonesia. This study aims to analyze how poverty affects access, participation, and the quality of education among low-income communities. Using a qualitative descriptive approach through literature review, the research identifies that economic hardship, inadequate infrastructure, limited digital access, and psychosocial stress significantly hinder educational opportunities for the poor. The findings reveal that poverty perpetuates intergenerational inequality by restricting learning opportunities and reducing human capital quality. The study concludes that inclusive educational reform, integrated with poverty alleviation policies and equitable resource distribution, is essential to breaking the cycle of deprivation and ensuring fair educational opportunities for all.

Keyword: *poverty, educational equity, structural barriers, Indonesia*

INTRODUCTION

Poverty represents a social phenomenon that transcends mere economic deprivation, encompassing a broader spectrum of limitations in accessing essential resources for human well-being, particularly education. In Indonesia, poverty has evolved into a structural and multidimensional issue deeply embedded within the social fabric of society. Despite various governmental initiatives—such as the Program Indonesia Pintar (PIP), Kartu Indonesia Pintar (KIP), and other educational assistance programs—educational disparities between affluent and low-income communities remain significant. Data from the Central Bureau of Statistics (2024) reveal that children from low-income families have substantially lower secondary school participation rates compared to their wealthier counterparts. This condition illustrates that education in Indonesia has not yet functioned effectively as an instrument of social mobility but continues to be shaped by the economic background of families.

The growing complexity of educational inequality has become even more apparent in the digital era, particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The sudden transition to online learning exposed a stark digital divide between socio-economic groups. Students from low-income households often lacked access to digital devices, stable internet connections, and conducive learning environments (Maddawin et al., 2024). Consequently, they experienced significant learning loss and widening academic disparities compared to their more privileged peers. This phenomenon demonstrates that poverty not only limits financial capacity but also constrains adaptability to technological shifts within the educational system. Poverty, therefore, operates as a systemic structural barrier that permeates social, economic, and cultural boundaries, undermining equal opportunities for educational attainment in Indonesia.

Education is widely recognized as the most effective means to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty. However, when access to education itself becomes restricted by economic hardship, education transforms into a privilege rather than a universal right. This makes the present study crucial, as it seeks to understand poverty as a structural impediment to achieving educational equity. Unequal access to education contributes to declining human capital quality, reduced national competitiveness, and the perpetuation of social marginalization. Therefore, this research positions poverty not merely as an economic challenge but as a systemic inequality that hinders the realization of social justice in education.

Previous studies have consistently demonstrated the strong correlation between poverty and education. Rofi'i (2024) found that increased rural poverty significantly reduces school participation rates, particularly at the primary and secondary levels. Bethäuser et al. (2023) further showed that students from

poor families suffered more severe learning losses during the pandemic compared to those from middle- and upper-income backgrounds. Similarly, Maba et al. (2023) revealed that economic hardship adversely affects students' psychosocial well-being, reducing motivation and academic engagement. These studies collectively affirm that poverty exerts a multidimensional impact—economic, cognitive, and psychosocial—on children's educational experiences. Given these interrelated challenges, the present study is both relevant and urgent. It aims to analyze how poverty functions as a structural barrier to educational equity in Indonesia by synthesizing existing empirical findings and exploring the underlying social mechanisms that perpetuate inequality. The insights derived from this research are expected to contribute conceptually and practically to the formulation of inclusive education policies, fostering equitable access to quality education, and empowering marginalized communities toward sustainable human development.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs a qualitative approach through a literature review method to provide an in-depth and contextual understanding of the relationship between poverty and educational equity in Indonesia. The qualitative approach was selected because it allows researchers to explore complex social phenomena by emphasizing meaning, interpretation, and contextual understanding rather than numerical measurement. As Creswell (2014) explains, qualitative inquiry seeks to uncover the meanings individuals or groups attribute to a social phenomenon within its natural setting. This approach enables a comprehensive exploration of poverty and education beyond statistical perspectives, incorporating social, cultural, and policy dimensions that influence educational inequality. Similarly, Moleong (2017) emphasizes that qualitative research aims to understand reality holistically, describing phenomena as they naturally occur in society.

