



Reconstructing Lived Experiences: A Phenomenological Study of Underprivileged Children in Indonesia's Sekolah Rakyat Program, Bantul, Yogyakarta

Bazlin Fadilah

Department of Social Development and Welfare, Gadjah Mada University, Indonesia

Abstract

Children account for over one-third of Indonesia's poor demographic. This situation linked to the social and demographic situation of the family ecosystem, forming experiences of deprivation that can harm their growth. As sporadic aid fails to transform deprivative home environments, the government introduced the Sekolah Rakyat Program, an institutional intervention aimed to break the cycle of poverty. This study aims to deconstruct the experiences of deprivation among underprivileged children and how the presence of Sekolah Rakyat reconstruct their lived experiences differently. This qualitative phenomenological study examines the lived experiences of 10 impoverished children aged 15 – 17 who are enrolled in the program. Data were collected through in-depth interview, observation, and documentation. The findings reveal diverse forms of material deprivations (housing, education, health, nutrition, information, and leisure) and psychosocial deprivations at home. Furthermore, the study identifies significant shifts in both material and psychosocial experiences following the intervention of Sekolah Rakyat. This research serves as a valuable reference for a new model in child poverty alleviation initiatives.

Keywords: child, deprivation, institutionalism, state, intervention

1 Introduction

Poverty remains a critical global issue with a particularly pronounced impact in Indonesia. According to Indonesian Statistics (2024), the national poverty rate was recorded at 8.25% in September 2025, which translates to approximately 23.36 million impoverished individuals. Indonesian Statistics evaluates this metric using a basic needs approach, assessing the minimum expenditure necessary to sustain essential food and non-food requirements.

Crucially, the ramifications of economic deprivation extend far beyond the adult demographic, disproportionately affecting the younger population. Children from low-income households constitute over one-third of Indonesia's total poor population. This systemic disparity is further underscored by age-disaggregated data from March 2025, which reveals a striking child poverty rate (under 17 years old) of 11%, substantially eclipsing the adult poverty rate of 7.46% (Indonesia Statistics, 2026). UNICEF (2023) emphasizes that child poverty extends far beyond mere household income metrics, rather, it constitutes a severe deprivation of essential fundamental rights necessary for survival. As a multidimensional phenomenon, this structural barrier systematically impedes children's capabilities.

The simultaneous limitations across material, social, spiritual, and emotional dimensions collectively compromise the integrity of their holistic development and well-being. In existing empirical studies, economic barriers within the household directly limit a child's opportunity to obtain adequate education, quality health services, and job prospects that can increase welfare (Rindiani et al., 2025, Landiyanto, 2024, Wu et al., 2019). Consequently, children raised in impoverished environments face a significantly higher risk of experiencing poverty during adulthood compared to their more affluent peers (Khoiruddin et al., 2025).

This vulnerability underscores the critical necessity of disrupting the intergenerational cycle of poverty, establishing it as a paramount agenda for child welfare interventions. Over the past fifty years, Indonesia's poverty alleviation paradigm has undergone a structural transition, shifting from a rural-centric development model to comprehensive human capital investments. Evolving alongside the nation's political landscape, this policy trajectory increasingly prioritizes the enhancement of human resource quality, as exemplified by the Sekolah Rakyat initiative. A critical analysis reveals that contemporary and future poverty reduction strategies place children at the center of development. Specifically engineered to break the cycle of extreme poverty through education, the Sekolah Rakyat program grants underprivileged youth access to educational opportunities and basic life needs.

Formally inaugurated in July 2025, the program is projected to span 198 locations nationwide, with a flagship site established in Bantul, Yogyakarta currently accommodating 200 high school students. Within this framework, Sekolah Rakyat functions not merely as an educational provider, but as a transformative social environment designed to reconfigure how children perceive economic precarity. Through intensive habituation, the institution systematically inculcates daily discipline, ethics, and restores the self-worth of the children. By maintaining total custody over the students' daily routines within a structured dormitory setting, the school establishes a profound experiential contrast between domestic precarity and institutional stability. This study aims to deconstruct the experiences of deprivation among underprivileged children and how the presence of Sekolah Rakyat reconstruct their lived experiences differently.

