

Garuda Indonesia Flagship High School as Educational Reform: A Critical Analysis of Meritocracy, Inclusivity, and Social Justice

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ABSTRACT

The Garuda Indonesia Flagship High School (SUGI) initiative represents a new educational reform designed to promote scientific excellence while expanding access to quality education for students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. The coexistence of merit-based selection and affirmative access mechanisms raises important questions regarding how contemporary educational policy negotiates the competing demands of excellence, inclusion, and social justice. This study aims to critically examine the policy design and policy discourse underpinning the SUGI initiative through the perspectives of meritocracy, symbolic elitism, and educational justice. A qualitative document-based research design was employed using Critical Policy Discourse Analysis (CPDA) integrated with the Policy Cycle Framework. The analysis drew upon official policy documents, government publications, historical records concerning RSBI/SBI, national media reports, and relevant scholarly literature published between 2012 and 2025. Data were analyzed through open coding, axial coding, thematic interpretation, and critical discourse analysis. The findings identify three interconnected policy discourses: inclusive meritocracy, symbolic elitism, and conditional affirmation. While SUGI demonstrates a stronger commitment to affirmative educational support than previous excellence-oriented initiatives by providing scholarships, boarding facilities, and comprehensive assistance for disadvantaged students, access remains dependent upon highly selective merit-based criteria, resulting in a model of conditional meritocratic inclusion. These findings suggest that contemporary educational reform in Indonesia seeks to reconcile educational excellence, global competitiveness, and social justice through hybrid policy narratives rather than replacing meritocratic principles. The study contributes to the literature on educational policy by advancing a critical understanding of how inclusion and excellence are simultaneously constructed within state-sponsored educational reform, while providing a conceptual basis for future empirical studies examining policy implementation and educational outcomes.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Higher secondary education in Indonesia still faces fundamental problems related to inequality in quality, access, and distribution of resources between schools. Data from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek) in 2023 show persistent disparities in educational quality across regions, particularly between western and eastern Indonesia. This phenomenon has direct implications for educational attainment and social mobility among students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Previous studies have similarly highlighted how unequal educational resources continue to shape opportunities and outcomes within the Indonesian education system (Rosser, 2018; Suryadarma & Jones, 2013). In response to these challenges, various policy initiatives have emerged to improve educational quality and competitiveness, including the establishment of the Garuda Indonesia Flagship High School initiative (Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, 2023).

The emergence of the Garuda Indonesia Flagship High School initiative should be understood within the broader history of excellence-oriented educational policies in Indonesia. Previous programs such as *Sekolah Bertaraf Internasional (SBI)* and *Rintisan Sekolah Bertaraf Internasional (RSBI)* were introduced to enhance educational competitiveness and align selected schools with international standards. However, these initiatives generated considerable criticism because they were perceived as creating unequal educational opportunities and reinforcing social stratification. Such concerns culminated in Constitutional Court Decision No. 5/PUU-X/2012, which declared the legal basis of RSBI unconstitutional due to its inconsistency with the constitutional principles of equality and non-discrimination in education (Putusan Mahkamah Konstitusi Nomor 5/PUU-X/2012, 2012).

Following the discontinuation of RSBI/SBI, Indonesian educational reforms increasingly emphasized equity-oriented approaches through school zoning policies, affirmative admission pathways, and targeted interventions for disadvantaged regions. These reforms sought to reduce disparities in access to quality education and prevent the concentration of educational resources within a limited number of elite institutions. Nevertheless, educational inequalities remain substantial across regions, particularly between urban and rural areas and between western and eastern Indonesia, indicating that the challenge of balancing excellence and equity remains unresolved (Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, 2023).