The literature review method was applied as the primary analytical strategy to examine, interpret, and synthesize previous studies relevant to the topic. The procedure included identifying credible sources, critically reviewing selected works, and interpreting conceptual meanings derived from each finding. According to Sugiyono (2019), a literature review serves as a systematic data collection technique that draws on research findings, scholarly articles, books, and official documents to build a strong theoretical foundation. Thus, this method does not merely compile existing data but integrates and connects various theoretical insights to construct a coherent academic argument. The scope of the literature examined in this study covers recent works (2020–2025) focusing on poverty, educational equality, and structural barriers to access within the Indonesian educational context.

Data analysis was conducted using a descriptive-analytical technique, which allows the researcher to synthesize and interpret findings systematically to derive new conceptual insights. As noted by Waruwu (2024), descriptive-analytical methods assist in identifying conceptual relationships, comparing findings, and drawing integrative conclusions from diverse literature sources. The collected data were categorized into key themes—economic dimensions, social structures, and educational policies—before being synthesized to uncover patterns illustrating how poverty operates as a structural barrier to equitable education. This methodological design not only produces factual descriptions but also fosters critical reflection on the social dynamics underpinning educational inequality in Indonesia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Poverty in Indonesia constitutes a structural barrier that extends beyond economic deprivation, encompassing social, cultural, and institutional dimensions. It creates a vicious cycle in which limited financial capacity constrains access to education, while the lack of education perpetuates intergenerational poverty. According to Haq et al. (2025), poverty in Indonesia is rooted in individuals' or families' inability to meet basic needs such as food, shelter, health care, and education. Within this context, education is often perceived as a secondary necessity once primary needs are fulfilled. Consequently, many children from low-income households fail to continue their education to higher levels due to financial pressure. This phenomenon demonstrates that poverty is not merely an economic issue but a manifestation of social structures that fail to provide equal opportunities for all citizens to pursue quality education.

This condition aligns with data from the Central Bureau of Statistics (2024), which reveals that school participation rates (APS) decline as poverty increases. Only 71.91 percent of individuals aged 16–18 remain in school—far below the 99.08 percent participation rate among those aged 7–12. Haq et al. (2025)

confirmed that in Semarang City, rising poverty during the COVID-19 pandemic directly reduced school attendance, which improved only after economic recovery began. Such evidence indicates a strong correlation between household economic status and educational continuity. Lower school participation translates into weaker human-capital quality and reduced national competitiveness in an increasingly globalized economy. Sociologically, this reinforces social stratification and restricts the upward mobility of impoverished groups.

The impact of poverty also appears in the qualitative dimension of learning. Betthäuser, Bach-Mortensen, and Engzell (2023) found that children from poor households experience greater learning loss than those from middle- or high-income families, especially after the pandemic. Limited learning facilities, an uncondusive home environment, and insufficient parental support lead to lower academic achievement. The learning-poverty phenomenon reported by Brief (2022) revealed that more than half of Indonesian children aged 10 are unable to read and comprehend a simple text—and most of them come from poor families. This indicates that poverty not only limits school attendance but also undermines the acquisition of basic literacy skills necessary for further education. Thus, poverty generates an intellectual disparity deeply rooted in early childhood development. Moreover, poverty exacerbates the digital divide that became evident during the shift to online learning. Students from low-income families often lack access to essential digital devices such as laptops or smartphones and cannot afford reliable internet connections. Maddawin et al. (2024) observed that across Southeast Asia, students from poorer households were the most vulnerable to learning loss due to limited digital access. The same pattern emerged in Indonesia, where many students not only lost learning opportunities but also lagged behind in developing digital literacy—an essential skill in the contemporary era. In this regard, poverty functions as a structural obstacle to educational modernization, widening disparities between socioeconomic groups in terms of access to technology and modern learning resources. This confirms that educational equity cannot be achieved without corresponding economic and infrastructural equity.

