



Free Education: A Strategic Solution to Reduce School Dropout Rates in Indonesia

Mohammed Shehada^{1*}

¹ Education Management, Faculty of Education, State University of Malang, Malang, Indonesia

*Corresponding author, email: soyko2022@gmail.com

Keywords:

Free Education
School Dropout
Educational Equity
Indonesia

Abstract

This article examines the role of free education as a strategic solution to reducing school dropout rates in Indonesia. Employing a qualitative research approach, the study analyzes current policies, community-based initiatives, and alternative education models to understand how free education impacts educational continuity among low-income students. Findings indicate that free education policies have significantly alleviated financial barriers, especially through programs like Bantuan Operasional Sekolah (BOS), which reduce operational costs for schools. Additionally, alternative models such as Sanggar Kegiatan Belajar provide flexible learning options that cater to students facing unique social and economic challenges.

The study highlights the need for a multi-dimensional approach to make free education more inclusive and sustainable. Recommendations include enhancing financial support to cover indirect costs, expanding alternative education initiatives, and strengthening community engagement to foster a supportive environment. Ultimately, this study underscores the effectiveness of free education policies in reducing dropout rates, while emphasizing the importance of additional supportive measures to address hidden costs and improve educational quality across Indonesia.

1. Introduction

Education is a fundamental right for every individual and one of the essential pillars for achieving social and economic development. In Indonesia, as in many developing countries, the education sector faces significant challenges, manifested in high school dropout rates, particularly in rural and remote areas. Data from the Indonesian government and reports by non-governmental organizations indicate that one of the primary reasons for school dropouts is financial barriers preventing students from accessing education, leading to decreased enrollment and retention rates (Zuilkowski, Samanhudi, & Indriana, 2019). Although dropout rates vary by region, this issue remains widespread across the country, where education poses a financial burden on low-income families, leaving children vulnerable to dropping out and reducing their opportunities for a better future (Muttaqin et al., 2017).

Despite government efforts to improve access to education through free education policies, some obstacles persist, such as hidden costs including additional school expenses like transportation, uniforms, and learning materials, which can create an added burden on families (Pettersson, 2013). Although free education policies have somewhat improved enrollment rates, research indicates that the lack of integrated implementation of these policies may result in limited outcomes, highlighting the necessity to improve implementation mechanisms and ensure comprehensive support for targeted families (Rosser & Joshi, 2013).

Moreover, the impact of free education on society is a vital topic for several reasons. First, education is a key factor in building human capital, which in turn contributes to enhancing productivity and fostering economic development. A study by Sofya et al. (2019) showed that improving education levels through free education policies helps reduce poverty rates by increasing employment opportunities and raising income levels. Second, free education helps narrow the gap between different social groups, promoting equality and reducing economic disparities. Exempting low-income families from educational costs opens the door for all children to access equal education, regardless of their social and economic backgrounds (Syafi'i, 2022).

Current research, such as that conducted by Cameron (2000), also supports the idea that free education can play a significant role in mitigating the effects of economic crises. Cameron's study

highlighted how scholarships during the Asian financial crisis helped maintain education continuity for students from economically affected families. In this way, free education can serve as a social safety net during challenging economic periods, enabling higher levels of educational sustainability even amidst economic adversity.

In the same vein, a study by (Asyiah, Adnan, & Mubarak, 2018) indicated that free education alleviates financial burdens on families in rural areas, increasing children's chances of enrollment and retention in schools. Additionally, initiatives like the "Bantuan Operasional Sekolah" (School Operational Assistance) represent an important step towards reinforcing the free education system in Indonesia by providing direct financial support to schools to cover some of the basic expenses students usually bear (Dahlia & Huda, 2023). Although these initiatives have succeeded in improving enrollment rates, there is an urgent need to enhance and expand these efforts to cover all affected regions and groups, making the policies more inclusive and sustainable.

Socially, research has shown that free education positively impacts not only the individual but also the family and the community as a whole, as improved educational opportunities help build a more knowledgeable and aware society, raising health, educational, and developmental awareness among individuals. Thus, free education gains an additional dimension as a tool for social development, beyond merely being an individual right. Effective implementation of these policies can contribute to reducing crime rates and improving public health, as a study by (Senatama, 2023) pointed out that free education can help decrease unemployment rates and increase overall satisfaction, promoting community stability and strengthening its social fabric.

