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Educational Transformation as a Strategic Solution to Prevent Early Marriage: A Quantitative Study among Senior High School Students

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ABSTRACT

Early marriage remains a critical socio-economic and public health challenge in Sidrap Regency, South Sulawesi, Indonesia, severely limiting adolescent development and exacerbating school dropout rates. This study examines the effect of educational transformation—operationalized through digital accessibility, a life-skills-based curriculum, and guidance counseling—as a strategic institutional mechanism to mitigate early marriage among vulnerable youth populations. Utilizing a quantitative approach with a cross-sectional survey design, primary data were gathered from 385 senior high school students aged 15–19 years, who were selected via multi-stage stratified random sampling techniques. Multiple linear regression analysis was applied to evaluate empirical relationships. The results demonstrate that educational transformation significantly enhances adolescents' early marriage preventive intentions, jointly explaining 54.2% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.542$, $p < .001$). Guidance counseling emerged as the most dominant predictor ($\beta = 0.441$), followed by the life-skills curriculum ($\beta = 0.394$) and digital accessibility ($\beta = 0.162$). These findings suggest that optimizing institutional support frameworks, particularly school counseling services and integrated reproductive-health literacy, offers the most potent lever for behavior modification. Theoretically, this research bridges educational sociology and macro-social adolescent behaviors. Practically, it provides a robust, data-driven framework for the Sidrap Regency government and educational policymakers to implement targeted, curriculum-based interventions to systematically reduce regional early marriage rates while highlighting the critical need for sustainable multi-sectoral collaborations.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Early marriage remains a critical global socio-economic and public health challenge that severely compromises progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals,

particularly those concerning gender equality, economic mobility, and quality education (Parsons et al., 2015; Yoosefi Lebni et al., 2023). Globally, millions of adolescent girls enter premature marital unions each year, truncating their developmental potential and exposing them to systemic vulnerabilities (Psaki et al., 2021). Sociological evidence indicates that early marriage is not merely an isolated domestic decision but a complex outcome of entrenched patriarchal norms, rural poverty, and gaps in local child-protection frameworks (Mishra et al., 2023). When an adolescent enters a marital union before reaching cognitive and emotional maturity, their trajectory toward self-actualization is markedly disrupted (Hodgkinson, 2016). Despite international conventions aimed at eradicating this practice, enforcement of legal minimum-age provisions continues to collide with cultural resistance and structural marginalization in developing regions.

In Southeast Asia, and Indonesia in particular, early marriage exhibits substantial regional variation driven by localized customary law (*adat*) and socio-religious interpretation (Barkah et al., 2025; Saepullah et al., 2025). South Sulawesi Province, including semi-urban areas such as Sidrap Regency, consistently reports persistent cases of underage-marriage dispensation sought through local religious courts. In these agrarian and transitioning communities, economic instability combined with parental concern over premarital relationships frequently accelerates marital arrangements for high-school-aged youth. Although the Indonesian government amended the Marriage Law (Law No. 16/2019) to raise the legal minimum marriage age to 19 for both sexes (Hanafi, 2024; Holijah & Abd Manaf, 2019; Julianto et al., 2025), the grassroots reality in Sidrap suggests that legislative reform alone is insufficient without corresponding structural change. Addressing this phenomenon therefore requires moving beyond punitive legal frameworks toward proactive institutional intervention.

Formal education has long been recognized as one of the most effective institutional counterweights to early marriage (Malhotra & Elnakib, 2021). Under human capital theory, keeping adolescents — particularly young women — enrolled in secondary education increases future earning potential, delays childbearing, and enhances autonomy in domestic decision-making (Bhuwania et al., 2023). Schools function as an alternative social space that offers youth a vision of upward mobility independent of immediate marital or domestic expectations. Prolonged exposure to formal schooling also strengthens cognitive capacity and critical-thinking skills, enabling adolescents to better evaluate the long-term consequences of early family formation (Chaudhary & Yadavendu, 2025). High enrollment rates in secondary institutions are consequently associated with a downward trend in national early-marriage statistics.

However, conventional schooling models often operate passively, treating education as a chronological holding period rather than an active agent of social change (Traver-Martí et al., 2023). When secondary schools rely on static, rote-learning paradigms that fail to address real-world socio-cultural pressures, vulnerable students remain highly susceptible to dropout and subsequent early union (Azzopardi et al., 2019). Many regional schools lack integrated life-skills education, reproductive-health literacy, and modernized guidance-counseling (*bimbingan konseling*) systems capable of addressing

the socio-psychological pressures faced by adolescents. When the educational experience feels disconnected from students' economic and social realities, it loses its protective value (Psaki et al., 2021). Standard educational retention is therefore no longer sufficient; a structural “educational transformation” that modernizes counseling, integrates life skills, and applies gender-responsive pedagogy is urgently needed.

