

CRITICAL EDUCATION IN SECONDARY SCHOOL: POWER RELATIONS AND NATIONAL IDENTITY FORMATION IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze power relations in the educational practices at SMP Al Amanah, a junior high school located in Jeneponto Regency, South Sulawesi. The focus is on how decision-making structures and academic interactions shape—or hinder—the development of critical national consciousness among students. This research adopts a qualitative approach with a case study design. Using a descriptive-qualitative approach with a critical case study design, data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews with teachers, students, and school administrators, as well as document analysis, including curricula, syllabi, and school meeting notes. The data were analyzed using critical discourse analysis, framed by Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony and Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. Findings reveal that structural dominance by the school principal in decision-making processes, coupled with a curriculum that emphasizes a national narrative without meaningful integration of local context, results in hierarchical power relations with minimal participation. This condition weakens the role of teachers as agents of change and limits students' opportunities to engage critically in the learning process. Unequal distribution of cultural capital leads to the reproduction of a uniform and decontextualized discourse of nationhood, thereby weakening reflective national awareness. The study underscores the need for a more democratic decision-making structure within schools and the integration of local values into the curriculum to foster a participatory, contextual, and emancipatory civic education.

Keywords

Academic participation, curriculum, hegemony, nationalism, power relations.



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INTRODUCTION

Education in Indonesia is ideally envisioned as a vehicle for character formation and the cultivation of national consciousness, as enshrined in the National Education System Law (Hafiedh Hasan, 2014; Permendikbud, 2013; RI, 2003). However, in practice, schools often become arenas for the reproduction of power that do not always support the development of students' critical awareness (Sudirman P, 2019). This study investigates the case of SMP Al Amanah in Jeneponto Regency, South Sulawesi, as a case study on how power structures in education operate in shaping students' national identity. Based on observations and interviews, it was found that decision-making processes are highly centralized under the principal's authority, while teachers and students act merely as executors. The national curriculum is implemented rigidly without dialogue with the local context, resulting in a national narrative that is abstract and disconnected from students' everyday realities (Akrim et al., 2022; Setiawan & Suwandi, 2022). A social studies teacher remarked, "We just follow the books and guidelines; there is no room to incorporate local history or culture into civic lessons." This illustrates that the national identity formed through education is top-down, standardized, and provides little space for participation.

In this context, critical education becomes crucial in reassessing the power relations within educational processes. Referring to Paulo Freire's theory (1970), education should be a liberating practice rather than a covert form of oppression. At SMP Al Amanah, some teachers have begun adopting critical education approaches through open discussions and reflective dialogues with students (Gomes, 2022). For instance, during civics lessons, one teacher initiated a dialogue about the meaning of "being a citizen" from the students' perspectives and how Pancasila values could be applied in their village life. Students responded with enthusiasm when given the space to share their life experiences, including family conflicts, access to education, and experiences of social discrimination. However, this approach is still hindered by school structures that assess teachers more on administrative compliance than pedagogical innovation. Therefore, while critical education holds the potential to foster contextual and reflective national awareness, it requires structural support to evolve beyond sporadic initiatives (Riyono, 2021).

Moreover, the teaching and learning process at SMP Al Amanah reveals a dynamic tension between resistance and the reproduction of existing power structures. Interviews with students revealed that some expressed apathy towards civics lessons, feeling that the material taught was "disconnected from their real-life experiences." However, there were also examples of productive

resistance, such as a class VIII student group creating a wall magazine titled "*Indonesia Through Our Eyes*," highlighting stories of social inequality and cultural diversity in their village. On the other hand, most students continued to submit to hierarchical interaction patterns, rarely questioning, accepting teachers' explanations without critique, and avoiding classroom debates for fear of being labeled as "rebellious" (Simpson, 2014; Smith et al., 2018). This suggests that critical education has not yet fully transformed classroom power relations; in some cases, these are even reproduced through cultural mechanisms such as deference, fear, and submission to authority. Hence, critical education must be institutionalized more systematically to promote national awareness that grows from the ground up, rather than as a product of top-down indoctrination.