Within this policy context, *SMA Unggul Garuda Indonesia (SUGI)* has been introduced as a strategic national initiative aimed at developing future scientific talent while expanding educational opportunities for students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. According to Presidential Regulation No. 116 of 2025, the program is expected to contribute to the development of nationally competitive human resources in science and technology. While the policy promotes narratives of excellence, inclusion, and national competitiveness, important questions remain regarding whether such objectives can be achieved without reproducing new forms of educational exclusivity through merit-based selection mechanisms. (Peraturan Presiden Republik Indonesia Nomor 116 Tahun 2025 tentang SMA Unggul Garuda Indonesia, 2025)

Although the Garuda Indonesia Flagship High School initiative is presented as a strategic effort to develop national talent while expanding access to quality education, important questions remain regarding how excellence-oriented educational policies can simultaneously promote inclusion and social justice. The coexistence of merit-based selection, affirmative access mechanisms, and narratives of global competitiveness creates a complex policy landscape that warrants critical examination. These questions are particularly relevant in light of Indonesia's previous experience with RSBI/SBI, which generated debates concerning educational inequality, institutional distinction, and equal access to educational opportunities. Consequently, examining the discursive foundations of SUGI is important for understanding how contemporary educational reforms seek to balance excellence, inclusion, and social justice within a single policy framework (Murtiningsih, 2016);(Peraturan Presiden Republik Indonesia Nomor 116 Tahun 2025 tentang SMA Unggul Garuda Indonesia, 2025).

Several previous studies have examined the relationship between educational inclusion, meritocracy, and social stratification. (Pozo-Armentia; 2020) explored the pedagogical limitations of inclusive

education, while (Koutsouris; 2022) analyzed inclusion policies within elite universities in the United Kingdom. Dias (2015) highlighted how educational expansion may coexist with persistent inequalities, and Walton and Engelbrecht (Walton, E., & Engelbrecht, 2024) demonstrated the importance of historical and institutional trajectories in shaping inclusive educational reforms. Despite these contributions, three important gaps remain.

First, existing scholarship has predominantly focused on higher education institutions or special education contexts, with limited attention given to state-sponsored flagship secondary schools as instruments of educational reform. Second, previous studies tend to examine inclusion and excellence as separate policy concerns, whereas little research investigates how both discourses are simultaneously constructed within a single policy framework. Third, empirical and conceptual analyses from developing countries remain relatively scarce, particularly in Indonesia, where educational reforms continue to grapple with the dual challenge of promoting competitiveness while ensuring equitable access. Consequently, a critical examination of the Garuda Indonesia Flagship High School initiative is necessary to understand how narratives of excellence, inclusion, and social justice are articulated, negotiated, and potentially contested within contemporary educational policy discourse.

This study contributes to the literature in several important ways. First, it extends existing discussions on educational inclusion and meritocracy by focusing on a state-sponsored flagship secondary school initiative rather than higher education institutions, which have dominated previous scholarship. Second, the study integrates Critical Policy Discourse Analysis (CPDA) with the Policy Cycle Framework to examine not only policy objectives but also the ideological assumptions embedded within policy narratives. Third, by situating the analysis within the Indonesian context, the study provides insights into how contemporary educational reforms seek to reconcile excellence, competitiveness, and social justice in a society characterized by persistent educational inequalities. In doing so, the article contributes to a broader understanding of how policy discourses may simultaneously promote inclusion while reproducing new forms of distinction and exclusion.

This study aims to critically examine the policy design and policy discourse surrounding the Garuda Indonesia Flagship High School (SUGI) initiative by focusing on issues of inclusivity, meritocracy, elitism, and social justice. Through a documentary and interpretive policy analysis approach, the study investigates how narratives of educational excellence and equitable access are constructed within official policy texts and public discourse. The findings are expected to contribute to contemporary debates on inclusive education, educational reform, and social justice, while providing policy recommendations for developing educational excellence without reproducing structural inequalities.

