

Improving Constructing Child Friendly School Culture Through Symbolic Interaction

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ABSTRACT

School culture is not merely an institutional attribute but a dynamic social accomplishment produced through everyday interactions among school stakeholders. This study investigates how child-friendly culture is socially constructed, negotiated, and internalized as a living school culture in an Indonesian Child-Friendly School (Sekolah Ramah Anak/SRA). Using a qualitative case-study design at SMA Swasta Harapan Mandiri Medan, data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews with teachers, students, parents, administrators, and a government education officer, and documentary analysis of school policies and SRA-related materials. The analysis was guided by constructivist symbolic interactionism, integrating Blumer's meaning-oriented interactionism, Charmaz's constructivist attention to situated meaning-making, and Denzin's interpretive emphasis on performance and lived experience. The findings show that child-friendly culture is constructed through multivocal stakeholder meanings, symbolic everyday practices, biographically situated interpretations, transformative interactional moments, and emerging school-culture literacy. The study argues that genuine SRA implementation depends less on formal compliance than on the capacity of school actors to interpret, evaluate, and reshape the symbolic environment of schooling. These findings contribute to school-culture scholarship by positioning child-friendly schooling as an ongoing interpretive and relational process rather than a static policy status.

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School culture is not merely an institutional attribute, but a dynamic social accomplishment produced through everyday interactions among school stakeholders. This study investigates how a child-friendly culture is socially constructed, negotiated, and internalized as a living school culture in an Indonesian Child-Friendly School (Sekolah Ramah Anak / SRA). Employing a qualitative case study design at SMA Swasta Harapan Mandiri Medan, data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews with teachers, students, parents, school administrators, and a government education officer, as well as documentary analysis of school policies and SRA-related materials. The analysis was guided by constructivist symbolic interactionism, which integrates Blumer's meaning-oriented interactionism, Charmaz's constructivist emphasis on situated meaning-making, and Denzin's interpretive focus on performance and lived experience. The findings reveal that child-friendly culture is constructed through multivocal stakeholder meanings, symbolic everyday practices, biographically situated interpretations, transformative interactional moments, and emerging school-culture literacy. This study argues that genuine SRA implementation depends less on formal policy compliance than on the capacity of school actors to interpret, evaluate, and reshape the symbolic environment of schooling. These findings contribute to school-culture scholarship by positioning child-friendly schooling as an ongoing interpretive and relational process rather than a static policy status.

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1. Introduction

School culture refers to the shared values, norms, symbols, relationships, routines, and practices that shape the collective life of an educational institution. It increasingly receives scholarly attention because it influences educational quality, student well-being, teacher professionalism, institutional trust, and the sustainability of educational reform. Unlike formal policy documents or curriculum frameworks, school culture operates through repeated everyday interactions: the way teachers greet students, how discipline is communicated, how students' voices are acknowledged, how parents are involved, and how institutional values are symbolically displayed in school spaces. These micro-social practices often reveal whether a school's declared values are genuinely lived or merely administratively documented.

The Indonesian Child-Friendly School policy (Sekolah Ramah Anak/SRA) represents an ambitious effort to transform schools not only structurally but also culturally. Its normative orientation emphasizes children's rights, protection, participation, inclusion, respect, and care within the broader national agenda of child-friendly cities and education environments [1], [2], [3]. However, empirical studies continue to report a gap between the administrative designation of schools as child-friendly and the actual cultural experience of students, parents, teachers, and school leaders [4], [5], [6]. This gap indicates that SRA implementation cannot be understood solely through compliance indicators; it must also be examined through the interpretive processes by which school actors construct the meaning of being child-friendly in everyday institutional life.

Existing research on SRA in Indonesia has mainly focused on policy implementation, anti-violence programs, inclusive education, parental involvement, and the fulfillment of children's rights [1], [7], [8]. These studies provide important insights into institutional readiness and programmatic challenges. Nevertheless, fewer studies have examined SRA as a socially constructed school culture shaped through symbolic interaction among multiple stakeholders. In particular, limited attention has been given to how teachers, students, parents, and administrators attach different meanings to child-friendly culture, how these meanings are negotiated through daily practices, and how such practices become embedded as a living institutional culture.

This study addresses that gap by applying constructivist symbolic interactionism as an integrated theoretical lens. The framework combines Blumer's proposition that human action is guided by meanings generated in social interaction [9], Charmaz's constructivist emphasis on situated and relational meaning-making [10], and Denzin's interpretive focus on performance, lived experience, and transformative interactional

moments [11]. This lens is relevant because child-friendly culture is not simply imposed through regulation; it is interpreted, enacted, contested, and reproduced by stakeholders situated within specific biographical, cultural, and institutional contexts.

