



The Legitimation Crisis of Mass Education: Habermas's Communicative Rationality as an Analytical Framework for the Erosion of Educational Authority in Late Modernity

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the crisis of legitimacy of mass education in late modernity through the perspective of Jürgen Habermas's communicative rationality. The goal is to identify the structural causes of the decline in public trust in educational institutions. Using a critical-interpretive approach that combines theoretical analysis and empirical data, this study identifies three forms of educational colonization: credentialism, standardized measurement, and commercialization. Gallup/Lumina data (2024) shows that trust in higher education has decreased from 57% (2015) to 36% (2024), while Pew Research (2025) notes that 70% of Americans believe higher education is moving in the wrong direction. As a solution, this article offers a Communicative Recovery Framework that includes stages of diagnosis, intervention, and recovery based on Habermasian principles. Future research should test this framework through case studies of institutional reform.

Keywords: communicative rationality; educational authority; Habermas; theory of communicative action; legitimation crisis

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji krisis legitimasi pendidikan massal dalam modernitas lanjut melalui perspektif rasionalitas komunikatif Jurgen Habermas. Tujuannya adalah mengidentifikasi penyebab struktural menurunnya kepercayaan publik terhadap lembaga pendidikan. Dengan pendekatan kritis-interpretatif yang menggabungkan analisis teoretis dan data empiris, studi ini menemukan tiga bentuk kolonisasi pendidikan: kredensialisme, pengukuran terstandarisasi, dan komersialisasi. Data Gallup/Lumina (2024) menunjukkan kepercayaan terhadap pendidikan tinggi menurun dari 57% (2015) menjadi 36% (2024), sedangkan Pew Research (2025) mencatat 70% warga Amerika menilai pendidikan tinggi bergerak ke arah yang salah. Sebagai solusi, artikel ini menawarkan Kerangka Pemulihan Komunikatif yang mencakup tahap diagnosis, intervensi, dan pemulihan berdasarkan prinsip Habermasian. Penelitian selanjutnya perlu menguji kerangka ini melalui studi kasus reformasi institusional.

Kata kunci: krisis legitimasi; otoritas pendidikan; Habermas; Teori Tindakan Komunikatif; rasionalitas komunikatif

A. Introduction

Few phenomena capture the social anxieties of late modernity more vividly than the erosion of public trust in educational institutions. Data from the 2024 Gallup/Lumina Foundation State of Higher Education survey reveal a stark trajectory: confidence in higher education among Americans plummeted from 57% in 2015 to a historic low of 36% in 2024, a decline of 21 percentage points in less than a decade (Gallup/Lumina, 2024). More recently, a Pew Research Center survey conducted in October 2025 found that 70% of Americans believe higher education is "heading in the wrong direction," up from 56% in 2020. A Yale Committee on Trust in Higher Education report (2026) documented that even among faculty and administrators, there is a pervasive recognition that institutions have lost the authority to speak convincingly on behalf of knowledge, truth, and the public good. These figures are not merely statistical curiosities; they index a structural transformation in the legitimacy of education as a social institution.

This crisis of educational legitimacy is not a new phenomenon, but its contemporary manifestations in late modernity exhibit a qualitatively distinctive character. Unlike earlier episodes of educational conflict, which were typically organized around questions of access, curriculum content, or pedagogical method, the current crisis strikes at the very foundations of educational authority itself: the

capacity of educational institutions to make credible validity claims about truth, justice, and human formation that are accepted as legitimate by the communities they serve. Nearly half of U.S. public school teachers reported in 2024 that they believe most Americans do not trust them much or at all (Pew Research, 2024), a remarkable datum that suggests the crisis has penetrated from the macro-institutional to the micro-pedagogical level. Such dynamics resonate with observations from developing contexts, including Indonesia, where structural tensions between traditional educational values and state-driven standardization have similarly eroded institutional legitimacy (Herwani and Pasiningsih 2023; Zakirah 2020).

The analytical framework of Jurgen Habermas, and specifically his theory of communicative rationality and legitimation crisis, provides unusually powerful conceptual resources for understanding this transformation. Habermas's project in the *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984, 1987) and *Legitimation Crisis* (1973) was precisely to diagnose the pathological consequences of what he termed the "colonization of the lifeworld" by systemic imperatives of money and power. Education, as a central institution of the lifeworld, oriented toward the reproduction of culture, the formation of social solidarity, and the socialization of persons, is paradigmatically vulnerable to such colonization. When the instrumental logics of the economic system (credentialism, labor-market alignment, return-on-investment) and the administrative system (standardized testing, accountability metrics, and bureaucratic governance) invade and displace the communicative logic of education, a legitimation crisis becomes structurally inevitable (Ferrara and Michelman 2021).

