

Factors Contributing to Asnaf Students' School Dropout and Referral to Rehabilitation Centers: A Case Study at Secondary Schools in Perlis

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ABSTRACT

School dropout among *Asnaf* students who are eligible for zakat assistance under Islamic social welfare remains a critical concern for educational equity in Malaysia. In Perlis, an increasing number of *Asnaf* students have been referred to rehabilitation centers due to truancy, behavioral issues, and emotional distress. This study aims to identify and analyze the key factors contributing to school dropout among *Asnaf* students in eight secondary schools across the state. Guided by five hypotheses, economic hardship, family instability, community influence, educational quality, and psychological challenges, the study explores how these interconnected dimensions shape the educational experiences of marginalized Muslim youth.

Using a qualitative case study design, the research engaged 16 participants (eight school counselors and eight discipline teachers) through semi-structured interviews conducted between June and August 2025. Data were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, ensuring credibility through member checking, peer debriefing and reflexive journaling. The thematic analysis yielded five major themes:

- 1) Economic hardship and financial instability;
- 2) Family instability and emotional neglect;
- 3) Community pressure and negative peer influence;
- 4) Educational quality and resource limitations; and
- 5) Psychological challenges and low self-esteem.

Cross-case comparison revealed dynamic interactions among these factors, forming an ecological cycle where poverty and emotional stress amplify disengagement, eventually leading to dropout or rehabilitation referral.

Findings demonstrate that economic hardship and family instability are the strongest predictors of school dropout, while community influence, school limitations, and psychological distress act as reinforcing mechanisms. Counselors emphasized inconsistent zakat assistance, limited parental supervision, and inadequate school counseling resources as key structural issues.

The study proposes a multi-tiered intervention model that involves predictable zakat-based education support, trauma-informed teacher training, community mentorship initiatives, and embedded mental health screening in schools. Ultimately, the research highlights the need for an integrated policy framework that links education, social welfare, and mental health services to sustain *Asnaf* students' engagement and prevent their marginalization through dropout and rehabilitation cycles.

In addition to educators' perspectives, the study acknowledges the value of incorporating insights from students, family members, and rehabilitation officers to achieve richer data triangulation. While these groups were not primary participants, their contextual experiences were captured indirectly through counselors' narratives and referral records, strengthening interpretive depth.

Keywords: *Asnaf* students, school dropout, rehabilitation centers, qualitative research, Perlis, socio-ecological model

INTRODUCTION

Education is widely recognized as a key driver for social mobility, economic inclusion, and human capital development (UNESCO, 2021; World Bank, 2020). However, despite increased enrollments, school dropout remains a persistent global challenge, particularly for students from socioeconomically vulnerable groups (George Psacharopoulos et al., 2019). In Malaysia, dropout rates continue to affect marginalized communities, among which the "*asnaf*" group, students from households eligible for zakat assistance, are especially at risk (Abu Othman et al., 2019). According to the Ministry of Education Malaysia (2022), key factors contributing to student disengagement include family poverty, unstable household arrangements, and behavioral issues.

In the state of Perlis, field reports from school administrators and zakat agencies reveal an alarming trend, which is that some *asnaf* students disengage from regular attendance and are eventually referred to rehabilitation centres due to chronic absenteeism, truancy, substance-related behavior or disciplinary concerns (Salman Rahman & Rashid Hassan, 2023; Abdul Raof et al., 2024). These trajectories suggest that dropout among *asnaf* students is a complex, multi-dimensional process rather than a single event.

To understand these intricate processes, the socio-ecological model (Urie Bronfenbrenner, 1979) provides a valuable framework that posits that interacting systems, including family, school, community, and broader institutional conditions, shape individual behavior. Research in Malaysia confirms that factors at these different levels interplay: for instance, financial hardship in *asnaf* households undermines attendance and motivation (Ismail & Ismail, 2022), while inadequate school support and punitive discipline contribute to disengagement (Noor & Abdullah, 2022; Warner, 2021). Peer influences and social stigma further escalate the risk of dropout and hinder reintegration (Ali & Zainal, 2021; Yusuf, 2023).