The empirical focus of this study is SMA Swasta Harapan Mandiri Medan, a private senior high school in Medan, North Sumatra, officially designated as a Child-Friendly School. The school provides a theoretically informative case because it operates in a multicultural urban context and has documented engagement with SRA-related initiatives, including anti-bullying and psychoeducational programs [12]. Medan's multicultural setting also makes the school an appropriate site for examining how meanings of protection, inclusion, recognition, and participation are negotiated among stakeholders with diverse cultural backgrounds.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze how child-friendly culture is socially constructed as a living school culture among stakeholders in an Indonesian SRA-designated school. Specifically, it examines stakeholder interpretations of child-friendly culture, symbolic practices through which such culture is enacted, and the conditions that support or inhibit the emergence of school-culture literacy as a basis for sustainable SRA implementation.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 *Symbolic Interaction and Meaning in School Life*

This Blumer's symbolic interactionism rests on three premises: human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings those things have for them; meanings arise from social interaction; and meanings are handled and modified through an interpretive process [13], [14]. Applied to school culture, these premises imply that teachers, students, parents, and administrators do not respond to SRA policy merely as a formal category. They respond to what child-friendly schooling means to them and to how those meanings are produced through interpersonal encounters, institutional routines, and symbolic communication.

In this perspective, child-friendly culture is not a fixed institutional property. It emerges from everyday interactions such as teacher-student communication, disciplinary encounters, student participation, ceremonial routines, and parental engagement. The same SRA policy may therefore result in different cultural realities across schools because its meaning is interpreted and enacted differently by actors in specific institutional contexts.

2.2 *Constructivist Meaning-Making and Biographical Situatedness*

The Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory extends the interactionist tradition by emphasizing that meanings are socially produced and biographically situated [15], [16], [17]. Actors

interpret social realities through accumulated experiences, professional trajectories, family backgrounds, emotional investments, and positions within relations of power. In an SRA context, this means that teachers' professional histories, students' prior schooling experiences, parents' expectations of safety, and administrators' leadership responsibilities shape how each group understands child-friendly culture.

This constructivist orientation also informs the methodological stance of this study. Rather than treating participants' statements as simple reflections of a single objective reality, the analysis examines how different stakeholder meanings are constructed, sustained, negotiated, and transformed through social relationships and institutional practices.

2.3 Interpretive Interactionism, Performance, and Cultural Transformation

Denzin's interpretive interactionism highlights the performative and experiential dimensions of social life [18], [19], [20]. Culture is enacted not only in what actors say but also in what they repeatedly do. In schools, child-friendly values are performed through embodied routines, affective interactions, spatial arrangements, ceremonies, and disciplinary practices. These performances communicate powerful symbolic messages about whether students are recognized, protected, included, and respected.

Denzin's concept of epiphany is also relevant to school cultural change. Transformative moments, such as a student's disclosure of bullying, a teacher's realization of the impact of disciplinary language, or a student's experience of being trusted as an anti-bullying agent, may alter how actors understand themselves and their responsibilities within the school community. Such moments can become turning points in the construction of a genuinely child-friendly culture.

3. Method

This study employed a qualitative case-study design. A case-study approach was selected because the construction of child-friendly school culture is a context-bound, relational, and interpretive phenomenon that requires detailed understanding of school life rather than measurement through standardized instruments alone [21], [22]. The research site was SMA Swasta Harapan Mandiri Medan, selected purposively because of its official SRA designation, multicultural student composition, and documented involvement in programs related to child protection, anti-bullying, and student well-being [23].

Data were collected over a four-month period through three complementary techniques. First, participant observation was conducted in classroom interactions, school ceremonies, student activities, staff meetings, parent-school communication settings, and physical-symbolic school spaces. Second, in-depth interviews were conducted with major stakeholder groups, consisting of teachers (n = 18), students (n = 24), parents (n = 12), school administrators (n = 6), and one government education officer. Third, documentary analysis was conducted on school policy documents, SRA compliance materials, internal

communications, reports of school programs, media representations of SRA activities, and student-produced materials.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, involving data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification [24]. The theoretical concepts of constructivist symbolic interactionism, including meaningful symbols, interpretive processes, biographical situatedness, performance, and epiphany, functioned as sensitizing concepts while allowing inductive categories to emerge from the data. Trustworthiness was strengthened through triangulation across data sources and stakeholder groups, member checking of key interpretations, prolonged engagement with the research context, and reflexive discussion within the research team regarding positionality and interpretive assumptions