Despite the richness of Habermas's theoretical resources, their systematic application to the contemporary crisis of mass educational legitimacy remains underdeveloped in the literature. While there is a substantial body of work applying Habermasian theory to pedagogy and curriculum (Han 2002; Palmer and Chandir 2023), less attention has been paid to the macro-sociological diagnosis of educational authority erosion through the lens of legitimation crisis theory. Previous empirical studies on public trust in education have documented declining confidence across multiple national contexts (Warnick, 2023; Morrow & Torres, 2022; Welton, 2021), yet these studies have not systematically connected their findings to Habermasian legitimation theory. This article addresses that gap. Its central argument is that the decline in public trust in education constitutes a legitimation crisis in the Habermasian sense: a structural displacement of

communicative rationality by instrumental reason within a domain constitutively dependent on the former. This study aims to contribute both to the sociology of education and to the continuing project of applying critical theory to the analysis of contemporary social institutions.

B. Methods

This study employs a critical-interpretive methodology drawing on the tradition of critical social theory in the Frankfurt School tradition. The research design integrates three analytical strategies: (1) theoretical reconstruction, a systematic reinterpretation of Habermas's key theoretical concepts (communicative action, lifeworld-system distinction, validity claims, legitimation crisis) in relation to contemporary educational phenomena; (2) conceptual analysis of empirical evidence, the critical examination of quantitative and qualitative data from recent surveys, institutional reports, and policy documents bearing on public trust in education across multiple national contexts; and (3) normative framework construction, the development of a prescriptive analytical framework grounded in Habermasian principles for the diagnosis and potential restoration of educational authority.

Primary theoretical sources include Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action (Volumes 1 and 2), Legitimation Crisis, and Between Facts and Norms. Secondary sources were drawn from a systematic literature review using search terms including "Habermas education," "communicative rationality pedagogy," "lifeworld colonization school," and "legitimation crisis higher education" in Scopus, JSTOR, and Google Scholar, filtered to works published between 2018 and 2026. Empirical data were drawn from Gallup/Lumina Foundation (2024), Pew Research Center (2024, 2025), the Yale Committee on Trust in Higher Education Report (2026), Inside Higher Ed/Hanover Research Presidential Survey (2025), and the Manhattan Institute National Higher Education Poll (2025). References were managed using Mendeley to ensure citation accuracy and bibliographic consistency (Allen 2002; McLaren and Jaramillo 2007; Vandenberghe 2008). Methodological validity is ensured through theoretical triangulation and the consistent application of immanent critique, measuring educational institutions against the communicative standards they themselves profess to embody.

C. Results and Discussion

1. The Structural Anatomy of Educational Legitimation Crisis

Habermas's concept of legitimation crisis designates a condition in which the normative structures that generate motivation and institutional acceptance deteriorate to the point where the state, or by extension any institution dependent on public endorsement, can no longer sustain the loyalty it requires to function effectively (Habermas, 1973). Applied to education, a legitimation crisis occurs when educational institutions lose the capacity to make credible validity claims about the truth of knowledge, the rightness of institutional norms, and the sincerity of their commitments to student formation that are accepted as binding by students, families, and the broader public.

The empirical data presented in Table 1 document the multi-dimensional character of this crisis across institutional levels and national contexts. The convergence of declining confidence figures across politically, culturally, and geographically diverse settings suggests that the crisis is not idiosyncratic but structurally conditioned by the global expansion of late-modern institutional forms.

Table 1. Indicators of Educational Legitimation Crisis in Late Modernity (2015–2025)

Indicator	Baseline	2024–2025	Source
Public confidence in higher education (US)	57% (2015)	36% (historic low)	Gallup/Lumina (2024)
HE heading in "wrong direction" (US)	56% (2020)	70% (2025)	Pew Research (2025)
Republican confidence in HE (US)	56% (2015)	26% (2025)	Yale Committee (2026)
Teachers feeling "not trusted" (US)	N/A	~50% (2024)	Pew Research (2024)
Trust in Ivy League (US voters)	N/A	15% "great deal"	Manhattan Inst. (2025)
College closures in US	14 (2023)	28 (2024)	Inside Higher Ed (2025)

The data in Table 1 demonstrate that the crisis of educational legitimacy is not a temporary perturbation but a sustained, multi-vector decline that has intensified across the decade from 2015 to 2025. The fact that trust has declined across demographic and ideological groups, though with sharper declines among conservative populations, suggests that the crisis operates on multiple axes simultaneously, each corresponding to a distinct dimension of Habermas's theory. Most tellingly, the near-doubling of college closures from 2023 to 2024 (14 to 28 institutions) signals that the legitimation crisis is beginning to produce material consequences for institutional survival, not merely perceptual ones.

