

## Empowering Communities: A Narrative Inquiry on Educational Volunteers' Role in Literacy Initiatives across Remote Indonesian Regions

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**Abstract:** Education in remote areas, specifically concerning literacy, has emerged as a critical issue on the Indonesian government's agenda, with an urgent need for effective intervention strategies to initiate and sustain literacy movements. Addressing the unique challenges of geographic isolation, limited resources, and local community engagement is pivotal. This study investigates these specific literacy challenges, focusing on remote regions by examining the experiences of three education volunteers in Seram Bagian Timur Regency, Maluku Barat Daya Regency, and Wakatobi Regency. This study employed a narrative inquiry approach to explore the literacy challenges and volunteer experiences in remote areas of Indonesia. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed using the constant comparative method to detail the complex interplay of volunteer background, motivations, encountered obstacles, and community-driven solutions that bolster literacy efforts. Our findings delineate four critical aspects: 1) the diverse backgrounds of the volunteers initiating literacy movements, 2) their intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, 3) the barriers they faced including logistical, cultural, and resource-based challenges, and 4) the significant role of community empowerment in overcoming these barriers and sustaining literacy initiatives. This research suggests that promoting literacy in Indonesia's remote areas can serve as a model for similar efforts elsewhere, ultimately contributing to regional educational development.

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## INTRODUCTION

Indonesia, renowned for its rich cultural heritage and diverse society, is currently facing significant challenges in the area of literacy. A 2019 survey conducted by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), managed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), revealed alarming data that Indonesia ranked 62nd out of 70 countries in terms of literacy. This ranking places Indonesia among the ten countries with the lowest literacy levels (Imran, 2024). Kusumawardani (2022) notes that literacy skills in Indonesia, including numeracy, scientific literacy, and general reading abilities, remain underdeveloped. In response, the Indonesian government now recognizes the importance of enhancing literacy, particularly at the primary school level, as a top priority. Various measures are being implemented to strengthen literacy as a core component of education, with a focus on fostering a love for reading and writing from an early age (Nurmiati et al., 2024). Addressing the low reading interest in Indonesia requires a comprehensive strategy. Various studies indicate that key measures include the implementation of literacy programs, the provision of diverse reading materials, the creation of engaging reading environments, and the utilization of technology to enhance participation (Indrayani, 2023).

The literacy issue in Indonesia is deeply concerning in both urban and remote areas. However, the situation is particularly alarming in remote areas. Education in remote areas plays a crucial role in shaping the literacy landscape of a nation. In Indonesia, the provision of quality education in these areas is essential for improving literacy rates among the local population. Research has indicated that factors such as socioeconomic status, cultural background, and home environment significantly influence the

literacy skills of young students in remote regions (Nurchayoko, 2024). Furthermore, early childhood language development in these areas is closely linked to the prevailing socioeconomic and cultural conditions (Poolman et al., 2019). Efforts to enhance literacy in remote areas have garnered the attention of researchers, with a focus on identifying the factors that influence literacy levels among the community of these regions. Studies emphasize the importance of primary education in these areas, which ensures that residents acquire cultural knowledge and literacy skills (Lu, 2024).

Addressing literacy challenges in rural areas requires a holistic approach that considers the unique characteristics of these communities. Studies have shown that rural populations often have distinct reading habits and educational attitudes that differ significantly from urban settings (Samsuddin et al., 2019). However, data indicating the specific literacy rates and educational outcomes in these regions remain sparse, highlighting a significant gap in our understanding of rural literacy issues. This gap undermines efforts to tailor educational programs effectively and necessitates further investigation into the factors influencing literacy in rural areas.