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative and interpretive research design using Critical Policy Discourse Analysis (CPDA) as its primary analytical approach. CPDA was selected because it enables researchers to examine how policy texts construct meanings, distribute power, and legitimize particular educational agendas through discourse (Ball, 2012). In addition, the study incorporated document analysis and the Policy Cycle Framework developed by Howlett, Ramesh, and Perl (2009) to situate policy narratives within broader processes of policy formulation, legitimation, and anticipated implementation.

2.1 Corpus of Documents

The study utilized purposive document sampling to construct a corpus relevant to the Garuda Indonesia Flagship High School (SUGI) initiative. The corpus consisted of four categories of documents: (1) official policy documents, including Presidential Regulation No. 116 of 2025, technical implementation guidelines, curriculum guidelines, and official policy presentations issued by the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Technology; (2) government publications and press releases concerning the establishment and objectives of SUGI; (3) historical policy documents relating to *Sekolah Bertaraf Internasional (SBI)* and *Rintisan Sekolah Bertaraf Internasional (RSBI)*, including Constitutional

Court Decision No. 5/PUU-X/2012; and (4) peer-reviewed academic literature addressing educational elitism, meritocracy, inclusion, affirmative action, and social justice.

The document collection covered the period 2012–2025. The starting year was selected to capture policy developments following the Constitutional Court's decision on RSBI/SBI, while the endpoint reflects the contemporary emergence of the SUGI initiative.

2.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Documents were included if they: (a) directly discussed SUGI, educational excellence policies, affirmative access, or elite-school governance; (b) originated from government institutions, reputable national media, or peer-reviewed academic publications; and (c) were publicly accessible and verifiable. Documents were excluded if they consisted of personal opinions, duplicated publications, blog posts without institutional authority, or materials unrelated to educational policy.

2.3 Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis consisted of policy statements, policy objectives, eligibility requirements, affirmative-access provisions, institutional narratives, and textual representations of excellence, inclusion, merit, and educational justice. Particular attention was given to recurring policy vocabularies and rhetorical constructions used to legitimize educational reform.

2.4 Analytical Procedure

The analysis followed four stages. First, open coding was conducted to identify recurring concepts such as excellence, merit, competitiveness, inclusion, equity, talent development, and affirmative access. Second, axial coding was used to group related concepts into broader analytical categories. Third, thematic interpretation was undertaken using CPDA to uncover underlying ideological assumptions and power relations embedded in policy discourse. Finally, the resulting themes were contextualized through historical comparison with RSBI/SBI policies and international literature on elite education.

The coding process generated three dominant discourse categories: inclusive meritocracy, symbolic elitism, and conditional affirmation. Inclusive meritocracy refers to policy narratives that combine academic excellence with claims of broad accessibility. Symbolic elitism refers to the use of institutional prestige and excellence narratives as mechanisms of distinction. Conditional affirmation refers to affirmative commitments that are not accompanied by clearly articulated redistributive support mechanisms.

2.5 Trustworthiness and Analytical Rigor

To enhance transparency and analytical rigor, the study maintained an audit trail documenting coding decisions, thematic development, and interpretive procedures. Triangulation was achieved through comparison across policy documents, government publications, media narratives, and academic literature. This approach enabled the identification of both convergent and divergent discourses surrounding the SUGI initiative and strengthened the credibility of the findings.

Table 1. Corpus of Documents Analyzed

Category	Source	Period	Purpose
Official policy documents	Presidential Regulation No. 116/2025, implementation guidelines, curriculum guidelines	2025	Policy discourse analysis
Government publications	Ministry presentations, policy briefs, official press releases	2024–2025	Identification of policy narratives
Historical policy documents	RSBI/SBI regulations, Constitutional Court Decision No. 5/PUU-X/2012	2006–2013	Historical contextualization

Media reports	National media coverage concerning SUGI	2024–2025	Public discourse analysis
Academic literature	Peer-reviewed journal articles	2014–2024	Theoretical interpretation

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Findings

3.1.1 Meritocracy, Affirmation, and Symbolic Elitism: Reading the Ideological Challenges in Garuda Indonesia's Flagship High School Policy

a. Discursive Typology in the Garuda Indonesia Flagship High School Policy

Analysis of the policy corpus reveals three dominant discourses underpinning the Garuda Indonesia Flagship High School (SUGI) initiative, namely inclusive meritocracy, symbolic elitism, and conditional affirmation. These discourses emerged from the interpretation of official policy documents, technical guidelines, government publications, and public policy narratives concerning the establishment of SUGI.