2. Three Pathways of Lifeworld Colonization in Education

Habermas argued that the pathological consequences of modernization arise not from rationalization per se but from its "one-sidedness," the tendency for systemic imperatives of money and power to invade and displace the communicative logic of the lifeworld. Figure 1 maps the structural architecture of this colonization process as it operates within mass education, visualizing the relationship between the lifeworld, the system, and the colonization zone in which educational legitimacy is contested.

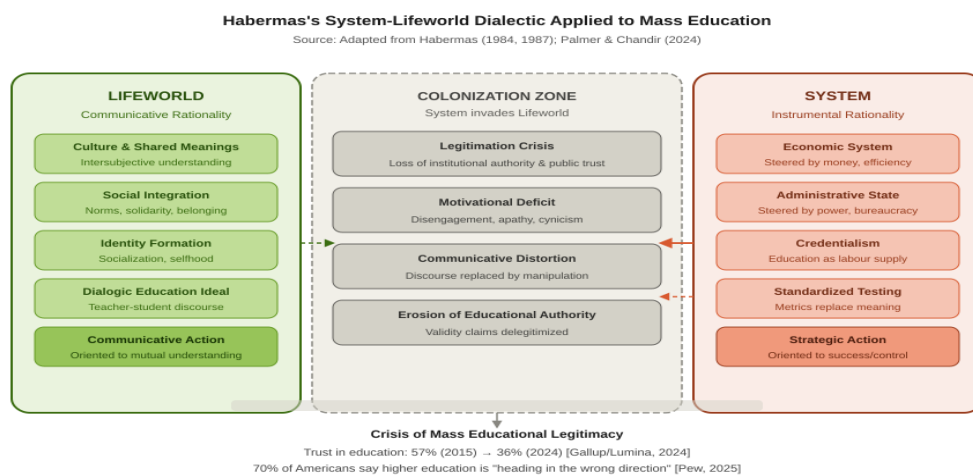


Figure 1. Habermas's System-Lifeworld Dialectic Applied to Mass Education

Figure 1 illustrates the structural conflict between the communicative rationality of the educational lifeworld and the instrumental rationality of the economic and administrative systems. The left column (LIFEWORLD) represents communicatively oriented dimensions: culture and shared meanings, social integration, identity formation, dialogic pedagogy, and communicative action

oriented toward mutual understanding. The right column (SYSTEM) represents instrumentally oriented imperatives: the economic system steered by money, the administrative state steered by power, credentialism as labor management, standardized testing as metric displacement, and strategic action oriented toward control. The central colonization zone is the contested terrain where these two rationalities meet and where the empirically documented legitimation crisis, motivational deficit, communicative distortion, and erosion of educational authority are produced.

This structural diagnosis is elaborated through three specific pathways of colonization confirmed as operative in contemporary mass education.

First pathway: Credentialism as educational reductionism. The transformation of education into a credentialing apparatus, in which the social function of schooling is reduced to the sorting and certification of labor-market entrants, represents a paradigmatic instance of what Habermas (1984) called the colonization of the lifeworld. When educational success is measured exclusively in terms of employability, income returns, and economic competitiveness, the communicative purposes of education, including the formation of critical citizens, cultivation of shared meaning, and reproduction of social solidarity, are rendered invisible or explicitly devalued. USC Rossier (2025) documents that much of modern higher education has become narrowly utilitarian, focused on credentialing, specialization, and workforce outcomes, often at the expense of intellectual depth and coherence. This reductionism produces a legitimation deficit because the institution can no longer make credible non-instrumental claims about its own value (McLaren, 2022; Morrow & Torres, 2022).

Second pathway: Standardized measurement as communicative distortion. The proliferation of standardized testing, accountability metrics, and performance rankings as primary instruments for evaluating educational quality represents a displacement of communicative by strategic action in Habermasian terms. In communicative action, participants seek mutual understanding through the exchange of validity claims that are open to contestation and rational revision. In strategic action, by contrast, participants seek to achieve their own ends through means that bypass genuine dialogue, including manipulation of appearances, strategic use of information, and the reduction of complex realities to manageable metrics. Gallup/Lumina (2024) data indicate that 37% of Americans who distrust higher education cite concerns that colleges are "not teaching relevant skills," a formulation that itself reflects the metric logic of credentialism: education's worth

is measured by its instrumentally demonstrable outputs (Lambeir, 2022; Warnick, 2023).