2 Conceptual Framework

2.1 Capability Approach

The capability approach focuses on an individual's real freedom to choose and achieve a life they value. Developed by Amartya Sen (2000), this framework posits that well-being should not be measured merely by the possession of resources, but rather by an individual's capability to function and engage in activities they deem meaningful. In the context of poverty, Sen asserts that the phenomenon must be understood as capability deprivation rather than mere income deprivation. The focus of this approach lies in various forms of intrinsically significant deficiencies such as the inability to learn, participate, or flourish while income is viewed only as an instrumental tool to achieve those states. For this study, the capability approach provides

a highly pertinent framework: children living in poverty suffer not only from material scarcity but also face systemic barriers in developing essential capabilities, including health, education, social participation, and a fundamental sense of security.

2.2 Child Poverty and Deprivation

Poverty does not merely dictate the lives of adults, it profoundly impacts children. Child poverty is a complex phenomenon that transcends low household income, rather, it is defined as a condition in which children suffer the stripping of basic rights essential to their survival (UNICEF, 2023). To examine the deprivations experienced by children, this study references the material and psychosocial vulnerabilities outlined in the United Nations General Assembly (1989). Material deprivation comprises inadequate housing, education, healthcare, water and sanitation, nutrition, clothing, access to information, and playtime. Meanwhile, psychosocial deprivation involves the lack of protection from all forms of violence, neglect, and unfair treatment, as well as the absence of being heard in matters affecting them, and restrictions on the freedoms of expression, thought, religion, and association. These two dimensions of deprivation serve as the researcher's foundation for data collection, providing a comprehensive portrait of the deprivation children endure while living within an ecosystem of poverty.

3 Method

3.1 Setting

This research is located in the Special Region of Yogyakarta, Indonesia, one of the operational sites for Sekolah Rakyat. Statistically, the Special Region of Yogyakarta holds the record for the highest poverty rate on the island of Java. According to Indonesian Statistics (2025), as of March 2025, the percentage of the poor population in Yogyakarta reached 10.23%, or approximately 425.82 thousand people. The specific Sekolah Rakyat selected for this study is situated in Bantul Regency, serving a population of 200 children from impoverished backgrounds. This site represents one of the largest concentrations of students among the 198 program locations across Indonesia.

3.2 Study Design

This study employs a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach. Generally, phenomenology is understood as an interpretative study that seeks to describe human experiences as they are, aiming to understand various situations, events, and experiences that emerge in daily life (Eckartsberg, 1998). The objective of the descriptive phenomenological approach is to uncover and describe a phenomenon so that its actual condition can be understood in greater depth (Rofiah, 2023). Specifically, this research utilizes a descriptive or transcendental phenomenological paradigm to delve deeper into what children raised in poverty endure and how they perceive those experiences. Furthermore, the study explores the extent to which Sekolah Rakyat influences these children's experiences, aiming to capture the shift in perspective and reality compared to their previous circumstances.

3.3 Data Collection

This research employs three data collection techniques: interviews, observation, and documentation studies. In-depth interviews were conducted with 10 children as primary informants. This study utilized an interview guide to facilitate semi-structured interviews. The guide was structured around two primary domains: (1) children's lived experiences while living in poverty, and (2) the transformation of their experiences following the program intervention.

Both domains comparatively examined material deprivation (housing, education, healthcare, water and sanitation, nutrition, clothing, access to information, and playtime) and psychosocial deprivation (protection and participation). Observation was conducted through a non-participatory approach, focusing on interactions with peers and teachers, learning activities, and other daily routines. Additionally, a documentation study provided supplementary information during the fieldwork, including child profiles, school overviews, academic schedules, cognitive assessments, and the learning curriculum.