As for the challenges, some criticisms and concerns have been raised about free education, with some researchers suggesting that free education alone may not be sufficient to reduce dropout rates unless accompanied by additional support programs. (Sofya, Siwi, & Oknaryana, 2019) emphasized the importance of enhancing supportive efforts, such as providing meal assistance or improving transportation options for students in remote areas, as such facilities may be crucial to boosting the effectiveness of free education programs. From this perspective, developing an integrated system that includes free education along with comprehensive support through mutual aid programs is critical to achieving the goal of education for all.

This study seeks to explore the impact of free education in Indonesia as a strategic solution to reduce school dropout rates by analyzing current policies, initiatives, and their socio-economic effects. Based on existing research, this study aims to provide recommendations to improve the free education system to make it more effective and inclusive, with a focus on strengthening policies to achieve equal educational opportunities for all and ensuring the sustainability of these policies to realize comprehensive and integrated development for Indonesian society.

Literature Review

The concept of free education is a critical strategy aimed at achieving equal educational opportunities among all social groups, particularly in developing countries like Indonesia. Free education is one of the primary solutions that governments have adopted to reduce school dropout rates and improve access to education for all children, regardless of their social and economic backgrounds. Numerous studies highlight the importance of free education in removing financial obstacles that hinder children's access to school, especially those from rural areas or low-income families (Zuilkowski, Samanhudi, & Indriana, 2019).

A study by Zuilkowski et al. (2019) revealed that financial barriers are a major factor driving young people to leave school, particularly due to the costs associated with education, such as tuition fees, books, and uniforms. The study showed that children from low-income families find it difficult to bear these costs, making free education an ideal solution to enable these groups to continue their education. This perspective is supported by Rosser and Joshi (2013), who found that free education policies have positively impacted school enrollment rates in Indonesia. However, the overall effectiveness of these policies largely depends on the government's capacity to implement them effectively, without hidden costs that might burden poor families.

Similarly, Sofya et al. (2019) emphasized the role of free education in improving educational opportunities and creating a more stable learning environment. The study demonstrated that free education helps reduce social and economic disparities among students, promoting equality and minimizing educational inequalities across different regions. Furthermore, the researchers noted that free education can improve future employment opportunities by equipping generations with essential skills needed to compete in the labor market, which in turn supports long-term economic growth.

On the other hand, a study by Tri Pujiastuti et al. (2017) discussed some of the challenges faced in implementing free education policies in Indonesia, indicating that some regions experience difficulties in funding schools, leading to a shortage of resources and infrastructure necessary for providing quality education. This study highlighted that free education might be less effective without sufficient support for schools to meet their needs in equipment and curricula. The study further suggested that the government should play a larger role in strengthening these policies by providing necessary funding and developing school infrastructure, especially in remote areas that lack adequate resources.

A study by Bila et al. (2024) explored additional aspects regarding the role of free education in supporting children in impoverished communities, such as Kampung Pemulung in Jakarta. The study noted that local community initiatives, like PKBM Nara Kreatif, offer an effective educational alternative for children who cannot afford traditional schooling. The study demonstrated how these programs support children by providing free and comprehensive education tailored to their circumstances, helping reduce school dropout rates and promoting equal opportunities.

Literature also highlights the significance of government programs like the *Bantuan Operasional Sekolah* (School Operational Assistance), which play a key role in supporting schools and covering essential expenses. A study by Dahliana and Huda (2023) found that these initiatives have alleviated the financial burden on families, encouraging more students to pursue their education, particularly in poverty-stricken areas. The study added that direct government funding to schools might be more effective than providing direct financial assistance to families, as this ensures funds are used to meet basic educational needs.

Another study by Nadziroh, Chairiyah, & Pratomo (2018) discussed the right of citizens to basic education, asserting that free education is a fundamental human right and that governments should commit to providing this right to all children regardless of their backgrounds. The study emphasized the importance of establishing comprehensive policies that enshrine free education as a constitutional right, ensuring all children have access to education.

In a recent study, Senatama (2023) underscored the importance of decentralizing education as part of government efforts to provide free education. The study highlighted how programs like *Freedom to Learn* enhance the capacity of local communities to improve education quality by allocating resources directly to schools based on local needs. The researchers argued that this decentralization could help overcome bureaucratic obstacles and enhance transparency in the use of funds allocated for education.

Finally, Syafi'i (2022) addressed the broader social impacts of free education, noting that these policies not only raise the education level of individuals but also contribute to building a more balanced society economically and socially. Free education strengthens individuals' sense of belonging to the community by providing equal educational opportunities, promoting social justice, and reducing social gaps.