Table 1. Dominant Discourses Identified in the SUGI Policy Corpus

Documentary Evidence	Interpretation	Supporting Literature
Policy statements emphasizing STEM excellence, talent development, and equitable educational access	Combines merit-based achievement with inclusion narratives	Koh (2014); Batruch et al. (2019); Koutsouris et al. (2022)
References to international curricula, global competitiveness, boarding school systems, and pathways to world-class universities	Constructs institutional distinction and prestige	Owens & de St Croix (2020); Liasidou & Symeou (2018)
Priority admission for disadvantaged students and provision of full scholarships alongside competitive academic selection	Inclusion remains conditional upon merit-based eligibility requirements	Autin et al. (2019); Abrahams (2024)

b. Inclusive Meritocracy

The first discourse identified is inclusive meritocracy. Official policy documents emphasize the dual objective of promoting educational excellence while expanding opportunities for students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Government publications describe SUGI as a program intended to “produce outstanding graduates in STEM fields with global competitiveness” while simultaneously “expanding equitable access to quality education throughout Indonesia.” Such formulations combine merit-based educational aspirations with a rhetoric of inclusion and equal opportunity.

From a CPDA perspective, these statements construct educational success as a function of both talent and opportunity. The policy attempts to reconcile excellence with social justice by presenting academic achievement and inclusivity as complementary rather than contradictory objectives. This discourse resonates with what (Koh, 2014) describes as meritocratic inclusion, where educational opportunities are formally opened to disadvantaged groups while maintaining a strong emphasis on academic performance and competitiveness.

c. Symbolic Elitism

The second discourse concerns symbolic elitism. Official documents repeatedly emphasize global competitiveness, international-standard curricula, highly qualified teachers, advanced scientific laboratories, integrated boarding-school systems, and pathways to leading universities. The vision of

SUGI as “a center for developing globally competitive talents” and the commitment to preparing students for world-class universities establish a discourse of distinction and institutional prestige.

Within CPDA, such representations are not merely descriptive but performative. They construct SUGI as a special educational space positioned above ordinary public schools. The repeated use of terms such as excellence, global competitiveness, international standards, and future leadership contributes to a symbolic hierarchy that differentiates SUGI from mainstream educational institutions. This finding supports arguments advanced by Owens and de St Croix (Owens & de St Croix, 2020) and Liasidou and Symeou (2018), who suggest that educational excellence narratives can simultaneously function as mechanisms of social distinction.

d. Conditional Affirmation

The third discourse identified is conditional affirmation. Official policy documents indicate that students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, including beneficiaries of PKH, KKS, and DTKS programs, are prioritized within the admissions process. Furthermore, the policy guarantees full educational support covering tuition fees, accommodation, meals, books, and learning materials. These provisions demonstrate a stronger affirmative orientation than many previous elite-school initiatives in Indonesia.

However, policy analysis also indicates that affirmative access remains embedded within a highly selective framework. Admission requirements continue to prioritize academic achievement, including minimum performance standards and competitive selection procedures based on academic records, potential assessments, and supporting documentation. Consequently, access remains conditional upon the ability of applicants to satisfy merit-based criteria. In this regard, affirmative measures do not fully replace meritocratic selection but operate alongside it, producing what this study conceptualizes as conditional affirmation.