Despite extensive literature on this topic, critical empirical gaps remain. Existing quantitative studies on early marriage largely focus on post-facto epidemiological risk, maternal mortality, or demographic correlates using macro-level national survey data (Kalamar et al., 2016). Educational research, in contrast, often isolates school performance and curriculum design from community-level social conditions (Buchmann & Hannum, 2021). Rigorous, localized quantitative studies that model “educational transformation” as an explicit, multidimensional predictor of early-marriage intention among high-risk secondary-school populations remain scarce, and empirical models of how modern school-based support systems interact with traditional agrarian family dynamics in specific locations such as Sidrap Regency are similarly underdeveloped.

To address this gap, the present study proposes a structural framework that measures the preventive effect of educational transformation — conceptualized through digital accessibility, a life-skills-based curriculum, and proactive guidance counseling — on early-marriage preventive intentions. Its novelty lies in the local quantitative modeling of 15–19-year-old high school students in Sidrap Regency, positioning schools not as passive demographic variables but as active structural instruments of prevention. By empirically testing these pathways in a region shaped by distinct cultural-religious dynamics, this study moves beyond general global statements to provide actionable, data-driven parameters for regional education policy, translating qualitative educational ideals into measurable quantitative indices.

This study offers both theoretical and practical contributions to educational sociology and regional policy planning. Theoretically, it extends human capital and social-institutions theory by showing how targeted educational modernization can help dismantle entrenched sociocultural barriers in developing societies. Practically, the resulting quantitative metrics provide a concrete basis for the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek) and the Sidrap Regency government to design data-driven, school-based intervention programs. By identifying which transformative components have the greatest statistical impact on preventing early marriage, this research supports the strategic allocation of public resources to protect adolescents' futures and strengthen human capital development in the region.

2. METHOD

This study employed a quantitative approach with a cross-sectional explanatory survey designed to empirically test the structural relationship between educational transformation and the prevention of early marriage. This design allows for a systematic, statistically measurable assessment of how institutional variables predict adolescent behavioral intent across a regional sample. The study was conducted in Sidrap Regency,

South Sulawesi Province, Indonesia, a location purposefully selected for its transitional socio-economic status as an agrarian society undergoing rapid semi-urban modernization, alongside a well-documented persistence of localized customary marriage dispensation despite national legislative reform.

The target population comprised of senior high school students enrolled in public and private secondary schools across Sidrap Regency. Inclusion criteria restricted participation among adolescents aged 15 to 19 years, the age range most directly exposed to early-marital pressure. A multi-stage stratified random sampling technique was used to select respondents across the regency's districts, ensuring proportional representation of urban and rural-agrarian schools. Using the Slovin formula with a 5% margin of error, a final validated sample of 385 high school students was established for analysis.

Primary data were collected through a structured, self-administered digital questionnaire distributed via an institutional portal to reduce social desirability bias among adolescent respondents. The instrument comprised three sections: a socio-demographic profile, an Educational Transformation Scale, and an Early Marriage Preventive Intention Index. Items were adapted from validated international frameworks (UNESCO and World Bank instruments) and culturally adjusted for the Indonesian regional school context. Prior to full deployment, a pilot test involving 30 non-sample students was conducted; the instrument demonstrated high internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient above 0.70, confirming its reliability and contextual clarity.

The independent variable, Educational Transformation (X), was modeled as a multidimensional construct comprising three dimensions: digital educational accessibility (X1), life-skills-integrated curriculum design (X2), and proactive guidance counseling (X3, bimbingan konseling). Each dimension was measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The dependent variable, Early Marriage Prevention (Y), was operationalized through attitudinal indices capturing students' cognitive rejection of underage marriage, awareness of legislative provisions (Law No. 16/2019), and motivation to continue their education. Parental income, maternal education level, and household locality were included as control covariates to isolate the institutional effect of educational transformation.

Collected data were cleaned, coded, and analyzed using SPSS version 26.0. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and percentage distributions) were computed first, followed by diagnostic tests to confirm the dataset's adherence to classical linear regression assumptions, including the Shapiro-Wilk normality test, Levene's test of homogeneity of variance, and multicollinearity assessment via Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values. Multiple linear regression analysis was then conducted to test the study's hypotheses and estimate predictive pathways, with statistical significance set at $p < 0.05$.