3.4 Informants

Informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique based on criteria most relevant to the research objectives. This approach allowed the researcher to select children who possess the specific characteristics required, ensuring that the data obtained is rich and aligned with the study's goals (Hadi et al., 2021). The selection criteria for the informants are as follows:

1. Socioeconomic Status: Informants originate from families within the first decile (extremely poor) or second decile (poor), based on poverty levels defined by the Integrated Social Welfare Data used for social assistance eligibility.
2. Educational Status: Informants are enrolled as high school students at Sekolah Rakyat, located in Bantul.
3. Gender Diversity: Informants include both male and female students at Sekolah Rakyat.

Based on the criteria above, the following Table 1 represents the child demographics.

Table 1. Child Demographics

Age	15 - 17	10
Gender	Boys	5
	Girls	5
Poverty Level	Extremely Poor	5
	Poor	5
Family Structure	Complete Parents	5
	Has lost one parent (due to death, divorce, or abandonment)	4
	Has lost both parents (orphaned)	1

Additionally, this study involved five (5) school affiliates as secondary key informants, comprising one principal, two teachers, one dormitory supervisor, and one caregiver. These school stakeholders were engaged to provide baseline contextual information, including the profile of Sekolah Rakyat, student demographics, academic curricula, residential/dormitory programs, and the children's living conditions. Furthermore, these secondary informants served as a mechanism for data triangulation to cross-validate and corroborate the children's self-reported responses.

3.5 Data Analysis and Validation

Data analysis followed Moustakas (1994) phenomenological framework, incorporating procedures from Van Kaam (1966) and Colaizzi (1978), through eight key steps:

1. Transcription: Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim.
2. Horizontalization: All statements were given equal weight while applying epoche (bracketing researcher bias).
3. Clustering of Meanings: Statements were grouped into thematic clusters based on shared experiences.
4. Elimination: Overlapping or non-essential data were removed to isolate invariant constituents.
5. Theme Identification: Core themes were finalized and cross-validated with original transcripts.
6. Textural Description: Synthesizing themes to describe what participants experienced.
7. Structural Description: Applying imaginative variation to explain how the experience occurred within its context.
8. Synthesis of Essence: Combining textural and structural descriptions to articulate the core essence of the phenomenon.

To ensure data validity, this study employed member checking by sharing written summary findings with participants for feedback and correction (Creswell, 1998). This procedure aimed to minimize bias and ensure the recorded data accurately reflected the subjects' lived experiences. Additionally, data triangulation was conducted through multi-perspective observations and cross-referencing findings with key informants, including the Sekolah Rakyat principal, teachers, and residential caretakers.

3.6 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

As adult academic researchers, we recognize that our background, social standing, and perspectives inherently influence the research process. Given the socio-economic and age disparities between the researchers and the underprivileged adolescent participants, deliberate measures were taken to mitigate power dynamics during interviews. To uphold the phenomenological principle of epoche (bracketing), the researchers maintained reflective field journals to continuously examine and set aside personal assumptions regarding poverty and government intervention programs. Additionally, periodic peer debriefing sessions were conducted during the data analysis phase to ensure that the findings faithfully reflected the children's lived experiences rather than adult-centric interpretations.

3.7 Ethics

This study is fully committed to rigorous research ethics standards to ensure the integrity of the process. Ethical implementation begins with informed consent, whereby each informant receives a comprehensive explanation regarding the study's objectives, their rights, and data usage guarantees before providing conscious agreement. To safeguard privacy, the researcher ensures confidentiality by anonymizing the identities and specific locations of the informants throughout the research report. Given that the participants are children, the researcher places a high priority on participant autonomy by cultivating a relaxed, friendly, and non-coercive research atmosphere.

4 Findings

4.1 Children Lived Experiences of Material and Psychosocial Deprivation

To achieve a deeper understanding of child poverty dynamics, this study clustered these experiences into core themes that are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Child Deprivation