The coexistence of inclusive meritocracy, symbolic elitism, and conditional affirmation demonstrates the complexity of contemporary educational reform in Indonesia. Rather than representing mutually exclusive policy orientations, these discourses interact and collectively shape the ideological foundation of SUGI. While the policy seeks to expand opportunities for disadvantaged students, it simultaneously reproduces narratives of excellence and distinction that may generate new forms of educational differentiation.

e. The Tension Between Inclusive Rhetoric and Merit-Based Selection

Policy documents consistently present SUGI as an initiative designed to expand educational opportunities for talented students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Government publications emphasize equitable access, regional representation, and support for students from disadvantaged families. In addition, affirmative provisions prioritize applicants registered in social assistance databases and provide comprehensive educational support, including tuition, accommodation, meals, books, and learning materials.

At the same time, admission procedures remain strongly merit-based. Official guidelines require applicants to demonstrate high academic achievement, submit academic records, and undergo a competitive selection process based on academic performance and potential assessments. Consequently, access to SUGI is structured through a dual logic: inclusion is promoted through affirmative mechanisms, while eligibility continues to depend upon academic excellence.

From a CPDA perspective, this duality reflects a tension between social justice aspirations and meritocratic selection principles. The policy attempts to reconcile educational equity and excellence within a single framework. However, the findings suggest that inclusion is not conceived as universal access but rather as access for those who can satisfy predetermined standards of achievement. This finding is consistent with Koh's (Koh, 2014) concept of the “smokescreen of meritocracy,” where educational opportunities are formally expanded while merit-based criteria continue to regulate participation.

3.1.2 Symbolic Elitism and the Construction of Educational Distinction

The analysis demonstrates that narratives of excellence occupy a central position within the SUGI policy framework. Official documents repeatedly refer to global competitiveness, international-standard curricula, advanced scientific facilities, boarding-school systems, and pathways to leading universities. The institutional vision of becoming a center for developing globally competitive talents further reinforces this orientation.

Within Critical Policy Discourse Analysis, these narratives are understood not only as descriptions of educational quality but also as mechanisms for constructing institutional distinction. The repeated emphasis on excellence, leadership, innovation, and international competitiveness symbolically differentiates SUGI from ordinary public schools. Such representations create a hierarchy of educational value in which certain institutions are discursively positioned as superior and strategically important.

This finding supports arguments advanced by Owens and de St Croix (Owens & de St Croix, 2020) and (Liasidou & Symeou, 2018), who contend that excellence narratives frequently function as instruments of symbolic differentiation. In the Indonesian context, these narratives are particularly significant because they emerge within a policy environment shaped by previous debates concerning RSBI/SBI and educational inequality. Consequently, the discourse of excellence may simultaneously serve as a vehicle for national talent development and as a mechanism for reproducing new forms of educational distinction.

3.1.3 Comparative Perspectives on Excellence, Inclusion, and Affirmative Support

To better understand the distinctive characteristics of the SUGI initiative, it is useful to compare its policy design with selected international experiences that have sought to balance educational excellence and social inclusion. Comparative policy analysis does not aim to establish direct equivalence between national systems; rather, it provides a framework for identifying different approaches to talent development, affirmative access, and educational justice. Sweden and China were selected because both countries have implemented excellence-oriented educational programs while simultaneously addressing questions of equity and inclusion through different institutional arrangements.

Table 2. Comparative Characteristics of Excellence-Oriented Educational Policies

Dimension	Sweden	China	Indonesia (SUGI)
Policy Objective	Excellence combined with social equality	National talent development and competitiveness	National talent development and educational equity
Access Mechanism	Academic selection with extensive social support	Academic selection combined with regional quotas	Academic selection combined with affirmative access mechanisms
Support for Disadvantaged Students	Scholarships, mentoring, and academic support	Rural quotas and targeted educational support	Full scholarships and boarding facilities for eligible students
Inclusivity Orientation	Structural inclusion	State-managed inclusion	Merit-based inclusion with affirmative provisions
Main Challenge	Balancing excellence and equality	Regional disparities	Balancing excellence, inclusion, and social justice

Source: Adapted from Dodillet (2019), Ruan et al. (2023), and official SUGI policy documents.