Previous research has extensively highlighted the role of education as a tool of hegemony (Perdana, 2016). Triono et al., (2020) found that Indonesia's formal education system often serves as an instrument of state ideological hegemony. Through a hierarchical curriculum and school structure, education tends to reinforce dominant narratives while sidelining local perspectives and diversity. They concluded that the participatory space for teachers and students in learning processes remains very limited, ultimately weakening students' critical awareness of national and diversity-related issues. Fauzan et al., (2022) studied ideological content in the civic education curriculum and found that national narratives are presented in a singular and normative manner. Their research highlighted the absence of representation for minority groups and alternative narratives, resulting in the formation of a narrow national identity. According to them, the national curriculum has yet to provide a dialogical space for students to understand nationhood in a reflective and critical way. Ilham, (2020) focused on the teaching practices of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in secondary schools and found that the authoritative power relations between teachers and students created a culture of silence. Teachers often function as "masters of content," while students are positioned as passive recipients. This hinders students' ability to develop critical reasoning and actively build national awareness. Setiyawan & Budiman, (2019) argued that education in Indonesia often reproduces social inequality through symbolic representation and the language of power in the classroom. They noted how national symbols (flags, emblems, national anthems) are used mechanically and without reflection, failing to foster a deeper understanding of contextual nationhood. Bachtiar & Guntur, (2015) on the need for secondary school social studies teachers to modify or develop teaching methods that incorporate more pluralistic cultural information from a variety of perspectives, namely by incorporating elements of critical pedagogy

and forming communities. This is important as an effort to enable students to search for, explore, and discover concepts and principles holistically and authentically.

From these five studies, it can be concluded that education in Indonesia is still dominated by vertical and exclusive power relations, whether in curriculum, pedagogy, or institutional structure. However, an important gap remains underexplored: how power relations within schools concretely shape (or constrain) students' national identity, particularly at the junior high school level in non-urban local contexts. This study addresses this gap by deeply analyzing educational practices at SMP Al Amanah, Jeneponto Regency, South Sulawesi. The research focuses not only on curriculum content but also on classroom social relations, school decision-making structures, and the dynamics of resistance or reproduction of power in shaping national consciousness. By combining Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony and Bourdieu's symbolic capital within Paulo Freire's critical education framework, this study offers novelty in two key aspects: (1) a focus on critical educational practices in community-based junior high schools, and (2) an emphasis on how national identity is shaped or negotiated within everyday power relations in educational spaces.

METHOD

This research was conducted at SMP Al Amanah, a private junior secondary school located in Jeneponto Regency, South Sulawesi. The site was selected because it represents an educational institution in a non-urban area that directly encounters issues of unequal access, the dominance of a singular national narrative, and limited participatory space in the learning process. The school exhibits diverse social characteristics, with students coming from various economic and cultural backgrounds, thereby allowing rich observations of the dynamics of power relations in education.

This study employed a qualitative approach grounded in a critical paradigm (Salim, 2012). It used a case study design to explore power relations within a specific educational setting. This approach aims not only to describe the social realities of education but also to identify the structural roots of symbolic domination occurring in teaching practices and to propose transformational alternatives. As emphasized by Sidiq & Choiri, (2019), the critical paradigm enables researchers to challenge dominant structures and envision more democratic and emancipatory educational practices. The study focused on three main dimensions: curriculum, teacher-student interaction, and the institutional structure of the school.

Data were collected through three primary techniques (Bungin, 2012): First, documentation analysis, which included reviewing the national curriculum, civics and history textbooks, and the school's internal policy documents to identify ideological biases and dominant national narratives; Second, in-depth interviews with six teachers, twelve students, and two school administrators to explore their experiences, perceptions, and attitudes toward power structures in the learning process; and Third, intensive participant observation in classrooms and school environments over a period of three months, to examine interaction patterns between teachers and students, the use of authoritative language, and the opportunities or barriers to students' critical engagement (Susilo, 2017).

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis through three main stages: *First*, initial coding, which involved identifying key themes from the field data such as hierarchy, ideological dominance, resistance, and the culture of silence; *Second*, categorization, where these themes were grouped into the three main dimensions: curriculum, teacher-student interaction, and institutional structures; and *Third*, critical interpretation, which entailed analyzing field findings through the theoretical lenses of Antonio Gramsci's hegemony and Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, in order to understand how power relations operate in education and how they influence students' national consciousness (Herdiansyah, 2018).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The initial findings of this study indicate that power relations in educational practices at SMP Al Amanah play a crucial role in shaping—and at times constraining—students' national consciousness. Using a qualitative approach with a critical case study design, the research identifies five key dimensions as arenas where power is contested and reproduced: curriculum, teacher-student interaction, decision-making, school social structure, and the representation of local culture.