No	Dimension	Theme
Material		
1	Housing	1. Non-permanent house ownership 2. Arrears in routine household expenses 3. Incomplete building structures
2	Education	4. Tuition fee arrears 5. Incomplete school uniforms and supplies 6. Bullying at school
3	Health, water, and sanitation	7. Reliance on well water for sanitation and consumption 8. Layered healthcare-seeking behavior (traditional to medical)
4	Nutrition and clothing	9. Irregular eating frequency and inadequate nutritional intake 10. Limited access to decent clothing
5	Access to information	11. Restricted access to information (lack of devices and internet)
6	Playtime	12. Limited play activities within the home environment 13. Play mobility and access constraints
Psychosocial		
7	Protection from all forms of violence, neglect, and unfair treatment	14. Economic conditions as a trigger for domestic conflict 15. Physical and verbal violence at home
8	Feeling heard	16. The phenomenon of self-silencing (repressing one's thoughts)
9	Freedom of expression	17. Withdrawn personality and low self-confidence
10	Freedom of thought and religion	18. Inconsistency in religious worship practices
11	Freedom of association	19. Mobility and financial barriers 20. Parental control over time and distance

4.2 Reconstructing Lived Experiences: Institutional Interventions of Sekolah Rakyat

To achieve a deeper understanding of these changes in the children's experiences, this clustered them into core themes that are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Child Reconstructed Experiences

No	Dimension	Theme (Experiences)
Material		
1	Housing	1. Structured collective housing (boarding or dormitory)
2	Education	2. Cost-free learning infrastructure and school supplies 3. Inclusive curriculum and academic capability enhancement
3	Health, water, and sanitation	4. Efficiency in water access and sanitation 5. Structured healthcare management

No	Dimension	Theme (Experiences)
4	Nutrition and clothing	6. Regular eating patterns and optimal nutritional intake 7. Cost-free clothing facilities
5	Access to information	8. Provision of laptops and integrated internet access for learning 9. Restrictions on personal mobile phone usage
6	Playtime	10. Play as a communal activity
Psychosocial		
7	Protection from all forms of violence, neglect, and unfair treatment	11. Materially and psychologically secure environment
8	Feeling heard	12. Dormitory tutors as parental substitutes within the boarding environment 13. Peers as a safe space for sharing stories
9	Freedom of expression	14. Opportunity to develop potential, interests, and talents
10	Freedom of thought and religion	15. Consistency in religious worship and discipline
11	Freedom of association	16. Active participation in organizational and leadership activities

5 Discussion

5.1 Deprivation among Underprivileged Children

Participants' lived experiences illuminate how household economic struggles manifest as multi-faceted child deprivation, illustrating how financial insecurity intersects with the restriction of substantive freedoms. Consistent with previous literature, participants' accounts reveal that low household income is rarely experienced in isolation. Instead, low parental education, fragile family structures, large household sizes, and reliance on informal labor interact as compounding conversion factors that deepen intra-household deprivation as lived by these children (Robasa et al., 2021, Mauludyani et al., 2025, Seran & Sengkoen, 2024, Mitra et al., 2025, Htet et al., 2023, Boulum et al., 2020, Bustos et al., 2023, Minh et al., 2016, Hitta et al., 2025).

In exploring the multidimensional ecosystem of domestic poverty, participants described how material constraints continuously shape their daily sense of comfort, health, and basic agency. Regarding housing conditions, participants highlighted how living in sub-standard physical structures such as unceilinged roofs or semi-permanent flooring was experienced as a persistent barrier to personal space and dignity. These spatial constraints and ambient financial anxieties were often recounted as triggering feelings of inadequacy, emotional fatigue, and reduced enthusiasm for academic tasks (Murendo et al., 2026, dePascale et al., 2022, Junge et al., 2021, Reschly & Christenson, 2010). This lived vulnerability closely connects with their accounts of water and sanitation access, where the absence of formal clean water systems led families to rely on unverified well water. The lived reality of inadequate sanitation and housing reflects a pattern of risk normalization, wherein participants recounted turning to self-medication or traditional practices due to perceived barriers in accessing formal medical care (Bima et al., 2022). Consequently, their narratives depict early exposure to recurring physical ailments and health risks, which participants remembered as significant disruptions during their developmental years (Karpati et al., 2020).

"It's an old house. And some of the walls are cracked because of that earthquake back then. Up until now, it hasn't been renovated because there really is no money. Also, some of the roof tiles are leaking. The floor isn't tiled yet either. And the wooden structures are a bit fragile. Well, they actually are fragile. That's because it's an old house that was already built back when my mother was little." (Informant N, 15 years old).

