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Systematic Literature Review: The Role of Education in Reducing Economic Inequality and Poverty

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Abstract

Education is widely recognized as a key driver of economic development and social mobility. However, disparities in access and quality of education remain significant challenges in many developing countries, including Indonesia, which may limit its potential to reduce poverty and economic inequality. This study aims to systematically examine the role of education in reducing poverty and economic inequality using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach. The review analyzed 19 empirical studies published between 2017 and 2025 obtained from Garuda, Neliti, Google Scholar, and Sinta databases using the PRISMA procedure. The findings show that education consistently contributes to poverty reduction by improving human capital, expanding employment opportunities, and strengthening social mobility. However, its impact on reducing economic inequality is more conditional and depends on equitable access, quality of education, and supportive public policies. The novelty of this study lies in integrating empirical evidence that simultaneously analyzes education as a mechanism influencing both poverty reduction and inequality mitigation, while identifying contextual factors that shape this relationship in developing countries. These results highlight that inclusive and equitable education policies are essential for achieving sustainable and inclusive economic development.

KEYWORDS

economic inequality; education; poverty reduction.

Introduction

Education has been viewed as a key instrument in a nation's economic and social development. Education provides a foundation for eradicating poverty and fostering economic development (Mujamder, S and Biswass S.C, 2017). A higher level of education makes it easier to obtain employment, thereby increasing income. Education interrupts obstinate and rising inequality by promoting the development of more decent work, rising incomes for the poorest people: it can aid to endorse long-lasting, wide-ranging economic growth and social cohesion (Spada, et al., 2023). Furthermore, by improving the quality of human resources, education not only plays a role in preparing individuals for the workforce but also serves as a means of social mobility that can break the intergenerational cycle of poverty. The constitutional mandate in Article 31 paragraph (4) of the 1945 Constitution, which requires a minimum allocation of 20 percent of the national and regional budgets for education, underscores the importance of equitable access to education as a foundation for improving welfare and reducing poverty. By expanding access and improving the quality of education, this policy is expected to strengthen the role of education in opening economic opportunities and encouraging social mobility (Rindiani Rindiani et al., 2025). With quality education, individuals not only gain knowledge and skills but also develop the ability to face changes and challenges in the digital era.

However, conditions on the ground indicate that access to and quality of education remain unequal. Regional disparities, socioeconomic differences among families, and limited educational facilities cause some groups in society to be left behind in obtaining adequate learning opportunities (Safitri, 2022). Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number

20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System states that Indonesian education is a conscious and planned effort to develop individual potential to achieve personal, societal, and national well-being. This law clearly emphasizes that education in Indonesia is positioned as a strategic instrument in improving welfare, while simultaneously reducing poverty rates, while economists emphasize that the advancement of knowledge and skills through education is a fundamental factor driving economic growth (Ramdani, 2019). Economic inequality is a fundamental problem facing many developing countries, manifested through unequal income distribution, limited access to education and healthcare, and inequality in economic opportunities. Although the industrial, service, and digitalization sectors have driven national economic growth in recent decades, the reality is that income and wealth distribution remains unequal, exacerbating disparities between regions, social groups, and individuals. One of the main factors driving economic inequality in Indonesia is limited access to employment, low levels of education and skills, and suboptimal infrastructure development. This situation demonstrates that economic inequality is not simply a matter of distribution. Income is not only related to human resource quality and the availability of supporting development facilities. According to the 2018 Global Wealth Report published by Credit Suisse, the richest 1% of Indonesia's population controls 46.6% of the total wealth of the adult population, while the richest 10% controls 75.3% of that wealth. This data shows that wealth distribution in Indonesia remains highly unequal, with most assets concentrated in the hands of a small group. This situation confirms that economic inequality in Indonesia is not merely a theoretical issue, but rather a structural reality with broad implications for sustainable development and poverty alleviation efforts (Lestari, 2018).