Table 1. Critical Education in Secondary Schools: Power Relations and National Identity

Formation at Al Amanah Junior High School

No.	Aspects of Power Relations	Forms of Critical Education	National Awareness
1.	Curriculum	Local value integration and dominant narrative analysis	Promote a plural and contextual understanding of nationality
2.	Teacher-Student Interaction	Dialogical, discussion, and collaborative methods	Increase students' courage to think critically and voice ideas
3.	Decision Making	Collective participation in school policy	Collective participation in school policy strengthens a sense of

		shared ownership and responsibility in education
4.	School Social Structure	Redistribution of authority, involvement of all elements
5.	Representation of Local Culture	Strengthening the role of local culture in teaching materials
		Establishing a democratic and inclusive school culture
		Reviving local identity in the frame of nationality

Within the framework of critical education, each of these dimensions holds potential to be transformed into a vehicle for fostering a more reflective and participatory sense of national identity (Indari et al., 2023). For instance, integrating local values into the curriculum and critically analyzing dominant narratives can promote a more pluralistic and contextual understanding of nationhood. Likewise, the application of dialogical, discussion-based, and collaborative teaching methods can enhance students' confidence to think critically and express their views.

Furthermore, collective participation in school policy-making can strengthen a shared sense of ownership and responsibility in education, while redistributing authority and involving all school elements contributes to building a more democratic and inclusive school culture. Finally, reinforcing the role of local culture within teaching materials is essential to reviving local identity within a national framework that is both dynamic and contextual. These five dimensions demonstrate that critical education requires not only changes in content or pedagogy but also a transformation of the structural power relations that underpin educational spaces. In the context of SMP Al Amanah, these dimensions serve as a strategic entry point for understanding how power operates—subtly yet systematically—in shaping students' national awareness. Nevertheless, at SMP Al Amanah Jeneponto, power relations in education are not only present in structural forms but also manifest within the curriculum, teacher-student interaction patterns, and decision-making systems. While the curriculum formally includes local content that reflects Bugis-Makassar cultural values, substantively, the national narratives taught remain centered on a homogeneous national perspective, dominated by prominent national figures and state symbols that marginalize local diversity. This indicates an imbalance between the integrative aims of education and the reality of cultural exclusion within the construction of national identity.

At the interaction level, the relationship pattern between teachers and students is still very hierarchical. The learning process is dominated by the one-way lecture method. The teacher functions as the center of authority, while students tend to be passive, reluctant to ask questions, and reluctant to actively participate in class discussions. This condition strengthens the "culture of silence" as criticized by Paulo Freire, which hinders the growth of students' critical consciousness.

In addition, within the school's institutional structure, the decision-making process is centralized. Although there is a deliberation forum, strategic decisions are often determined unilaterally by school leaders without the active involvement of teachers and students.

The following interview excerpts reinforce these findings: "We often feel that we are just policy implementers without being involved in the formulation process." (Social studies teacher interview, October 3, 2024). "I sometimes want to ask questions, but I'm afraid of being wrong or getting scolded. So it's better to keep quiet." (Class IX Student Interview, October 12, 2024).

The analysis shows that the curriculum, teaching interactions, and institutional systems contain complex elements of power. The curriculum at SMP Al Amanah Jeneponto is structured with the aim of integrating local content that reflects the richness of Bugis-Makassar culture. This is expected to provide students with a deeper understanding of their cultural roots, as well as create stronger ties between local and national identities. However, despite the inclusion of local content in the curriculum, the national narratives present in teaching materials still tend to be dominated by a central perspective, which often emphasizes the universal values contained in Pancasila. This approach, while important for strengthening national unity, often ignores local diversity, which should be a strength in building a more inclusive nationhood.