Significance

Free education is a vital issue for promoting sustainable social and economic development in Indonesia, as educational challenges are closely tied to improving human capital and strengthening the national workforce. As economic and social challenges increase, free education has become a strategic tool for bridging educational gaps among different social groups, contributing to poverty reduction and improving the standard of living. Researchers agree that free education offers genuine opportunities to achieve equal educational access and reduce inequalities, especially in remote areas and low-income families (Baker et al., 2020).

Education plays a crucial role in combating school dropout rates, as many studies indicate that the financial burden on families is one of the primary reasons children leave school (Rosser & Joshi, 2013). Thus, free education can alleviate financial pressures, particularly for families facing economic hardships. This policy holds strategic importance for achieving national educational development goals by fostering a learned community capable of tackling economic and social challenges. Furthermore, free education promotes social equity and nurtures a sense of active citizenship among future generations (Priambodo et al., 2022).

In Indonesia, free education serves as a gateway to reducing school dropout rates and enhancing educational continuity, particularly in rural areas. Numerous studies have shown that removing educational costs encourages families—especially those with limited income—to allow their children to continue schooling, which reduces dropout rates. In a study by Muchlisin et al. (2020), free education programs were found to reduce financial burdens, increasing the likelihood of students staying in primary and secondary education and strengthening their community integration.

Additionally, implementing free education represents a significant step toward promoting long-term economic growth. Children who complete their education become more qualified to enter the labor market, increasing their chances of obtaining well-paying jobs, which subsequently improves the economic status of families and society as a whole. Free education is also a powerful tool for enhancing social security, as education can reduce crime by improving economic opportunities and fostering community awareness.

International experiences have demonstrated the effectiveness of free education in several countries, where this policy successfully increased basic education rates and reduced dropout rates, thus contributing to overall human development. For example, in countries like Finland and Sweden, free education has helped build highly skilled societies, where individuals enjoy equal educational opportunities without discrimination based on social or economic status (Tristo, 2019). Providing equitable educational opportunities fosters a society capable of addressing contemporary challenges, relying on a generation that is educated, skilled, and socially adept.

However, it is essential to recognize that free education alone may not be sufficient to fully reduce dropout rates. This approach should be supported by additional social and educational policies, such as awareness programs for families and enhanced community engagement. Free education is a fundamental solution but requires integration with other strategies to expand its impact and ensure the long-term sustainability of desired outcomes. Additional resources are also necessary to ensure educational quality, as offering free education may increase student numbers, requiring qualified teachers and a conducive learning environment to deliver effective and impactful education.

In light of the above, free education gains particular importance as a strategy for reducing school dropout rates and represents a strategic investment by the Indonesian government in building an educated and aware generation. To maximize the benefits of this policy, it is crucial to ensure the continuity and expansion of these programs to reach all population groups, with a focus on providing quality education alongside accessibility.

Objective

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the role of free education as a strategic solution to reducing school dropout rates in Indonesia. School dropout remains a critical issue in the country, particularly among students from low-income families who face economic hardships that hinder their ability to pursue consistent education. This objective seeks to address how eliminating financial barriers through free education can mitigate dropout rates and facilitate equitable access to education. By analyzing both the policy impacts and social factors influencing dropout rates, this study aims to offer insights into how the implementation of free education can foster sustained educational participation across diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.

Financial obstacles represent one of the most significant barriers to education in Indonesia, especially for families in rural or economically disadvantaged areas. Zuilkowski et al. (2019) highlight that despite the Indonesian government's push for universal education, many families perceive that education still comes with unavoidable costs, including school fees, uniforms, books, and transportation (Zuilkowski

et al., 2019). These expenses pose considerable burdens on households with limited income, often leading to students discontinuing their education to help support their families. Consequently, free education policies aim to address these economic challenges, making it possible for students to attend school without financial strain on their families. As Rosser and Joshi (2013) discuss, transitioning from a fee-based to a fee-free education system is a complex but necessary political and social endeavor that promises long-term benefits in reducing dropout rates by directly targeting financial exclusion (Rosser & Joshi, 2013).

Moreover, free education policies have shown significant promise in increasing school retention rates by reducing the financial burden on parents. In their evaluation of free education policy implementation in various Indonesian regions, Asyiah et al. (2018) found that free education initiatives have alleviated the economic pressures on families, enabling more children to remain in school and complete their education (Asyiah et al., 2018). Such policies serve as critical interventions for low-income communities, where the cost of education might otherwise deter students from completing basic educational levels. This study will further analyze the socio-economic benefits of free education in Indonesia, drawing on findings from these regional implementations to understand how these policies can be optimized to increase their effectiveness.

