

PRIMARY RESEARCH

The impact of volunteer programs in improving literacy and reading engagement among children in rural areas of Indonesia

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Abstract

This study examines the role of volunteer programs in enhancing literacy and fostering reading engagement among children in rural areas. Illiteracy and a lack of interest in reading are problems that frequently affect less-developed regions, often because they do not have adequate access to education or assistance. This research is about an Educational Program designed by the Independence Volunteer Program to prevent these problems when they come later in life for people who live off the land and breed parasites. This research uses a qualitative research method. The case study approach was used for this particular project, which included in-depth interviews with the founder of Literasi Lumbung Lombok, the project leader, the participants of the Independence Volunteer Program, the students, observations, and documentary analysis. It is recommended that volunteer participation have a major impact on community educational development in rural areas, particularly when tailored to local circumstances. Highlights of the findings include a marked increase in children's reading interest, the development of basic literacy skills, an increase in community ownership and sustainability, and the promotion of enthusiasm. This paper introduces a common ground for those who require similar measures in order to repeat such programs, offering a model of enduring success in alleviating illiteracy among groups outside the mainstream society.

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INTRODUCTION

The problem of the low literacy rate in rural areas is still a priority issue in Indonesia, in which poor accessibility to educational resources is caused by many children in rural areas who have difficulty developing literacy (Nasrullah, Laksono, Prayogi, Parmin, & Inayatillah, 2024). The score of Indonesia's literacy-based result of the 2022 Program of International Student Assessment (PISA) also reflects a low position compared with other countries, with an average score of 15-year-old 359 in reading compared to 476 points, the average of OECD countries, even becoming the lowest session between the PISA results in the previous years (PISA, 2024).

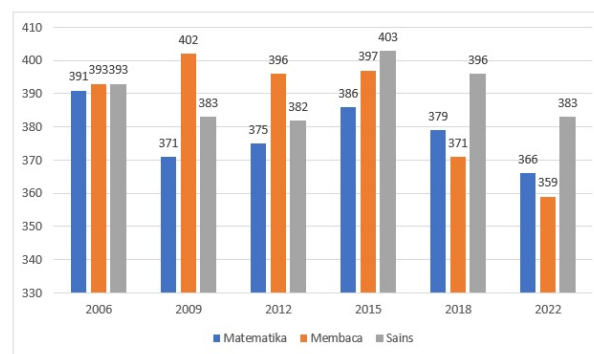


FIGURE 1. Percentage of Indonesia's PISA Score from Year to Year

It is a general rule of thumb that the bad results of a bachelor from rural Indonesia, in particular, reflect they are able to recognize only the most basic information out of a given line

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chronicle, not critical or true understanding of poor literacy skills in these areas means that children receive no supplementing materials for reading environments have minimal access to trained educators, and all the adults nearby must struggle just to get by: under such circumstances logic cannot take hold.

These are unhealthy conditions not only for children's learning but also for their chances of ever reaching their potential or at least becoming citizens who do not live off others (Muttaqin, 2018). However, even when measures are taken to break the cycle, some emergencies still invariably occur. Moreover, in combination with poor economic conditions, it can be difficult, if not impossible, for wide-ranging reform (Khalifatussalam, 2021; Nurcahyoko, Anniurwanda, & Sudirjo, 2024).

The need for such can be seen in the literacy program of the Indonesian government, such as the National Literacy Movement (*Gerakan Literasi Nasional*) (Tebay, 2023) and the setup of the Community Reading Garden (*Taman Bacaan Masyarakat*) (Rohman & Lusiana, 2017).

These initiatives seek to develop a reading culture among students by offering surplus reading materials, staging reading activities and promoting participation in activities for learning based on reading. The government is striving to help improve students' reading and bridge the education gap between urban and rural areas through these initiatives.

