



The Making of Critical Consciousness Among Marinalizes High School Students in Sociology Education

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the formation of critical awareness among high school students from marginalized backgrounds in the context of sociology learning. Motivated by the socioeconomic limitations that often hinder reflective thinking and understanding of social injustice, the research employs a qualitative exploratory descriptive approach. Data were collected through open-ended online questionnaires completed by 85 students from low-income families in Baubau City, Southeast Sulawesi. Thematic analysis reveals three stages of critical awareness development: (1) initial awareness, recognizing social injustice; (2) critical analysis, fostered through real-life case learning; and (3) orientation to action, though still limited to activities like information sharing or peer discussions. Key supporting factors include teachers' reflective questioning, relevance of learning materials, and peer solidarity, while main barriers involve limited access to literature and low reading habits. The study concludes that sociology learning can effectively foster critical awareness among marginalized students, with outcomes shaped by instructional strategies and access to knowledge. It highlights the importance of contextual, participatory learning designs and calls for further mixed-methods research to deepen insights into the dynamics of critical awareness formation.

INTRODUCTION

Education not only functions as a means of knowledge transfer, but also as a space to form students' critical consciousness to be able to understand, analyze, and respond to the social realities they face (Khoiri et al., 2025). In the context of sociology education, students are geared towards developing reflective abilities that allow them to recognize the structures of social, political, and economic injustices. Paolo Freire (1970) emphasizing that education should be praxis-oriented, which is a combination of reflection and action aimed at freeing the oppressed group from restrictive situations. Thus, sociology learning is not enough to just convey theories, but also to provide space for students to connect these concepts with everyday life experiences (Newman, 2020; Ballantine et al., 2021).

Nonetheless, the formation of critical awareness in high school students from marginalized groups faces significant challenges. Students' socioeconomic limitations, such as limited access to literature, lack of learning facilities, and low reading habits, are often an obstacle to deep reflection (Pinedo et al., 2024; Chancel, 2020). This condition is clearly seen in various regions of Indonesia, including in Baubau City, Southeast Sulawesi, which has socio-cultural diversity as well as economic challenges. Many students in the region come from low-income families, which causes their space to develop intellectual and critical potential to be more limited. At the same time, the social realities they face are fraught with experiences of injustice, such as limited access to education, social inequality, and lack of economic opportunities. This contradiction makes marginalized students an important group to be researched in relation to the formation of critical consciousness through sociological learning (Havill, 2021; Jan, 2016).

Previous studies on sociology education in Indonesia have generally focused on the effectiveness of learning models or methods in improving students' conceptual understanding. For example, many studies have discussed the effectiveness of project-based learning, problem-based learning, or contextual learning on academic achievement. However, research that specifically explores how students from marginalized groups build their critical awareness is still relatively limited. In fact, the process of forming this critical awareness is complex, determined not only by the teaching material, but also by the teacher-student interaction, the relevance of learning to the reality of student life, and social support from the surrounding environment (Putri et al., 2024; Lam, 2018).

In addition, most previous studies used a quantitative approach with structured instruments to measure students' knowledge or attitudes. This approach tends to reduce the process of critical awareness which is actually reflective, dynamic, and strongly influenced by the context of the student's personal experience. Therefore, research with a qualitative approach is important to capture these dynamics in more depth. Through the exploration of students' narratives, researchers can understand how they identify injustices, analyze their structural causes, and respond in the form of reflection and action, even if the actions are still simple.

This study seeks to fill the gap by highlighting the process of forming critical awareness in high school students from low-income families in Baubau City. Limited socioeconomic backgrounds often limit students' space for reflection on the reality of injustice they experience, so it is important to understand how sociology education can play a role in unlocking such awareness. This study places sociology learning not only as a means of knowledge transfer, but also as a transformative medium that is able to connect students' personal experiences with broader social structures (Adib, 2024; Mardizal & Ramatni, 2024).