In addition to exploring the economic advantages of free education, this research will examine alternative educational models that have been implemented to further support students in low-income areas. Programs like Sanggar Kegiatan Belajar have emerged as essential resources in urban regions with high dropout rates, offering alternative pathways for students who may struggle to adapt to conventional schooling environments due to financial or social challenges (Priambodo et al., 2022). These programs, which often include flexible schedules and community-based learning structures, make education more accessible for students who might otherwise leave school prematurely. Rosmilawati and Mutaqin (2024) highlight that community-based educational initiatives play an essential role in reducing dropout rates by providing targeted support and adapting to the needs of students within their specific contexts (Rosmilawati & Mutaqin, 2024).

Understanding the complementary role of financial support programs is also crucial to achieving the study's objectives. Programs like the Bantuan Operasional Sekolah (BOS), which provides operational funds to schools to reduce student expenses, have had a measurable impact on lowering dropout rates, particularly in secondary education. According to Dahliana and Huda (2023), the BOS program has been effective in subsidizing essential school costs, thereby enhancing access to education for students from financially struggling households (Dahliana & Huda, 2023). This study will examine the impact of the BOS program and other similar initiatives in tandem with free education policies to understand how they collectively contribute to reducing dropout rates.

Furthermore, this study aims to analyze how these educational policies and programs are perceived by the communities they are intended to serve. Research indicates that in some instances, families and students are unaware of their eligibility for free education benefits or the assistance available to them, which can limit the reach and effectiveness of these initiatives (Syafi'i, 2022). As noted by Satiti (2019), educational awareness programs such as the "Gerakan Ayo Sekolah" have been instrumental in raising awareness and encouraging school attendance, underscoring the need for community engagement in the successful implementation of free education policies (Satiti, 2019). Therefore, this study will also investigate how communication and outreach efforts can enhance the impact of free education by ensuring that families understand and take advantage of available resources.

Through a comprehensive examination of these factors, the study seeks to provide recommendations for policymakers on how to optimize free education programs. It will consider how combining financial support with targeted, community-based educational programs can address the various factors contributing to school dropout. As proposed by Tristo (2019), increasing community involvement and awareness regarding the importance of education is vital to the long-term success of dropout reduction efforts (Tristo, 2019). Therefore, this study aims to demonstrate that while free education is an essential foundation for reducing dropout rates, additional programs, community engagement, and consistent policy support are necessary to sustain these gains over time.

2. Method

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the strategic role of free education policies in reducing dropout rates in Indonesia. Qualitative research allows for a nuanced understanding of complex social phenomena, particularly when studying diverse variables such as financial, cultural, and regional factors that influence educational access and retention. By focusing on qualitative data, the study can capture the multifaceted experiences of students, parents, and educators affected by school dropout, particularly within Indonesia's diverse socioeconomic landscape. The research builds on the insights of Anwar and Darwis (2015), who argue that qualitative approaches are essential for understanding how education policies manifest across different regions and populations, especially in rural areas where access to education is limited by geographic and economic constraints (Anwar & Darwis, 2015).

In Indonesia, dropout rates are influenced by a combination of socio-economic challenges, policy limitations, and community factors. A qualitative approach is especially suited to studying these complex interactions as it enables the exploration of specific case studies and community-level dynamics that quantitative data might overlook. For example, as Muchlisin et al. (2020) demonstrate, free education policies are implemented differently across urban and rural areas, resulting in varying degrees of effectiveness in preventing dropout. Their findings underscore the importance of qualitative research for examining localized education strategies (Muchlisin et al., 2020). Furthermore, this study examines the role of community-based initiatives like Sanggar Kegiatan Belajar as a complement to free education policies, particularly in urban centers where economic and social factors may limit students' ability to attend conventional schools. Priambodo et al. (2022) highlight the significance of these community-based programs in providing flexible learning options tailored to students who would otherwise be at risk of dropping out (Priambodo et al., 2022). Through qualitative analysis, this study captures the diversity of educational interventions and their implications for dropout rates across different Indonesian contexts.

Data Collection

The data collection process for this study centers on an extensive review of secondary sources, including academic journals, policy reports, NGO publications, and government documents. This approach ensures a broad perspective on the impact of free education on dropout rates, drawing from a variety of studies and reports to provide a comprehensive understanding. Primary sources include peer-reviewed studies on the effectiveness of government subsidies like the Bantuan Operasional Sekolah (BOS) program, which provides funding to schools to reduce operational costs and make education more accessible (Dahlia & Huda, 2023).