According to the Central Statistics Agency (BPS), poverty is defined as the economic inability to meet basic food and non-food needs, as measured by expenditure. Residents are categorized as poor if their average monthly per capita expenditure falls below the poverty line (Putra, 2022). However, contemporary discourse, poverty is no longer understood solely as an economic inability, but also as a failure to fulfill basic rights and differential treatment for individuals or groups in their lives, dignified. The high poverty rate in Indonesia is caused by the community's limited access to proper education, making it difficult for them to understand and utilize developments in information and technology (Wahyuni, 2019). Based on these conditions, the main problem of this research is the lack of a systematic synthesis regarding the role of education in reducing poverty and economic inequality, particularly in the context of Indonesia and developing countries. Therefore, this study aims to systematically examine empirical findings related to the role of education in poverty and economic inequality through a Systematic Literature Review approach. The significance of this research lies in its contribution in providing a conceptual basis for more inclusive and equitable education policies to support sustainable economic development. Income inequality remains a significant socioeconomic challenge worldwide, impacting social cohesion, economic growth, and individual well-being (Lestari Putri and Siti Nurjanah, 2024). Income inequality has emerged as a pressing global issue, characterized by the growing divide between the rich and the poor across and within countries. It has socio-economic implications, including reduced social mobility, increased poverty, and political instability (Laidin, J and Sidek, 2025)

Based on the issues described above, disparities in educational access and quality remain closely related to persistent poverty and economic inequality in developing countries. Although many studies have examined the relationship between education and economic outcomes, existing literature often discusses poverty reduction and inequality separately, resulting in limited comprehensive synthesis of how education simultaneously influences both issues. Therefore, the main problem addressed in this study is the lack of systematic integration of empirical findings regarding the role of education in reducing poverty and economic inequality. This study aims to systematically review previous empirical research to identify patterns of findings, mechanisms through which education influences economic outcomes, and remaining research gaps. The significance of this study lies in providing a clearer conceptual and empirical understanding of how education contributes to inclusive economic development and offering insights for policymakers in designing more equitable and effective education policies.

Methods

This study adopts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to examine the role of education in reducing poverty and economic inequality. The SLR method was selected because it enables a structured, transparent, and replicable synthesis of previous empirical studies. The review process follows the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework.

The literature search was conducted using four academic databases: Garuda, Neliti, Google Scholar, and Sinta. The search used the keywords "education," "poverty," "economic inequality," and "inclusive development." The search focused on studies published between 2017 and 2025. The literature search was conducted using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, widely used in social research in Indonesia (Rahayu, 2021).

The inclusion criteria were:

1. empirical studies examining the relationship between education and poverty or economic inequality
2. quantitative or qualitative research articles
3. publications within the last eight years; and articles published in peer-reviewed journals or conference proceedings.