Third pathway: Marketization as motivational crisis. The marketization of higher education, the progressive application of market mechanisms to the governance, financing, and organization of universities, constitutes the third pathway of lifeworld colonization. When market logic penetrates the educational lifeworld, it produces what Habermas called a "motivational deficit": individuals cease to be motivated by the communicative values of the institution and are instead motivated primarily by private economic calculations. The Yale Committee (2026) identifies soaring costs and declining return-on-investment perceptions as primary drivers of trust erosion, precisely the dynamic Habermas predicted when market logic colonizes lifeworld institutions (Welton, 2021; Young, 2022).

3. The Ideal Speech Situation and Its Educational Conditions of Impossibility

Central to Habermas's theory is the notion of the ideal speech situation, a counterfactual standard against which actual communicative practice can be measured. In an ideal speech situation, all participants have symmetrical opportunities to initiate and continue communication, to question and contest validity claims, and to express their needs and desires without coercion or manipulation. No authority claims are recognized except the unforced force of the better argument. Applied to education, the ideal speech situation generates a powerful critical benchmark: educational authority is legitimate insofar as it is based on the rational acknowledgment of validity claims, where students accept the authority of teachers and institutions not because they are compelled to do so but because they recognize that teachers possess relevant expertise, institutional norms are justifiable, and the purposes of education are genuinely oriented toward students' formation.

The empirical data document precisely the deterioration of these conditions. When 70% of Americans believe higher education is heading in the wrong direction, when nearly half of teachers feel distrusted, and when confidence has declined across virtually all demographic groups, these figures indicate that the conditions for the rational recognition of educational authority have been substantially eroded. Critically, however, this erosion is not simply a perception problem amenable to better communication strategy. It reflects genuine structural conditions: the enclosure of educational communication within the strategic logic of marketing, credentialing, and accountability; the displacement of teachers' communicative

authority by the administrative authority of metrics and rankings; and the reduction of students from communicative participants to consumers of educational services. Palmer and Chandir (2024) describe this dynamic, observing that technology becomes "a medium in which instrumental action-coordination replaces communicative understanding through interest-based designs," a formulation applicable equally to the administrative technologies that have colonized the educational lifeworld (Zembylas, 2023).

4. Toward a Communicative Restoration Framework

If the crisis of educational legitimacy is structurally produced by the colonization of the educational lifeworld by instrumental rationality, then its resolution requires not managerial reform, such as better accountability mechanisms, improved marketing, or strategic rebranding, but structural counter-colonization: the deliberate reconstruction of communicative spaces within and around educational institutions in which validity claims can be raised, contested, and redeemed through reason rather than power. Figure 2 presents the Communicative Restoration Framework for Educational Authority, operationalizing Habermasian principles across three interdependent phases.

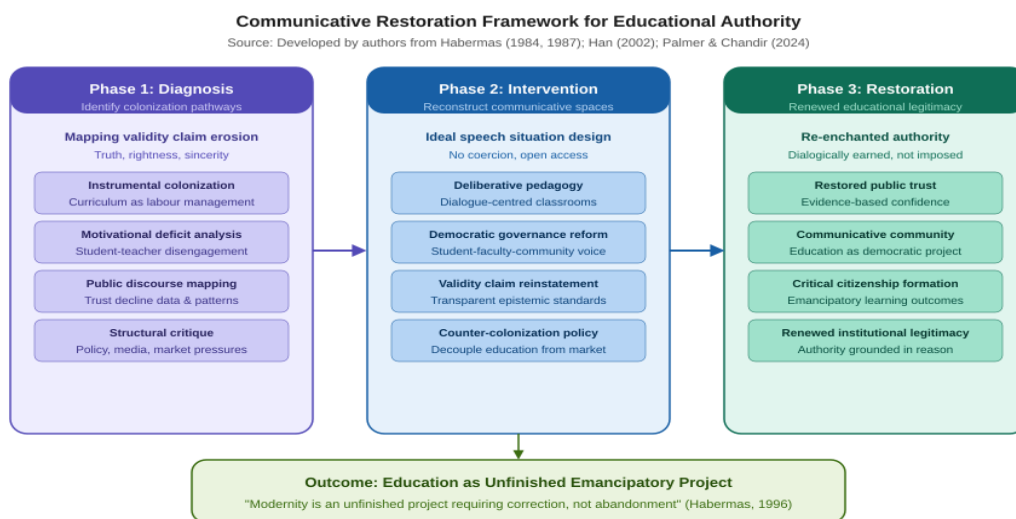


Figure 2. Communicative Restoration Framework for Educational Authority

Source: Developed by authors from Habermas (1984, 1987); Han (2002); Palmer & Chandir (2024)