Psychosocial factors further magnify the educational consequences of poverty. Maba et al. (2023) found that financial stress among low-income families generates anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and diminished learning motivation in children. These conditions impair concentration, engagement, and academic performance. Children living in economic hardship frequently perceive education as futile for changing their circumstances, reducing their willingness to attend school. Wardani and Ayriza (2020) explained that many parents from poor families cannot assist their children's studies due to long working hours or limited educational attainment. Consequently, children lose emotional and academic support—an essential foundation for success in learning. Poverty therefore influences psychological, social, and cognitive dimensions simultaneously, restricting both intellectual and emotional development. Poverty also manifests in the scarcity of educational infrastructure, particularly in rural and underdeveloped regions. Togatorop et al. (2024) reported that schools in remote areas of North Sumatra still lack laboratories, libraries, and qualified teachers, even though enrollment has increased. Similarly, Maharani et al. (2024) emphasized that government investment in education remains uneven, with urban schools enjoying far superior resources compared to those in rural districts. This imbalance not only diminishes instructional quality but also creates structural inequality between affluent and impoverished regions. As a result, students in disadvantaged areas lag behind academically and lose fair opportunities to compete in the labor market, reinforcing the spatial dimension of educational inequality.

The geographic nature of poverty presents additional complexities. Aini and Islamy (2021) documented that in rural communities, children from poor families often work to support household income, leaving them with little time or energy to study. In contrast, in urban settings, the high cost of living and tuition fees become primary deterrents to education. Both contexts demonstrate that poverty reshapes family priorities in allocating resources. Education is no longer viewed as a long-term investment but as an economic burden. Consequently, poverty constrains not only access to schooling but also families' perceptions of its value, underscoring the need for educational reform integrated with comprehensive poverty-alleviation strategies.

Several government initiatives—such as the Kartu Indonesia Pintar (KIP), Program Indonesia Pintar (PIP), and Bantuan Operasional Sekolah (BOS)—have sought to address educational inequality. However, Maharani et al. (2024) noted that the effectiveness of these programs remains limited due to weak targeting

mechanisms and inadequate monitoring. Many eligible children, especially those in the 3T regions (tertinggal, terdepan, terluar—disadvantaged, frontier, and outermost areas), have yet to receive assistance. Additionally, educational policy in Indonesia remains heavily focused on access rather than quality, leading to persistent gaps despite rising enrollment. To overcome this, education policy must adopt a comprehensive approach that integrates physical access, instructional quality, psychosocial support, and economic empowerment of low-income families. In conclusion, poverty operates as a pervasive structural barrier permeating every layer of Indonesia's education system. It influences school participation, learning quality, motivation, and even educational aspirations. Therefore, poverty-reduction strategies must be integrated with inclusive and equity-oriented educational reforms. The government should expand investment in educational infrastructure, enhance teacher training, provide need-based scholarships, and establish psychosocial support systems for underprivileged students. Through such multidimensional measures, educational equity can be realized, and the intergenerational cycle of poverty can be disrupted in a sustainable manner.

CONCLUSION

Poverty functions as a deeply embedded structural constraint that perpetuates educational inequality in Indonesia. It restricts access, lowers participation, and undermines the quality of learning through multidimensional effects spanning economic hardship, limited infrastructure, digital exclusion, and psychosocial distress. The persistence of poverty results in unequal educational opportunities, reinforcing intergenerational cycles of deprivation and social stratification. Addressing this issue requires a multidimensional approach that integrates educational reform with socioeconomic empowerment. The government must expand investment in rural education, strengthen teacher capacity, and ensure that programs such as Kartu Indonesia Pintar (KIP) and Program Indonesia Pintar (PIP) are accurately targeted and effectively monitored. Schools should enhance learning quality through adaptive curricula and equitable resource distribution, while families and communities must be engaged in fostering a culture that values education. Private and non-governmental sectors can support these efforts through corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs, digital literacy initiatives, and psychosocial assistance for disadvantaged students. Only through a collaborative, sustained, and equity-centered strategy can Indonesia realize inclusive education and dismantle the structural barriers that perpetuate poverty across generations.

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