

Illiteracy Eradication Strategies in Indonesian Rural Schools Using the I Love Reading (SSM) Curriculum

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Abstract

This study examines the implementation of the SSM curriculum in eradicating illiteracy in rural Indonesian schools and identifies contributing factors to illiteracy in these areas. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with teachers, school principals, parents, and students, alongside direct observations and document analysis. The findings highlight challenges such as children dropping out to assist with family livelihoods, inadequate teacher training, and the lack of a specialized curriculum. Implementation of the SSM curriculum has shown promising results in enhancing both student and teacher engagement by employing phonics, local wisdom-based media, and adaptable teaching resources. This study underscores the significance of contextually relevant curricula in addressing illiteracy in rural areas and aims to contribute to strategies for improving education quality in similar contexts.

Keywords: Illiteracy Eradication, SSM Curriculum, Rural Education, Indonesia

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Introduction

Education plays a pivotal role in improving the quality of human resources and life. However, in rural Indonesia, education quality remains alarmingly low, hindered by factors such as difficult geographical conditions, lack of educational infrastructure, low teacher quality and welfare, and minimal government attention. These issues contribute to high illiteracy rates, particularly in remote areas.

As of 2021, 9.24% of Indonesians aged 45 and above were illiterate, while 1.50% of those aged 15–59 years remained illiterate in 2022 (BPS, 2022). The productive age group (15–19 years) exhibited the highest illiteracy rates, indicating a missed opportunity for human resource development. Poor literacy and numeracy exacerbate social exclusion and alienation, particularly in disadvantaged communities (Hajaj, 2002).

Factors Contributing to Illiteracy in Rural Indonesia

Various factors contribute to this issue, including lack of motivation, varying intelligence levels, and external influences from family, school, and community environments (Sartina et al., 2020). Economic constraints and limited access to education historically have also played a role (Waziroh, 2021). To address this problem, government and non-formal institutions have implemented literacy programs, though these often face challenges such as inadequate learning hours and low student motivation. Successful interventions have included involving religious leaders to increase learner motivation (Anto, 2020), optimizing literacy activities in early childhood education and elementary schools, and providing reading materials (Sudarwita, 2022).

Implementation of the SSM Curriculum in Rural Schools

Several recent studies have explored innovative approaches to eradicate illiteracy in remote areas of Indonesia. The use of flashcards has shown promising results in improving basic reading and writing skills in Sorong district, West Papua (Kasri et al., 2023). Integrating local culture and activities into literacy instructional design has been effective in improving adult reading skills in disadvantaged areas (Hadianto et al., 2022). In Papua, utilizing folklore and mother tongue materials has been proposed as a culturally appropriate strategy to strengthen literacy programs and preserve local languages (Yektingtyas-Modouw & Karna, 2013). Environment-based literacy programs have also been implemented, as seen in Owata Village, Gorontalo Province, where the surrounding environment became a learning resource for vocabulary and sentence acquisition, resulting in reduced illiteracy rates and increased awareness of environmental conservation (Supriyadi & Kadir, 2020).

Over three years of living and working in 3T areas (Outermost, Frontier, and Disadvantaged), including Nias (North Sumatra), East Nusa Tenggara, and the Mentawai Islands (West Sumatra), the author observed a persistent issue of illiteracy in rural Indonesian schools, where many students in grades 3–5 still cannot read, write, or perform basic arithmetic. These students are often promoted despite lacking foundational skills, as formal schools struggle to address their needs due to limited teacher resources, inadequate teaching materials, and the absence of a special curriculum. Factors such as students missing school to help their families, the blending of illiterate and literate students in one classroom without differentiated instruction, and teachers focusing only on academically capable students exacerbate the problem. Furthermore, the lack of teacher training, low teacher welfare, and insufficient

learning media contribute to the ongoing challenge of illiteracy eradication in these rural areas.