To bridge this literacy gap between urban and rural communities, it is crucial to adopt a multifaceted approach. This involves upgrading educational infrastructure, supplying high-quality teaching materials, developing teacher training programs, and engaging community stakeholders (Nurchayoko, 2024). Research indicates that initiatives involving peer collaboration and pre-service teacher involvement in literacy practices significantly enhance instructional methods (Ries et al., 2023). Furthermore, empowering communities through early childhood education and community libraries has been shown to have a positive impact on literacy rates (Raharja et al., 2021; Neuman et al., 2008). Empowering communities entails providing individuals with the knowledge and skills necessary to understand and influence social and economic conditions, thereby improving their quality of life (Mulyono, 2024). Recommendations have been put forward to bolster community literacy through strategies centered on engagement and empowerment, underscoring the importance of cultivating literacy skills within these populations (Herry, 2023). Community empowerment efforts centered on advancing literacy, especially within the educational sector, are vital for strengthening individual abilities and fostering social transformation. By combining literacy development with empowerment strategies, communities can achieve significant improvements in educational success and overall quality of life.

This research aims to explore literacy challenges, with a particular focus on remote regions. Through this investigation, the study seeks to provide insights that can guide similar efforts in other remote areas, aiming to enhance literacy skills, educational outcomes, and ultimately, the quality of life in these communities.

## METHOD

This study adopted a narrative inquiry approach to explore the literacy challenges and volunteer experiences in remote areas of Indonesia. This study examined the experiences of three education volunteers placed in Seram Bagian Timur Regency, Maluku Barat Daya Regency, and Wakatobi Regency, aiming to explore their challenges, learning experiences, and contributions to literacy development in remote areas. The research employed the narrative inquiry method. Narrative inquiry method is a qualitative approach that delves into personal experiences and meanings by analysing stories shared by individuals (Jaeni, 2024). This method seeks to understand human experiences by gathering and interpreting the life narratives of participants (Hu, 2023). It involves the examination and categorization of human experiences through shared stories, emphasizing the significance of understanding the narratives individuals construct (Littlefield et al., 2015). Narrative inquiry is not just a method but a comprehensive framework of procedural concepts that prompts researchers to be attentive to the dynamics of storytelling (Stanley, 2008). Recognized as a rapidly evolving research methodology within the social sciences and humanities, narrative inquiry (Xu & Connelly, 2010) provides a valuable approach for researchers to explore people's experiences and gain insights into how individual experiences are influenced by social and institutional narratives (Wen-li, 2019). By blending theoretical perspectives on human life with educational experiences, narrative inquiry sheds light on the lived realities of individuals within an educational context (Clandinin et al., 2007).

Data were collected through in-depth interviews. This research employed the constant comparative

method for data analysis. Developed by Glaser and Strauss, the constant comparative method is a qualitative research technique that systematically compares data to uncover similarities and differences (Wepa & Wilson, 2019). This approach enables researchers to analyze data throughout the research process, aiding in the identification of patterns and relationships within the data (Ramalu et al., 2021). By repeatedly comparing data points, researchers can establish categories and themes that contribute to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Lassig, 2022). Additionally, the constant comparative method has been applied in various contexts, such as analyzing consumer decision-making processes (Anninou & Foxall, 2017), exploring the experiences of pre-service teachers in classroom settings (Yaşar, 2019), and examining the influence of position and identity on women's lives (Baumgartner, 2017). This method supports a thorough analysis by continuously comparing incidents and concepts, leading to the development of higher-level categories for theoretical integration (Lassig, 2022).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the writer will elaborate on the findings of the research conducted on three participants who have dedicated themselves to serving in remote areas, with efforts to improve literacy by establishing libraries. The results of the study are presented below, categorized into several sub-sections.

### Findings

The findings of this study are categorized into several themes. The first section will outline the background of the volunteers who initiated the movement in remote areas. These findings are based on data obtained from three participants, each of whom has served as a teacher in various social programs, such as Indonesia Mengajar and Sekolah Guru Indonesia. A detailed account of the volunteers' experiences in pioneering literacy movements in remote areas will be presented in the following sections.

#### 1. Volunteers Background

Everything a person does is inevitably influenced by their background, including the literacy movements initiated by volunteers in remote areas. Among the three participants, their motivations for engaging in volunteer work varied. P-1 explained that their strong commitment to volunteerism stems from a personal experience with a disaster in their village, which led to a realization of the importance of contributing to recovery efforts, particularly in helping children overcome trauma.