Table 1 summarizes the data sources and their analytical purposes

Data source	Scope	Analytical purpose
Participant observation	Classroom interactions, ceremonies, student activities, staff meetings, parent-school communication, and symbolic school spaces	To identify repeated symbolic practices through which child-friendly culture was enacted or contradicted.
In-depth interviews	Teachers, students, parents, administrators, and one government education officer	To compare stakeholder meanings, expectations, and experiences of child-friendly school culture.
Documentary analysis	SRA-related policy documents, internal reports, communications, program records, and student-produced materials	To contextualize formal institutional commitments and compare them with enacted cultural practices.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1 Multivocal Meanings of Child-Friendly School Culture

The first major finding is that child-friendly school culture was interpreted differently across stakeholder groups. These differences were not merely terminological; they reflected distinct evaluative priorities, institutional positions, and lived experiences. Teachers tended to associate child-friendly culture with pedagogical practice, particularly classroom management, respectful communication, disciplinary encounters, and the recognition of student dignity. For teachers who strongly identified with SRA values, child-friendly culture was not a label owned by the institution but a practice enacted in everyday

teaching.

Students constructed child-friendly culture more experientially. They evaluated the school not through abstract policy categories but through the quality of their daily encounters with teachers and peers. For them, child-friendly culture was present when teachers listened seriously to student voices, acknowledged individual contributions, responded fairly to bullying, and avoided public humiliation. Conversely, it was perceived as absent when institutional convenience overrode students' emotional safety or when disciplinary practices undermined students' dignity.

Parents interpreted child-friendly culture mainly through the lens of safety and protection. They emphasized freedom from physical harm, bullying, discrimination, and psychological insecurity. In the multicultural context of Medan, concerns about ethnic recognition, peer acceptance, and social exclusion were particularly salient. Parents who trusted the school's commitment to protection were more likely to support school initiatives and reinforce child-friendly values at home.

Administrators tended to frame child-friendly culture in organizational terms. They emphasized governance, leadership commitment, accountability mechanisms, teacher development, and school systems that institutionalize protection and participation. This indicates that child-friendly culture is simultaneously pedagogical, experiential, protective, and organizational. Its construction therefore requires negotiation among diverse stakeholder meanings rather than top-down policy translation alone.

4.2 Symbolic Practices in Everyday School Life

The second finding concerns the symbolic practices through which child-friendly culture was enacted. Greeting routines were one of the most visible practices. Teachers who welcomed students at the classroom door, used students' names, maintained eye contact, and acknowledged students' presence communicated a symbolic message that each student mattered. Students in classrooms where this practice was consistent reported stronger belonging and trust.

Disciplinary interactions were another crucial symbolic domain. When discipline was communicated privately, respectfully, and with attention to problem solving, it reinforced child-friendly values. By contrast, public humiliation, arbitrary rule enforcement, or emotionally harsh reprimands communicated symbolic messages that contradicted the school's child-friendly identity. This contrast reveals that SRA culture may be uneven within the same institution, forming a patchwork of more and less child-friendly micro-cultures across classrooms and relationships.

The school's participation in anti-bullying initiatives, particularly the Roots UNICEF program, represented an

important institutional investment in child-friendly culture [25]. From an interactionist perspective, the program's significance lies not only in its explicit anti-bullying content but also in its symbolic message: students are not passive recipients of school culture but active co-constructors and guardians of it. Students involved as change agents described a stronger sense of responsibility for peer relationships and school climate.

4.3 Biographical Situatedness and Interpretive Diversity

In The third finding shows that stakeholder interpretations were shaped by biographical and relational situatedness. Teachers' interpretations were influenced by their prior experiences as students, professional training, and collegial relationships. Teachers who had experienced respectful and dialogic schooling tended to articulate richer meanings of child-friendly culture. Those socialized in more hierarchical educational traditions sometimes interpreted child-friendly practice more narrowly as the absence of overt punishment rather than the active presence of recognition, participation, and emotional care.

Students' meanings were shaped by family culture, prior schooling, and peer status. Students from families that valued democratic communication were more likely to articulate child-friendly culture in terms of participation and recognition. Students from more authoritarian backgrounds sometimes initially equated good schooling with obedience, requiring repeated positive experiences before they expanded their understanding of what respectful school relationships could mean.

These findings demonstrate that stakeholder meanings cannot be separated from the histories and social positions that actors bring into the school. Child-friendly culture is therefore constructed through interaction between institutional messages and the biographical resources through which stakeholders interpret those messages.