Theoretically, this study enriches the discourse of sociology education in Indonesia by emphasizing the dimension of critical awareness that is still rarely raised in the local literature. The focus on students from marginalized groups provides a new perspective on how education can serve as a tool of liberation and empowerment, while also broadening understanding of the social dynamics that shape the way of thinking of younger generations.

Practically, this research provides input for teachers and policy makers in designing learning strategies that are more contextual, participatory, and relevant to students' lives. By strengthening the relevance of teaching materials and encouraging critical reflection, sociology education has the potential to become a social instrument that not only hone academic skills, but also form a young generation that is sensitive to injustice, has a reflective attitude, and is ready to contribute to creating a more just and inclusive society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The development of critical consciousness among marginalized high school students has become a crucial focus in sociology education, as it empowers learners to analyze and challenge social inequalities that shape their lived experiences. Drawing on Paulo Freire's concept of conscientization, education is not merely a transmission of knowledge but a transformative process that fosters awareness of structural oppression and encourages collective action for social change. Studies have shown that marginalized students often internalize social hierarchies due to socioeconomic disadvantages, limiting their capacity to question systemic injustice. However, sociology classrooms that emphasize reflective dialogue, problem-posing pedagogy, and contextualized learning can cultivate students' ability to connect personal experiences with broader social structures. Teachers play a pivotal role in this process by facilitating discussions, presenting real-world case studies, and encouraging critical questioning. Moreover, integrating participatory and culturally responsive teaching methods helps students not only recognize inequities but also envision their agency in transforming them. Thus, sociology education serves as a strategic space for nurturing critical consciousness and empowering marginalized youth to become active, socially aware citizens.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative approach with an exploratory descriptive method. The selection of this approach is based on research objectives that focus

on deeply understanding the subjective experiences of marginalized students in the process of forming critical awareness through sociological learning (Stevens & Wrenn, 2013). The qualitative approach allows the researcher to capture reflective dynamics, values, and meanings that cannot be quantitatively measured, while the exploratory descriptive method is used to map the stages as well as factors that influence the development of such critical awareness (Mudjiyanto, 2018).

Location and Participants

The research was carried out in Baubau City, Southeast Sulawesi, which is an area with socio-cultural diversity and most of the population comes from groups with middle-to-lower economic backgrounds. The study participants were high school (SMA) students who came from low-income families. Inclusion criteria were established to ensure respondents' fit for the research focus, including: (1) students aged 15–18, (2) currently taking sociology subjects at school, (3) coming from families with incomes below the regional average, and (4) willing to give consent to participate.

Participants were selected by purposive sampling technique, so that only students fit the criteria involved in the study. A total of 85 students participated and filled out an online questionnaire distributed through the Google Form link. This technique was chosen to facilitate data collection without having to do face-to-face, while providing space for participants to answer more reflexively and free from pressure.

Instruments and Data Collection

The research instrument is in the form of an online questionnaire with open-ended questions designed to explore students' experiences in sociology learning, their understanding of social issues, and reflections on daily living conditions. The questions are structured based on Paulo Freire's critical consciousness theory framework which includes three main dimensions, namely initial awareness of injustice, critical analysis skills, and action-orientation.

Data collection was carried out over a period of two weeks, where questionnaire links were shared through sociology teachers and student forums. Participants were asked to fill out independently with a sufficiently flexible time duration to allow for more in-depth answers. To maintain validity, each question is equipped with clear instructions, and a short answer sample is given so that participants can more easily understand the meaning of the question without directing the content of the response.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data was analyzed using a thematic analysis method. All student answers are compiled and read over and over again to find key patterns, themes, and categories that fit the research focus. The analysis process is carried out through three stages, namely (1) data reduction by selecting relevant answers, (2) categorization of data into themes that represent the development of critical awareness, and (3) data interpretation to understand the relationship between themes and their implications in the context of sociology learning.

To increase the validity of the results, this study applied the source triangulation technique by comparing answers between participants, as well as conducting limited member checking with several respondents to ensure that the researcher's interpretation was in accordance with their intentions. The reliability of the analysis was also strengthened through discussions with two colleagues who had a background in sociology and educational science education to validate the consistency of the thematic categories obtained.