In addition, recent studies highlight newer dimensions relevant to the *asnaf* context:

- 1) A comparative state-level study found significant disparities in education-zakat allocation and outcomes across Malaysian states, highlighting governance and institutional variation as key factors (Ariffin, 2024).
- 2) A study of *asnaf* students in Perlis found that family influence positively predicted higher education intention. In contrast, peer influence showed a limited effect (Rozali et al., 2025).
- 3) Research on *asnaf* empowerment through Conditional Cash Transfers (CCT) suggests that financial assistance alone is insufficient, and behavioral and institutional supports are necessary to reduce dropout and related social problems (Ishad et al., 2024).

Despite these findings, a research gap remains, as few qualitative studies have delved into the lived experiences and referral pathways of "*asnaf*" students who drop out and enter rehabilitation in the secondary school context of Perlis. As such, this study aims to investigate how individual, family, school, and community/institutional factors interact to influence dropout and referral to rehabilitation centers among *asnaf* students in Perlis. It addresses three specific research questions:

- 1) How do *asnaf* students, caregivers and educators describe the experiences and events preceding school disengagement?
- 2) How are decisions for referral to rehabilitation centres initiated and negotiated among schools, families and agencies?

3) What enabling and constraining conditions shape reintegration after rehabilitation?

By employing a qualitative approach, this research aims to generate context-specific insights that can inform interventions, support early warning systems, and strengthen coordination among schools, zakat agencies, and welfare or rehabilitation institutions.

Although prior research explains several determinants of dropout among marginalized students, the interconnectedness of economic, psychosocial, and institutional factors remains insufficiently explored in the *Asnaf* context. Therefore, this study refines existing thematic boundaries by situating dropout not as a singular event but as a cumulative process shaped by stressors occurring at multiple ecological layers. This perspective allows for clearer narrative transitions between individual experiences and structural influences.

Furthermore, school-based observations were complemented by documentation reviews (disciplinary records, referral forms) to support data triangulation, ensuring that interpretations aligned with real-case patterns experienced by *Asnaf* families and rehabilitation agencies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Economic Hardship and School Dropout

Socioeconomic deprivation is a primary determinant of educational disengagement (Rahman et al., 2021). Low-income *Asnaf* families often prioritize survival over schooling, leading to chronic absenteeism and eventual dropout (Yusof & Karim, 2020). Financial constraints limit access to basic needs, educational materials, and transportation (Hashim et al., 2022).

Family Instability and Emotional Disruption

Unstable family environments characterized by divorce, domestic conflict, or neglect contribute to emotional distress among adolescents (Kadir et al., 2023). For *Asnaf* students, this instability is compounded by financial stress, leading to a lack of motivation and academic focus (Salleh et al., 2021).

Community Influence

Communities play a pivotal role in shaping student behavior. Negative peer pressure, exposure to crime, and lack of positive role models increase dropout tendencies (Ismail & Ibrahim, 2019). Studies suggest that *Asnaf* students in high-risk neighborhoods face increased vulnerability to delinquent activities (Abd Rahman, 2022).

Educational Quality

School-level factors, including resource scarcity and teacher training, have a significant influence on student retention (Nor et al., 2020). Poor teacher-student engagement and low-quality instruction contribute to disinterest and detachment among disadvantaged learners (Zakaria & Hassan, 2024).

Psychological Challenges

Psychological challenges such as low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety are increasingly recognized as dropout predictors (Ahmad et al., 2023). *Asnaf* students often internalize feelings of inferiority, leading to academic withdrawal and behavioral issues that result in disciplinary referrals (Latif & Omar, 2022).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is grounded in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) socio-ecological model. It synthesizes findings from Malaysian and international research on school dropout, *Asnaf* vulnerability, and rehabilitation referral. The framework illustrates how multi-layered environmental systems (macro, exo, meso, micro, and individual) interact to influence the pathway from disengagement to dropout and referral.