While well-intentioned, these programs have various restrictions that hinder their ultimate effectiveness. Lack of funds (Nugrahaeni & Wiarsih, 2023), resource inequality (Kadir & Wibowo, 2024), and inadequate infrastructure (Sari, Winasis, Pratiwi, Nuryanto, et al., 2024) frequently prevent their extension to the remotest, most disadvantaged sections of heathenry. In addition, teachers are not trained to implement innovative literacy strategies because there are no opportunities for professional development (Xu, 2024). As a result, the benefits of all these government programs are only partly achieved, and large portions of the rural population remain without written languages. These challenges cry out for both more help to be given to literacy programs and new ideas that will increase effectiveness and sustainability of such work.

In view of this, volunteers have become an increasingly important additional force to help village children improve literacy. Another distinction between volunteers is that they offer literacy in smaller classes and so are more flexible than state teachers. Such activities include interactive reading sessions or literacy workshops, access to a range of reading materials, and so on. (Fitzgerald, Robillard, & O'Grady,

2018; Rifanto, Hufad, & Hasanah, 2024).

Earlier research has pointed out the positive role played by volunteer systems. Organizing community reading parks with volunteers can, according to Nur'aeni, Nurhayati, and Ansori (2023), create flexible, supportive reading atmospheres which help to raise children's interest in reading. This, in turn, will improve their reading ability.

Similarly, Jazadi et al. (2023) showed that interactive games like story-telling and story-telling enhance involvement and performance in the reading process among low-income students. Finally, Nurhidayati and Yasmin (2024) noted that volunteer-led stories improve both reading ability and social skills, especially in rural areas where encouragement for children to engage actively in reading activities is almost lacking.

The low literacy rate in Indonesia, according to the findings of Puslitjakdikbud (Education and Culture Policy Research Center), is largely due to cultural factors (Solihin, Utama, Pratiwi, & Novirina, 2019); therefore, a community-based approach to education is appropriate, particularly in those areas which are disadvantaged but as a result of being all things, nowhere at all but nowhere. In these areas, school interventions must be supplemented by active participation on the part of the community. This research is intended to build up knowledge about how volunteer and community participation can help increase children's literacy as well as their interest in reading in rural areas. The primary purpose of this study is to discover the relationship between volunteer activity and the literacy development of children and how volunteers can increase children's literacy development.

That research will also look at the positive effect of volunteer action community participation on children's literacy in poor areas, emphasizing collaborative strategies for meeting illiteracy-related challenges within such areas.

RESEARCH MODEL

Taking a qualitative approach, this study is an attempt to understand social phenomena through experience and meaning. The researchers collected information from the questions or responses of participants. How Sugiyono (2017) The aim was to grasp trends in phenomena: data was drawn from interviews and documentation and organized into narrative form using the case study method. The individual stories of people living in a particular period and place, their loves and hates, customs or practices, including some aspects that might have been neither learned nor understood for generations (Creswell, Hanson, Clark Plano, & Morales, 2007). By doing so, the study aims to yield an ex-

haustive, multifaceted understanding of social and cultural dynamics taking place within different communities.

A village in Sengkerang is where the main case data was collected directly from scholar interviews and the research team. Key informants were the founder of Literasi Lumbung Lombok, the project leader, volunteers for independence programs, and local students. To ensure the data is authentic and reliable, observation and interviews closely matched documentary records from a range of sources being studied. This assures the results are credible, multi-faceted, and comprehensive with respect to its objects of inquiry. In this way, the study aims to offer not only a stand-alone but also a clear understanding of the impact of volunteer programs on children's reading practices and literacy among rural people generally. Through such a practice, it also seeks to describe both difficulties faced by literacy projects for rural children - and what hope lies ahead within the community's educational practices.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Human Resource Potential and Challenges in Sengkerang Village

Sengkerang Village, located in East Praya Sub-district, Central Lombok Regency, West Nusa Tenggara Province, has considerable human resource potential, especially among children who have a high spirit of learning. In this village, there is the Literasi Lumbung Lombok, which acts as a forum for children's character development.

The foundation is also a partner in the implementation of various programs, with support from local youth groups. The social life of the people of Sengkerang Village is similar to that of the Sasak community in general, where human resource development is still very limited due to the lack of access to information about the development of the outside world.