The comparison reveals that SUGI incorporates a stronger affirmative dimension than previous elite-school initiatives in Indonesia. Official policy documents indicate that students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds may receive comprehensive educational support, including tuition-free education, accommodation, meals, books, and learning materials. These

provisions suggest a more redistributive orientation than that associated with earlier excellence-oriented programs such as RSBI/SBI (Indonesia, 2025)

Nevertheless, the policy continues to operate within a highly selective framework. Admission remains dependent upon academic achievement, demonstrated potential, and competitive evaluation processes. As a result, the policy seeks to balance two objectives that are often difficult to reconcile: promoting educational excellence while expanding access for disadvantaged students. This tension is not unique to Indonesia but is also evident in international experiences where meritocratic selection coexists with affirmative interventions (Dodillet, 2019).

From a social justice perspective, the significance of SUGI lies not only in its commitment to educational excellence but also in the extent to which affirmative support mechanisms are capable of reducing structural barriers to participation. While policy documents indicate a stronger commitment to redistribution than previous Indonesian excellence programs, future evaluations will be necessary to assess how these commitments are translated into educational experiences and outcomes. Therefore, the findings should be understood as an analysis of policy design and policy discourse rather than as an assessment of policy implementation.

3.1.4 Implications for Educational Justice in Indonesia

The findings of this study have important implications for ongoing debates concerning educational justice and excellence-oriented reform in Indonesia. The emergence of SUGI demonstrates that contemporary educational policy is increasingly attempting to reconcile two objectives that have historically been treated as competing priorities: the pursuit of academic excellence and the expansion of equitable educational opportunities.

Unlike previous elite-school initiatives such as RSBI/SBI, SUGI incorporates explicit affirmative mechanisms intended to broaden access for students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. The provision of tuition-free education, boarding facilities, meals, learning materials, and scholarship opportunities reflects a stronger commitment to redistribution than earlier models of excellence-oriented schooling. From a policy perspective, this suggests that educational excellence and social inclusion need not be conceptualized as mutually exclusive goals.

Nevertheless, the analysis also indicates that tensions between meritocracy and social justice remain embedded within the policy design. While affirmative provisions seek to reduce barriers to access, admission procedures continue to rely heavily on academic achievement and competitive selection. Consequently, the success of SUGI in promoting educational justice will depend not only on expanding access but also on ensuring that students from diverse backgrounds can participate and succeed within the educational environment.

The Indonesian experience also offers broader lessons for educational reform in developing countries. Policies that emphasize excellence without adequate redistributive mechanisms risk reproducing existing inequalities, whereas policies that focus exclusively on access may struggle to maintain academic quality and competitiveness. The challenge therefore lies in developing institutional arrangements capable of simultaneously supporting excellence, inclusion, and educational equity.

From the perspective of Critical Policy Discourse Analysis, the significance of SUGI extends beyond its institutional design. The policy illustrates how contemporary educational reforms construct narratives that combine meritocracy, inclusion, national competitiveness, and social justice within a single policy framework. Understanding these discursive dynamics is essential for evaluating how educational policies shape opportunities, distribute resources, and define the meaning of fairness in education. Future research should therefore investigate how these policy narratives are interpreted and experienced by students, teachers, and educational stakeholders in practice.

3.2 Discussion

The findings reveal that the Garuda Indonesia Flagship High School (SUGI) policy is constructed through the interaction of three dominant discourses—inclusive meritocracy, symbolic elitism, and

conditional affirmation—which collectively shape the ideological foundation of contemporary educational reform in Indonesia. Rather than functioning as separate policy orientations, these discourses operate simultaneously to reconcile two historically competing objectives: developing globally competitive human capital while promoting broader educational inclusion. From the perspective of Critical Policy Discourse Analysis (CPDA), this coexistence demonstrates that educational policy is not merely a technical instrument for improving schooling but also a discursive mechanism through which the state defines legitimate forms of excellence, constructs desirable educational subjects, and distributes educational opportunities (Ball, 2012).