In addition to formal government reports, the study integrates NGO reports that offer unique insights into community responses and perceptions of free education policies. For instance, reports from UNICEF and local NGOs highlight how educational support programs affect low-income families, shedding light on financial and social barriers that may not be fully addressed by current policy frameworks (Pettersson, 2013). This combination of academic and NGO data provides a balanced perspective on the successes and limitations of free education policies.

Case studies on alternative education programs, such as Sanggar Kegiatan Belajar, are also integral to the data collection process. Such programs cater to students in urban settings who are at risk of dropping out due to economic constraints or familial responsibilities. Research by Rosmilawati and Mutaqin (2024) on these alternative models demonstrates their importance in filling gaps left by conventional schooling systems, especially in high-dropout regions (Rosmilawati & Mutaqin, 2024). By compiling data from various sources, this study achieves a multi-dimensional view of how free education and complementary programs contribute to reducing dropout rates.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study is conducted using thematic analysis, a qualitative method that involves identifying patterns and recurring themes within the collected data. This approach is well-suited to exploring how free education policies impact dropout rates across different regions and demographic groups. Thematic analysis allows for categorization of data into central themes such as "financial barriers," "policy effectiveness," "community engagement," and "alternative education models." Each theme offers

insights into specific aspects of free education, enabling a detailed understanding of the challenges and outcomes associated with these policies.

For instance, Asyiah et al. (2018) provide evidence that financial barriers remain a significant deterrent to school attendance, even in regions with free education policies in place. Their findings reveal that additional costs, such as transportation and school supplies, continue to prevent some students from fully participating in education (Asyiah et al., 2018). By coding such findings under a “financial barriers” theme, the study highlights the critical need for supplementary support beyond tuition-free policies. To enhance the rigor of the analysis, themes are cross-referenced across multiple sources to identify consistent trends and divergences. For example, the analysis of policy documents alongside NGO reports and academic studies reveals regional disparities in policy impact, with rural areas often facing more significant challenges in policy implementation. Findings from Anwar and Darwis (2015) suggest that local adaptations of free education policies are necessary to account for these disparities and enhance accessibility (Anwar & Darwis, 2015). This thematic analysis framework allows for a nuanced examination of how free education policies address—or fall short of addressing—the varied needs of Indonesian students.

Case Study Analysis

Case study analysis provides an in-depth look at specific initiatives and models that aim to reduce dropout rates through free education. By examining selected case studies, this method enables the study to explore the practical application and community reception of free education policies across different contexts. For instance, the Gerakan Ayo Sekolah initiative in Bojonegoro focuses on raising community awareness and encouraging school attendance, offering a model of how social mobilization can enhance policy impact (Satiti, 2019). Analyzing this initiative provides insight into how community engagement efforts can support government policies by fostering positive attitudes toward education.

Another focal point of the case study analysis is the Sanggar Kegiatan Belajar program, which provides flexible, community-based learning options for students in urban areas who may be at risk of dropping out. Muchlisin et al. (2020) highlight that such alternative education models are essential for students who face barriers to traditional schooling, whether due to economic hardship or family obligations. By offering flexible schedules and localized support, these programs help retain students who might otherwise disengage from formal education (Muchlisin et al., 2020). The case study analysis also considers the long-term impact of these initiatives on community perceptions and dropout rates. Rosser and Joshi (2013) emphasize that while free education policies can alleviate some financial burdens, community-based initiatives are critical for addressing the deeper social and cultural barriers that lead to dropout (Rosser & Joshi, 2013). Through detailed examination of such case studies, the study identifies effective practices and areas for potential improvement in policy design and implementation.

3. Results and Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the critical role of free education policies in reducing school dropout rates across diverse socio-economic backgrounds in Indonesia. Through a qualitative analysis of policy impacts, alternative educational models, and community-based interventions, this study explores how free education initiatives alleviate economic barriers, foster educational continuity, and address the unique needs of disadvantaged communities. The following sections discuss key themes that emerged from the analysis, including the financial benefits of free education, the role of alternative education models, the influence of community engagement, and the challenges to achieving equitable education access.

Financial Benefits of Free Education in Reducing Dropout Rates

Free education policies have significantly reduced the financial burden on families, which has directly contributed to lower dropout rates. Studies indicate that a substantial portion of the dropout population consists of students from low-income households who struggle to meet the costs associated with schooling, such as uniforms, books, transportation, and other fees (Anwar & Darwis, 2015). Free education policies help alleviate these costs, making it more feasible for families to keep their children in school (Anwar & Darwis, 2015).