Fluctuations in household income were further experienced through the lens of nutritional and clothing insecurity, which participants perceived as visible markers of structural poverty. In their accounts, irregular meal patterns were remembered as a common experience of food insecurity (Hitta et al., 2025, Bustos et al., 2023, Alistina et al., 2025, Ayu et al., 2024). Beyond physical hunger, participants described how prolonged nutritional instability impaired their daily concentration and cognitive energy in school. This bodily experience ran parallel to their narratives around clothing deprivation, where reliance on hand-me-down uniforms and secondary clothes was felt as a source of social stigma. Participants articulated how the visible absence of decent clothing was psychologically internalized as a sense of shame, often prompting self-protective behaviors such as withdrawing from social interactions (Ozoemenan et al., 2022).

"I eat once a day. Sometimes twice, too." (Informant Y, 16 years old)

"Do you know what hand-me-downs are? From my older sibling then to me, sometimes from neighbors to me. Buying new clothes is usually only right before Eid." (Informant P, 17 years old)

Beyond the home environment, participants' narratives regarding education, digital access, and leisure reflect additional layers of precarity rather than opportunities for personal growth. In school settings, children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds described feelings of exclusion from shared facilities (Liou, 2017) and recalled instances of peer bullying, which they associated with lower class participation, psychological distress, and occasional school absenteeism (Bima et al., 2022, Rock et al., 2016). This perceived gap was further widened by limited access to digital technology, leading some participants to express adaptive preferences a subtle satisfaction shaped by an unawareness of broader developmental opportunities. Furthermore, restricted physical mobility and diminished opportunities for recreational play were described as barriers to developing peer connections and social confidence. As literature suggests, access to safe recreational spaces supports social cohesion and spatial navigation skills (Weir, 2023), for these participants, however, the lived absence of play environments fostered feelings of passive compliance and limited agency.

"So I intentionally didn't go out to hang out because I didn't have any pocket money, didn't have a motorbike either, and didn't have proper means to go hanging out, so yeah, I just preferred staying at home." (Informant D, 17 years old)

Material hardships deeply intersected with the participants' psychosocial experiences, framing how they navigated emotional well-being and personal dignity. When discussing protection from violence and neglect, participants recalled how household financial stress frequently escalated into family arguments and rigid parenting practices, which they felt shaped their personal tendencies toward social withdrawal and self-doubt (Watts et al., 2018). Experiences of domestic conflict and peer bullying were expressed as spatial trauma, leaving participants with a pervasive sense of insecurity that made building trusting relationships challenging (Vaughan-Jensen, 2020). This emotional burden was often compounded by "self-silencing," where participants deliberately suppressed their own distress to avoid burdening their

struggling families. Narratives also highlighted gendered dynamics, particularly where the absence of a supportive father figure left participants feeling unheard, which they associated with challenges in developing self-competence and interpersonal skills (Reyome et al., 2010).

“When I'm at home, I never used to open up. That was back then. Now I do it often, but back then, I didn't.” (Informant R, 15 years old)

“When I'm sad, I still go to that friend of mine. I go to my mom if the issue is more about family, but for personal problems, I prefer my friend because I already trust them. That's because if I talk to my mom, there are some things I just can't share with my own family.” (Informant D, 17 years old)

Alongside emotional distress, participants articulated experiences of spiritual and social limitations. In terms of spirituality, participants did not describe an absence of faith, but rather a lack of an enabling environment to maintain consistent religious practices amidst daily domestic struggles. Meanwhile, limited pocket money, fear of peer discrimination, and restricted access to recreational spaces were described as factors that prompted children to retreat into domestic spaces, experiencing feelings of social anxiety and isolation. These financial constraints constrained their choices regarding social participation, restricting their ability to join extracurricular outings or study tours (Liou, 2017). Participants felt that these accumulated barriers hindered their capacity to engage confidently in peer networks, fostering feelings of self-doubt and shaping a cautious, submissive approach toward future opportunities.

