

NARRATIVES OF MERITOCRACY IN EDUCATION AND THE REPRODUCTION OF SOCIAL INEQUALITY: A LITERATURE REVIEW IN A CRITICAL SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine how the narrative of meritocracy in education contributes to the reproduction of social inequality through a critical sociological approach. Education is often assumed to be a means of social mobility based on individual ability and effort, but the literature shows that this system is fraught with structural biases. This study uses a systematic literature review method with a critical qualitative approach. Data sources come from scientific articles, academic books, policy reports, and educational documents collected from databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and DOAJ. The selected literature focuses on meritocracy, educational inequality, as well as critical theories of education such as cultural capital, habitus, and symbolic dominance. The analysis was carried out thematically and interpretively. The results of the study show that the education system actually strengthens social stratification through evaluation and selection mechanisms that appear to be neutral. The ideology of meritocracy plays a role in justifying inequality and blaming individuals for their failures. This study concludes that a socially equitable approach to education needs to be developed to break symbolic dominance and open up space for more inclusive and equitable policies.

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INTRODUCTIONS

The narrative of meritocracy in education is often the basis for optimistic views about the potential social mobility of individuals. In this context, education is seen as the main path that allows a person to achieve success and change his social status. However, this claim contains a number of assumptions that need to be criticized. Many narratives of meritocracy imply that the main factors that determine a person's success in education are individual

efforts and talents, regardless of the social and economic background that may affect access and quality of education received. (Farkhan & Maryani, 2023; Rasya & Triadi, 2024; Siska & Rudagi, 2021)

The concept of meritocracy refers to a system in which individuals succeed based on their abilities and efforts. In many countries, including Indonesia, the education system is often managed under this view. Student evaluation structures and education policies are designed to encourage each individual to maximize their potential through consistent efforts. However, there is criticism that the assumption of the alignment of this education system on the principles of neutrality and justice is often not realized in practice. Education policies rooted in meritocracy often ignore the systemic issues that contribute to the sustainability of social inequalities, both in access to education and the quality received. (Herianto & Marsigit, 2023) (Anwar, 2022; Farkhan & Maryani, 2023)

Social inequality in education shows that academic achievement is not only determined by internal factors, such as motivation to learn, but also the privacy of resources, family support, and accessibility to quality educational institutions. Research shows that socio-economic backgrounds, such as parents' education level and family economic situation, significantly affect students' academic performance. Inequality in access to educational resources, such as books and technology, also contributes to the reproduction of social inequality. Students from families with better economic backgrounds have easier access to high-quality study materials and adequate educational facilities, thus increasing their chances of success. (Siska & Rudagi, 2021) (Afdhal & Hidayat, 2019; Meyanti & Lasmawan, 2023)

The reproduction of this inequality is described in the educational literature which shows that education does not always function as a tool to improve social mobility. In many contexts, education can reinforce existing social stratification. A study shows that inequality in the education system, which is evident in school choice, career paths, and training opportunities, actually benefits those who previously had advantages. In addition, the results of educational evaluations often reflect biases rooted in broader social, cultural, and economic norms, which can widen the gap. (Farkhan & Maryani, 2023; Siska & Rudagi, 2021) (Rasya & Triadi, 2024; Suryani et al., 2023)

The importance of addressing inequality in education is to build an inclusive system, which provides more equal opportunities for all individuals, regardless of their background. In this effort, policies that focus on improving the quality of education in underserved areas are essential. Research shows that collaboration between governments, communities, and educational institutions can provide practical solutions to address these issues and promote social justice in education. Moreover, strengthening access to education in remote areas and improving the quality of educational institutions is a strategic step to reduce inequality. (Qomarrullah, 2024)

Taking into account the above discourse, it can be understood that meritocracy in education does not necessarily guarantee social justice or individual mobility. Although education plays a crucial role in developing the character and potential of individuals, the existing system is often riddled with various biases and injustices that can reinforce existing social stratification. That is why, serious efforts are needed to reform the education framework to be more responsive to the social and economic needs of marginalized communities, so that education can function effectively as a tool to create equality. (Farkhan & Maryani, 2023; Rahmawati, 2023)