*Generally, my love for the world of volunteerism began when a few years ago, the Wae Ela tragedy struck my village. The collapse of a natural dam caused a massive flood that swept away nearly 500 houses, including my family's house. At that time, many volunteers stayed in our village for months, even years. I, too, was a victim, but I chose to become a volunteer as well. I was almost swept away by the flood while attempting to cross the river to deliver food to some refugees on the other side. This moment shaped me significantly, deepening my sensitivity and commitment to volunteerism (P-1, Personal Interview, August 5, 2024).*

Unlike P-1, P-2's story was different. Coming from a family that initially placed little emphasis on education, P-2 felt that education was the key to changing the course of her life. Eventually, fate led her to become a volunteer in an educational program in a remote area.

*From elementary school through university, I was able to pursue my education with the help of government scholarships, which instilled in me a sense of duty to serve Indonesia. I felt called to become more involved in the field of education, particularly in children's literacy, especially in remote areas (P-2, Personal Interview, August 5, 2024).*

P-2 expressed that her thoughts about the conditions in remote areas and their desire to contribute to development there motivated them to enrol in a social program and initiate a literacy movement. This sentiment was expressed in the following interview excerpt:

*At that time, I wondered if many young people were heading to the capital, who would develop the*

*remote areas? After all, Indonesia is not just Jakarta and Java; Papua and Maluku were also part of Indonesia. I was convinced that many children in remote areas had dreams that needed to be kept alive, and perhaps my presence could help keep their dreams burning. This thinking eventually led me to apply for Indonesia Mengajar as a young teacher, where I was placed in Maluku Barat Daya and began a literacy movement in the remote area regions (P-2, Personal Interview, August 5, 2024).*

A similar experience was shared by P-3. Although she did not initially have a background in education, their involvement in a social program to empower communities in remote areas eventually required them to initiate an educational social program, which was closely related to literacy movements.

*I didn't have an educational background, but after graduation, I joined the Sekolah Guru Indonesia program. It was through this program that I learned about education and community empowerment, which I then applied during my one-year assignment in Wakatobi, Southeast Sulawesi (P-3, Personal Interview, August 5, 2024).*

From the stories above, it can be concluded that P-1's path was deeply influenced by a personal tragedy that sparked a strong desire to help others, especially children who needed support. P-2 had different stories when she thought about the opportunities that she received in her own education, it fueled a passion to give back to communities that are often overlooked. As for P-3, even though she didn't originally come from an educational background, her work in community empowerment led her to see literacy as a powerful way to make a real difference in people's lives.

## **2. Volunteers Motivation**

The second aspect shared by these volunteers was the pivotal moment that motivated them to take action and initiate literacy movements in challenging and remote areas. P-2 mentioned that in the area where she served, the infrastructure was significantly lacking compared to her hometown.

*In Lakor Island, there was no electricity, let alone the internet. The only lighting at night came from oil lamps, and the village head's house was the only place with a generator. There were no markets on Lakor Island, and there wasn't a single bookstore in the entire Maluku Barat Daya Regency (P-2, Personal Interview, August 5, 2024).*

P-3 experienced a similar situation in her assigned area. She noted that the only bookstore in her area was located in the local market, and for a more comprehensive bookstore, they had to travel to Kendari, the capital of Southeast Sulawesi.

*Even if there were books, they were of basic quality. The available books were very limited and expensive. In more remote islands, these books were non-existent. I happened to be placed in Wanci, the capital of Wakatobi Regency, so there was at least one bookstore in the market. But for those placed in areas like Kalaidupa, Tomia, or Binongko, there was not a single bookstore. To find one, you had to go to Kendari (P-3, Personal Interview, August 5, 2024).*

P-1 also faced the same issue of book scarcity in the area where she was assigned. Driven by a desire for change and to ensure the availability of books, she reached out to her network to send books to the community library she established in her placement area.

