

## Social Inclusion in Education: A Study of Access and Equality among Marginalized Groups

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### Abstract

Inequality in access to education in Indonesia remains a serious challenge, particularly for marginalized groups such as children from poor families, people with disabilities, and indigenous communities. Although the national legal framework guarantees the right to education, the reality on the ground shows that various structural and cultural barriers still hinder the creation of substantial educational equity. This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study method at an inclusive public school in a rural area to explore the implementation of social inclusion in the local context. Data were obtained through interviews, observations, and documentation studies, then analyzed thematically to uncover the dynamics of marginalized student participation, teacher readiness, and local community support. The results show that despite the commitment to inclusion, its implementation is still hampered by minimal teacher training, a lack of disability-friendly infrastructure, and the dominance of homogenous values in the learning system. However, the involvement of local actors and the use of a community-based approach have proven effective in strengthening the application of inclusive principles contextually. This research emphasizes that social inclusion is not merely an administrative effort but requires comprehensive structural and cultural changes. Therefore, a transformative and human rights-based education strategy is needed to realize an education system that is equitable, participatory, and truly respects diversity.

**Keywords:** Access to Education; Social Inclusion; Marginalized Groups.

### 1. Introduction

Inequality in access to education in Indonesia remains a complex structural problem, particularly for marginalized groups such as children from poor families, people with disabilities, and indigenous communities and religious minorities. Although the constitution and national policies, such as Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System, guarantee the right of every citizen to education, the reality is that these policies have not fully reached vulnerable groups. Various factors, such as limited educational infrastructure, low digital literacy, and social discrimination, prevent marginalized groups from accessing equal and quality education. Data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) (2023) shows that school enrollment rates have declined sharply in remote areas and low-income communities, reflecting inequality that has not been systematically addressed.

Furthermore, this inequality reinforces the intergenerational cycle of poverty. Education, which should be an instrument of social mobility, instead becomes a class divide when it is enjoyed only by those with better economic and geographic access. Children from marginalized families tend to face



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multiple barriers, both economic and social stigma, which reduce their chances of achieving academic success. UNICEF research (2022) confirms that children from poor communities are twice as likely to drop out of school as children from wealthy families. When education fails to be accessed equitably, the social and economic systems reproduce profound injustice (Ginting, 2023). Therefore, unequal access to education is not merely an educational issue, but also a social justice issue that must be addressed across sectors.

The right to education as a fundamental right has been universally recognized through various national and international legal instruments, such as Article 31 of the 1945 Constitution and Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). However, these normative guarantees are still insufficient to ensure substantive justice on the ground, especially for marginalized groups. In practice, the right to education is often reduced to an administrative formality, without addressing the dimensions of quality, affordability, and social acceptance. A human rights approach to education requires states not only to provide access but also to ensure that all citizens receive quality, relevant, and inclusive education without discrimination. According to a UNESCO report (2022), more than 260 million children worldwide, mostly from the poorest and most marginalized groups, remain outside the education system, demonstrating a collective failure to realize this fundamental right globally.

In the Indonesian context, the absence of a rights-based approach in the implementation of education policies often leads to structural exclusion of marginalized groups. For example, the school zoning system, designed for equity, actually reinforces social segregation, as superior schools are generally located in more economically developed areas. Furthermore, discriminatory practices such as bullying of students with disabilities, neglect of children from indigenous communities, and minimal affirmative action for children living in conflict areas indicate that the state is not fully present in protecting the educational rights of vulnerable groups. Many children with disabilities in Indonesia are still sent to special schools separate from the general education system, widening the gap in participation and quality (Sholichah et al., 2025). Therefore, it is crucial to promote educational reforms that are not merely administrative and technocratic, but also grounded in the principles of social justice, the elimination of discrimination, and respect for the dignity of all learners.