5.2 Examining the Extent of Sekolah Rakyat in Reconstructing Experiences

Participants' accounts illustrate how transitioning to the Sekolah Rakyat boarding ecosystem was experienced as a meaningful shift away from chronic material deprivation. In contrast to their prior housing insecurity and domestic financial strain, participants described the tuition-free residential setting as providing a strong sense of stability and relief from daily anxieties. The consistent provision of regular meals, nutritious food, clean water, and accessible medical care was expressed by participants as a restorative experience that eased their physical vulnerabilities. Through these accounts, the school environment is perceived not merely as physical infrastructure, but as a supportive conversion factor that enables students to rebuild their basic physical functioning and well-being, while helping mitigate long-term health risks such as stunting often associated with severe poverty (Karpati et al., 2020).

In terms of residential living, Sekolah Rakyat replaces unstable domestic conditions with a structured boarding environment governed by shared routines. In a study on Chinese boarding schools, Yang (2026) noted that when a boarding environment fails to improve upon a student's original living conditions, adolescents tend to experience negative outcomes that impair academic engagement. According to resource conservation theory, when students move from higher-quality home environments to less supportive boarding facilities, the resulting resource deficit adversely affects physical and psychological well-being. In contrast, participants in Sekolah Rakyat entered the boarding program from severe socioeconomic deprivation. Consequently, their narratives suggest that relocation to the school was experienced not as a resource loss, but rather as a process of resource gain. The structured residential setting provided essential material resources such as adequate nutrition, learning facilities, and safe living spaces alongside psychosocial support that was previously inaccessible at home.

Through the framework of resource conservation theory, this accumulation of new resources is articulated by participants as enhancing their overall physical and mental well-being. Their narratives indicate that these acquired resources fostered greater psychological resilience, self-efficacy, and active involvement in learning activities. These findings refine existing

theoretical understandings by highlighting that the perceived impact of residential schooling is closely tied to students' baseline socioeconomic backgrounds. For youth from acutely vulnerable backgrounds, the residential environment is experienced not as an institutional constraint, but as a site of resource replenishment that supports positive personal transformation.

Beyond material security, participants described their experience in the boarding environment as a transition toward a psychologically safe space. The presence of resident guardians was recounted as helpful in reducing the impact of past domestic stress and unhealthy parenting practices (Watts et al., 2018). Participants viewed these guardians as supportive parent surrogates who provided emotional validation, gradually encouraging them to move past patterns of self-silencing. This secure atmosphere, combined with an inclusive peer environment, was perceived by participants as easing the psychological burden of prior bullying in their previous schools (Bima et al., 2022, Rock et al., 2016) while helping rebuild their self-esteem and confidence (Ozoemenan et al., 2022).

"My friends here are cool, no one bullies anyone because we all have the same background" (Informant D, 17 years old)

"Here, I study more diligently, because at home I sometimes play on my phone and don't focus on studying. But here, we don't use phones, so I can focus better and my grades are improving too." (Informant A, 15 years old)

Nevertheless, a nuanced insight emerged regarding interpersonal dynamics: despite the presence of caring resident guardians, participants identified their peers as their primary source of emotional comfort. Participants articulated that sharing personal stories with peers felt safer due to a shared sense of equality. Unlike the vertical, power-delineated relationships between students and adult guardians, peer interactions offered horizontal connections free from institutional authority. This perceived equality fostered a secure psychological space where adolescents felt understood without fear of judgment, blame, or disciplinary consequences. Shared experiences of past deprivation and the collective adaptation to boarding life further deepened emotional bonds and mutual solidarity among students. While resident guardians remain essential for functional care and daily guidance, deep emotional expression naturally flourished within peer relationships.

"If I open up, it's to close friends because it's more comfortable and we're the same age." (Informant Y, 15 years old).

"If I open up, it's to close friends. I've only ever talked to my foster guardian once." (Informant Ra, 16 years old).