Research Ethics

This study pays attention to the ethical aspects of social research by ensuring the confidentiality of participants' identities. Each student is provided with information regarding the research objectives, benefits, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Consent to participation is given voluntarily through online approval prior to filling out the questionnaire. The data obtained is only used for academic purposes and will not be published individually.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study show that the process of forming critical awareness in marginalized high school students in Baubau City takes place gradually, dynamically, and is influenced by internal and external factors. The thematic analysis of the open-ended questionnaire data revealed three main themes, namely (1) early awareness of injustice, (2) critical analysis through sociological learning experiences, and (3) orientation to social action. These three themes are intertwined, forming a process that marks the birth of critical consciousness among students.

Early Awareness of Injustice

Most students show early awareness in the form of recognition of the social injustices they experience in their daily lives. This awareness arises from concrete experiences that include family economic limitations, lack of learning facilities, and social stigma they face at school and in the community. At this stage, the student's consciousness is still emotional and individual, but serves as a foundation for critical reflection in the later stages.

The family's economic limitations appear to be the dominant factor. Many parents work in the informal sector with uncertain incomes, so their ability to meet their educational needs is very limited. One student revealed, "*If the teacher gives an assignment over the internet, I often collect late because I have to borrow your cellphone. I feel different from my friends who can work right away*" (BB-S03-L). This quote shows how the technology access gap affects student participation in learning.

The experience of social stigma is also a trigger for the emergence of early awareness. Some students stated that they felt they were treated differently simply because of their economic limitations. One student said, "*I was once not invited to a group work because they said I didn't have any extra books. It feels like it's not being considered*" (BB-S11-P). This statement shows that the inability to

provide additional learning facilities can have an impact on social exclusion in the classroom.

In addition, the burden of family also strengthens this early awareness. Students are often faced with demands to help their parents' work which often interferes with their learning time. One of the respondents wrote, *"Sometimes my parents tell me to help sell at the market so I don't have time to study. I started to wonder if this school was really for my future"* (BB-S19-L). This statement confirms the dilemma between family responsibility and educational commitment.

Thus, students' initial awareness is still at a personal and emotional level. However, concrete experiences of economic hardship, limited learning facilities, and social discrimination have begun to open up space for the formation of critical awareness, although it has not yet developed into a more structural analysis.

Critical Analysis through Sociology Learning

Students' awareness grows as they interact with sociological material on injustice, poverty, and social stratification. They begin to relate personal experience to broader social structures, resulting in a shift from individual consciousness to structural consciousness.

One student wrote, *"All this time I thought my family was poor because my father only worked odd jobs and didn't finish school. But after studying sociology, I realized that the problem was also because there were very few jobs in Baubau and the wages were also low. So it's not only your fault, but there is a system that makes it difficult for us to get out of poverty"* (BB-S11-L).

Another student highlighted the uneven construction of educational facilities, *"We in school often lack textbooks, even the computers in the lab do not work at all. While in big cities, the facilities are complete. From the sociology lesson, I came to understand that this is part of structural injustice, not just our fate in a small area"* (BB-S27-P).

There are also students who reflect on the social stigma they experience, *"Friends sometimes mock me because my cellphone is bad and I often don't have a quota. I used to be able to only get angry or embarrassed. But after studying, I realized that it was not my fault, but because my family did earn little"* (BB-S46-L).

Some students even attributed their condition to government policies, *"I see that a lot of government assistance does not reach families who are really struggling. From the study of sociology I understand that the problem is in the system, not just our fate"* (BB-S63-P).

These quotes show that through the learning of sociology, students begin to develop new understandings. They no longer see poverty or limitations simply as individual failures, but as the result of unequal social structures and policies that do not favor marginalized groups. This shift in perspective is a tangible sign of the process of forming critical consciousness.

Orientation to Action

The final stage is the orientation on action, although it is still limited to a simple scope. Many students begin to express their critical awareness through

discussions with peers, sharing social information on social media, and showing solidarity by helping friends who have learning difficulties.

