# Institutional Stigma and Educational Inclusion among Economically Marginalized Students: A Case Study of Indonesia's People's School Program

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**HOW TO CITE:**

Reski P, Tahir Kasnawi, Hasbi (2026). Institutional Stigma and Educational Inclusion among Economically Marginalized Students: A Case Study of Indonesia's People's School Program. International Journal of Special Education, 41(12s), 617-623

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**ABSTRACT:**

Educational inclusion remains a critical challenge in developing countries, particularly among students from economically marginalized communities who often experience both structural barriers and social exclusion. Indonesia's People's School Program (Sekolah Rakyat) was established as an affirmative educational policy to expand educational opportunities for disadvantaged learners. However, institutions specifically designed for vulnerable populations may also become subjects of institutional stigma and social labeling. This study examines how institutional stigma is socially constructed toward Sekolah Rakyat Menengah Atas (SRMA) 26 Makassar and explores its implications for educational inclusion among economically marginalized students. Employing a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis involving students, parents, community leaders, educational actors, and social facilitators. The findings reveal that institutional stigma emerges through public perceptions that associate People's Schools with poverty, social disadvantage, and lower educational status. Such labeling affects students' social identity, self-perception, and institutional legitimacy. Nevertheless, supportive educational experiences within the school environment contribute to identity negotiation, increased self-confidence, social belonging, and aspirations for upward mobility. The study demonstrates that educational inclusion is shaped not only by access to educational opportunities but also by symbolic recognition and social acceptance within broader social contexts. The findings contribute to the sociology of education by highlighting the relationship between institutional stigma, symbolic inequality, and inclusive educational policies for marginalized learners.

Keywords: institutional stigma, educational inclusion, marginalized students, affirmative education, symbolic inequality.

## 1. Introduction

Educational inclusion remains one of the major challenges facing developing societies, particularly among students from economically marginalized communities experiencing socioeconomic vulnerability. Education is widely recognized as a fundamental human right and an essential mechanism for promoting social mobility, equality, and individual development

(Berch, 2024). Nevertheless, unequal opportunities for participation and inclusion continue to persist across different socioeconomic groups. In Indonesia, disparities in educational participation are closely associated with poverty, geographic inequality, and unequal distribution of educational resources. Consequently, educational inequality not only limits academic opportunities but also reproduces broader patterns of social disadvantage and exclusion within society (Ulfa, 2019; UNICEF, 2020).

In response to these conditions, the Indonesian government introduced the People's School (Sekolah Rakyat) program as an affirmative educational initiative intended to promote educational inclusion and equitable learning opportunities for economically marginalized students. The program provides free boarding-school education and prioritizes students from vulnerable socioeconomic backgrounds. Beyond improving educational accessibility, the program seeks to strengthen social inclusion, enhance educational participation, and reduce structural barriers experienced by marginalized youth. Inclusive education plays an important role in empowering marginalized communities, fostering social belonging, and promoting broader social participation (Dela Peña & Galigao, 2025).

Recent studies suggest that educational inclusion extends beyond physical access to schooling and encompasses meaningful participation, social acceptance, and equitable educational experiences. Learners from marginalized socioeconomic backgrounds frequently encounter both structural and symbolic barriers that limit their educational participation and social recognition (Whitcomb & Singh, 2020). Educational inequality should therefore be understood not only in terms of resource distribution but also in relation to social perceptions, institutional legitimacy, and experiences of belonging within educational environments. These dimensions are particularly relevant in affirmative educational settings, where institutions designed to support vulnerable learners may simultaneously become subjects of public labeling and stigma.

However, the emergence of affirmative educational institutions often generates unintended social consequences. Institutions specifically designed for disadvantaged populations may become associated with symbolic disadvantage and marginalized educational identities, resulting in social stigma and institutional labeling. Such perceptions may influence students' confidence, sense of belonging, social identity, and perceptions of institutional legitimacy. Previous studies have demonstrated that stigma can significantly affect educational engagement, participation, and relationships between educational institutions and their stakeholders (Wilson & McGuire, 2021). These conditions suggest that educational inequality operates not only through material limitations but also through symbolic processes embedded within broader social structures.

From a sociological perspective, stigma can be understood as a process of social labeling that categorizes individuals or institutions as socially different from dominant norms. Goffman conceptualizes stigma as a socially discrediting attribute that shapes interactional experiences and symbolic positioning within society (Goffman, 2022). Meanwhile, Bourdieu argues that symbolic violence and social reproduction operate through institutional structures, including educational systems, producing unequal symbolic hierarchies that influence recognition, legitimacy, and social status (Bourdieu, 1990). Within educational contexts, such symbolic processes may create barriers to educational inclusion, particularly for students enrolled in institutions associated with poverty and social disadvantage.