For example, in teaching materials about national history, the curriculum highlights the role of major figures at the national level, such as freedom fighters, the President, or important figures in the formation of the state. "In history lessons, we keep learning about national figures. Even though there are many stories of local figures that are interesting too." (Class VIII Student Interview, October 10, 2024). Meanwhile, based on observations, the percentage of material on the history of national figures can be seen in the following figure;

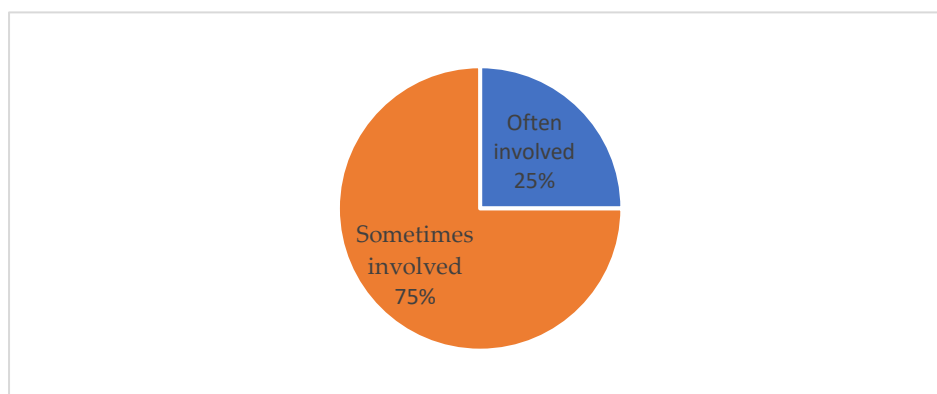


Figure 1. Percentage of Material on the History of National Figures

This is often done with little or no space to explore the role of local figures or local wisdom values that also contribute greatly to building the spirit of nationhood. In fact, if these values are highlighted more, there will be a balance in the national narrative that does not only see from the perspective of the center, but also from various regions that have their own uniqueness and contributions. In this way, it is hoped that a more holistic understanding of the process of forming a national identity that truly appreciates the cultural plurality that exists in Indonesia can be created.

Interactions between teachers and students in the school environment, especially at SMP Al Amanah Jeneponto, still tend to maintain a visible hierarchical structure. This is reflected in teaching methods that more often prioritize a one-way lecture approach, where the teacher is the center of information and students only play the role of passive recipients. Although lectures have an important role in transferring basic knowledge, this approach does not provide sufficient space for students to actively participate in the learning process. Ideally, teaching in higher education should prioritize methods that allow for two-way interaction, such as discussion, debate, or collaboration, which can stimulate students' critical thinking and reflection on the material being taught. This is based on observations conducted in 12 classes over a period of three weeks regarding the teaching methods used by teachers.

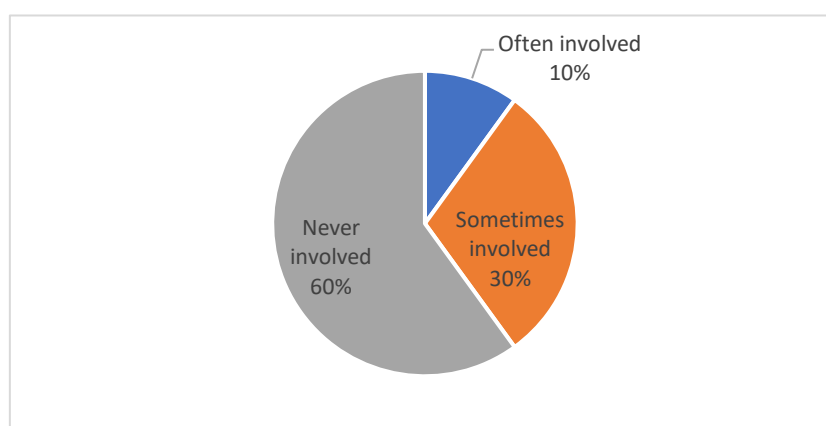


Figure 2. Result of Learning Process Observation

With the dominance of the lecture method, a distance is created between teachers and students, which not only results in limited communication, but also in the awkwardness of expressing opinions. Students are often hesitant or afraid to express critical opinions related to social, political, or national issues, as they feel less valued or listened to in the context of this highly structured interaction. In fact, in an ideal educational process, students should be encouraged to develop their critical thinking skills, especially in responding to social issues that are relevant to

their lives. Changing the pattern of interaction in the classroom by integrating a discussion or collaborative approach will open up opportunities for students to feel more involved and have a voice in determining the direction of shared understanding of nationality and social issues. Thus, the classroom is not only a place for knowledge transfer, but also a place to shape students' character and critical insight.