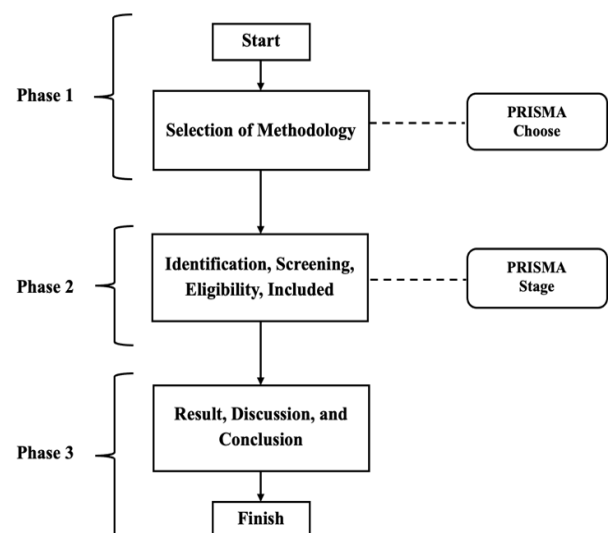


Figure 1. Methodology Flowchat

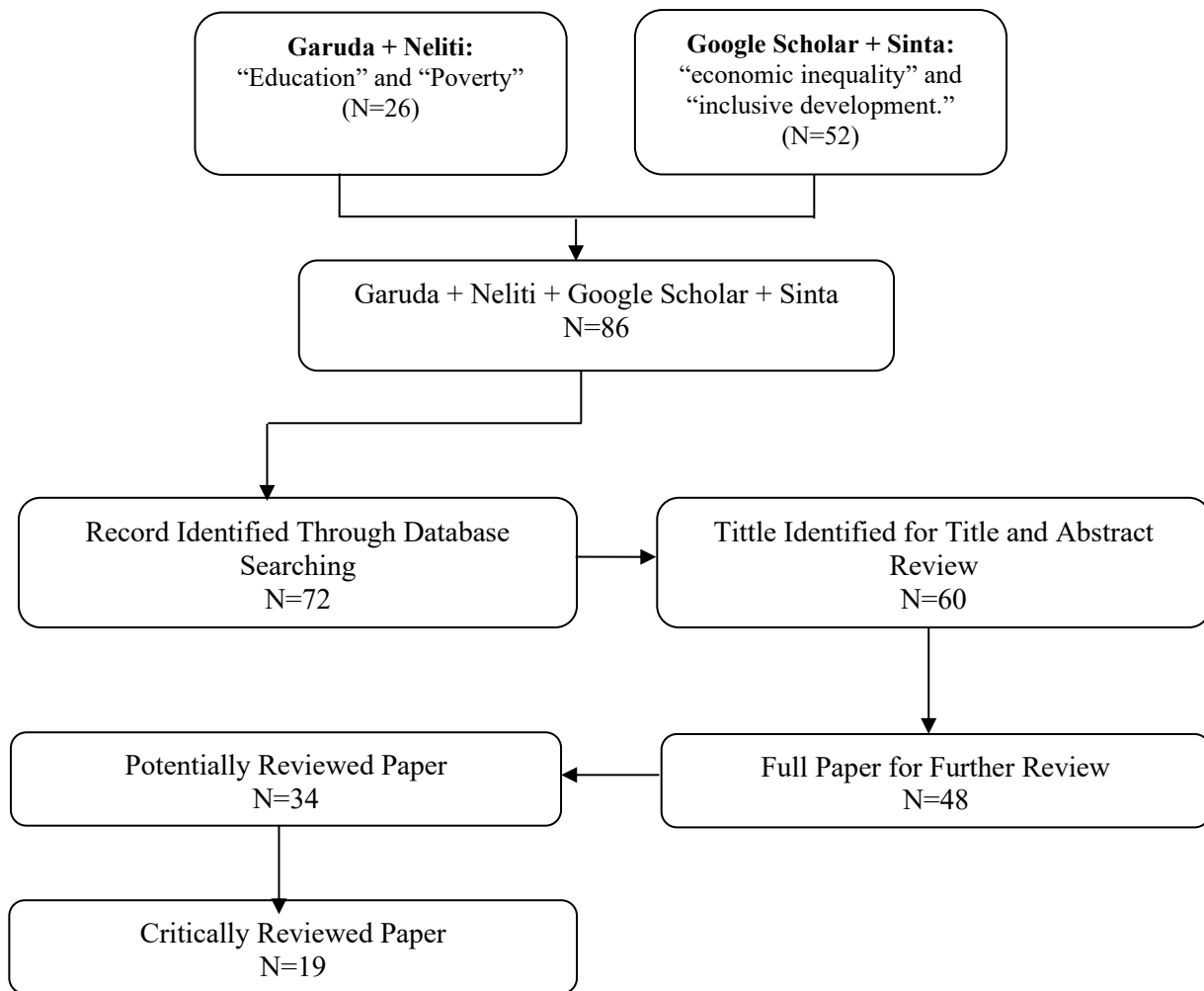


Figure 2. Prism Steps

and research gaps regarding the role of education in reducing poverty and economic inequality.