For instance, the Bantuan Operasional Sekolah (BOS) program, which provides schools with operational funding to reduce or eliminate fees for students, has been especially effective in improving access to education. Research by Dahliana and Huda (2023) highlights that the BOS program has lowered financial barriers for middle and high school students, enabling them to pursue their studies without imposing a financial strain on their families (Dahliana & Huda, 2023). As these operational costs are covered, students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are better positioned to continue their education through secondary school, thereby reducing dropout rates significantly.

Further, studies by Asyiah et al. (2018) underscore that the impact of free education policies extends beyond immediate financial relief; they also contribute to long-term economic stability for families who may otherwise require their children to work instead of attending school. Free education serves as an incentive for parents to prioritize their children's education, thereby breaking cycles of poverty and limited educational attainment (Asyiah et al., 2018).

Role of Alternative Education Models

While free education policies play a foundational role in reducing dropout rates, alternative education models like Sanggar Kegiatan Belajar have emerged as complementary strategies that address unique challenges faced by specific communities. These models provide flexibility in learning schedules and a curriculum tailored to the needs of students who cannot attend traditional schools due to financial, social, or family constraints. Priambodo et al. (2022) indicate that Sanggar Kegiatan Belajar centers serve students who are at high risk of dropping out by offering an accessible and supportive learning environment (Priambodo et al., 2022).

These alternative programs are particularly effective in urban areas, where children may need to balance schooling with work or family responsibilities. For example, Muchlisin et al. (2020) highlight that students enrolled in these alternative education centers often come from marginalized backgrounds where the opportunity cost of traditional schooling is high (Muchlisin et al., 2020). By offering flexibility, these models increase student engagement and reduce dropout rates, as students can attend classes that fit their schedules.

Additionally, programs like PKBM Nara Kreatif have been instrumental in reaching out to marginalized communities, such as children living in impoverished areas or informal settlements. Bila et al. (2024) show that this community-based model not only reduces dropout rates but also fosters a supportive community where students feel motivated to complete their education (Bila et al., 2024). These alternative models illustrate the importance of adaptability in education, emphasizing that a one-size-fits-all approach is often insufficient in addressing the diverse needs of at-risk students.

Community Engagement and Social Awareness

Community engagement is a crucial factor in the success of free education policies. Programs that actively involve community members in promoting education have a higher chance of success because they address local attitudes and social norms that may otherwise discourage schooling. Satiti (2019) discusses the impact of the Gerakan Ayo Sekolah initiative, which has been successful in raising awareness about the importance of education in rural and underserved areas (Satiti, 2019). By working directly with families, community leaders, and educators, such initiatives encourage a positive perception of schooling, fostering a supportive environment that promotes attendance and reduces dropout rates.

Community-based education models also help to bridge the gap between free education policies and practical outcomes. Rosmilawati and Mutaqin (2024) emphasize that involving communities in education programs creates a sense of ownership and responsibility, which is critical for sustaining student engagement over time (Rosmilawati & Mutaqin, 2024). In areas where formal educational institutions are limited, community support becomes essential in making free education policies effective. For instance, local leaders often act as advocates, encouraging parents to prioritize their children's education and ensuring that children stay in school.

Furthermore, Syafi'i (2022) notes that awareness campaigns are essential for educating families about the benefits of free education policies and dispelling misconceptions about costs associated with schooling (Syafi'i, 2022). These campaigns ensure that families in rural and impoverished areas

understand that free education policies can significantly benefit their children, ultimately contributing to lower dropout rates.

Challenges to Achieving Equitable Access

Despite the benefits of free education policies, challenges persist in achieving equitable access to education across all regions in Indonesia. Studies indicate that rural areas continue to face barriers due to limited infrastructure, teacher shortages, and logistical constraints. For example, research by Senatama (2023) shows that decentralization policies, while empowering local governance in education, often lead to inconsistencies in policy implementation, with rural schools struggling to match the resources available in urban areas (Senatama, 2023).

In addition, financial barriers remain a challenge even in areas where tuition fees have been eliminated. Cameron (2000) highlights that indirect costs, such as school supplies, uniforms, and transportation, continue to deter families from fully embracing free education policies (Cameron, 2000). These costs, while not covered by free education programs, add to the financial strain on low-income families and can contribute to dropout rates. Addressing these indirect costs is essential for ensuring that free education policies are genuinely inclusive and accessible to all students.