*The children here were simple, far from modernity, innocent, and sweet, which made me long to visit and meet them again. We learnt while playing, whether indoors or outdoors, including in the forest and on the beach. The children had a strong desire to learn, but they were lacking access to books for reading. Thinking about this, I remembered that there were still many areas in Maluku with similar conditions. Since then, I had communicated with friends both in and outside of Maluku to work together, despite the limitations, to collect and send books to these areas (P-1, Personal Interview, August 5, 2024).*

The scarcity of books in these remote areas motivated P-1, P-2, and P-3 to establish Community

Library in their placement areas. They shared a common goal: to provide reading materials for children in these remote areas, far from urban areas, so that in the future, these children can dream big and contribute to the development of their areas. In the following interview excerpt, P-2 explains what motivated her to start a literacy movement.

*During the first month, I struggled internally to accept the situation because it was so vastly different from the life I had known. But after much adaptation and entrusting everything to Allah, I eventually realized that I was here to bring a little bit of hope and colour to the lives of the children and the community. This realization was what drove me to fight for literacy. If not me, then who else would start? Those words constantly motivated me to seek solutions and map out the type of literacy initiatives that would be suitable for this community (P-2, Personal Interview, August 5, 2024).*

Among the three participants, there was a common realization that the availability of books in their placement areas was extremely limited, to the point of being almost nonexistent, as there were no bookstores available. Even in instances where books were available, the quality often failed to meet basic standards. This awareness served as the foundation for their decision to establish community libraries.

### **3. Volunteers Challenges**

Establishing a community library in placement areas was no easy task, particularly when it came to encouraging children to develop the habit of reading. Below are some of the challenges faced by volunteers in their efforts to foster a reading culture among children in these areas.

*The first challenge was the limited access to educational resources, especially reading materials for children. This lack of access often led children to spend excessive time watching television, with content that was generally not educational. Additionally, the parents' traditional mindset posed another obstacle, as many children, especially girls, were often allowed to drop out of school after completing only elementary or middle school. In some cases, parents intentionally prevented their daughters from continuing their education, believing that they should instead help at home until they married. This contributed to the concerning prevalence of early marriages and limited education (P-1, Personal Interview, August 5, 2024).*

A similar situation is observed in P-2's placement area, where the community's level of education and the lack of recognition of literacy's importance posed significant challenges. This is reflected in the following interview excerpt from P-2:

*In addition, the limited access to information, both digital and printed, was a major issue, particularly in remote areas where there was no internet or electricity. The only solution was to rely on printed books. Therefore, the greatest challenge to promoting literacy there was the lack of facilities to support basic literacy development, compounded by the community's mindset that higher education was not urgent, leading to a lack of concern for the importance of literacy (P-2, Personal Interview, August 5, 2024).*

P-3 faced similar challenges upon arrival, where the children's literacy levels were very low. Another issue of concern was the presence of a neglected and underutilized library.

*One of the initial challenges was the role of parents and teachers. In that area, parents did not introduce their children to books or engage them in literacy activities. At the school where I was placed, there was a library, but it was covered in dust, as if it had never been used. This was the first challenge I had to address (P-3, Personal Interview, August 5, 2024).*

The challenges faced by P-1, P-2, and P-3 had a common thread that was the involvement of parents in their children's education was significantly low. Beyond the lack of parental support, the volunteers also encountered challenges related to maintaining consistency, as highlighted by P-3:

*The greatest challenge was maintaining consistency and fostering enthusiasm in children to*

*engage in reading and literacy activities from an early age. When children became accustomed to using mobile phones and parents simply gave them phones to keep them quiet and obedient, this was not a real solution (P-3, Personal Interview, August 5, 2024).*

P-2 faced a different challenge in that, with only a one-year duration in her placement area, she felt the urgency to find a local leader who could take over the management of the community library after her departure. This presented a significant challenge, as it required identifying a local leader who shared the same vision.