To address the problem of illiteracy in rural areas, it is necessary to develop an effective literacy curriculum that suits local needs. The SSM (Saya Suka Membaca) curriculum offers a step-by-step approach to teaching children to read, utilising learning media based on local wisdom. Research shows that local context-based approaches can increase participation and success of literacy programmes. For example, research by (Hiryanto, 2009) on the illiteracy eradication programme through Kuliah Kerja Nyata (KKN) in Bantul showed success because it integrated local themes and relevant learning resources. In addition, the social context-based education theory proposed by Freire, (2017) emphasises the importance of education that is relevant to students' life experiences and cultural backgrounds, which can increase their motivation and participation in learning.

The functional curriculum theory described by Kress (2003) is also relevant in this context, where literacy is not only about the ability to read and write, but also about the ability to use these skills in practical situations. The active learning approach proposed by John Dewey (1938), which involves direct experience and active interaction of students with learning materials, has been shown to be effective in improving literacy skills. That literacy curriculum interventions that focus on local needs can reduce illiteracy rates in different community groups, emphasising the importance of curriculum development that is appropriate to students' social and cultural contexts (Dewey, 2022).

The SSM (Saya Suka Membaca) curriculum offers a potential answer. Designed to foster literacy through phonics, interactive media, and local wisdom, the curriculum has demonstrated success in improving literacy rates in diverse contexts across Indonesia. This study explores its implementation in rural schools to identify its impact and potential as a model for addressing illiteracy nationwide. In 2018, SSM Curriculum materials were used in the teaching process for more than 4,500 children in 12 Indonesian provinces, ranging from North Sumatra (Nias) to Papua (Merauke), more than doubling the number compared to the previous year, where we served 1,800 children in 2017. The SSM curriculum has provided more than 6000 reading books to partners, including UNICEF and Room to Read. Therefore, researchers are interested in examining how the strategy of eradicating illiteracy in Indonesian rural schools using the SSM curriculum.

Conclusion

The research method used is qualitative research with a case study approach. According to Creswell, in Sugiyono (2023: 45) a case study is a type of qualitative research, where the author conducts in-depth exploration of programs, events, processes, activities for individuals related to time and activities. Case studies aim to study intensively the background of the problem of the current situation and position of an event, as well as the interaction of certain social environments that are as they are. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with rural teachers (20 people), local teachers (4 people), principals in rural schools (3 people), parents (5 people) and students in grades 3-5 who were still illiterate (25 people) who were the subjects of this study. In addition, direct observation and analysis of related documents were also conducted. All information obtained from the field was verified for accuracy through a data triangulation process.

Based on the results of the analysis conducted by the researcher, several factors were found to influence the presence of illiterate high school students in Indonesian rural schools.

a. Factors Influencing Illiteracy Among High School Students in Rural Indonesia

1. Many students leave school because they have to follow their parents to the plantation or to the forest to harvest or hunt, causing them to miss many lessons and even drop out of school but they can return to the same class or even age-appropriate class whenever they come down from the mountain or return from the forest. This indecisive system creates an imbalance of literacy learning needs in one classroom.
2. Illiterate students and students with good academic abilities are combined in one class and there is no special attention or learning for illiterate children so that illiterate students are only present in the class without being able to participate in learning.
3. Teachers in Indonesia's rural schools have no guidelines, teaching materials, modules and no skills training on how they should eradicate illiteracy in the rural schools where they serve.
4. Teachers' unemployment and students' backgrounds from underprivileged families mean that there is limited access to reading resources and effective learning media for children who cannot read.
5. There are still many teachers who focus only on students whose academic abilities are considered good and ignore students who are difficult to teach calistung since the lower grades.

b. The Stages Undertaken by Rural Teachers in Carrying Out Illiteracy Eradication Strategies Using the SSM Curriculum Are As Follows:

1. Identifying students' reading ability and then grouping students based on SSM curriculum levels, namely letter sound class, syllable class, word and sentence class and independent reading class. So that students in one class can vary in age but almost the same learning needs in literacy.
2. Teaching letter sounds (lL, Kk, Mm, Pp consonant letters and vowels until 26 letters are completed). At this level or stage, letters are not introduced or taught in order A-Z but randomly to prevent students from recognizing letters by memorizing but should remember because of understanding not because of memorization. This stage also learns both lowercase and capital letters at the same time and avoids learning similar letters in close proximity such as nN and Mm. Before starting the lesson, the teacher explains to the students what letters they will learn today. The teacher explains and pronounces several names of objects beginning with the letter L. The teacher invites students to look at several different pictures drawn on the blackboard or pasted on the classroom wall (can be printouts, results drawn by the teacher or can be cutouts from used snack wrappers and then leads students to say together all these objects whether the sound of the initial name of the object is the same or different. For the student activity sheet, there are several activities such as finding and then circling the letter being studied that day among many other letters, collaging letters using origami or other used paper according to the teacher's creativity, sticking letters on dry wooden twigs provided by the teacher (letter trees), games to find letters behind friends' chairs and learning to recognize letters written on leaves. For the letter sound stage, students are invited to sing a letter sound song with the same tone for each letter, only changing the name of the object according to the initial letter being studied at that time. The lyrics of the song are as follows: lL flies flies flies Flies start with L L L L L L That's the letter L.



Figure 1: Origami Letter Collage



Figure 2: Learning the Letter nN

3. Syllables. At this stage, all students from the letter sound class are expected to recognize and be able to write letters. The teacher teaches students to combine two syllables combining consonant letters and vocal letters such as Sa-Pu. In addition to reading aloud combining 2-3 syllables in front of the blackboard, teachers can also provide learning media in the form of letter cards. Letter cards do not have to be purchased but can also be made by yourself with cardboard written with letters using markers.



Figure 3: Reading Two-Syllable Picture Story Words

4. Words and sentences. The learning objectives at this level are for children to: a. Assemble simple syllables to form new words. b. Explore new varieties of syllables (for example, words ending in the syllable "h", or containing "ng"). c. Follow the reading of simple stories. d. Read simple stories together in class and afterwards individually. e. Read simple questions about the stories they read and write the answers. f. Read stories together in class and afterwards individually.



Figure 4: The Child Reads the Sentence Written on the Leaf

5. Independent reading. This is the final level and the goal of all levels of the SSM curriculum. At this level, the learning objectives are for children to achieve several things, including: a. Practice reading independently to improve their ability to read fluently and understand the content. b. Demonstrate their understanding of the reading

material by writing responses to questions about books they have not read before. c. Understand the proper use of capitalization, as well as punctuation marks such as periods, question marks, and exclamation marks. d. Develop an interest and enjoyment in reading as well as the overall learning process.

The conclusion from the results of this study is that there is an increase in the willingness or participation of high grade students (3-5) to take part in learning because the learning process is adjusted to the agreement with students in the afternoon or evening for students who have to go to the forest to hunt or hunt. Students are also happy in the learning process because in one class all have the same learning objectives so that there are no passive students. The enthusiasm of illiterate students to immediately be able to go to the next stage or level is very high because the motivation is to show everyone that they can read and learning to read is fun. Teachers also feel a positive impact when preparing activity sheets or learning media plans for each level of the SSM curriculum because they can be created with materials provided by nature so that teachers are more happy to be able to teach for good without feeling burdened. Teachers who implemented the SSM Curriculum stated that they benefited from a better understanding of reading teaching methods, felt re-inspired, had a more defined vision for the teaching process, and became more efficient in lesson preparation. They also noted that the children they taught progressed in learning to read more quickly and showed greater interest in reading independently.

Related to the above conclusions, some suggestions for rural schools and the government are that schools need to collaborate with the Tuna Aksara Foundation and the local government or Education Office to provide training on the practice-based SSM curriculum to rural teachers so that in the future classroom teachers for low grades are able to cope with student literacy learning from grade 1 and there are no more illiterate students in high grades (3-5). The SSM curriculum demonstrates significant potential in addressing illiteracy in rural Indonesia by leveraging phonics-based instruction, local wisdom, and adaptable teaching methods. This study highlights the urgent need for targeted literacy programs and specialized teacher training in rural areas. By adopting contextually relevant curricula, Indonesia can make substantial progress toward eradicating illiteracy and improving educational equity.

Future research should explore the long-term impact of the SSM curriculum and its scalability to other rural contexts. Collaborative efforts between policymakers, educators, and communities are essential to ensure sustainable and impactful literacy interventions.

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