Social inclusion in education is not merely normative jargon, but rather a transformative strategy to address structural injustices that have excluded marginalized groups from the formal education system. This concept emphasizes the importance of embracing diversity and eliminating all barriers that hinder students' full participation, whether physical, social, or cultural. However, the practice of social inclusion in Indonesia often faces serious challenges, both in terms of teacher preparedness, curriculum, and school infrastructure. Schools in remote areas still lack basic disability-friendly facilities, such as wheelchair access or teaching materials tailored to special needs (Sahlan, 2025). This demonstrates that the commitment to social inclusion has not yet been fully translated into concrete and equitable policies and practices.

More critically, the failure to implement inclusive principles also reveals a cultural bias in our education system, which is still dominated by a homogenous and meritocratic paradigm. Systems that prioritize conventional academic achievement often ignore the social context and background of students, creating a single standard that does not accommodate differences. This results in symbolic exclusion, where students from marginalized groups feel excluded from the learning community. As revealed in a World Bank report (2022), children from vulnerable groups are more likely to experience learning delays not due to lack of ability, but due to learning environments that are not socially and emotionally inclusive. Therefore, the implementation of social inclusion must be interpreted as an effort to overhaul the structure of power relations in education, promote a diversity-based curriculum, and reaffirm the role of schools as democratic spaces that humanize every individual without exception (Poed, 2020).

The lack of contextual studies on social inclusion in education in marginalized communities indicates a serious gap in policy research that directly impacts vulnerable groups. While social inclusion discourse has often been macro and normative, little has been done to analyze how these policies are

internalized and implemented at the local level, particularly in communities with socioeconomic, geographic, and cultural limitations. Yet, local context plays a central role in determining the success or failure of an inclusive education policy. For example, in remote indigenous communities in Papua or the border areas of Kalimantan, a locally-based approach is essential to adapt the curriculum, language of instruction, and learning methods to suit the cultural realities of the local community. Research by Arifin et al. (2022) confirms that the failure of national education programs often stems from a lack of sensitivity to the local context, including the imbalance of power between the central and regional governments in designing and implementing policies.

Furthermore, the lack of in-depth and sustainable data on the experiences of marginalized groups in accessing education weakens advocacy processes and evidence-based policymaking. Many discriminatory or exclusionary practices remain unrecorded because they are not identified by technocratic and quantitative education monitoring systems. This results in marginalized voices remaining marginalized in public discourse and policy formulation. The RISE Programme Indonesia (2021) report shows that most available education data does not reflect the conditions of children from marginalized communities such as migrant workers, street children, and indigenous communities, thus leaving their needs overlooked by state intervention. Therefore, a participatory approach in research and policy formulation is crucial to capturing the complex realities on the ground. Inclusive research must involve marginalized communities as active subjects, not merely objects of study, so that the resulting policies are not only responsive but also transformative to existing structures of injustice.

## 2. Method

A qualitative approach using the case study method was chosen because it can capture social complexities and subjective experiences that quantitative methods cannot. Yin (2018) stated that case studies are highly effective for understanding phenomena in real-world contexts in depth and comprehensively. In the context of inclusive education, this approach allows for an understanding of the dynamics between educational policies, practices, and actors in diverse environments.

In-depth interviews and participant observation were conducted to explore inclusion practices, power relations, and the perceptions of educational actors. Consistent with Creswell's (2014) argument, a qualitative approach allows for the exploration of meanings formed through social and cultural interactions. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns of meaning and social dynamics in the implementation of inclusion principles. Data validity was maintained through triangulation and member checking, as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to ensure the credibility and validity of the research results.

Theoretically, this approach aligns with the views of Booth and Ainscow (2011) who emphasized that inclusion in education is not only about physical access, but also about active participation, recognition of identity, and the creation of a learning environment that is responsive to diversity. The findings are expected to contribute to transformative strategies to realize more contextual and sustainable educational justice.