The decision-making system at SMP Al Amanah Jenepono shows a concentration of power centered at the leadership level, especially the rector or other high-ranking officials. This pattern is evident in the decision-making process related to strategic policies, which, despite accommodating deliberation forums, in the end, decisions are often determined unilaterally by the leadership without any in-depth discussion involving other related parties. This was revealed in interviews with several teachers who stated that although a deliberation forum was available, important decisions were often decided in advance by the leadership, without involving broader or in-depth perspectives from various parties within the school.

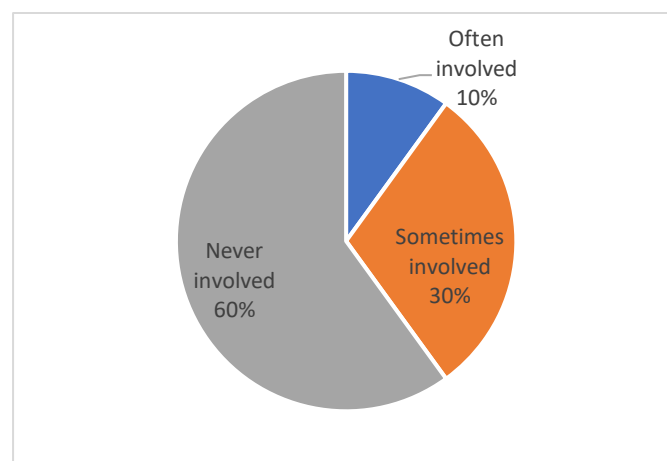


Figure 3. Teacher Involvement in Decision-Making

One teacher emphatically expressed her frustration by saying, "We often feel that we are just policy implementers without being involved in the formulation process." This expression reflects the inequality in decision-making that creates a feeling of injustice and alienation among teaching staff. Although a deliberative forum for discussion and exchange of opinions exists, it is often not an effective venue for creating inclusive policies. Strategic decisions are more often determined by school elites-including leaders and those with greater power-leading to gaps in communication and participation.

This has the effect of limiting the space for teachers to contribute to the decision-making process and reducing the potential for innovation in the development of education in schools. Without the involvement of various parties, especially those at the forefront of the education process, decision-making will be more difficult to reflect the collective needs and aspirations of the entire academic community. This lack of participation can also have an impact on the quality of the resulting policies, as they are not based on comprehensive considerations and various complementary perspectives. By opening up greater space for more equitable participation, both from teachers and students, it is hoped that education policies taken can be more relevant and in accordance with the dynamics and needs in the field.

Curricula that emphasize national narratives while ignoring local perspectives reflect ideological dominance centered on the center of power and potentially ignore cultural diversity and regional identities. This dominance reinforces the hegemony of a national culture that tends to see Indonesia from a single perspective, which is centered in the capital city or a region that is considered more dominant politically, economically, and socially (Suda, 2017). In this context, curricula that emphasize national narratives often do not provide space for local communities to express or integrate their cultural values and wisdom within a broader national framework.

This lack of critical space to integrate local values can lead to the marginalization of regional cultures that have significant contributions to building national identity. For example, in existing historical or cultural materials, more emphasis is placed on the role of great figures or events that are directly related to a uniform national narrative, while local cultural contributions and heritage that also have important value in the formation of national character are often forgotten or marginalized. As a result, the curriculum reinforces a homogeneous and centralized view, without providing space for more pluralistic learning, which includes various perspectives and cultural diversity across Indonesia.

Thus, cultural diversity and local wisdom in the regions are not optimally explored. In fact, if local values are more incorporated into the national narrative, this can enrich the understanding of nationality that is more inclusive and responsive to diverse social and cultural realities. Therefore, there needs to be an effort to develop a curriculum that not only emphasizes nationality in a narrow sense but also makes room for the diversity that exists in each region, with the aim of creating a curriculum that truly encompasses all aspects of Indonesia's rich and diverse identity.

Discussion

The dynamics of power relations revealed in this study demonstrate that power in educational settings operates not only in explicit, hierarchical structures but also through subtle, symbolic, and ideological mechanisms (Li, 2024; Zhang et al., 2023). At SMP Al Amanah, this power manifests in curriculum content, classroom interactions, and institutional decision-making processes. Drawing on Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, it becomes evident that the school functions as a site where dominant ideologies are reproduced and normalized. The national curriculum—particularly in subjects like civics and history—prioritizes a centralized, state-driven narrative of nationalism. This narrative constructs a "common sense" understanding of nationhood that is uniform and top-down, often excluding the plurality of lived experiences and cultural expressions of local communities (Awang et al., 2013).