Because the study involved adolescent participants aged 15–19 discussing sensitive socio-behavioral and legal matters, rigorous ethical protocols were maintained throughout. Institutional ethical clearance was obtained from the regional research

review board prior to data collection, together with formal permits from the Dinas Pendidikan (Office of Education). A dual-layered informed consent procedure was applied: written parental consent was obtained for participants under 18 years of age, supplemented by personal assent from each student. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by assigning encrypted identification codes to each questionnaire response, ensuring that no personal identifiers were retained during data processing.

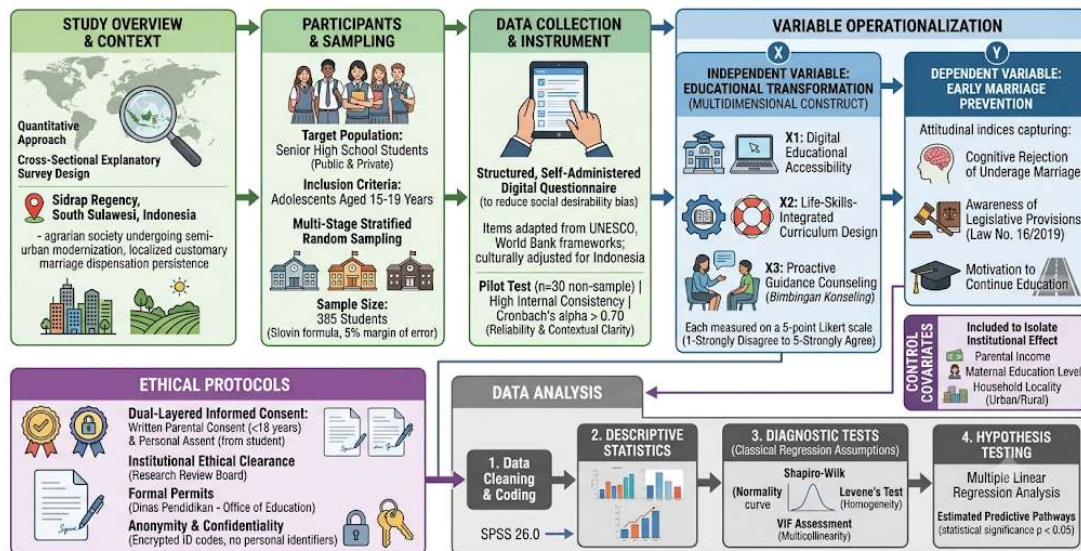


Figure 1. Research Steps

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Prior to the primary inferential analysis, the demographic profile of respondents was examined. The validated sample consisted of 385 senior high school students in Sidrap Regency, distributed across age cohorts, gender, and school locality, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 385)

Demographic Attribute	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age Group	15–16 years	162	42.1
	17–19 years	223	57.9
Gender	Male	148	38.4
	Female	237	61.6
Locality	Urban	135	35.1
	Rural-Agrarian	250	64.9
Maternal Education	Primary/Secondary School	288	74.8
	Higher Education (Degree)	97	25.2

Classical Assumption Tests

To confirm the validity of the ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model, standard diagnostic tests were performed. The Shapiro-Wilk test confirmed normal distribution of the residuals ($p > 0.05$). Multicollinearity diagnostics showed Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values for all independent dimensions ranging from 1.120 to

1.450, well below the conservative threshold of 5.0, indicating the absence of multicollinearity. Levene's test further confirmed homoscedasticity across variance arrays ($p > 0.05$), satisfying the classical assumptions required for regression analysis.

Effect of Educational Transformation on Early Marriage Preventive Intention

The independent variable, educational transformation, was decomposed into three dimensions — Digital Accessibility (X_1), Life-Skills Curriculum (X_2), and Guidance Counseling Effectiveness (X_3) and regressed against the Early Marriage Preventive Intention Index (Y), following the model:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \varepsilon$$

The simultaneous regression model yielded a high coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.542$), indicating that 54.2% of the variance in early-marriage preventive intention among high school students in Sidrap Regency is explained by the structural transformation of their educational environment; the remaining 45.8% is attributable to variables outside the scope of this model. Coefficient estimates are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Multiple Linear Regression Coefficients

Predictor Variable	B	SE	Std. β	t	Sig. (p)
(Constant)	1.124	0.215	—	5.228	< 0.001
Digital Accessibility (X_1)	0.145	0.042	0.162	3.452	0.001
Life-Skills Curriculum (X_2)	0.382	0.051	0.394	7.490	< 0.001
Guidance Counseling (X_3)	0.426	0.048	0.441	8.875	< 0.001

All three dimensions of educational transformation exerted a positive and statistically significant effect on adolescents' intention to reject early marriage, though the magnitude of their standardized coefficients differed, offering distinct structural insights into the regional dynamics of Sidrap Regency.