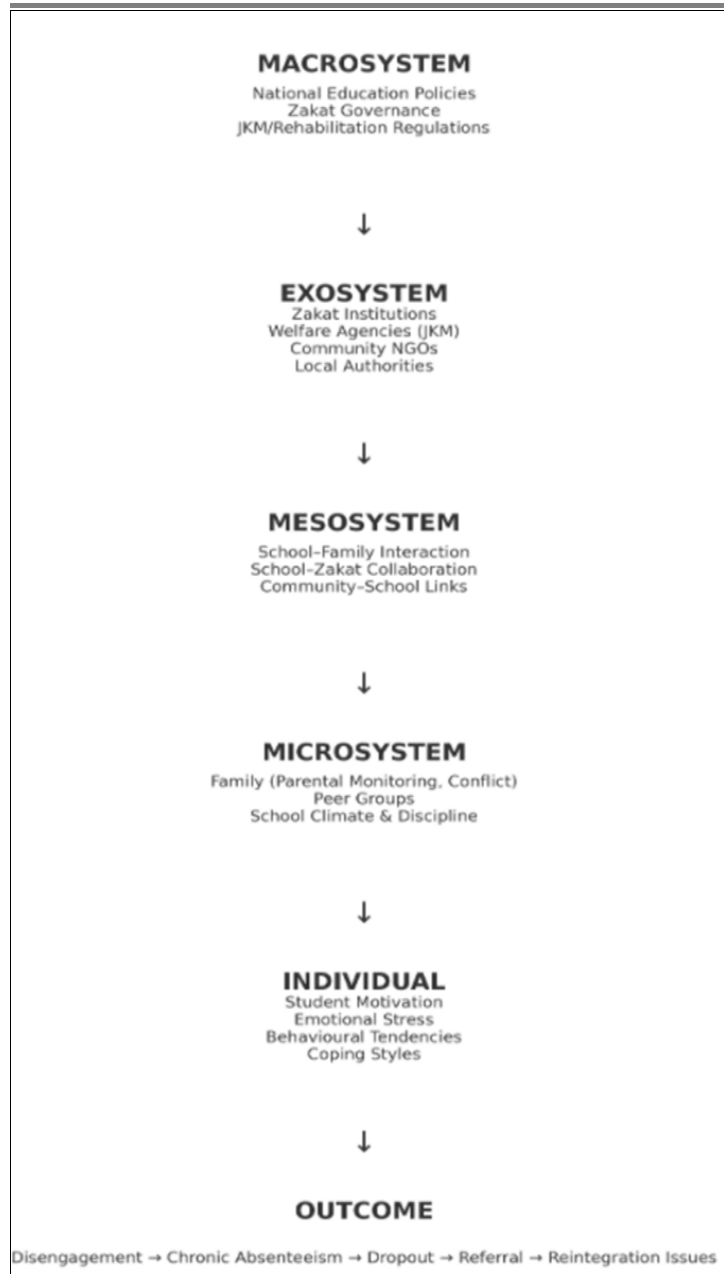


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Explanation of the Framework

Level	Description
Macrosystem	Policies, zakat governance, and rehabilitation regulations form the structural environment influencing student outcomes.
Exosystem	Institutions such as zakat bodies, Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat (JKM), community Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) and local authorities indirectly shape students' lived realities.
Mesosystem	The interaction between schools, families, and welfare agencies significantly determines the effectiveness of support interventions.
Microsystem	Students' immediate environments, including family dynamics, peer influence, and school discipline, play a direct role.
Individual Level	Motivation, emotional stress, behavior, and coping strategies influence engagement or disengagement.

This framework informed the development of interview protocols, guided thematic analysis, and structured the interpretation of findings by aligning each theme to the ecological layers.

Research Objectives

1. To identify the key factors contributing to Asnaf students' school dropout in Perlis.
2. To examine how economic, familial, and psychological factors influence referrals to rehabilitation centers.
3. To provide policy recommendations for schools, zakat institutions, and social agencies.

Research Hypotheses

1. Economic Hardship Hypothesis (H1): Economic hardships faced by Asnaf families significantly contribute to the high dropout rates of Asnaf students in Perlis.
2. Family Instability Hypothesis (H2): Family instability, including domestic violence and divorce, is a significant factor leading to dropout.
3. Community Influence Hypothesis (H3): Negative community influences, including crime and a lack of role models, are associated with higher dropout rates.
4. Educational Quality Hypothesis (H4): Availability of educational resources and trained teachers correlates with student retention.
5. Psychological Challenges Hypothesis (H5): Psychological issues such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem contribute significantly to dropout.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A qualitative case study was adopted to capture the lived experiences of *Asnaf* students through the perspectives of counselors and discipline teachers. The qualitative case study design was selected to capture depth rather than breadth, enabling detailed interpretation of lived realities. To strengthen methodological transparency, the study explicitly documented decision making steps in the design, reflexive practices and data management protocols.