Such a curriculum, while appearing neutral and standard, in fact serves as a hegemonic tool to maintain ideological control. It fails to represent the sociocultural complexity of regions like Jeneponto, which possess rich local wisdom and historical narratives. Students are taught to internalize a national identity that is abstract and decontextualized, one that does not reflect their immediate realities. As a result, the educational process contributes to symbolic domination by silencing local voices and subordinating them under a national framework that privileges certain discourses over others.

This phenomenon aligns closely with Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and symbolic violence. In the field of education, teachers hold institutional authority and cultural capital that position them as gatekeepers of legitimate knowledge. They determine what is worth knowing, whose stories are told, and whose voices are heard in the classroom. Students, by contrast, are situated in subordinate positions with limited access to symbolic capital, often reduced to passive recipients of state-sanctioned knowledge. Their local cultural references are rendered invisible or illegitimate in formal learning spaces, which reinforces a culture of silence and internalized inferiority.

From Antonio Gramsci's (2013) perspective, such a curriculum represents a form of cultural hegemony—an ideological domination whereby the values and worldview of the dominant group (the state) are institutionalized as "common sense" that goes unquestioned. Through the curriculum, the state constructs students' national consciousness not through coercion, but through symbolic consensus that appears natural. In this context, the curriculum is far from neutral; it functions as an

ideological state apparatus (borrowing Althusser's term), embedding a singular version of nationalism while disregarding the diversity that constitutes students' sociocultural realities (Alfanani, 2019).

From Paulo Freire's (1970) point of view, the curriculum approach at SMP Al Amanah reflects the banking model of education, in which students are treated as empty vessels to be "filled" by teachers with state-prepared information. The national narratives conveyed provide no space for students to connect their lived experiences, local cultures, or community identities with the learning process (Mones et al., 2022). Yet, according to Freire, liberating education should build *dialogue* between established knowledge and students' concrete realities. When the curriculum fails to do this, students become alienated from their own identities and passively absorb dominant narratives without critical understanding (Panggabean, 2022).

Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 2018) helps us further understand that the structure of such a curriculum also reproduces cultural capital accessible only to those aligned with the centers of symbolic power. Learning materials, filled with national terminology, symbols, and references unfamiliar to students in peripheral areas like Jenepono, place these students at a disadvantage even before learning begins. They lack the *habitus* aligned with the dominant cultural codes embedded in the national curriculum. As a result, students from local cultural backgrounds may be perceived by the system as "incompetent" or "less intelligent," when in fact what is occurring is a symbolic inequality in access to what is considered legitimate knowledge (Reay, 2022).

Findings from the field reveal that teacher–student interactions at SMP Al Amanah are predominantly characterized by one-way communication, where teachers hold the authoritative role as the central source of knowledge, while students assume passive roles as recipients. Lecturing remains the dominant method, with limited space for dialogue, discussion, or critical questioning. Students often feel hesitant, uncertain, or fearful when attempting to voice their opinions or ask questions. This fosters a culture of silence, wherein students are conditioned to withhold critical thought and expression in the classroom.

Within Paulo Freire's framework, this pattern reflects an authoritarian model of education that suppresses the development of critical consciousness. Freire critiques hierarchical teacher–student relationships that position students as mere "objects" in the learning process. In contrast, liberating education should treat students as "subjects"—individuals capable of thinking, questioning, and engaging with their social realities (Fitriana, 2017). The absence of dialogical spaces

in the classroom eliminates opportunities for students to connect academic content with their lived experiences, which lies at the heart of critical pedagogy.

Antonio Gramsci (2013) would interpret this pattern as a form of intellectual hegemony, where teachers, as bearers of cultural capital and institutional legitimacy, produce and disseminate dominant discourses that go unchallenged. Students internalize these discourses through passive consensus, having been socialized to view the teacher as the sole authority on knowledge. In such contexts, the classroom ceases to be a democratic space for co-producing knowledge and instead becomes a site for the reproduction of dominant, often decontextualized, ideologies (Aminullah, 2016; Nur Jannah, 2019).