For example, one student wrote: *"I often talk to close friends about what we are going through. We also remind each other not to be ashamed of the family's condition."* This action has not progressed towards a collective movement or formal advocacy, but it is an indication that students are beginning to build awareness to not be passive towards the injustices they experience.

Supporting Factors and Barriers

Further analysis showed that the formation of critical awareness in students did not occur suddenly, but rather through the interaction between the supporting factors and the obstacles they faced. The main supporting factor is the role of teachers. A sociology teacher who not only teaches theory but also relates the material to local reality is able to trigger reflective questions in students' minds. For example, when teachers raise the issue of development inequality between big cities and regions, students feel that their experiences that have been considered "personal problems" are actually part of a broader structural problem. Teachers also often use simple triggering questions, such as "why do many of your parents remain poor despite their hard work?", which makes students start thinking more critically.

In addition, the relevance of learning materials to students' daily lives is an important factor. Discussions about poverty, access to education, and social discrimination provide space for students to reflect on their own experiences (Ariadila et al., 2023). This contextual material helps students build the relationship between micro-realities (family and school) and macro social structures. In many cases, students state that they only understand their social position after studying sociology, because previously they only considered the experience to be part of "fate".

Another factor that is no less significant is solidarity between peers. Support from fellow students, both through informal chats and class discussions, provides a sense of community that strengthens the reflection process. Students feel that they are not alone in facing limitations, so they are more courageous to express their experiences and critical thoughts. These collective discussions play an important role in broadening students' perspectives, as they complement each other's different perspectives and experiences (Elder & Paul, 2020; Joseph, 2025).

However, the development of critical consciousness cannot be separated from significant obstacles. Limited access to literature and scientific references makes it difficult for students to deepen their analysis beyond the material provided by the teacher. The lack of digital facilities, such as limited learning devices and internet quotas, also limits their opportunities to access alternative learning resources. In addition, the low reading habit among students further slows down the formation of more complex understanding. Psychological barriers also arise, such as a strong sense of inferiority, especially when students compare themselves with friends from more affluent families. This factor keeps some students trapped in an inferior mindset, so their critical reflection does not develop optimally.

Overall, these supporting factors and barriers show that the formation of critical awareness among marginalized students is not a linear process, but rather a fragile and challenging process. Only with the right learning strategies, access to wider knowledge, and consistent social support, can such critical awareness grow deeper and be oriented towards collective action.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study shows that sociology learning has strategic potential in shaping the critical awareness of students from marginalized groups in Baubau City, Southeast Sulawesi. Critical consciousness does not arise instantaneously, but through multiple stages, starting from initial awareness of the injustice experienced, progressing to critical analysis through the connection between personal experience and social structure, to action-oriented even though it is still in a simple scope.

Supporting factors that have proven to play an important role include the role of teachers in asking reflective questions and presenting contextual material, the relevance of learning to the reality of students' lives, and solidarity between peers that strengthens collective reflection. However, the development of critical awareness is also hampered by limited access to literature, lack of digital facilities, low reading habits, and a strong sense of insecurity among some students. These obstacles make students' reflection often stop at the emotional level, so it has not developed into more systematic analysis or more organized social action.

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that sociology learning can be an effective medium in fostering critical awareness in marginalized students, but its success is highly dependent on participatory learning strategies, support for knowledge access, and consistent mentoring. The implications of this study emphasize the need for a more contextual and transformative curriculum and pedagogical design so that students not only understand the reality of injustice, but also be able to develop reflective attitudes and collective action capacities oriented towards social change.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

Future research could further investigate how sociology learning can be designed to more effectively nurture critical consciousness among marginalized students across different socio-cultural settings. Subsequent studies might explore innovative pedagogical models, digital tools, and participatory approaches that overcome barriers such as limited access to resources and low reading habits. Additionally, longitudinal research examining how critical awareness evolves over time and leads to sustained collective action would provide deeper insights. Expanding the scope beyond Baubau City to include diverse marginalized communities could also enhance the understanding of how contextual factors shape the development of critical consciousness through sociology education.

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