Another challenge lies in the perception of education quality within free schooling systems. While free education policies have expanded access, some parents remain skeptical about the quality of education provided, especially in schools that may lack resources or qualified teachers. Research by Rosser and Joshi (2013) notes that quality issues in free public schools can lead families to opt for private schooling, even when it poses a financial burden (Rosser & Joshi, 2013). Enhancing the quality of education in public schools is therefore critical for maximizing the impact of free education policies.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study underscore the need for a multi-faceted approach to education policy that integrates financial support, alternative educational models, and community engagement. First, it is essential to expand financial support mechanisms to cover indirect schooling costs, ensuring that all expenses are manageable for low-income families. Programs like the BOS initiative could be further developed to include subsidies for transportation, uniforms, and school materials, making education genuinely cost-free for vulnerable students (Dahlia & Huda, 2023).

Second, enhancing the flexibility of the education system through alternative models like *Sanggar Kegiatan Belajar* could be a valuable strategy to accommodate students with unique needs. Adapting these programs to various local contexts—urban, rural, and remote—can support at-risk students who face different barriers to conventional schooling (Muchlisin et al., 2020).

Finally, strengthening community engagement and awareness programs can build support for free education initiatives, especially in areas where cultural and social factors influence schooling decisions. Community-based campaigns, as demonstrated by *Gerakan Ayo Sekolah*, can shift public attitudes, making education a shared community goal and fostering an environment that values educational attainment (Satiti, 2019).

4. Conclusion

This study highlights the significant impact of free education policies in Indonesia as a strategic tool to reduce school dropout rates, especially among low-income and marginalized communities. Through examining financial relief, alternative education models, and community engagement initiatives, it becomes evident that free education policies are crucial in facilitating educational access and equity. However, while these policies alleviate direct financial burdens, challenges remain in addressing hidden costs and ensuring quality education across diverse regions.

The analysis indicates that a multi-faceted approach is essential to maximize the effectiveness of free education policies. This approach should include comprehensive support to cover indirect educational costs, the integration of flexible and alternative education models like *Sanggar Kegiatan Belajar*

Belajar, and community-driven awareness programs to foster a supportive environment for education. By enhancing policy mechanisms, expanding financial and logistical support, and fostering community involvement, free education can more effectively reduce dropout rates and support Indonesia's broader socio-economic development goals.

In conclusion, while free education provides a foundational step toward reducing dropout rates, its success depends on integrated strategies that address financial, social, and logistical barriers. By focusing on inclusivity and sustainability, these policies can contribute to a more equitable educational system, helping Indonesia build an educated and empowered generation capable of facing future challenges.

Reference

- Anwar, K., & Darwis, D. (2015). Formulasi kebijakan pendidikan gratis kabupaten Pelalawan tahun 2013. *Journal of Politic and Government Studies*.
- Arung, F., Murthado, F., & Boeriswati, E. (2023). Merdeka belajar: The real learning needs of students, teachers, and institutions related to demands for independent learning innovation. *Indonesian Journal on Learning and Advanced Education (IJOLAE)*, 5(2), 120-135. <https://journals.ums.ac.id/index.php/ijolae/article/download/20370/8414>
- Asyiah, S., Adnan, M. F., & Mubarak, A. (2018). Evaluasi implementasi kebijakan pendidikan gratis di kabupaten Pasaman. *Jurnal Pendidikan Sosiologi dan Humaniora*, 2(1), 1-9. <https://jurnal.untan.ac.id/index.php/JPSH/article/download/56241/75676595630>
- Bila, Z. Z., Martini, M., & Hidayat, A. N. (2024). Strategi PKBM Nara Kreatif dalam penanganan anak putus sekolah di Kampung Pemulung Pondok Kopi Jakarta. *Morfologi Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.61132/morfologi.v2i3.621>
- Cameron, L. A. (2000). An analysis of the role of social safety net scholarships in reducing school drop-out during the Indonesian economic crisis. *Social Science Research Network*. <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/iwp82.pdf>
- Dahlia, D., & Huda, N. (2023). Pengaruh bantuan operasional sekolah terhadap pemenuhan akses pendidikan menengah di Indonesia. *Indonesian Treasury Review*.
- Hasanah, A., Kantun, S., & Soepeno, B. (2019). The implementation of Free Educational Program (FEP) at MTs Syamsul Arifin in Jember. *International Conference Proceedings*. <https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/243/1/012062>
- Kurniati, P. S., & Rattealo, M. (2024). Makassar government policy in involving students in the free education program. *Proceeding of The International Conference on Business, Economics, Social Sciences, and Humanities*, 677-684.
- Ministry of Education and Culture (2017). Free basic education strategy development volume 7: Support for poor families in meeting the personal costs of basic education. *Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Kementerian*.
- Muchlisin, A., Zuber, A., & Haryono, B. (2020). The role of alternative education in tackling students dropout. *Society*, 8(2), 719-731.
- Muttaqin, T., Wittek, R., van Duijn, M. A. J., & Heyse, L. (2017). Why do children stay out of school in Indonesia?. *JPP (Journal of Public Policy)*, 1(2), 94-108. <https://journal.bappenas.go.id/index.php/jpp/article/download/12/7>
- Nadzirah, N., Chairiyah, C., & Pratomo, W. (2018). Hak warga negara dalam memperoleh pendidikan dasar di Indonesia. *Trihayu Journal*, 4(3), 259091.
- Pettersson, G. (2013). Free basic education for all?: Understanding household education spending patterns and trends. *Social Science Research Network*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/SSRN.2524818>
- Priambodo, B., Reviandani, O., & Nirawati, L. (2022). Implementation of Sanggar Kegiatan Belajar to reduce the school dropout rate in the city of Surabaya. *Jurnal Ad-ministrare: Jurnal Pemikiran Ilmiah dan Pendidikan Administrasi Perkantoran*, 9(2), 397.
- Rosmilawati, I., & Mutaqin, M. Z. (2024). Eradicating out-of-school-children: Strategies and best practices from alternative education context. *JPP (Jurnal Penelitian Pendidikan Indonesia)*, 10(2), 364-364. <https://doi.org/10.29210/020244055>
- Rosser, A., & Joshi, A. (2013). From user fees to fee free: The politics of realising universal free basic education in Indonesia. *Journal of Development Studies*, 49(2), 175-189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2012.671473>
- Satiti, S. (2019). Gerakan ayo sekolah di kabupaten Bojonegoro: Peningkatan sumber daya manusia melalui pendidikan untuk menyongsong bonus demografi. *Jurnal Kependudukan Indonesia*, 14(1), 77-92. <http://ejournal.kependudukan.lipi.go.id/index.php/jki/article/download/351/pdf>
- Senatama, G. (2023). Investigating freedom to learn program as form of education decentralization in Indonesia. *Ittishal Educational Research Journal*. <https://journal.ittishal.net/index.php/ierj/article/download/44/30>