*The biggest challenge was to keep the enthusiasm of the local leaders in managing this community library, ensuring that positive activities continued. Given that I was only assigned to this area for one year, and Reverend Emma would also eventually be transferred, although we did not know when, we had to constantly search for a local leader who shared our vision. Additionally, during the planting and harvesting seasons, children's afternoon activities often came to a halt, and restarting them was usually fraught with difficulties. This was also a serious challenge when considering the sustainability of the project (P-2, Personal Interview, August 5, 2024).*

The requirement for children to assist their parents during the planting and harvesting seasons posed another challenge, as during these times, activities at the community library, particularly afternoon programs, were hindered. In the other hand, P-1 identified a different challenge related to the limited access to books and the high cost of books in Maluku, as noted in the following interview excerpt.

*The challenge lay in the limited access to books, especially children's books. There was also the issue of funding, as the cost of books was particularly high in Maluku. Additionally, travel expenses and the difficulty of accessing island regions posed significant challenges (P-1, Personal Interview, August 5, 2024).*

Transportation access also presented a challenge, considering the archipelagic conditions, which required adjusting to the tides and incurred high costs. This highlights the challenges faced by children in remote areas in their efforts to obtain a quality education, due to the geographically inaccessible locations of these regions. The difficulty in reaching these areas leads to delays in book distribution, resulting in higher book prices and frequent shortages.

#### **4. Community Empowerment**

In their efforts to improve literacy among children in their placement areas, it would have been challenging to achieve success without involving the local community. This understanding led P-1, P-2, and P-3 to actively encourage community participation in supporting and becoming a part of the literacy movement they initiated. P-3, who was assigned to Wakatobi Regency at the time, began by mobilizing the school community first, before eventually extending the efforts to the surrounding community.

*At the outset of the literacy movement, it was initiated within school environments. Once the students became acquainted with the world of literacy, such as reading books, we then approached the community with the agenda of establishing Istana Baca. In this venture, we sought communities that supported our endeavours. Subsequently, the children enjoyed participating in mobile libraries, allowing us to travel from one village to another to promote reading activities through Istana Baca (P-3, Personal Interview, August 5, 2024).*

A different situation occurred in a village named Keta. P-1 was initially welcomed warmly upon arriving there, as a literacy movement had already been pioneered by the community in the village. Throughout the literacy movement in Keta, the community offered full support. This was a marked change from prior attitudes, where education was not deemed important.

*We were well received. Indeed, before my colleagues and I arrived, there was already a movement. We simply volunteered to continue the good work initiated by our peers in Keta. Full support was obtained. Where once parents did not consider education to be significant, it was seen as a*

necessity (P-1, Personal Interview, August 5, 2024).

As conveyed by P-1, the literacy movement originated from the village youths, thus generating greater enthusiasm compared to external initiators. P-1 emphasized that he played a significant role in providing training for management and activities conducted in the community library, which could then be carried out by them. This was detailed in the following interview excerpt.

*In Keta, the community library was initiated by the village youth themselves. If it were outsiders coming in to start this movement, it might not have turned out the same. Therefore, my colleagues and I merely provided support through various training sessions and the like, for them to implement subsequently (P-1, Personal Interview, August 5, 2024).*

In contrast to the ease encountered by P-1 in Seram Bagian Timur Regency, P-2, who was stationed in Maluku Barat Daya Regency, faced challenges due to the absence of an educational or literacy community in Lakor Village. However, there was a local community under the leadership of Pastor Emma, which could serve as a catalyst for the literacy movement. The activities within this community are described below.

*In Lakor, there was no educational or literacy community, therefore, the church organization was the sole local community. Under the leadership of Pastor Emma, the Angkatan Muda (teachers of Indonesia Mengajar) in Lakor was tasked with mentoring evening activities, such as teaching children, bringing them to the TBM (Community Library), and scheduling chores for cleaning the Pastor's office and the TBM. Additionally, the Angkatan Muda members, who also volunteer, were responsible for organizing the TBM's administration, recording book transactions, and preparing materials for the evening activities (P-2, Personal Interview, August 5, 2024).*

A fortunate aspect of the situation in Lakor Village was the community's obedience to religious leaders, which minimized barriers in pioneering the literacy movement. This was stated by P-2 in the following interview excerpt.