Figure 2 maps the three-phase framework through which communicative restoration of educational authority may be pursued. Phase 1 (Diagnosis) involves the systematic identification of colonization pathways through validity claim mapping, motivational deficit analysis, public discourse mapping, and structural critique. Phase 2 (Intervention) moves from diagnosis to structural reconstruction through four concrete strategies: deliberative pedagogy, democratic governance reform, validity claim reinstatement, and counter-colonization policy. Each strategy corresponds directly to one of the three colonization pathways identified above. Phase 3 (Restoration) identifies the outcomes toward which communicative restoration aims: restored public trust grounded in genuine institutional responsiveness rather than marketing; a communicative community in which education is experienced as a democratic project rather than a private investment; critical citizenship formation; and renewed institutional legitimacy grounded in reason rather than coercion or tradition. The Yale Committee (2026) implicitly endorses this communicative vision when it calls for institutions to "engage the Yale community as well as its outside critics" and to "invite external experts with varied viewpoints and backgrounds to provide perspective," practices that approximate, within the constraints of real institutional life, the standards of Habermas's ideal speech situation (Habermas, 1996; Zembylas, 2023).

5. Global Dimensions: Educational Authority in Postcolonial Modernity

Extending the analysis beyond North American and European contexts, the crisis of educational legitimacy takes on additional dimensions in postcolonial settings such as Tanzania and Indonesia, contexts directly relevant to the authorship of this article. The colonization of the educational lifeworld has a dual character: the contemporary colonization by neoliberal market and administrative logics operates on top of a historical colonial legacy in which educational institutions were originally established as instruments of foreign domination rather than communicative formation. The result is an educational lifeworld that is doubly colonized: by the residues of colonial epistemic hierarchy and by the contemporary penetration of market and bureaucratic instrumentalism.

Santos (2021) argues in this context that "decolonizing the university" requires not merely the revision of curricula but the recognition of "cognitive justice," the right of multiple epistemologies and communicative traditions to make validity claims that are recognized as legitimate within educational institutions. This decolonial supplement to Habermas's framework implies that Phase 1 (Diagnosis) in postcolonial contexts must include mapping not only the colonization by contemporary systemic imperatives but also the historical sedimentations of

colonial communicative distortion and that Phase 2 (Intervention) must include the active recovery and validation of indigenous communicative traditions as legitimate sources of educational validity claims. The Communicative Restoration Framework is thus not merely a Western theoretical import but a genuinely universal analytical structure that must be locally inflected in its application (Ibreck 2023; McLaren and Jaramillo 2007).

D. Conclusion

This article has argued that the contemporary crisis of mass educational legitimacy, empirically documented in the dramatic decline of public trust in educational institutions across multiple national contexts, constitutes a legitimation crisis in the Habermasian sense: a structural displacement of communicative rationality by the instrumental logic of the economic and administrative systems. Drawing on Habermas's theory of communicative action, the lifeworld-system distinction, and the concept of legitimation crisis, the study has identified three interlocking pathways through which this colonization operates: credentialism as educational reductionism, standardized measurement as communicative distortion, and marketization as motivational crisis.

Against this diagnosis, the article has proposed a Communicative Restoration Framework that operationalizes Habermasian principles across three recursive phases: diagnosis, intervention, and restoration. The framework insists that the recovery of educational authority cannot be achieved through managerial reform or improved communication strategy but demands the deliberate reconstruction of communicative spaces in which validity claims can be raised, contested, and redeemed through reason. The article has also identified the need to supplement Habermas's framework in postcolonial educational contexts, where the double colonization of indigenous lifeworlds requires specific attention in both diagnostic and restorative phases. Future research should empirically test the Communicative Restoration Framework through case studies of institutional reform initiatives and should further develop its postcolonial dimensions in dialogue with decolonial educational theory. The fundamental insight follows Habermas's own characterization of modernity as an "unfinished project requiring correction, not abandonment": the crisis of educational legitimacy is not a terminal pathology but a call to the reconstruction of communicative conditions that mass education has never yet fully realized.

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