Most of the people in Sengkerang Village work as farmers. Many children in this village come from broken home families, orphaned or abandoned by parents who migrate, so their psychological and motoric growth is often hampered. This condition poses its own challenges in an effort to build the future of these children. Therefore, it is very important to empower and develop the character of children in Sengkerang Village to help them achieve their best potential.

Increasing Reading Engagement among Rural Children

The results showed that the volunteer independence program effectively increased children's involvement in reading in Sengkerang Village. Through interactive reading sessions, philanthropic students play a big role for children

who have weak interest or none at all in reading activities, beginning to show more active participation above all out of all children passing through the outermost of this station (Anwar, Rukmana, Saepudin, Khadijah, & Vanamamalai, 2023). Through observations, the volunteers were seen making use of novel methods, such as games and pictures in their reading, which was also full of meaning to children. This is quite distinct from the traditional methods, which children often feel are stiff and lifeless (Fitzgerald et al., 2018). The face-to-face interaction at close quarters between volunteers and children also provides a forgiving environment, so reading is worth the drive as far as children are concerned.

They personally felt the change in children's attitudes towards reading. Many children talked of their newfound excitement and willingness to explore through all forms of reading materials that were provided by volunteers.

As a result of these materials, children could look into things that interested them so they would be happy to read. This increased their inner motivation for reading and speaks well for the times.

It also shows kids today are more clever readers, not just of words but of everything around them (Rifanto et al., 2024). Thus, volunteer-based programs are shown to considerably enhance children's reading engagement within a flexible and interactive framework, particularly when they are linked directly with the children's hobbies or that of their local environment.

To cater more to the children's interests, volunteers also emphasized how this is key. By designing activities that seemed interesting to students and which they could relate to, the volunteers were also able to be accepted into a deeper level of play, interacting with the children on such terms as reading properly (Jazadi et al., 2023). The technique of flexibility further made literacy activities more appealing both to villages and volunteer-run programs and also gave rural children a much-needed push on their reading habits.

Compared to the standardized environments of formal education, community volunteer programs have a special flexibility that allows them to address children who are missed in the formal system.

This is in line with research findings influenced by community-led programming, which has more success in reaching vulnerable sectors because it can adapt to local conditions or demands (Solihin et al., 2019).



FIGURE 2. Reading Session

Developing Basic Literacy Skills

There was a significant improvement in the basic reading and writing skills of the children involved. Volunteers hosted one of the literacy workshops that focused on key skills such as vocabulary development, sentence structure, and reading comprehension. Slowly, young people who had been at an early disadvantage began to know their letters, fashion sentences, and understand simple texts (Lindo, Weiser, Cheatham, & Allor, 2018). Those workshops often integrated local concerns and speech patterns to make it easier for children to understand and familiarize themselves with the learning process.

The design also reflects these findings, with attention being paid to rural children's literacy gaps. In so doing, nurturing and living contexts allowed children to tie together literacy concepts with what they do daily, thus making learning more enjoyable (French, Farrell, McCormack, Nic Mhuirí, & Sheil, 2022; F. A. Jam, Singh, Ng, & Aziz, 2018). This way, together with regular prompting from volunteers, the process was a slow but steady one. Context-based approaches mean children can get closer to the material, making it easier for them to understand and remember.

Furthermore, it was largely due to the skills training gained by those volunteers that we were able to achieve good results in this field. Armed with novel literacy techniques such as story It is, role-playing, and interactive exercises (Nurhidayati & Yasmin, 2024), the volunteers created a mood that combined study with pleasure. These methods enabled the

volunteers to get around learning obstacles, making the process more enjoyable and more widely interactive. The constant presence of volunteers meant the children had permanent support, thus helping them to read better and better as time went on. This reliable continuous backup made it possible for the children to advance further in their literacy studies year by year, bit by bit building up confidence and insight into materials.