4.4 Epiphanic Moments and Cultural Transformation

The fourth finding concerns transformative interactional moments. Several teachers described specific incidents that changed their understanding of child-friendly practice, including student disclosures of bullying, moments when students expressed feeling invisible, and classroom incidents that led teachers to reconsider the emotional consequences of disciplinary language. Such events became reflective turning points that deepened teachers' commitment to relationally sensitive pedagogy.

Students involved in anti-bullying activities also narrated identity-transforming experiences. Becoming peer change agents helped them see themselves not merely as students subject to adult authority but as contributors to the quality of school culture.

These narratives illustrate how participation in cultural construction can generate the kind of intense and identity relevant experience that supports deeper cultural change.

4.5 *School-Culture Literacy as an Emergent Capacity*

The fifth finding is the emergence of school-culture literacy: the capacity of educational actors to understand, evaluate, and intentionally shape the symbolic environment of their school. School-culture literacy was most visible among teachers deeply involved in SRA programs and among students engaged in peer-led anti-bullying activities. These actors were able to translate abstract policy values into concrete school practices, interpret the symbolic effects of routine interactions, and recognize contradictions between formal claims and lived experience.

School-culture literacy was not evenly distributed. Some stakeholders still treated SRA primarily as a formal program, while others understood it as a continuous cultural process. This unevenness suggests that sustainable SRA implementation requires not only policy compliance but also deliberate cultivation of interpretive capacity among teachers, students, parents, and administrators.

4.6 *Discussion*

The findings support the argument that SRA implementation should be conceptualized as a cultural and interpretive process rather than as a bureaucratic compliance exercise. Prior studies have emphasized the importance of child-friendly policies, school safety, anti-violence programs, and stakeholder participation [26], [27], [28], [29]. This study extends that literature by showing how such elements become meaningful through everyday symbolic practices and stakeholder interpretation. A school may formally meet SRA indicators, yet its culture becomes genuinely child-friendly only when protection, recognition, participation, and care are repeatedly performed and recognized in daily school life.

The multivocal character of stakeholder meanings has important theoretical implications. Rather than viewing different interpretations as obstacles, schools can treat them as resources for cultural development. Teachers emphasize pedagogy, students emphasize lived recognition, parents emphasize safety, and administrators emphasize organizational systems. A sustainable child-friendly culture requires a dialogic process that integrates these meanings into a shared yet flexible cultural framework. This aligns with constructivist perspectives that emphasize meaning-making as relational and situated [30], [31], [32].

The findings also highlight the importance of symbolic micro-practices. Greetings, disciplinary conversations, peer support, classroom recognition, and student-led anti-bullying activities may appear minor compared with formal policy

documents, but they are central mechanisms through which school culture is reproduced. This finding resonates with studies on child-friendly school implementation and character education, which show that habitual practices and relational climates are key to developing inclusive and safe learning environments [33], [34].

Practically, schools should strengthen SRA implementation by developing school-culture literacy. This can be achieved through structured reflection sessions for teachers, student-led cultural review forums, parent dialogue groups, and school-wide cultural self-assessment. Such activities would help stakeholders identify symbolic practices that support or undermine child-friendly values. Policy makers should also revise SRA assessment mechanisms so they do not rely exclusively on formal documentation but include evidence of lived culture, student voice, relational safety, and stakeholder meaning-making.

This study has several limitations. First, it focuses on a single private senior high school in Medan; therefore, the findings are analytically rather than statistically generalizable. Second, the multicultural and urban characteristics of the school may shape meanings of child-friendly culture differently from rural or more socioeconomically constrained schools. Third, although triangulation was used, the study remains interpretive and context-bound. Future research should compare multiple SRA schools across regions, examine longitudinal cultural change after SRA designation, and investigate how student-led cultural initiatives influence school climate over time.

5. **Conclusion**

This study concludes that child-friendly culture in Indonesian SRA-designated schools is best understood as a living school culture continuously constructed, negotiated, and reproduced through everyday symbolic interactions among stakeholders. At SMA Swasta Harapan Mandiri Medan, teachers, students, parents, and administrators attached different yet interrelated meanings to child-friendly culture, shaped by their institutional roles, biographical experiences, and social positions. These meanings became visible through symbolic practices such as greeting routines, respectful disciplinary communication, anti-bullying participation, student recognition, and organizational efforts to institutionalize protection and participation. The study further shows that genuine SRA implementation depends on the development of school-culture literacy, namely the ability of school actors to understand, evaluate, and intentionally shape the symbolic environment of schooling. Accordingly, child-friendly schooling should not be reduced to administrative designation or program compliance; it must be cultivated through sustained relational practices, reflective stakeholder dialogue, and institutional commitment to transforming everyday school life

into a culture of care, recognition, safety, and participation.

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