Regarding future aspirations and personal agency, participants' narratives highlight how access to educational technology, digital tools, and structured activities broadened their horizons. The provision of laptops and internet access was described as bridging the digital divide that had previously limited their aspirations, enabling students to explore new educational and career paths. Furthermore, participants recounted that opportunities for student organization, leadership roles, and group recreation helped reconstruct their relational lives, counteracting past social isolation. Having equitable access to shared social spaces allowed participants to practice self-advocacy, cooperation, and decision-making (Weir, 2023). By grounding daily discipline in shared spiritual routines built upon foundational values from home, participants expressed a growing sense of autonomy, self-confidence, and readiness to engage as active subjects in the broader public sphere.

5.3 Critical Areas

In conditions of severe socioeconomic poverty, children's agency is often experienced as constrained due to a lack of viable opportunities to pursue valued functionings. Within this context, the structured environment provided by Sekolah Rakyat was perceived by participants as a vital safety net. For instance, participants recounted that enforced daily routines such as regular, balanced meals were essential for achieving physical recovery and nutritional stabilization that had been unattainable in their home environments. In their accounts, institutional regulation served as a stabilizing mechanism that elevated their daily living conditions. However, participants' narratives also reveal emerging tensions regarding their psychological need for personal autonomy. As structured routines persisted, participants expressed feelings of boredom, fatigue, and psychological pressure resulting from rigid institutional schedules. Their experiences suggest that prolonged institutional control, if maintained without flexibility, may limit opportunities for independent decision-making as students become accustomed to a highly regulated ecosystem. While establishing character and discipline offers an effective initial intervention, participants' accounts highlight the importance of gradually tapering institutional control to foster self-reliance and prevent long-term institutional dependency.

"Here, it's the discipline. It's semi-military here, whereas at home, you're free to do whatever." (Informant Ra, 16 years old)

Although Sekolah Rakyat has been established as a national initiative, its recent implementation highlights critical challenges regarding qualitative scalability and long-term sustainability. In this context, scalability extends beyond numerical expansion to encompass the capacity to maintain uniform standards of material and psychosocial support across diverse geographic regions. Ensuring that newly established boarding units, particularly in remote areas, replicate baseline standards of care requires sustained multi-year public funding, continuous professional training for educators and dormitory guardians, and strong institutional governance to prevent service degradation as national student enrollment increases.

As the national rollout progresses, the institutionalization of comprehensive child safeguards emerges as an essential foundation within the boarding environment. To address inherent power asymmetries between adult caregivers and adolescent students, Sekolah Rakyat requires robust Child Protection Policies across all units. Participants' accounts underscore the necessity of safe, confidential reporting mechanisms that allow students to disclose experiences of bullying, violence, or mistreatment without fear of repercussions. Furthermore, institutional safeguards must incorporate standardized staff screening procedures, routine mental health monitoring by professionals, and independent external oversight to ensure that residential dynamics remain transparent and consistently oriented toward protecting children's fundamental rights and psychosocial well-being.

6 Conclusion

Childhood poverty extends beyond immediate hardship, often creating a latent effect where early deprivation may heighten the risk of poverty in adulthood. Sporadic interventions frequently struggle to provide holistic protection, addressing children's biological, cognitive, and affective needs seems to require a more comprehensive, integrated approach. Within this context, the Sekolah Rakyat Program offers an insightful model functioning not merely as a pedagogical space, but as a supportive social environment through which children can reframe their perceptions and lived experiences of poverty. Explorations into children's phenomenological experiences reveal a complex reality marked by intersecting material

deprivations (such as housing, education, health, sanitation, nutrition, information, and play) and psychosocial deprivations (including safety, feeling heard, and freedoms of expression, thought, and association). Across varying family backgrounds, children's accounts suggest that material lack often compounds psychosocial strain, profoundly shaping their daily well-being and sense of self.

In response to these interconnected vulnerabilities, Sekolah Rakyat seeks to mitigate the impacts of child poverty by combining educational access with basic material support housing, nutrition, and healthcare alongside consistent psychosocial care. Transitioning children from environments of severe deprivation into a structured, supportive setting appears to ease the cognitive load associated with poverty. By providing a space where children are less consumed by immediate survival, such environments allow them to better process their experiences, develop their capabilities, and gradually build their agency for the future.

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