Critical sociological criticism of meritocracy is rooted in Pierre Bourdieu's thinking about cultural capital, habitus, and symbolic domination. In the context of education, institutions serve as a selection mechanism that disguises social inequality as a result of individual failure. Bourdieu emphasizes that what is considered "ability" or "success" in a meritocratic system is in fact strongly influenced by structural factors such as social and economic background. This process creates the illusion that education is meritocratic and equitable, when in reality, access to quality education often depends on the accumulation of cultural capital possessed by individuals or families. As a result, the values and norms of individuals from lower social class backgrounds are often ignored, and they are forced to adapt to the standards set by the dominant class, creating an ongoing cycle of injustice. (Dekkers et al., 2022; Sun & Shi, 2025) (Bocquet et al., 2024; Dekkers et al., 2022)

The gap between the narrative of meritocracy promoted by the state and educational institutions and the unequal social reality shows that the ideology of meritocracy not only plays a role in justifying social stratification, but also blames individuals who fail. Research shows that belief in meritocracy can reinforce inequality and create the

view that undersuccessful individuals are the result of insufficient effort, not because of structures that stand in their way. Thus, this ideology serves to mask existing structural inequalities and create distortions in society's understanding of social justice, leading to a rejection of interventions that can reduce those disparities. This disconnection exacerbates the situation by prioritizing rhetoric that is not in tune with the reality of the lives of many individuals in an unequal society. (Darnon et al., 2018; X. Tan et al., 2021) (Atria et al., 2020; Sengupta et al., 2017)

This research has both theoretical and practical urgency: theoretically, it enriches the sociological discourse on education by integrating the perspectives of Bourdieu and other critics of education; Practically, it opens up space for critical reflection on education policies that claim neutrality but fail to touch the structural roots of inequality. Amid growing attention to social justice in the education sector, this study contributes to strengthening a more equitable, inclusive, and socially context-aware education reform framework.

The purpose of this study is to criticize and evaluate in depth the narrative of meritocracy in education which has been considered as a neutral mechanism to encourage social mobility, by highlighting how unequal social and economic structures actually reproduce inequality through the education system.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research takes a qualitative approach with a systematic literature review method based on a critical sociology perspective, especially in the study of the sociology of education. As a literature study, this study does not involve the collection of primary data, but rather focuses on the search, selection, and analysis of scientific literature that discusses the concepts of meritocracy, educational justice, and the relationship between education and social inequality.

The main objective of this study is to identify how the narrative of meritocracy is constructed and reproduced in the education system, as well as to analyze the contribution of educational institutions in maintaining an unequal social structure. This study also aims to uncover how critical sociological theories can be used to reread the relationship between educational ideology and social inequality.

The data sources in this study come from secondary literature such as scientific journal articles, academic books, research reports, education policy documents, and relevant conference proceedings. The literature is collected through systematic searches in various scientific databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, and DOAJ. The keywords used include: "meritocracy in education", "educational inequality", "social reproduction", "critical sociology of education", "Pierre Bourdieu and education", and "ideology in curriculum".

The selection of literature is focused on the publications of the last two decades, taking into account also classical literature that has a significant theoretical influence, especially the works of Pierre Bourdieu, Michael Apple, and other writers in the tradition of critical sociology. The selected literature meets the inclusion criteria: discussing meritocracy, educational inequality, and critical analysis of the education system. Meanwhile, technocratic, administrative, or purely statistical literature without structural and ideological studies is excluded.

The analysis process is carried out through thematic and interpretive approaches, by identifying the main themes that are repeated in the literature, such as: the illusion of justice in meritocracy, the role of cultural capital in educational attainment, symbolic selection mechanisms, and the institutionalization of inequality through curriculum and evaluation. The theoretical framework of critical sociology is used to interpret the results of the analysis, with an emphasis on the concepts of habitus, capital, symbolic reproduction, as well as criticism of dominant ideologies in education.