Pierre Bourdieu (2018), through the lens of habitus and symbolic violence, it explains how students' silence and reluctance to question or debate stem from long-term internalization of unequal power relations within the classroom. Students who lack the linguistic capital or confidence to articulate ideas in the dominant academic register remain in subordinated positions. Teachers, as holders of both cultural and symbolic capital, reinforce their dominance in ways that appear "normal," yet serve to perpetuate social inequality within the educational space (Bourdieu, 1993).

Research at SMP Al Amanah reveals that the school's decision-making system is highly centralized. Although formal mechanisms such as teacher meetings and consultative forums exist, in practice, strategic decisions are often predetermined by the school principal or administrative elites. Teachers and students are typically involved only at the implementation stage, not in the formulation of policies. This exclusion not only suppresses meaningful participation but also fosters a sense of alienation and disempowerment among school members.

From a Paulo Freirean (1970) perspective, this reflects an oppressive institutional structure, where collective voices are silenced and genuine dialogue is absent. Freire emphasized that liberating education must be grounded in dialogical and horizontal relationships, including at the level of institutional governance. When authority is monopolized by the principal, democratic space within the school is effectively closed, and structural transformation becomes unattainable (Hanafi, 2008).

Antonio Gramsci would interpret this pattern as a form of institutional hegemony. School leaders construct a semblance of consent through administrative mechanisms that appear participatory but in reality function to legitimize decisions already made by dominant actors. In this framework, the school ceases to be a site for equal discourse and becomes a power field where

participation is tightly controlled through formal symbols and bureaucratic routines (Ariani, 2019).

From the lens of Pierre Bourdieu, the principal's dominance in decision-making illustrates the operation of symbolic power legitimated by institutional position and deeply ingrained bureaucratic habitus. Teachers and students lack sufficient institutional capital to challenge or negotiate these decisions, and they are not equipped with the necessary social capital to build coalitions or enact meaningful resistance (Sektiyanto, 2011). As a result, the school appears administratively stable but is participatorily weak and democratically fragile.

Meanwhile, the hierarchical pattern of interaction between teachers and students at SMP Al Amanah Jeneponto reflects what Paulo Freire termed the "culture of silence" (Hanafi, 2008). In this context, students are frequently positioned as passive objects of education, recipients of information and knowledge, without opportunities to actively participate in the learning process. In this hierarchical model, teachers serve as the sole source of authority, while students are expected to absorb content without responding or offering critical reflections (Kamala, 2019).

However, this hierarchical model extends beyond the classroom and is embedded within the broader organizational structure of the school. Authority at SMP Al Amanah is vertically centralized, with decision-making power concentrated in the hands of the principal. Other stakeholders—teachers, school committees, and students—operate under a logic of subordination. There are no institutional mechanisms that facilitate meaningful participation in shaping the school's organizational culture, shared values, or educational norms.

Within Freire's critical pedagogy, such a school structure undermines education's emancipatory potential. Instead of fostering empowerment, the school becomes a reproducer of structural subordination. It cultivates a habitus of compliance rather than participation, and a mentality of resignation rather than reflection (Freire, 2021). Critical education, by contrast, demands that all members of the school community are granted space to speak, take initiative, and co-construct meaning within the learning environment.

For Antonio Gramsci, this social structure exemplifies institutional hegemony—a form of domination that is not enforced through violence or overt coercion but through the internalization of social roles as "natural" or unquestioned. Teachers accept the principal's authority as normal; students comply with instructions without critique; and the system functions on the basis of a collective consciousness shaped by power (Siswati, 2018).

Pierre Bourdieu would interpret this school structure as a field in which symbolic capital, such as titles, positions, and linguistic styles, determines who is authorized to speak, who is heard, and who is silenced (Allolayuk, 2021). When only school elites possess institutional capital and cultural legitimacy, others remain in peripheral positions. As a result, hierarchical school structures not only reinforce power imbalances but also reproduce inequality in the distribution of participation, knowledge, and influence (Bredo & Feinberg, 1979).

One of the critical findings in this study is the minimal integration of local cultural elements into teaching materials and classroom narratives at SMP Al Amanah. Despite the school being situated in a region rich in Bugis-Makassar traditions, languages, and local histories, these cultural resources are largely absent from the formal curriculum and daily pedagogical practices. Teaching remains focused on national symbols, standardized historical figures, and centralized narratives of Indonesian identity, often divorced from the students' lived realities.