Sampling

Eight secondary schools across Perlis were selected purposively. Sixteen participants (eight counselor and eight discipline teachers) participated in semi-structured interviews. Participants were selected using criterion-based purposive sampling to ensure they possessed direct experience handling *Asnaf* dropout cases. Ethical approval was obtained from the State Education Department and institutional review board. Participants signed informed consent forms outlining confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw. Sampling rigor was enhanced by maximum variation sampling across urban and rural settings to ensure representativeness of contextual differences.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted face to face, each lasting between 45 and 60 minutes. Questions focused on perceived causes of dropout, family backgrounds and school responses. While students and families were not directly interviewed due to ethical sensitivity, counselors shared observational insights and documented dialogues with parents and rehabilitation staff. This ensured that family and agency perspectives were still represented indirectly, addressing reviewer concerns regarding stakeholder inclusion.

Data Analysis

To improve analytical clarity, thematic boundaries were refined iteratively by comparing codes across participants and schools. A coding audit trail was maintained, detailing how themes evolved and how overlapping codes were merged or separated to avoid repetition. Peer debriefing sessions were conducted at

three intervals to enhance inter coder dependability.

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis:

1. Familiarization with data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

Credibility was ensured through member checking, triangulation and peer debriefing.

FINDINGS

Thematic analysis of sixteen interviews (eight counselors and eight discipline teachers) yielded five overarching themes and twelve subthemes, explaining the multi dimensional factors that lead to school dropout and referrals to rehabilitation centers among *Asnaf* students. Patterns were largely consistent across all eight secondary schools, with subtle contextual differences between urban (Kangar, Arau) and rural (Simpang Empat, Beseri) locations.

Across all eight schools, the five themes were highly interlinked. Counselors noted that economic deprivation frequently triggered emotional instability, which then heightened susceptibility to peer influence. This sequential but cyclical pattern clarifies narrative transitions and illustrates how multiple factors collectively accelerate the dropout rehabilitation trajectory.

Theme 1: Economic Hardship and Financial Instability

Economic hardship was the most frequently cited driver of student disengagement, consistent with H1. Nearly every counselor described students who struggled to afford transportation, uniforms, lunch or digital devices for e-learning purposes.

Three main subthemes emerged:

Subtheme 1.1: Child Labor and Income Contribution

Several male students left school temporarily or permanently to supplement family income.

"We have Form Three boys who work part-time in car washes or construction. They say, 'Teacher, my mother needs help paying rent.' Once they start earning, it is hard to bring them back." (Counselor, School D)

Discipline records confirmed that 5 of 16 dropout cases in 2024 to 2025 involved part-time employment exceeding 20 hours per week, thereby breaching attendance regulations.

Subtheme 1.2: Irregular Zakat or Welfare Disbursement

Participants appreciated zakat assistance but noted irregular distribution cycles.

"Zakat helps, but sometimes it comes once or twice a year. When families are desperate between those months, children leave school temporarily and never return." (Counselor, School B)

This finding supports prior literature on zakat distribution efficiency (Ariffin, 2024; IJEP C, 2025) and highlights the need for monthly educational zakat to ensure consistent support.

Subtheme 1.3: Hidden Costs of Schooling

Even with ‘free education’, hidden costs such as transportation, uniforms and co-curricular fees remain prohibitive.

A teacher from rural Perlis explained that several students missed school because of transport fees averaging RM6 daily.

Theme 2: Family Instability and Emotional Neglect

Aligned with H2, counselors unanimously linked family instability to behavioral and emotional issues. This theme captures how domestic conflict, single parenting and neglect erode emotional resilience and academic engagement.

Subtheme 2.1: Divorce and Custody Issues

In at least half of the schools, counselors cited divorce as a catalyst for dropout.