By integrating systematic approaches and critical sociological theories, this study builds on a conceptual analysis that maps the relationship between meritocracy and social inequality in education, as well as providing a theoretical basis for imagining a more structurally equitable direction of educational policies and practices.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

The Dominance of Meritocratic Discourse in Education

Meritocracy is often positioned as a key principle in the modern education system, where it is believed that an individual's success in school and college reflects their abilities, efforts, and talents. In the literature, meritocracy is the basis for many educational policies, where students are assumed to have an equal chance of achievement without taking into account the socioeconomic factors that affect their access and quality of education. This policy forms the narrative that education is a path to equality and social justice. However, despite this rhetoric claiming to provide equal opportunities, many studies show that the reality is much more complex and often reflects the existence of deep inequalities in society. (Brighouse, 2022; P. K. W. Tan & Kosat, 2024) (Elliott, 2023; Batruch et al., 2023; Mijs, 2019)

In practice, the representation of meritocracy is integrated not only in policy, but also in curriculum and evaluation methods. A curriculum that focuses on individual achievement and clear standards recognizes meritocratic structures, but often ignores students' social contexts, such as family backgrounds and access to quality educational resources. Research shows how reputable schools generally contain students from the upper social classes, which indicates that access to quality education is often obtained through social networks and family wealth, not just through talent or effort. Thus, although the education system claims that all students have equal opportunities, the reality shows that success is often more a reflection of the social and cultural capital accumulated by individuals throughout their lives. (Kuppens et al., 2018; Wang, 2022) (Batruch et al., 2023; Littler, 2017)

The common perception of meritocracy often makes this idea an effective ideology in distracting from structural inequality. Many students and society believe that individual failures in the education system are the result of a lack of effort, not the result of an unequal system. The consequence of this view is the legitimacy of social injustice and the disregard for the interventions necessary to create equality. The limitations of this view become apparent when faced with the fact that academic success is often more influenced by outside factors, such as educational support and social environment, than simply by individual merit. Criticism of this view suggests that referring to meritocracy without considering the social context only exacerbates inequities in education. (Batruch et al., 2023; Darnon et al., 2018) (Gavriş, 2020; P. K. W. Tan & Kosat, 2024)

Further, criticism of meritocracy in education also highlights how beliefs in this system can lead to a driving effect on educational injustice. Research shows that belief in meritocracy can make individuals feel satisfied with the status quo and less motivated to make changes that can address inequality. The confluence of meritocratic discourse with educational capitalism risks tying individual identities to their success or failure based on criteria set by educational institutions without understanding the larger dynamics surrounding them. This alarm illustrates that individuals are often faced with the challenge of proving their 'worthiness' in a system that is inherently unequal. (Batruch et al., 2023; Sun & Shi, 2025) (Gavriş, 2020; Kuppens et al., 2018)

The dominating rhetoric of meritocracy often reflects on ideologies that are unable to reflect complex social realities. Many academics draw attention to the gap between expectations and reality, where the notion that education can be a tool of social mobility contradicts empirical findings. Research shows that the marginalization of groups from low socioeconomic backgrounds is present in many education systems, creating a reality in which education systems more often reinforce inequality rather than reduce or change it. A deep understanding of these factors is essential to discuss and reformulate our view of education as a tool of social justice. (Brighouse, 2022; P. K. W. Tan & Kosat, 2024) (Batruch et al., 2023; Littler, 2017)

Thus, meritocracy cannot be ruled out as an ideology that has the potential to support social domination. In this context, education is not only about academic achievement, but also about how education can serve as a means to stabilize and maintain systems that favor power and control in the hands of certain groups. Thus, an analysis of meritocracy in education paves the way to a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities of circumstances and the challenges of creating a fair and inclusive education system, which not only serves as a place to evaluate individual talents but also promotes fairness and equality in access to quality education. (Bubak, 2019; P. K. W. Tan & Kosat, 2024)

Finally, the creation of change in the education system requires recognition of the limitations of the principle of meritocracy and the acceptance of diversity in its experience. The ability to move beyond the psychotic of meritocracy requires reforms that take into account existing inequalities and commit to improving existing structures. Without this acknowledgement, education will continue to serve as a mirror of existing injustices, disguising the shortcomings in the system as individual failures rather than structural weaknesses. Collaborative efforts to counter the rhetoric of meritocracy can be used to pave the way for more inclusive and transformational policies, in order to produce a more equitable education system. (Sun & Shi, 2025; Wang, 2022)

Institutional Mechanisms of Inequality Reproduction

In the education system, schools and academic selection mechanisms function as social screening tools that not only distribute knowledge but also strengthen the social position of certain groups. This process occurs through merit-based evaluations that, while seemingly objective, often normalize existing inequalities. When students are assessed based on achievement criteria, there is an assumption that all students start from the same starting line, when in reality, many face various obstacles that they cannot control, such as the socioeconomic conditions of their families. (Meipiani et al., 2021)