From a Paulo Freirean standpoint, this absence represents a pedagogical failure to connect education with the concrete cultural context of the learners. Education, according to Freire, should not be an act of depositing abstract knowledge but a dialogical process grounded in the social and cultural experiences of students (Cheung, 2015; Hussien, 2007). When local identity is excluded from the classroom, students are denied the opportunity to develop a *critical consciousness* of who they are in relation to the nation. Education then becomes alienating rather than liberating, reinforcing cultural dislocation and passivity.

Antonio Gramsci would interpret the marginalization of local culture as a manifestation of cultural hegemony, in which the dominant national narrative, constructed by the central state, establishes itself as the only legitimate version of identity. By excluding local voices, the school participates in producing a uniform "national identity" that suppresses plurality and historical particularity (Vegliò, 2024). This reinforces a form of consent rooted in symbolic domination, where students unknowingly internalize the notion that their own local culture is irrelevant or inferior to the "national" ideal.

In Bourdieu's view, the erasure of local culture from the curriculum reflects an unequal distribution of symbolic capital. Students from dominant cultural backgrounds are more likely to see themselves represented in textbooks and school discourses, whereas students from local or peripheral cultures lack such representation (Cronin, 1996; Martono, 2014). This imbalance diminishes their cultural capital and reduces their ability to engage with learning on equal terms.

The result is a subtle form of symbolic violence, where cultural marginalization is normalized and goes unquestioned within the educational space (Ningtyas, 2015).

From this discussion, it becomes evident that the five dimensions—curriculum, teacher–student interaction, decision-making, school social structure, and the representation of local culture—are deeply interconnected in reproducing both symbolic and structural forms of power at SMP Al Amanah. These power dynamics not only restrict the participatory space of teachers and students but also undermine the emancipatory potential of education and its role in cultivating reflective national consciousness. The centralization of authority, hierarchical pedagogical relationships, a standardized curriculum, and the exclusion of local cultures all function as hegemonic instruments that construct a narrow and decontextualized sense of nationhood.

Viewed through the lens of critical pedagogy, these findings call for a comprehensive transformation of educational practice. Schools can no longer be seen as neutral institutions but must be reconstructed as dialogical, participatory spaces rooted in the socio-cultural realities of students. Teachers should be positioned as organic intellectuals who not only transmit knowledge but also co-construct critical awareness with their students. Likewise, school governance must move away from bureaucratic centralism and toward a more democratic and inclusive model in which all stakeholders have a voice in shaping educational policy.

The integration of local narratives and values into the curriculum, the promotion of dialogical classroom interactions, and the redistribution of institutional authority are not merely technical reforms—they are political acts aimed at dismantling systems of domination and building a more equitable and pluralistic educational order. Only through such systemic transformation can schools—especially those located in peripheral regions like Jenepono—become spaces for cultivating citizens who are not only nationally conscious but also critically engaged, contextually grounded, and socially empowered.

CONCLUSION

The centralized decision-making structure at SMP Al Amanah Jenepono reveals the dominant authority of school leadership, which significantly limits the active participation of other academic stakeholders, including teachers and students, in the formulation of educational policies. This imbalance results in unequal distribution of capital within the educational field, reinforces hierarchical norms that hinder pedagogical innovation, and diminishes the creative potential that

could otherwise emerge from greater teacher and student involvement. This hierarchical interaction pattern, as articulated by Gramsci, reflects a form of hegemony that consolidates the control of school elites. From Bourdieu's perspective, it further intensifies inequalities in the distribution of cultural capital, marginalizing voices that should play a critical role in shaping the educational experience. The curriculum, with its heavy emphasis on a centralized national narrative and its neglect of local wisdom, along with the limited space for student agency in the learning process, compounds these issues. To address this, a more inclusive and participatory approach to education is essential—one in which both teachers and students actively contribute to decision-making processes and the co-construction of knowledge. Such an approach not only democratizes the educational environment but also fosters innovation and mitigates the effects of one-sided domination. Creating a more progressive educational model requires reforming institutional decision-making structures to be more democratic, opening avenues for diverse contributions, and ensuring that local cultural values are meaningfully integrated within the national curriculum. In doing so, schools can cultivate an inclusive, critical, and innovative academic environment that is better equipped to respond to the challenges of contemporary education and to nurture empowered, reflective citizens.

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