The selected articles addressed the relationship between education and economic issues, particularly its impact on poverty and inequality reduction. The research inclusion criteria included: (1) articles explicitly examining the relationship between education and poverty or inequality; (2) empirically based research, both quantitative and qualitative; (3) published within the last eight years; and (4) published in credible journals or proceedings. Meanwhile, the exclusion criteria included: (1) articles that only discuss general education issues without a direct link to economic aspects; (2) duplicate publications; and (3) publications that do not meet academic eligibility standards (Setiawan, 2018).

The analysis stage involved four main steps: identification, selection, evaluation, and synthesis. First, identification was carried out by searching all relevant articles. Second, articles were selected using inclusion and exclusion criteria. Third, article quality was evaluated by examining methodology, clarity of findings, and academic contribution. Fourth, a synthesis of research results was compiled narratively to identify patterns of relationships, differences in findings, and research gaps (Fadillah, 2022). The final result of this method is a literature mapping that presents the role of education from two main perspectives: as an instrument for poverty reduction and as a tool for reducing economic inequality. This systematic approach education in inclusive economic development. Based on all stages of selection and feasibility assessment, 19 articles were found to be relevant and met the inclusion

provides a stronger foundation for developing inclusive development policy recommendations and opens up opportunities for further research (Haryanto, 2023). Following the initial search process, all obtained articles were screened and subjected to eligibility assessment. Initially, titles and abstracts were reviewed to ensure they align with the research focus. Articles that passed this stage were then read in full (full-text review) to assess the relevance of the content, clarity of the methodology, and the alignment of the findings with the study objectives. The selection process was conducted systematically to minimize bias and ensure that only studies meeting the criteria were further analyzed. The article selection process followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) principles, ensuring transparency and replicability of the studies.

The selected articles were then analyzed using a thematic synthesis approach. The analysis focused on patterns of findings regarding the role of education in reducing poverty and economic inequality, the mechanisms by which education influences well-being, and contextual factors that moderate this relationship, such as education quality, equity of access, and policy support. The analysis results were then grouped into key themes to identify general trends, discrepancies in findings, and potential research gaps. Through this approach, the study not only summarizes the results of previous research but also develops a more comprehensive conceptual understanding of the role of criteria, and were therefore selected as primary sources for the analysis. These 19 articles specifically focus on the role of education in reducing poverty and economic inequality

and provide an adequate empirical basis for addressing the research objectives.

Result and Discussion

The Strategic Role of Education as a Key Instrument in Reducing Poverty Levels in Indonesia

Education is a key factor in socioeconomic development, serving as a means of breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty. Various studies in Indonesia show that individuals with higher levels of education tend to have better access to employment, a more stable income, and a better quality of life (Sari, 2018). Therefore, education is not only an investment in increasing knowledge, but also a key mechanism in poverty reduction efforts. Poverty in Indonesia is largely caused by low skills and limited access to economic resources among the poor. Education can address this problem by improving the quality of human resources, enabling people to compete in the job market and take advantage of existing economic opportunities (Putri, 2021). Furthermore, both formal and non-formal education have been shown to increase public awareness of resource management productively and reduce dependence on the low-income informal sector. This report delves into the relationship between education and poverty reduction in the European context. It highlights that quality education plays a pivotal role in lifting individuals out of poverty.

From an inclusive development perspective, education also plays a role in expanding opportunities for vulnerable groups to achieve social mobility. For example, vocational education programs focused on practical skills can provide the poor with immediate access to the job market (Hidayat, 2021). Similarly, scholarships and government affirmative action programs for underdeveloped regions have proven effective in helping poor groups escape the cycle of poverty. However, a challenge remains the persistent disparity in education quality across regions in Indonesia. Numerous studies confirm that poverty reduction is difficult if the quality of education in underdeveloped regions is not significantly improved. Therefore, investment in education must be viewed not merely as a constitutional obligation, but as a long-term development strategy for sustainable poverty reduction.

Overall, education has been shown to play a strategic role in reducing poverty in Indonesia through three main aspects: improving the quality of human resources, expanding employment opportunities, and strengthening social mobility (Prasetyo, 2020). By strengthening access to and quality of education, particularly for the poor, Indonesia can accelerate the poverty alleviation process while strengthening the foundations for inclusive and sustainable economic development.