FIGURE 3. Learning Alphabet in English

Building Community Ownership and Sustainability

The research also found that community attachment and a sense of ownership were strengthened through volunteer work. With active participation, members of the community, including parents and local political leaders, gradually began to take responsibility for literacy programs as well. In collaboration with parents, volunteers regularly suggested that parents take up their children's home reading program. This joint effort created an environment in which readings can be given at any time, spreading literacy into extracurricular life and planting reading as a desirable habit among community members (Wessel-Powell et al., 2023; F. Jam et al., 2014).

In sustaining these literacy programs, community ownership played a crucial role. Each reading session is not only made available to parents of the child participants but also attended by local leaders and PTA chairmen as session organizers in espoused involvement, thereby reducing their own burden. This eventually led to discussions about how the program would be kept going when the volunteers left, at what we find is a foundational period over a very extended length of time (Rahman, Al-Qasri, & Ofara, 2023; Khalid, Mahmood, Atta, & Halima, 2021). Another point: The Foundation's continuous involvement with the community underscored that literacy is crucial to the future of its children, instilling a supportive attitude toward the program itself. Under the program, parents become more deeply involved in their children's education. Some parents even took

the initiative to lead small reading groups outside formal sessions, extending the program's reach and creating community-based habits of literacy. This grassroots development bodes well for the future, showing how to make volunteer programs engage local people and put educational programs on a more secure footing over time.

Increasing Children's Enthusiasm and Positive Attitude towards Learning

Another significant result of this program, relying as it does on volunteers, was the large and sustained increase in child learning energy. Over time, children who had paid little attention to school or literacy work became more active in participating as they were now more enthusiastic about the problems ahead. The interactive, enjoyable volunteer classes inspired the children to look at learning in a new way. What had earlier been seen as difficult or boring work gradually turned into something they looked forward to, turning the natural desire to learn into an enjoyable and rewarding experience (Nelson, 2023).

The interactive nature of the sessions played a key role in this shift. By providing opportunities for creative self-expression, the activities allowed children to develop a sense of confidence in their ability to learn new skills. Story-telling, role-playing, and group-based exercises created a platform for children to connect with their peers, adding a social dimension to the learning experience. This social interaction was particularly valuable in further enhancing their enthusiasm for learning. Rather than feeling isolated or pressured, children began associating learning with fun, growth, and collaboration (Rofiq, Nisa, & Muid, 2024).

The interactive nature of the sessions had a major role to play. Through creative self-expression, the various activities gave children confidence in their own ability to learn new skills. They employed story-telling, role-playing, and group participation to create a platform for children to interact with their friends. This added a social element growing up was one more facet in their learning experience. This social interaction further intensified children's enthusiasm for learning. Instead of feeling alone and under pressure, children began to associate learning with joy and growth, and to collaborate with each other in new ways.

This new pleasure in learning brought great confidence to the children's hearts. The more they became infatuated with this learning, so too did their academic self-assurance improve. This blossoming confidence was also reflected in how they chose to tackle more demanding reading material and take part in fresh literacy exercises. Once unable even to perform simple tasks, children began to deal with more

complicated exercises with interest, revelling in their discovery of newfound abilities. The social and interactive aspects of the program not only made learning more fun but also provided children with the emotional and psychological support to face hurdles in literacy head-on. This resulted in a positive, lasting change in all their ideas about education, which went beyond the walls of their classes and fostered continuous learning.



FIGURE 4. The enthusiasm of Sengkerang village children in joining the independence volunteer program

CONCLUSION

This research shows that volunteer programs have significant positive effect on both improving children's literacy and sparking interest in literacy among rural children. The findings indicated that children made significant improvements in basic reading and writing skills after repeating non-timed drills during self-initiated oral story-telling. The volunteer programs' personalized and flexible methods effectively address the one-of-a-kind literacy challenges in rural regions, giving learning a more joyful and meaningful connotation. With the help of volunteers, local residents and parents participated in and supported literacy programs, so these projects became something that belonged to the entire community.

By working together people were also able to ensure that these programs expanded successfully; thus they imparted a beneficial long-term influence on rural community educational development.

The results of this study offer substantial lessons and advice for policy makers and educators seeking to create similar projects. Main points include the value of tailored,

community-led methods in resolving illiteracy problems in poor regions.

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