The influence of economic and social capital plays a major role in facilitating access to a wide range of learning opportunities, such as additional courses and quality educational facilities. Students from upper-middle-class backgrounds typically have greater access to these resources, which aids them in achieving better academic achievement. In many cases, this creates a cycle in which students who already have access to social and economic capital-based facilities and support have an advantage in academic competition over their peers from lower backgrounds. Research also shows that extensive social relationships often allow students to take advantage of information and opportunities that are not available to other students. (Syahputra et al., 2023) (Tohet & Hidayat, 2023)

Educational institutions play an important role in maintaining and strengthening the privileges of the middle and upper classes. Through admissions policies that tend to favor students from wealthy families, schools often reproduce the structural inequities that exist in society. As such, the education system looks unfair and biased to economically disadvantaged students, who may not receive equally good support at home or in their communities. In this context, education, which is supposed to be a tool to increase social mobility, actually serves to reinforce existing social stratification, blocking opportunities for those who actually need it. (Amalia et al., 2021) (Nov. 2019)

As time goes by, many students realize that while they may have great desire and potential, their initial condition as "disadvantaged students" affects their academic results. When schools and other institutions evaluate and position students based on merit, this policy creates the view that individual failure or success depends entirely on personal effort and ability. Thus, it is important to question the fairness and objectivity of the norms and criteria used in the current education system. (Susanti, 2020)

On the other hand, there is a debate about how the education system can be changed to be more inclusive and equitable. For example, some researchers suggest that providing better access and academic support for students from low-income backgrounds can reduce existing inequalities and promote social justice in education. By introducing programs that assist students in gaining access to the necessary educational resources, schools can contribute to reducing existing gaps. (Khofsah et al., 2023)

It is important for education policy to begin to recognize that academic achievement does not only depend on individual ability, but is also influenced by many factors, including the support students have and access to available resources. In order to create a more equitable system, expanding access to quality education should be a priority. Without recognition of these aspects, the education system will continue to ignore existing inequalities, supporting the misleading narrative that every student has an equal opportunity to succeed. (Purnomo et al., 2022)

Overall, education cannot be separated from its social and economic context. Although governments and educational institutions often promote meritocracy as a fundamental principle in education, the reality is that existing social filtering mechanisms serve not only to distribute knowledge but also to reinforce and legitimize existing social inequalities. To address these issues, it is imperative to create an inclusive education system and provide equitable

opportunities for all students, regardless of their socio-economic background. (Alfia & Quarto, 2023; Sakina & A., 2017)

The Relevance of Critical Sociology Theory in Reading Educational Reality

Pierre Bourdieu's theory offers a powerful framework for understanding the reality of education through the concepts of cultural capital, habitus, and symbolic power. In Bourdieu's view, cultural capital encompasses all resources related to culture, including education, that influence individuals in achieving their social position. Habitus refers to the disposition system that individuals internalize throughout their lives, influencing how they respond to social and educational situations. Symbolic power, on the other hand, manifests itself in the way society defines what is considered 'achievement' and 'success' in the context of education. In the context of education, meritocracy is often thought of as a form of symbolic power that appears fair but is inherently biased towards those from more established social classes, who have greater access to resources that support their learning process. (Manullang et al., 2021) (Afida et al., 2021)

Meritocracy in schools often creates the illusion that all students have an equal chance of success, even though many external factors affect their academic results. Research shows that students from wealthier backgrounds have better access to additional courses and tutoring, which contributes to higher academic achievement. In this way, education systems that claim to implement meritocracy not only reinforce inequality, but also normalize existing inequalities. Students from the lower classes are often faced with greater challenges to achieve equal achievement, which ultimately diminishes their opportunities. (Nisa et al., 2023) (Manullang et al., 2021)

The contributions of thinkers such as Michael Apple, Bowles & Gintis, and Paulo Freire in critiquing educational ideology are essential to understanding these dynamics. Apple asserts that the curriculum is not neutral and often reflects dominant ideologies that perpetuate power structures and injustice. Bowles and Gintis argue that the education system is designed to produce individuals who support the capitalist system, in which social segregation and stratification are maintained through an unjust curriculum. Meanwhile, Paulo Freire offers a different approach, emphasizing the importance of education that is liberative and dialogical. Freire argues that education should invite students to be critical of existing social structures and help them understand the powers operating in their lives. (Aliefiah & Prasetyo, 2024) (Afida et al., 2021) (Afida et al., 2021)