The Dominant Role of Guidance Counseling (X_3)

With the highest standardized coefficient ($\beta = 0.441$, $t = 8.875$, $p < 0.001$), institutionalized guidance counseling (bimbingan konseling) emerged as the most influential protective factor against early-marriage intention. In the transitioning socio-cultural landscape of Sidrap, adolescent students frequently face psychological pressure from familial expectations and peer norms that normalize early union. When school counselors shift from disciplinary figures to proactive, empathetic actors, they create a cognitive buffer that equips students with the resilience needed to negotiate or refuse premature marital arrangements, redirecting their focus toward long-term self-actualization.

The Structural Power of the Life-Skills Curriculum (X_2)

The life-skills-integrated curriculum was also a strong, statistically significant predictor ($\beta = 0.394$, $t = 7.490$, $p < 0.001$). Traditional, rote-learning models offer little

defense against deeply rooted cultural pressures. When the curriculum integrates reproductive-health literacy, legal awareness of Law No. 16/2019, and financial literacy, it reshapes students' worldview: structured knowledge about the biological risks of early childbearing and the legal consequences of unauthorized marriage dispensation converts abstract statutory provisions into a localized behavioral deterrent.

The Digital Accessibility Vector (X1)

Digital accessibility showed a smaller, though still significant, effect ($\beta = 0.162$, $t = 3.452$, $p = 0.001$). In semi-urban and rural areas of Sidrap, open digital access to learning platforms and educational media dilutes the influence of conservative agrarian environments, connecting students to broader discourse on higher education, professional training, and youth networks. Digital accessibility transforms the school from a local physical institution into a gateway to macro-social opportunity, reducing the perceived inevitability of early marriage as the only viable path after secondary school.

Discussion

These findings provide important insight into how systemic educational transformation functions as an institutional mechanism to mitigate early-marriage intentions among high school students in Sidrap Regency. The regression model shows that 54.2% of the variance in adolescents' early-marriage preventive intention is explained by the combined effect of digital accessibility, the life-skills curriculum, and guidance counseling ($R^2 = 0.542$). This explanatory strength supports the view that the school environment can be intentionally re-engineered beyond its conventional, passive instructional role, functioning instead as an active site of social protection capable of disrupting locally entrenched marriage cycles (Junaedi et al., 2022; Malhotra & Elnakib, 2021).

The Institutional Shield: The Dominance of Guidance Counseling

Guidance counseling (X3) emerged as the strongest protective determinant against early-marriage intention ($\beta = 0.441$, $t = 8.875$, $p < 0.001$). In transitioning regional contexts such as Sidrap Regency, where 64.9% of respondents reside in rural-agrarian areas, adolescent decisions are heavily shaped by communal expectations and parental concern over premarital relationships. This finding aligns with human capital and social-institutional frameworks, which propose that individual social risk can be substantially reduced when public institutions provide strong, accessible support structures (Tical et al., 2024).

Regional Indonesian school counseling systems (bimbingan konseling) have historically operated within a largely disciplinary paradigm rather than an empathetic, developmental one (Sofyan et al., 2023; Taufiq et al., 2026). The present findings indicate that when counseling services shift toward a proactive model, they introduce a meaningful cognitive buffer into students' immediate social environment, transforming the counseling office from a space of behavioral correction into one of psychological

support. This transformation appears particularly consequential for female adolescents, who represented 61.6% of the sample and typically bear a disproportionate share of early-marital pressure (Psaki et al., 2021). Supported by personalized guidance and clearer long-term planning, students appear better equipped to negotiate domestic expectations and prioritize academic continuation over early family formation (Chaudhary & Yadavendu, 2025).

Structural Realism: The Contribution of Life-Skills Integration

The substantial predictive contribution of the life-skills curriculum ($\beta = 0.394$, $t = 7.490$, $p < 0.001$) underscores the value of curricular modernization. Traditional academic tracks reliant on rote learning provide limited protection against entrenched cultural expectations and economic pressures. This study demonstrates that when curricula purposefully integrate reproductive-health literacy, financial capability, and explicit legal awareness of Law No. 16/2019, they meaningfully reshape students' understanding of their choices and risks.