Education's Contribution to Efforts to Reduce Economic Inequality and More Equal Income Distribution

Empirical evidence consistently indicates that education contributes to reducing income disparities by improving individuals' skills and access to higher-quality employment. However, the magnitude of this effect varies across contexts. Several studies report that increased average years of schooling significantly reduce regional income inequality, particularly in areas with expanding labor market opportunities. In contrast, other findings suggest that education alone may not automatically reduce inequality if disparities in education quality and labor market access persist. These contrasting findings indicate that the effectiveness of education as an equalizing mechanism depends on broader structural factors, including infrastructure development, regional economic opportunities, and policy support.

Economic inequality is a structural issue that remains a

major challenge in Indonesia, where the distribution of income and wealth is unequal across regions and social groups. Education plays

a crucial role in reducing this inequality because it creates fairer opportunities for employment and income (Susanto, 2020). By providing equitable access to education, economic opportunities can be distributed more inclusively, preventing the gap between the rich and the poor from widening. Research shows that increasing the average length of schooling contributes to reducing income inequality in various regions in Indonesia. Quality education enables individuals from disadvantaged families to acquire skills and competencies relevant to job market needs, thus providing them with equal opportunities with more economically advantaged groups. In other words, education can be a mechanism for equalizing economic opportunities by improving the quality of human resources.

Furthermore, equitable access to higher education has also been shown to be effective in reducing economic inequality. For example, the Bidikmisi scholarship and KIP Kuliah (School Assistance Program) policies have provided access to higher education for students from low-income families, which in turn increases opportunities for social mobility and long-term income. These educational interventions can narrow the gap in access between the rich and the poor, leading to a more equitable distribution of income. Moreover, empirical evidence shows that education plays a role in creating a more productive and innovative society, which ultimately drives inclusive economic growth. Economic growth generated by improving the quality of the workforce through education tends to be more sustainable because it is based on competency, not just resource exploitation. Thus, education can strengthen a more equitable economic structure and prevent the accumulation of wealth by certain groups.

However, the challenge faced is the persistence of disparities in education quality between regions. In some regions, particularly in eastern Indonesia, limited infrastructure and teaching staff limit access to quality education. This has the potential to widen inequality if not balanced with appropriate affirmative action policies. Therefore, efforts to reduce economic inequality through education must be accompanied by strategies to equalize educational infrastructure, improve teacher competency, and provide subsidies for the poor. Overall, education plays a role in equalizing economic opportunities and income by improving skills, expanding access to education for the poor, and creating more inclusive economic growth. Without increasing equitable access and quality of education, economic inequality will be difficult to reduce even if national economic growth continues to increase.

Disparities in Access and Quality of Education between Regions, Social Groups, and Their Implications for Economic Inequality

The gap in access to and quality of education remains a fundamental problem in Indonesia. Although the government has allocated a minimum of 20% of the national budget (APBN) for education, as mandated by the 1945 Constitution, the reality on the ground shows significant disparities between regions and social groups. Urban areas generally have access to schools with adequate facilities and qualified educators, while rural and underdeveloped areas still face limited infrastructure and a shortage of qualified teachers. This inequality has a direct impact on the quality of the human resources produced.

Recent research confirms that the education gap between high and low socioeconomic groups further widens the gap in economic inequality. Children from wealthy families have greater opportunities to pursue higher education due to financial support, while poorer groups often stop at primary or

secondary education. Consequently, employment opportunities for the poor are limited to the low-wage informal sector, making the cycle of poverty difficult to break (Handayani, 2019). Geographically, eastern Indonesia still lags behind western Indonesia, particularly Java. Poor internet access, limited infrastructure, and the uneven distribution of teaching staff are key factors hindering improvements in the quality of education in the region. This situation became even more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when online learning was difficult for students in rural areas due to limited network access and technological devices. This demonstrates that educational inequality is not merely a classic problem but a contemporary challenge that has implications for strengthening economic inequality (Dewi, 2020).