The relationship between language, values, and curriculum structure also plays an important role in reproducing dominance. The education system often uses language and values that reflect upper-class experiences and perspectives, so students from different backgrounds feel alienated. When curriculum and teaching do not reflect the diverse realities of students, this reinforces the view that certain values are superior to others, thus perpetuating inequalities in education. In this context, it is important for educators and policymakers to create an inclusive curriculum that allows all students to feel recognized and valued, regardless of their background. (Abdullah & Arafat, 2024) (Nur et al., 2023)

In the face of this reality, the criticism of education carried out by Bourdieu and his colleagues became increasingly relevant. By understanding how cultural capital and symbolic power operate in education, we can be more aware of the biases that exist in the system. This is the first step towards a more equitable education reform, which not only relies on achievement as a measure of success but also considers the broader social and economic impacts. Education must serve as a tool of liberation, not only for the individual but also for society as a whole, by developing the critical awareness necessary to challenge the status quo. (Nisa et al., 2023) (Iqbal et al., 2023)

Overall, a deeper understanding of the structure of education and the power involved can drive more significant changes in the education system. By integrating these critical perspectives, we can formulate more effective solutions in creating a more inclusive and equitable education. Being able to challenge established ideologies and involve all elements of society in the educational process is an important step towards this goal. Through this approach, education will not only serve as a means to achieve successful individuals, but also as a means to create a just and equal society. (Junaidi et al., 2023)

Institutionalized Inequality through the Ideology of Meritocracy

Institutionalized inequalities in education are often justified through the ideology of meritocracy, in which the failure of individuals to achieve success is perceived as the result of a lack of talent or effort. In this context, meritocracy serves as a structural legitimacy that places responsibility on the individual, while concealing the systemic inequalities that exist in society. By promoting the idea that anyone can succeed through hard work and dedication, meritocracy creates the misleading view that the way to achieve social mobility depends entirely on individual effort, without taking into account external factors such as an often unfavorable socioeconomic background. (Batruch et al., 2023; Darnon et al., 2018)

The ideological effect of this meritocracy not only shapes individual views due to the difficulties faced in the educational process, but also masks the inequality that actually occurs. The notion that success is a natural consequence of differences in talent and effort becomes a tool to ignore and rationalize existing inequalities. This is further reinforced by the fact that individuals from dominant groups tend to have greater access to resources that support quality education, while those from marginalized groups often face various obstacles that limit their opportunities. Thus, meritocracy indirectly strengthens existing social stratification, reinforcing the position of groups that already have privileges. (Kuppens et al., 2018; P. K. W. Tan & Kosat, 2024)

This injustice becomes even more evident when we look at the perception gap between learners from the dominant group and those who are marginalized. Students from the middle and upper classes often have strong beliefs in meritocracy and believe that their educational success is entirely the result of personal effort. On the other hand, students from disadvantaged backgrounds may feel that they do not have the same opportunities, and their experiences are often overlooked in discussions about meritocracy. This gap creates dissatisfaction and leads to feelings of injustice, where marginalized groups feel neglected and do not get the recognition they deserve for their efforts. (Rick, 2023)

The long-term implications of this institutionalized inequality are significant for social mobility and educational justice. When education is considered a path to success, but the existing system does not provide equal access, then there will be deep frustration and loss of hope among individuals who struggle against these injustices. This can lead to a prolonged cycle of poverty and powerlessness, where individuals feel trapped in their social position and unable to move to a better position, even though they have the talent and desire to do so. (Bird & Rhoton, 2021; Darnon et al., 2018)

On the other hand, when society begins to realize that meritocracy does not apply fairly, the desire to reform and make changes begins to emerge. This raising awareness is important to encourage more inclusive education policies, which not only rely on the principles of existing meritocracy, but also ensure that all students are given a fair opportunity to develop. This approach will include increased support for disadvantaged students, the provision of better access to educational resources, as well as recognition of students' individual contexts. (Elliott, 2023; Darnon et al., 2018)

Overall, meritocracy, as a seemingly fair concept, ultimately serves to maintain and strengthen existing social stratification. Through a critical analysis of these ideologies, we can begin to understand the broader negative impact of meritocracy in education. Therefore, it is important to create a more open and honest dialogue about injustices in our education system and how its changes can lead to greater justice in society as a whole. Only by doing this can we begin to build an education system that delivers on its promise as a tool for true social mobility and justice for all.