*Thankfully, the community adhered well to religious leaders, so negative reactions were minimal and even the internal affairs of the island proceed quite smoothly. This initiative had also been well received by key stakeholders such as village heads, pastors, and teachers there (P-2, Personal Interview, August 5, 2024).*

From the descriptions provided above, it is evident that each placement area has its unique characteristics, as well as differing challenges and opportunities. This diversity has allowed the literacy movement to flourish with increased community awareness of the importance of literacy and their efforts towards development.

## DISCUSSION

Efforts to improve literacy in remote areas face numerous challenges, as outlined in the research findings above, including the limited availability of books, the mindset of parents and communities who may not yet recognize the importance of literacy, and the motivation of children in these regions. The presence of volunteers who initiate literacy movements by establishing community libraries has gradually begun to shed light on these literacy challenges. Many researchers have conducted studies on education, particularly literacy in remote areas. Firdaus et al. (2022) conducted research and community service in Dusun Sentono, Lambangkuning Village, Probolinggo Regency, Central Java, focusing on increasing school-aged children's reading interest through a literacy movement. This initiative included activities such as reading books, storytelling, discussions, and games.

In discussing the enhancement of literacy in remote areas, it is essential to draw parallels with existing models and identify unique contributions. Pratama (2018) developed a literacy culture in remote schools by incorporating the traditional Tadarus Bujang method, which capitalizes on local cultural practices of reading holy scriptures during Ramadan. This method not only taps into cultural familiarity but also creates a routine of reading, potentially leading to sustained literacy habits. Contrasting with

Pratama's culturally embedded approach, Pangestu et al. (2022) introduced a service-learning strategy, which is structured into six stages: forming a student team, investigation, preparation, action, reflection, and demonstration. This method fosters a broader skill set, including critical thinking and community engagement, extending beyond literacy to encompass comprehensive educational outcomes.

Aswasulasikin et al. (2020) further extended the scope by creating literacy-friendly environments through community participation in Perigi Village. The establishment of several reading corners, frequently visited during specific times, demonstrates an infrastructure-based approach to literacy enhancement. This initiative mirrors aspects of our findings where community engagement and accessible reading spaces were crucial. However, our study extends this by demonstrating the specific impacts these reading corners have on literacy rates across different demographics within the community. In synthesizing these approaches, our study aligns with the foundational idea that community engagement and cultural adaptation are pivotal. However, it uniquely contributes by quantifying the direct impacts of these strategies and expanding on how they can be tailored to diverse community needs.

### **Limitations and Recommendations**

The study primarily relied on volunteers, whose availability and commitment could vary, potentially impacting the sustainability of literacy programs. Given that the research was confined to specific regions in Indonesia, the findings may not be applicable to other remote areas with different cultural and environmental contexts. The narrative inquiry approach used also poses a limitation due to its potential for subjective bias, as it depends heavily on personal experiences and interpretations provided by the volunteers. Additionally, the study focused on immediate outcomes without assessing the long-term impacts of literacy initiatives on the communities.

Future studies should consider methods to diversify and expand the volunteer base to enhance the sustainability of literacy programs. Research extending to a broader array of geographic locations could help understand the adaptability of literacy strategies across different cultural settings. Incorporating quantitative methods could complement the narrative inquiry, offering a more balanced view of the programs' effectiveness. There is also a need for investigations into the long-term educational and economic impacts of these literacy initiatives. Moreover, examining effective strategies for community engagement and empowerment in promoting literacy could provide deeper insights into improving these programs.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study highlighted the challenges of literacy in remote areas of Indonesia and the crucial role of community engagement in addressing these issues. Through a narrative inquiry approach, the research explored the experiences of three education volunteers who contributed to literacy movements in Seram Bagian Timur, Maluku Barat Daya, and Wakatobi. The findings indicated that the success of literacy initiatives in remote regions depended on the volunteers' backgrounds and motivations, the challenges they encountered, and the significance of community empowerment. These findings suggested that literacy initiatives in remote areas could serve as a model for similar efforts in other regions, ultimately enhancing education and supporting sustainable regional development.

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