- Shanty, M. V., Mahaditir, M., Awaluddin, A., Natalia, D., & Ramadani, R. A. (2024). Statistical modeling and factors influencing school dropout in Indonesia: A review. *Sainsmat: Jurnal Ilmiah Ilmu pengetahuan Alam*.
- Sibarani, S., & Sinamo, N. (2020). Implementation of educational policy in Indonesia. *KnE Social Sciences*, 433-440. <https://journal.unnes.ac.id/nju/index.php/jejak/article/download/16125/8299>
- Sofya, R. (2018). Dropping out of the school: Factors and its impact on primary school in Indonesia. *Psychosophia*, 4(1), 10-18.
- Sofya, R., Siwi, M. K., & Oknaryana, O. (2019). The factors that contribute to students dropping out of school. *Proceedings of the 2019 International Conference*. <https://doi.org/10.2991/PICEEBA2-18.2019.110>
- Syafi'i, I. (2022). Pendidikan gratis di era kapitalis dalam usaha pemerataan hak atas pendidikan. *Jurnal Pendidikan Sosiologi dan Humaniora*, 13(2), 899-899. <https://jurnal.untan.ac.id/index.php/JPSH/article/download/56241/75676595630>
- Syakdiah, S. (2015). Pendanaan pendidikan di Indonesia. *Jurnal Politik dan Pemerintahan*, 9(2), 109-121. <https://jurnal.ugm.ac.id/jkap/article/download/8321/6430>
- Tristo, R. (2019). Peningkatan kesadaran pentingnya pendidikan bagi suku anak dalam provinsi Sumatera Selatan melalui penyuluhan sosial. *Quantum Jurnal*. <https://ejournal.kemensos.go.id/index.php/Quantum/article/download/1750/915>
- Tri Pujiastuti, R., Sujarwoto, & Hidayati, F. (2017). Preventing students from dropping out of school in Indonesia's basic education: What should government do?. *ICASPGS-ICBAP Proceedings*. <https://doi.org/10.2991/ICASPGS-ICBAP-17.2017.28>
- Yuliana, R., Widayati, W., & Taufiq, A. (2015). Evaluasi pelaksanaan kebijakan pendidikan gratis pada jenjang sekolah menengah di kabupaten Sukoharjo. *Journal of Politic and Government Studies*, 4(3), 261-270.
- Zuilkowski, S. S., Samanhudi, U., & Indriana, I. (2019). 'There is no free education nowadays': Youth explanations for school dropout in Indonesia. *Compare*, 49(1), 16-29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2017.1369002>