## 2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study design to examine the sociological dimensions of institutional stigma and educational inclusion within the context of Indonesia's People's School Program. A qualitative case study was considered appropriate because it enables an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, perceptions, and social

meanings within their natural settings (Creswell, 2021; Yin, 2018). The study was conducted at Sekolah Rakyat Menengah Atas (SRMA) 26 Makassar, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement and knowledge of the People's School program. The informants consisted of students, parents, community leaders, educational stakeholders, and Program Keluarga Harapan (PKH) facilitators who were considered capable of providing rich and diverse information regarding institutional stigma, educational inclusion, and the educational experiences of economically marginalized students. The researcher served as the primary research instrument and was supported by semi-structured interview guides, observation protocols, field notes, audio recordings, and institutional documents.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis. The interviews were conducted to explore participants' perceptions, experiences, and interpretations regarding institutional stigma, educational inclusion, and community attitudes toward People's Schools. Observations were undertaken to examine interaction patterns, educational practices, and social dynamics within the school environment, while document analysis was used to review educational policies, institutional reports, program guidelines, and social assistance records related to the implementation of the People's School program. The data collection process began with obtaining permission from relevant educational authorities and school administrators, followed by participant recruitment based on purposive criteria. Interviews and observations were subsequently conducted, recorded, transcribed, and systematically documented. Documentary evidence was collected concurrently to support and validate information obtained from other data sources. Throughout the research process, ethical principles were observed by informing participants about the purpose of the study, obtaining their voluntary consent, and ensuring confidentiality through the anonymization of personal information.

Data were analyzed using the interactive model developed by Miles and Huberman (1994), which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The analytical process began with organizing and transcribing interview data, observation notes, and documentary materials. Subsequently, thematic coding was conducted through open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to identify recurring patterns and themes related to institutional stigma, symbolic inequality, educational inclusion, and students' educational experiences. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, methodological triangulation was employed by comparing evidence derived from interviews, observations, and documentary sources. Source triangulation was also conducted by examining perspectives from different participant groups, including students, parents, community leaders, educational actors, and PKH facilitators. Data collection and analysis continued until thematic saturation was achieved, indicated by the repeated emergence of similar themes concerning poverty labeling, institutional stigma, symbolic inequality, social belonging, and educational inclusion across multiple participants and data sources. The consistency of these findings provided confidence in the credibility and robustness of the study's interpretations.

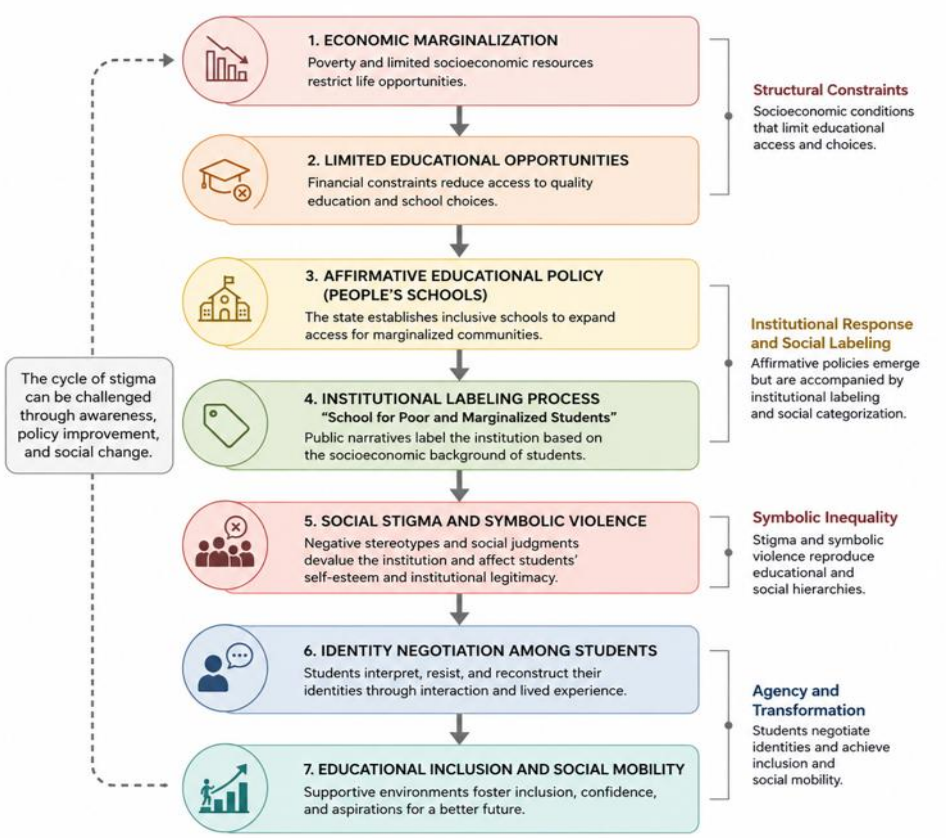
## 3. Results

### 3.1 Institutional Stigma toward People's Schools

The findings revealed that stigma toward SRMA 26 Makassar primarily emerged from public perceptions associating the institution with poverty and socioeconomic disadvantage. Community members frequently described People's Schools as educational spaces intended exclusively for students from low-income families. Several students reported initial hesitation when enrolling because they believed the school was socially labeled as a "school for poor students." These perceptions contributed to the formation of institutional stigma and influenced how the school was viewed within the wider community. The findings further showed that public labeling affected students' perceptions of the institution and its social status. Participants

indicated that People's Schools were often compared unfavorably with mainstream schools due to their association with poverty-targeted educational programs. As a result, the institution was frequently positioned within a lower symbolic status compared with conventional schools.