The discourse of inclusive meritocracy illustrates how the Indonesian government seeks to redefine excellence-oriented education following the constitutional criticism directed toward the former *Sekolah Bertaraf Internasional (SBI/RSBI)* program. Unlike its predecessor, SUGI explicitly incorporates affirmative provisions for students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds through scholarships, boarding facilities, tuition waivers, and comprehensive educational support. At the level of policy discourse, this represents an important ideological shift from exclusive institutional privilege toward a more socially responsive narrative of educational opportunity. However, this inclusivity remains embedded within a merit-based selection framework that continues to privilege measurable academic achievement as the primary gateway to participation. Consequently, inclusion is not conceptualized as universal access but rather as expanded access for those who successfully demonstrate exceptional academic potential.

This finding reflects what Koh (2014) describes as the "smokescreen of meritocracy," whereby educational systems appear increasingly inclusive while simultaneously preserving competitive selection mechanisms that continue to regulate access. Meritocracy therefore functions not only as an admission criterion but also as a powerful legitimizing discourse through which educational inequality becomes interpreted as the outcome of individual ability rather than structural disadvantage. In this sense, SUGI demonstrates how contemporary educational reforms attempt to reconcile equity and competitiveness without fundamentally abandoning meritocratic governance. Similar tensions have been observed in Singapore, where meritocracy has long been promoted as a mechanism of equal opportunity while continuing to reproduce existing social hierarchies through unequal access to educational resources (Koh, 2014).

The second discourse, symbolic elitism, reveals a deeper ideological dimension within the policy. Official policy documents repeatedly emphasize concepts such as *global competitiveness*, *international-standard education*, *scientific excellence*, *future leaders*, and *world-class universities*. These recurring policy vocabularies perform more than descriptive functions; they symbolically construct SUGI as an educational institution positioned above ordinary public schools. From a CPDA perspective, such discursive strategies create institutional distinction by defining what constitutes legitimate educational excellence and by establishing symbolic hierarchies among schools.

Ball (2012) argues that educational policies increasingly function as technologies of governance through which states regulate aspirations, identities, and institutional priorities. Within this framework, the repeated emphasis on global competitiveness reflects broader neoliberal educational rationalities in which schools become instruments for producing internationally competitive human capital. Excellence is therefore framed not solely as an educational objective but also as an economic strategy linked to national competitiveness within the global knowledge economy. Similar processes have been documented internationally, where excellence narratives frequently reinforce symbolic differentiation despite being accompanied by commitments to educational inclusion (Liasidou & Symeou, 2018; Owens & de St. Croix, 2020). Consequently, symbolic elitism within SUGI should not simply be interpreted as institutional prestige but as a discursive mechanism that legitimizes differentiated educational investment through narratives of national development and strategic talent cultivation.

The third discourse, conditional affirmation, further illustrates the complexity of balancing educational justice and academic excellence. Policy documents indicate that students registered in

government social assistance programs receive priority consideration and comprehensive educational support. Compared with previous elite-school initiatives in Indonesia, these redistributive mechanisms represent a substantial policy innovation because financial barriers to participation are explicitly addressed. Nevertheless, affirmative support remains conditional upon applicants first satisfying highly competitive academic requirements. Redistribution therefore operates after meritocratic selection rather than replacing it.

From a social justice perspective, this arrangement raises important questions regarding the extent to which affirmative policies are capable of addressing structural educational inequalities. Batruch et al. (2019) argue that meritocratic systems often overlook the unequal distribution of educational opportunities that precedes academic achievement itself. Students from disadvantaged regions frequently experience disparities in school quality, teacher availability, learning facilities, and family educational resources long before entering selective admission processes. Consequently, although SUGI broadens opportunities for successful disadvantaged students, it does not fully eliminate structural inequalities that shape the production of academic merit. The policy therefore reflects what this study conceptualizes as conditional affirmation—a form of redistribution that remains contingent upon prior academic performance.