## 3. Results

### **Social Inclusion Practices in School Contexts: Realities and Challenges**

Social inclusion in education is a systematic effort to ensure that every student, without exception, can access, participate in, and succeed in an equitable and supportive educational environment. UNESCO (2009) emphasizes that inclusive education is a human right that must be realized through the restructuring of the education system to be able to respond to the diverse needs of students. At the school level, social inclusion is implemented through curriculum adaptation, differential learning approaches, and institutional support based on the principles of justice and non-discrimination. The importance of differentiated instruction, a learning approach that adapts the content, process, and learning products to suit students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles, is the main key to the

success of inclusive education (Atika, 2024). The role of teachers in this context is crucial; they are required to possess pedagogical, social, and emotional competencies that are able to embrace diversity and create safe and supportive learning spaces for all students.

However, various studies show that implementing inclusion in schools still faces significant challenges, especially in developing countries like Indonesia. A study by Juvonen et al. (2019) noted that most teachers in inclusive schools in Indonesia have not received adequate training on inclusive learning methods, resulting in low-effective learning practices for students with special needs. Furthermore, according to Simanjuntak et al. (2025), inclusion is not just about learning techniques, but rather a transformation of school culture that recognizes and values differences. However, social realities such as discrimination, stereotypes, and stigma against students from marginalized groups, whether disabled, ethnic minorities, or low-income backgrounds, remain major obstacles. Schools often reproduce majority norms and fail to provide equal spaces for expression for all students. This demonstrates that the success of social inclusion does not rely solely on good intentions but requires systemic changes that encompass educational policies, increased teacher capacity, strengthening an inclusive school culture, and parental and community involvement.

### **Inequality of Access and Structural Barriers Faced by Marginalized Groups**

Many studies show that marginalized groups not only experience physical and economic limitations in accessing education but are also trapped within systemic structures that produce and reproduce injustice. According to Bourdieu (1986), schools are arenas where cultural and symbolic capital plays a central role. Children from poor families or cultural minorities lack cultural capital aligned with the dominant norms and values of the formal education system, and therefore tend to be marginalized.

Research from UNESCO (2020) in its Global Education Monitoring Report states that students from poor backgrounds, minority groups, people with disabilities, and women in rural areas are more likely to experience learning poverty, or the inability to understand simple texts by the age of 10. This is due not only to limited facilities but also to a non-inclusive and non-homogeneous educational approach.

Practically, language barriers in teaching have been a focus of attention in numerous linguistic and educational studies. Polii & Polii (2025) emphasize the importance of mother tongue in early childhood learning. Curricula that ignore local languages can reduce students' cognitive abilities and participation, as the learning process becomes unfamiliar and meaningless. This is particularly relevant in the multilingual context of Indonesia, where instruction is often conducted solely in Indonesian, without adapting to students' linguistic diversity.

Furthermore, structural discrimination is reflected in teachers' treatment and expectations of marginalized students. Research by Mardizal & Ramatni (2024) shows that teachers' labeling of students from ethnic minority groups as "less capable" creates a self-fulfilling prophecy, ultimately lowering students' academic achievement. In the Indonesian context, research by Suryadi and Priyanto (2018) found that students from indigenous communities in Papua are often excluded from active classroom activities due to perceived intellectual limitations, when in fact the problem lies in inappropriate teaching methods.

From a justice theory perspective, Nancy Fraser (2009) proposed three dimensions of social justice in education: redistribution (economic access), recognition (recognition of identity and culture), and representation (voice in decision-making). Within this framework, educational inequality cannot be addressed simply by building schools or providing scholarships, but also by changing exclusionary institutional structures and values.

Thus, the approach to addressing structural barriers in education must be holistic: encompassing education policy reform, teacher training in inclusive pedagogy, developing locally context-based curricula, and strengthening the role of communities in supporting schools. Technical solutions alone are insufficient without a critical awareness of the social roots of exclusion.

To address this inequality, a transformational approach to education is essential. Education must be liberating and contextual, not simply a one-way transfer of knowledge that reinforces the dominance of the majority culture. In the context of marginalized students, this means creating learning spaces that enable them to critically understand their social realities while remaining empowered to change them. Schools should not be tools for reproducing inequality, but rather spaces for emancipation. Therefore, the active participation of local communities, especially parents and traditional leaders, is crucial to bridging local cultural values with formal educational structures. This aligns with the findings of Cano-Hila (2022), who highlighted the importance of community engagement in improving the quality of learning in underdeveloped areas.