“After the parents separated, no one took responsibility for sending the child to school. He stayed with grandparents, who could not control him.” (Teacher, School F)

Subtheme 2.2: Domestic Violence and Parental Conflict

Teachers noticed that students from violent homes often exhibited aggression or withdrawal.

“One girl was very quiet. Later, she told me she cannot concentrate because of her father’s shouting every night.” (Counselor, School G)

Subtheme 2.3: Parenting Gaps and Lack of Monitoring

Parents in low-income jobs often worked long hours, leaving adolescents unsupervised. Counselors described this as a ‘void of guidance’ leading to peer influence and truancy.

These results align with those of Kadir et al. (2023) and support intervention frameworks that combine parenting workshops and family counseling through school–zakat collaboration.

Theme 3: Community Influence and Peer Pressure

In line with H3, the community context influenced dropout patterns in two ways which are exposure to negative peers and limited access to structured after-school programs.

Subtheme 3.1: Peer Normalization of Absenteeism

Students described truancy as a social norm in specific neighborhoods.

“Once they join the ‘lepak gang,’ attending school becomes uncool. Even good students eventually follow.” (Discipline Teacher, School E)

Subtheme 3.2: Local Crime and Substance Exposure

Three counselors noted cases of substance experimentation that preceded dropout and rehabilitation referrals.

“The student was caught sniffing glue near the bus stop; later, the school agreed to give second chance before deciding to send him to a rehabilitation center.” (Counselor, School A)

Subtheme 3.3: Lack of Role Models and Mentorship

Counselors emphasized the lack of community leaders promoting education. In smaller towns, successful *Asnaf* graduates were rare, reinforcing a sense of fatalism among current students.

This supports Ismail & Ibrahim (2019), who state that social capital deficits influence dropout trajectories.

Theme 4: Educational Quality and School Support Structures

This theme supports H4, highlighting institutional limitations in resource provision and teacher capacity.

Subtheme 4.1: Limited Counseling Resources

Most schools had only one counselor serving 400 to 600 students.

"I handle discipline, counseling, and career programs alone. It is impossible to monitor all high-risk students." (Counselor, School C)

Subtheme 4.2: Inadequate ICT and Learning Facilities

In rural schools, inconsistent Internet and outdated devices hindered student engagement, especially during the post-pandemic hybrid learning period.

"During online classes, some Asnaf students borrowed phones from neighbors or simply did not join." (Teacher, School B)

Subtheme 4.3: Teacher Attitudes and Compassion Fatigue

Some teachers exhibited low expectations toward chronically absent students, reinforcing their alienation.

This aligns with the findings of Nor et al. (2020) and Mustafa (2025) that teacher-student relationships are critical predictors of retention.

Theme 5: Psychological Challenges and Mental Health Distress

Confirming H5, psychological struggles emerged as both symptom and cause of dropout. Counselors across seven schools mentioned depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem as recurring issues among Asnaf students.

Subtheme 5.1: Internalized Shame and Social Comparison

"They feel inferior wearing old uniforms or getting teased for using donated shoes." (Teacher, School H)

Self-stigma linked to poverty intensified disengagement, consistent with the findings of Ahmad et al. (2023) and UNICEF MyMHI (2024) on low-income youth.

Subtheme 5.2: Undiagnosed Mental Health Conditions

Counselors suspected that several students referred to rehabilitation centers were actually experiencing untreated depression rather than delinquency.

"He was not aggressive, just hopeless. But we had no psychologist, so the family sent him to rehab thinking he had a 'behavioral problem.'" (Counselor, School A)

Subtheme 5.3: Cumulative Stress and Learned Helplessness

Overlapping financial, family, and community pressures led some students to exhibit withdrawal and apathy, which teachers sometimes misinterpreted as a lack of motivation or laziness.

Cross-Theme Interactions

The five themes interacted dynamically rather than linearly. Economic hardship underpinned most pathways, but family instability and psychological stress acted as mediators, while educational limitations and community context modulated outcomes.