The comparative analysis further demonstrates that the tensions identified within SUGI are not unique to Indonesia but represent broader international challenges in excellence-oriented educational reform. Sweden, for example, has attempted to reconcile elite educational programs with egalitarian educational traditions by embedding extensive social support within excellence initiatives (Dodillet, 2019). China similarly combines highly selective educational pathways with regional quota systems intended to reduce geographic disparities in educational access (Ruan et al., 2023). These international experiences suggest that educational excellence and inclusion are not inherently contradictory but require carefully designed institutional arrangements capable of addressing inequalities before competitive selection occurs. Compared with earlier Indonesian policies such as RSBI/SBI, SUGI demonstrates a stronger redistributive orientation through fully funded education and affirmative admission pathways. However, its long-term contribution to educational justice will ultimately depend upon whether these redistributive mechanisms effectively compensate for structural inequalities experienced by disadvantaged students throughout earlier stages of schooling.

The present findings also extend theoretical discussions within Critical Policy Discourse Analysis by illustrating how contemporary educational reforms increasingly employ hybrid policy narratives that combine meritocracy, redistribution, global competitiveness, and social justice within a single policy framework. Rather than replacing meritocratic ideology, contemporary educational policies appear to reframe it through the incorporation of carefully designed affirmative mechanisms that preserve excellence while improving legitimacy. This study therefore proposes the concept of conditional meritocratic inclusion to describe educational policies that simultaneously expand opportunities for disadvantaged groups while maintaining highly selective standards of academic achievement. The concept contributes to emerging debates concerning how states negotiate the competing demands of excellence, equity, and international competitiveness within contemporary educational governance.

Finally, it is important to recognize that the present study analyzes policy discourse rather than policy implementation. The ideological commitments articulated within official documents do not necessarily guarantee equivalent outcomes in educational practice. Future research should therefore investigate how students, teachers, school leaders, and policymakers interpret and enact these policy narratives within everyday educational settings. Such empirical studies would provide valuable evidence regarding whether the discursive promises of inclusive excellence embedded within SUGI are translated into substantive educational justice or whether existing social inequalities continue to shape educational trajectories despite the introduction of affirmative policy mechanisms.

4 CONCLUSION

This study critically examined the policy design and policy discourse surrounding the Garuda Indonesia Flagship High School (SUGI) initiative through the lens of Critical Policy Discourse Analysis (CPDA). The findings demonstrate that the policy is constructed through three interconnected discourses—inclusive meritocracy, symbolic elitism, and conditional affirmation—which collectively illustrate the Indonesian government's attempt to reconcile educational excellence, global competitiveness, and social justice within a single policy framework. Compared with previous excellence-oriented initiatives such as RSBI/SBI, SUGI incorporates stronger affirmative mechanisms by providing comprehensive educational support for students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, yet access remains contingent upon merit-based selection, reflecting a model of conditional meritocratic inclusion. These findings contribute to contemporary debates on educational reform by showing how policy discourse simultaneously expands inclusion while preserving selective standards of excellence. Nevertheless, this study is limited by its exclusive reliance on documentary sources and policy discourse, and therefore does not evaluate policy implementation, institutional practices, or the lived experiences of students and educators. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as an analysis of policy design rather than evidence of policy effectiveness. Future research is encouraged to employ empirical approaches, including case studies, interviews, ethnographic inquiry, or mixed-methods designs, to investigate how the policy is implemented across different educational contexts and how its discursive commitments to meritocracy, inclusion, and educational justice are experienced, negotiated, and translated into educational outcomes by schools, teachers, students, and policymakers. Such studies would provide a more comprehensive understanding of whether the aspirations embedded in the SUGI policy ultimately contribute to reducing educational inequality while sustaining academic excellence.

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