This result is consistent with sociology-of-education perspectives emphasizing that knowledge must be directly applicable to local risk to influence behavior (Buchmann & Hannum, 2021). In Sidrap, where 74.8% of respondents' mothers had attained only primary or secondary education, gaps in household-level sex education and legal-rights knowledge are common (Saepullah et al., 2025). When secondary schools address this gap through targeted life-skills instruction, they translate abstract statutory provisions into practical, localized deterrents. Equipped with knowledge of the medical risks of early childbearing and the legal boundaries of marriage dispensation, students may be better positioned to weigh immediate socio-cultural pressures against longer-term consequences (Kalamar et al., 2016), shifting education from a passive holding period toward a tool for social mobility and informed self-protection.

The Digital Vector: Reducing Agrarian Isolation

Although digital accessibility (X1) showed a comparatively smaller effect size, its statistical significance remains relevant for regional policy design ($\beta = 0.162$, $t = 3.452$, $p = 0.001$). In areas dominated by conservative agrarian environments, adolescents' social exposure is often bounded by the immediate physical limits of their village or neighborhood, a spatial isolation that can normalize early marriage as the primary available option after secondary school.

The findings suggest that digital accessibility helps reduce this geographical isolation. By providing access to digital learning platforms, hybrid training modules, and broader youth networks, technology can weaken the influence of local conservative norms and expose students to alternative educational and professional pathways that would otherwise remain out of reach (Syamsiah & Aisyah, 2025). In this sense, digital integration extends the school beyond its physical boundaries, connecting students to wider socio-economic opportunities and potentially reframing early marriage as a constraint on future mobility rather than an inevitable custom (Khan et al., 2024).

1

Theoretical and Policy Implications

Theoretically, this study contributes to regional educational modeling by demonstrating that “educational transformation” can be operationalized and empirically tested as a multidimensional predictor of adolescent micro-social, extending earlier demographic research that has often treated formal schooling as a single-dimension control variable such as years of enrollment. The findings instead indicate that the internal quality and delivery of secondary education play an important role in its preventive capacity.

Practically, these results offer an evidence-based basis for the regional government of Sidrap Regency, the provincial Dinas Pendidikan, and school administrators to prioritize investment. Given finite public resources, the observed statistical hierarchy suggests that interventions prioritizing the modernization of guidance-counseling services and the systematic integration of life-skills modules may offer greater protective returns than generic infrastructural investment, supporting more strategic allocation of resources toward safeguarding adolescent futures and regional human capital development.

4. CONCLUSION

This study quantified the role of systemic educational transformation in mitigating early-marriage intentions among senior high school students aged 15–19 in Sidrap Regency, showing that digital accessibility, a life-skills-integrated curriculum, and proactive guidance counseling together explain 54.2% of the variance in adolescents' preventive intentions ($R^2 = 0.542$). Within this model, guidance counseling emerged as the most dominant protective factor ($\beta = 0.441$), followed by the life-skills curriculum ($\beta = 0.394$) and digital accessibility ($\beta = 0.162$). These findings suggest that regional stakeholders — including the provincial Education Office and the Sidrap Regency government — could benefit from re-orienting the guidance-counseling (BK) function toward a more empathetic, supportive model, integrating structured reproductive and legal literacy (Law No. 16/2019) into the curriculum, and prioritizing human-resource capacity alongside physical infrastructure investment. Overall, the study indicates that the internal quality, delivery, and support mechanisms of secondary education play a meaningful role in its function as an institutional safeguard against early marriage, reframing schools from passive demographic settings into active contributors to adolescent protection and regional human capital development.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that the regional government of Sidrap Regency, the provincial Education Office, and local school administrators consider directing fiscal and structural resources toward strengthening a proactive, empathetic guidance-counseling (BK) paradigm, so as to provide vulnerable adolescents with a stronger support structure against familial and communal marriage pressure. It is further recommended that a modernized life-skills curriculum — incorporating reproductive-health literacy, financial capability, and explicit awareness of national statutory protections such as Law No. 16/2019 — be formally integrated into secondary schooling. Given limited public funding, resource allocation should prioritize capacity-

building for school counselors and the expansion of inclusive digital learning platforms. Future research employing longitudinal or mixed-methods designs across multiple regencies would help to validate and extend these findings, and to examine causal pathways more directly.

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