Critical Implications for Education Policy and Reform

A sociological approach in the formulation of education policy is very important to understand and overcome the problem of inequality in the education system. This approach provides an analytical framework that allows stakeholders to identify social, economic, and cultural factors that influence educational outcomes. When education policies are formulated without considering these social dimensions, the resulting policies often have the potential to reinforce existing structures of injustice. This shows that a deep understanding of students' socio-cultural contexts is essential in designing effective and equitable policies. (Abdurahman, 2017; Rifa'i et al., 2021)

In this case, the redistribution of educational resources is indispensable to address prolonged structural inequality. Many schools in poor areas lack adequate education, teaching materials, and facilities. Policies that prioritize disadvantaged students, both in terms of financing and access, will provide wider opportunities to participate in quality education. Research shows that when resources are allocated equitably, it can significantly improve the educational outcomes of students from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. Therefore, reform in the distribution of educational resources is a crucial step to realize social justice and support social mobility. (Aryani & Wilyanita, 2022; Rifa'i et al., 2021)

The potential for new directions for curriculum and evaluation is also very important in creating a more inclusive and socially just education. A curriculum that is responsive to social conditions and student needs not only guarantees a diversity of perspectives in learning, but also encourages students to build a critical identity and be responsive to the social challenges they face. In this regard, the curriculum should emphasize the teaching of the values of social justice, tolerance, and cooperation, leading to a deep understanding of society and encouraging students to be actively involved in improving their social conditions. (Annisa et al., 2024; Zubair et al., 2024)

Educational evaluation must be transformed to be able to measure not only academic achievement, but also students' social, emotional, and creative skills. A holistic evaluative approach creates space for students from diverse backgrounds to shine and overcome the limitations set by traditional model-based education systems. Thus, evaluation is no longer a tool to identify 'failures', but as a mechanism to support individual development. This approach will ensure that all students, without exception, are recognized for their competence. (Hidayat & Asyafah, 2019; Tanjung et al., 2022)

Critical education has a central role in dismantling the dominant narrative that justifies social injustice. Through critical education, students are invited to explore and question accepted assumptions about meritocracy and inequality. By awakening structural awareness, critical education encourages students to understand the role and challenges in the broader system, as well as contribute to those changes. Therefore, critical education capacity building is essential to form a generation capable of overcoming injustice and contributing to social justice. (Andiatma, 2019; Batlajery, 2016)

The implementation of sociological approaches in education policy not only improves the understanding of social structures, but also provides opportunities for the development of more innovative solutions. The proposed education reform must be oriented towards the creation of a responsive, inclusive, and equitable education system, by prioritizing the fairness of the right to education for all students. This creates a new constellation in which education serves not only as a tool of individual mobility, but also as a platform to achieve social sustainability and the reduction of inequality in society. (Aryani & Wilyanita, 2022; Rifa'i et al., 2021)

By utilizing a sociological approach, education can be transformed into a tool for the promotion of justice and equality. This includes efforts to open a more multisectoral dialogue, engaging a wide range of stakeholders in a more comprehensive education reform. Policies that are inclusive and aligned with social justice will allow education to reflect social realities and serve as a driver of positive change for the entire society. This initiative will ultimately create a more equitable educational environment, one that is ready to face the challenges of the future and advance the collective well-being of all people. (Wafi & Subaidi, 2022)

CONCLUSION

This research shows that the narrative of meritocracy in education is often perceived as a reflection of justice and equal opportunities, but in reality it reinforces the existing structure of social inequality. Through the analysis of the literature within the framework of critical sociology, in particular the thought of Pierre Bourdieu and other critical education thinkers, it was found that the modern education system is not neutral. It is loaded with social, cultural, and economic class biases that favor the dominant group. Education, which is supposed to be a tool of social mobility, has instead become a means of symbolic reproduction that disguises inequality as individual failure. The ideology of meritocracy serves as a legitimacy mechanism that masks the differences in access, quality, and support that are

heavily influenced by cultural capital and habitus. It is therefore important to dismantle claims of the neutrality of the education system and push for policy reforms that are more equitable, inclusive, and in favor of marginalized groups. Critical awareness of institutionalized inequality through meritocratic ideology is the key to creating an education system that is able to realize real and comprehensive social justice.

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