**Figure 1. Cycle of Institutional Stigma in People's Schools**




***Source:** Developed by the author based on field findings and sociological theories of Goffman and Bourdieu.*

The findings illustrated that institutional stigma developed through a cycle involving economic marginalization, affirmative educational policy, public labeling, and social perceptions that associated the institution with social disadvantage.

3.2 Educational Inclusion and Economic Barriers

The findings demonstrated that economic limitations were the primary reason students enrolled in SRMA 26 Makassar. Parents explained that financial constraints prevented them from accessing conventional educational institutions. The provision of free education, accommodation, meals, and learning resources significantly reduced educational costs for participating families.Participants also emphasized that the school expanded educational opportunities for students who were previously at risk of educational exclusion. Student recruitment was conducted through social welfare databases and recommendations from PKH facilitators, ensuring that educational support reached economically vulnerable groups.

3.3 Educational Experiences and Social Belonging

Despite initial negative perceptions, students reported increasingly positive educational experiences after enrollment. Participants highlighted supportive relationships with teachers, adequate facilities, and positive peer interactions. These experiences contributed to greater self-confidence and a stronger sense of belonging within the school environment. Students also reported that the boarding-school system encouraged social interaction, personal development, and educational aspirations. Many

participants indicated that their perceptions of the school improved significantly after experiencing its educational environment directly.

3.4 Symbolic Inequality and Institutional Recognition

The findings revealed that institutional stigma was closely related to broader patterns of symbolic inequality. Participants noted that educational institutions were frequently judged according to their social prestige and student backgrounds. Consequently, People's Schools were often perceived differently from mainstream schools despite providing comparable educational opportunities. The data further indicated that public perceptions influenced institutional recognition and students' educational experiences. Although the program promoted educational inclusion, the school continued to face challenges associated with poverty-related labeling and symbolic disadvantage.

## 4. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that institutional stigma toward People's Schools is socially constructed through labeling processes that associate affirmative educational institutions with poverty and social disadvantage. This finding supports Goffman's (2022) argument that stigma functions as a social marker shaping interactional experiences and symbolic positioning within society. In the context of SRMA 26 Makassar, institutional stigma extended beyond individual students and became attached to the educational institution itself. The findings also reinforce Bourdieu's (1990) perspective concerning symbolic capital, symbolic violence, and social reproduction. Educational institutions are not evaluated solely according to academic functions but also according to symbolic meanings associated with social class and economic status. Consequently, institutions serving economically marginalized communities may experience lower symbolic legitimacy despite their educational contributions. The study further highlights that educational inclusion involves more than access to schooling. Consistent with previous studies on inclusive education, meaningful educational inclusion requires social acceptance, recognition, participation, and a sense of belonging. The experiences of students at SRMA 26 Makassar suggest that supportive educational environments can mitigate the negative effects of institutional stigma and contribute to identity reconstruction, self-confidence, and educational aspirations. From a policy perspective, the findings indicate that affirmative educational programs should address not only structural barriers but also symbolic barriers. Efforts to strengthen educational inclusion should therefore include public awareness initiatives aimed at reducing negative stereotypes toward institutions serving marginalized populations. Educational policies that expand access without addressing institutional stigma may unintentionally reproduce symbolic inequalities. Several limitations should be acknowledged. This study was conducted within a single case study setting at SRMA 26 Makassar, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other People's Schools in Indonesia. Future studies may employ comparative approaches across multiple institutions and incorporate quantitative methods to examine the broader relationship between institutional stigma and educational inclusion among marginalized learners.

## 5. Conclusion

This study examined institutional stigma and educational inclusion within the context of Indonesia's People's School Program at Sekolah Rakyat Menengah Atas (SRMA) 26 Makassar. The findings demonstrate that institutional stigma is socially constructed through labeling processes that associate affirmative educational institutions with poverty and symbolic disadvantage. Such stigma influences institutional legitimacy, students' social identities, and educational experiences. The study further reveals that educational inclusion is shaped not only by access to educational opportunities but also by symbolic recognition, social acceptance, and a sense of belonging within educational environments. Although People's Schools have successfully expanded educational opportunities for economically marginalized students, negative

public perceptions continue to create symbolic barriers that may hinder the broader goals of educational inclusion. The findings suggest that educational policies aimed at supporting marginalized learners should address both structural and symbolic dimensions of educational inequality. In addition to providing access to education, policymakers and educational stakeholders should develop public awareness initiatives and community engagement strategies to reduce institutional stigma and strengthen the social recognition of affirmative educational institutions. Such efforts are essential for fostering more inclusive educational environments and promoting equitable participation among economically marginalized students. This study is limited to a single case study setting and therefore may not fully represent the experiences of students in other People's Schools across Indonesia. Future research could employ comparative studies across multiple institutions, incorporate diverse regional contexts, or utilize mixed-method approaches to further examine the relationship between institutional stigma, educational inclusion, and educational outcomes among marginalized learners.

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