Furthermore, the gender gap remains a significant issue. Although female school enrollment rates are increasing, there are still areas where girls are more vulnerable to dropping out of school than boys, primarily due to cultural factors, early marriage, and family economic burdens (Nugroho, 2018). This phenomenon creates inequality in economic opportunities, as limited education impacts women's limited access to decent work. The implication of this gap in access to and quality of education is that the poor are increasingly trapped in a cycle of structural poverty. Without significant intervention, this gap will continue to widen national economic inequality. Therefore, affirmative action policies targeting the poor, disadvantaged regions, and vulnerable communities are crucial. Education subsidy programs, equitable teacher distribution, school infrastructure development, and widespread digitalization of education must be priorities in efforts to achieve more inclusive economic development (Maharani, 2021).

The Relevance of Higher and Vocational Education in Encouraging Social Mobility and Improving Community Welfare

Higher education and vocational education play a crucial role in promoting social mobility. Higher education is generally viewed as a strategic pathway to improving social status, obtaining better job opportunities, and opening access to strategic positions in the formal sector. On the other hand, practical skills-based vocational education plays a role in preparing a skilled workforce ready to enter the job market with competencies aligned with industry needs. In the context of national development, these two educational pathways complement each other. Higher education encourages innovation, research, and knowledge development, while vocational education addresses the needs of businesses and industry for a workforce with technical expertise (Kurniawan, 2019). The combination of the two contributes to increased labor productivity, which ultimately has a positive impact on economic growth and public welfare.

Higher education makes a significant contribution to vertical social mobility. College graduates tend to have broader access to high-paying jobs, thereby improving their standard of living compared to previous generations (Pratama, 2020). However, it cannot be denied that not all higher education graduates are absorbed into the job market due to a mismatch between competencies and industry needs. This raises the urgency for higher education

institutions to adapt their curricula to the dynamics of the job market. Meanwhile, vocational education places greater emphasis on practical, applicable skills. Vocational education institutions such as vocational high schools (SMK), polytechnics, and job training centers play a strategic role in providing a skilled workforce in the manufacturing, tourism, technology, and service sectors (Rahayu, 2021). Research shows that vocational education graduates have a faster chance of finding employment, even at the entry level, enabling them to quickly improve their well-being (Susanto, 2020).

In the era of the Industrial Revolution 4.0 and the transition to Society 5.0, the relevance of vocational education is increasingly heightened. Digitalization, automation, and information technology demand a workforce with adaptive, creative, and problem-solving skills. Therefore, improving the quality of vocational education through collaboration with industry is a strategic step to address the needs of the global labor market (Fadillah, 2022). Thus, higher and vocational education play a significant role in promoting social mobility and improving societal well-being (Wijaya, 2022). The synergy between these two educational pathways, through curriculum alignment, improving the quality of teaching staff, and supporting government policies, will create an education system that is inclusive, relevant, and oriented towards sustainable development.

Conclusion

The results of this systematic literature review confirm that education is a structural determinant in reducing poverty and economic inequality in Indonesia. The study's primary theoretical contribution lies in integrating education's dual role, not only as a mechanism for increasing individual income but also as an instrument for redistributing economic opportunities, influencing broader inequality structures. These findings enrich the development literature by demonstrating that the impact of education on economic inequality is contextual and strongly influenced by equity of access, quality of learning, and the alignment of education with labor market needs.

From a policy perspective, the study's results indicate that poverty alleviation and inequality reduction efforts cannot rely solely on expanding educational access but must be accompanied by improvements in the quality and relevance of education. Strengthening higher education and vocational education, integrated with industry needs, is a key strategy for promoting social mobility and accelerating the absorption of a productive workforce. Therefore, inclusive, adaptive, and equitable education policies play a central role in realizing sustainable and equitable economic development. Further research is recommended to explore the relationship between education, poverty, and inequality at the micro level, such as at the household or individual level, to capture more specific dynamics. In addition, a longitudinal approach is needed to understand the long-term impact of education on social mobility and changes in economic inequality across generations.

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