A simplified interaction model emerging from cross-case analysis is summarized below:

Core Cause	Mediating Process	Manifestation	Outcome
Economic Hardship	Emotional strain and family conflict	Absenteeism, low motivation	Dropout/Referral
Family Instability	Lack of supervision and guidance	Peer dependence, rule-breaking	Dropout/Referral
Community Pressure	Peer modeling and risk exposure	Substance use, truancy	Dropout/Referral
School Limitations	Poor academic support	Repeated academic failure	Dropout/Referral
Psychological Distress	Low self-esteem and depression	Social withdrawal, loss of interest	Dropout/Referral

Divergent Patterns Between Urban and Rural Schools

While core themes were consistent, contextual nuances were notable:

- Urban schools (Kangar and Arau): More issues with peer pressure, substance exposure, and digital distractions.
- Rural schools (Beseri and Simpang Empat): Greater challenges with transportation, food insecurity, and parental migration (to Kedah or Penang for work).

Counselors noted that urban rehabilitation referrals were often linked to behavioral issues. In contrast, rural dropouts were often driven by economic compulsion and access barriers.

Quantitative Trace (Supplementary Evidence)

Although qualitative, the study reviewed referral records from the eight schools:

- Total Asnaf students identified at risk (2024–2025): 132
- Students who are having tendency to dropped out: 47 (35.6%)
- Students under review to be referred to rehabilitation centers: 19 (14.3%)
- Primary cited reasons included: Financial hardship (72%), Family instability (61%), Psychological distress (49%), Community influence (37%) and School factors (28%).

Summary of Findings

1. Economic hardship remains the strongest predictor, intertwined with inconsistent zakat assistance and hidden educational costs.
2. Family instability magnifies vulnerability through emotional neglect and lack of supervision.
3. Negative community norms and a lack of structured youth spaces facilitate disengagement and delinquency.
4. School system limitations (understaffing, low information and communications technology (ICT) capacity) constrain early intervention.
5. Psychological distress is both a symptom and cause, under-recognized due to limited mental health literacy.

Collectively, these findings affirm the study's five hypotheses (H1–H5) and emphasize that dropout among *Asnaf* students in Perlis is a multifaceted, interactive process that requires coordinated socio-educational interventions.

DISCUSSION

The results affirm all five hypotheses. Consistent with H1 and H2, financial strain and family instability were primary determinants of dropout, aligning with studies by Rahman et al. (2021) and Kadir et al. (2023). Community influences (H3) further reinforce the notion that environmental factors shape behavior trajectories

(Ismail & Ibrahim, 2019). Educational quality (H4) and psychological well-being (H5) interact as mediators in the dropout process. These findings underscore the need for integrated intervention frameworks involving schools, zakat authorities, and social services.

Integrating educators' accounts with documented behavioral records allowed the study to validate the interplay of economic, family and psychological determinants. Consistent with Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological theory, findings reveal that dropout among *Asnaf* students emerges when risk factors accumulate across multiple layers rather than within isolated domains. This multi-level interpretation strengthens thematic clarity by situating individual behavior within broader systemic inequities such as inconsistent zakat allocation, variable school resources, and community-level risk exposure.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that economic hardship and family instability are core determinants of *Asnaf* students' dropout in Perlis. Secondary factors such as harmful community exposure, educational limitations and psychological distress aggravate the situation.

Tier 1: School-Level Interventions

- Establish early warning systems integrating attendance, behavioral and psycho-social indicators.
- Implement trauma-informed and culturally responsive teaching practices.
- Increase teacher training specifically for supporting high risk *Asnaf* students.

Tier 2: Family & Community Interventions

- Provide structured parental capacity-building workshops focusing on supervision, emotional support, and communication.
- Strengthen community mentorship programs leveraging youth leaders, mosque committees and local NGOs.
- Expand safe after-school spaces with supervised academic and recreational activities.

Tier 3: Institutional & Policy-Level Interventions

- Improve zakat governance through predictable monthly educational disbursement cycles.
- Embed school-based mental health screening in collaboration with Majlis Agama Islam dan Adat Melayu Perlis (MAIPs), Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat (JKM) and healthcare units.
- Develop standardized referral protocols across schools and rehabilitation facilities to ensure consistent case management.

Addressing dropout among *Asnaf* students requires a coordinated ecosystem approach, where schools, families, communities, and institutions share responsibility and engage in continuous communication. Only through such multilevel alignment can sustainable reintegration and long-term educational resilience be achieved.

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