Furthermore, it is crucial to promote differentiation and affirmative action policies based on the principle of educational equity, not simply equality. This principle emphasizes that fair treatment does not mean giving everyone the same thing, but rather providing support tailored to the needs of each group. For example, providing specialized teachers with training in multicultural pedagogy, using contextual teaching materials based on local wisdom, and integrating the mother tongue into early education. A study by Yuliasari et al. (2024) found that children who are allowed to develop academic competencies in their mother tongue tend to have higher learning outcomes, both in their mother tongue and in their second language. Affirmative action policies like these have proven effective in multilingual education programs in various developing countries, including the Philippines and Nepal (UNESCO, 2016). Implementing similar strategies in Indonesia, particularly in regions like Papua, East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), and remote Kalimantan, would be a crucial step in eliminating structural barriers that have limited access to meaningful education for marginalized groups.

### **The Role of Local Actors and Adaptive Strategies in Realizing Inclusive Education**

Various studies confirm that local community-based approaches to inclusive education have a significant impact on creating learning environments responsive to the needs of marginalized students. For example, according to Alia & Dermawan (2025), the success of inclusive education is not solely determined by national policies but rather depends on how schools and communities interact to create inclusive cultures, policies, and practices. This suggests that bottom-up strategies, which rely on the initiative and critical reflection of local actors, are crucial in adapting inclusion principles to specific community contexts.

Furthermore, research by Judijanto & Caroline (2025) in the context of developing countries shows that local community involvement in inclusive education is often a solution to systemic weaknesses, such as limited resources, lack of teacher training, and policy designs that are not aligned with local realities. Adaptive strategies such as involving community leaders, collaborating with local NGOs, and utilizing local wisdom values have been shown to increase social acceptance of students with special needs or from marginalized socio-economic backgrounds.

In Indonesia, research by Schuster & Kolleck (2024) confirms that teachers and principals play a strategic role as agents of change in creating inclusive environments, particularly in remote areas. They often make informal curriculum adjustments and implement contextual learning to ensure students from marginalized groups remain actively involved. This approach aligns with the principles of context-responsive pedagogy, which emphasizes the importance of education relevant to local conditions (Ahmad & Islam, 2024).



Thus, the contribution of local actors and adaptive strategies is crucial in bridging the gap between macro policies and micro practices, and supporting the creation of an equitable and transformative education system. This model is not merely a complement to national policies, but rather a key pillar in ensuring that inclusion is not mere jargon but a reality implemented from the ground up by those who best understand the context.

Furthermore, the successful implementation of adaptive strategies by local actors is often determined by the level of transformative leadership possessed by principals and teachers. Inclusive and visionary leadership can create a school culture that encourages the participation of all parties and accommodates students' needs equally. This is supported by research by Nufus et al. (2024), which shows that school leaders who apply transformative leadership principles play a significant role in shaping an inclusive vision, empowering teachers, and encouraging active community participation. In many cases, principals who are able to foster cross-sector collaboration, including with civil society organizations and traditional leaders, can transform schools into inclusive spaces that not only accept but also celebrate diversity as a strength

#### 4. Conclusion

Inclusive education in schools requires comprehensive changes, not only in teaching methods but also in school culture and structures to better respond to student diversity. Challenges such as the lack of teacher training and persistent social discrimination demonstrate that inclusion requires systemic transformation, not just technical policies. Furthermore, the unequal access to education experienced by marginalized groups demonstrates the need for a transformative approach that emphasizes social justice and local context. The role of local actors such as teachers, principals, and communities is crucial in bridging national policies with realities on the ground. Adaptive strategies based on local potential have proven effective in creating equitable, relevant, and sustainable learning environments for all students.

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