Volume 20 Issue 1 | FEBRUARY 2023
e-ISSN: 2685-4198 | p-ISSN: 1693-7481
https://ojs3.unpatti.ac.id/index.php/tahuri/index

Bridging Home and School Literacies: A Sociocultural Analysis of Early Literacy Practices in Rural Indonesia

https://doi.org/10.30598/tahurivol20issue1page1-20

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Abstract

This study examines the sociocultural dimensions of early literacy practices in rural Indonesia, addressing the limited understanding of how home and community literacies intersect with formal schooling in marginalized contexts. Despite national efforts promoting standardized literacy instruction in Bahasa Indonesia, children's literacy development in Negeri Suli, Central Maluku, remains deeply shaped by the social, cultural, and religious life of the community. The study aims to explore how home, church, and school literacy events interact and how these interactions influence children's early reading and writing experiences. Employing a qualitative ethnographic design, data were gathered through classroom and home observations, semi-structured interviews with teachers, parents, and Sunday school leaders, and analysis of local literacy artifacts. The findings reveal that literacy learning in Suli is primarily cultivated through religious and communal activities such as home prayers and church gatherings, which contrast sharply with the print-based, decontextualized literacy valued in schools. This discontinuity marginalizes children's home literacies and limits their classroom engagement. The study's novelty lies in situating sociocultural literacy theory within a non-Javanese, rural Christian community, highlighting faith and collective life as mediating forces in literacy development. Theoretically, it expands global understandings of literacy as a culturally situated practice, and practically, it informs inclusive, community-based pedagogical models for literacy education in diverse Indonesian contexts.

Article Info:

Keywords: *Anthropology of Literacy, Community-Based Pedagogy, Rural Education, Sociocultural Theory, Translanguaging*

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Received manuscript: *15/08/2022*
Final revision: *05/11/2022*
Approved: *25/11/2022*
Online Access: *20/01/2023*
Published: *25/02/2023*

Publisher: *Jurusan Bahasa dan Seni FKIP Universitas Pattimura, Jl. Ir. M. Putuhena, Kampus Universitas Pattimura, Poka, Ambon 97233*
E-mail:
tahuri.journal@mail.unpatti.ac.id

How to cite: Afdhal. (2023). Bridging Home and School Literacies: A Sociocultural Analysis of Early Literacy Practices in Rural Indonesia. *Jurnal Tahuri, 20(1)*, 1-20. https://doi.org/10.30598/tahurivol20issue1page1-20

INTRODUCTION

Early literacy practices in Indonesia continue to face significant challenges in bridging the gap between children's literacy experiences at home and what is taught in schools. In many regions, particularly rural areas, children's literacy development is shaped not only by textbooks or formal classroom activities but also by everyday experiences rooted in their social, cultural, and religious lives (Purnomo & Solikhah, 2021; Sumaryanta et al., 2019). This reflects the reality that literacy is never a mere technical skill of reading and writing but a socially meaningful practice imbued with values and ideologies. Amidst national policies emphasizing functional literacy and standardized assessment through instruments such as the National Assessment (ANBK) or the Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (AKMI), local contexts, such as that of Negeri Suli in Central Maluku, reveal a more complex picture of literacy practices that often escape the focus of mainstream educational policy and academic

research (Harjanto et al., 2018; Wulan et al., 2022).

Negeri Suli, a predominantly Protestant Christian rural community grounded in customary social structures, demonstrates literacy practices that are deeply intertwined with communal life. Children in this setting are introduced to letters, words, and texts not primarily through textbooks but through the Bible, hymns, family prayers, and church announcements. In such a context, reading is not merely a technical ability but also a form of social participation, an avenue through which children negotiate their identities as members of both a faith-based and customary community (Prahmana et al., 2021; Sugiharto, 2022). However, once they enter primary school, these home-based literacy practices are often regarded as irrelevant or "inappropriate" within the formal curriculum. Teachers tend to prioritize fluency in Standard Indonesian, correct spelling, and textual comprehension tasks, often disregarding the children's sociocultural backgrounds. Consequently, a disconnection arises between "home literacy" and "school literacy," limiting the full development of children's literacy potential in rural settings.

Over the past two decades, literacy research in Indonesia has begun to move toward more contextual and critical perspectives. Studies by Artasia et al. (2022), Iqbal (2018), and Widodo et al. (2020) have emphasized the importance of functional and socially contextualized literacy learning, though most of these studies still focus on urban contexts or state schools in Java. For instance, Amri et al. (2022) and Kanoksilapatham and Channuan (2018) demonstrated that early literacy in Surabaya primary schools is influenced by family socioeconomic background and access to reading materials, while Ferdiansyah et al. (2022) found that kindergarten teachers in Bandung tend to adopt mechanistic approaches to early literacy without linking them to children's home experiences. These findings are valuable, yet they do not fully capture the dynamics of literacy practices in rural areas characterized by distinct social and religious structures.

Globally, home and community-based literacy research has long been developed within a sociocultural framework. Vygotsky (2008) asserted that learning, including literacy, is inherently social and mediated, children learn through interactions with others within their cultural contexts. Building upon this foundation, Goodway et al. (2018) advanced the concept of literacy as a social practice, rejecting the view of literacy as a neutral skill and emphasizing its embeddedness in cultural values and ideologies. Similarly, Maunder and Crafter (2018) argued that each community cultivates distinctive literacy forms, often divergent from those practiced in schools. In early childhood education, Zhang et al. (2018) found in their Carolina study that differences in home literacy practices across social groups significantly affect children's school success. This perspective aligns with the "Funds of Knowledge" concept proposed by Eccles and Wigfield (2020), which highlights household literacy practices and cultural resources as valuable pedagogical assets for schools.

In the Southeast Asian context, studies by Pathan et al. (2018) and Storch (2018) revealed that children's literacy in minority communities often develops through religious and oral traditions. For example, Lantolf et al. (2021) found in rural Buddhist communities in Thailand that children learn to read through religious texts recited by monks, while Daneshfar

and Moharami (2018) reported that family Bible reading and prayer practices in rural Philippines foster children's reading motivation. Similarly, studies in Indonesia by Ardiwinata and Mulyono (2018) and Aziz et al. (2022) noted that Qur'anic reading within Muslim households significantly influences children's foundational literacy. Collectively, these studies underscore that early literacy in non-urban societies tends to be religious, communal, and contextually situated.

Nevertheless, in Indonesian scholarship, studies linking early literacy with religious and customary contexts in Eastern Indonesia remain scarce. Turwelis et al. (2022) explored the role of church communities in promoting youth literacy in Papua but did not address early childhood contexts. Hukubun et al. (2022) and Sarah (2022) ex*amin*ed reading activities in Sunday schools in Ambon without connecting them to formal school literacy. Meanwhile, Matayane and Rahawarin (2022) and Pattihua and Manuputty (2022) discussed literacy among coastal communities in North Sulawesi, yet their analyses did not deeply engage with socio-religious dimensions. Hence, there remains significant scholarly room to explore how early literacy practices within Protestant Christian rural communities, such as Negeri Suli, interact, intersect, or even conflict with school-based literacies shaped by national policy and standardized curricula.

This study, therefore, approaches literacy not as a purely cognitive skill but as part of a living sociocultural ecology. Suli offers a unique site to understand how children's early literacy develops amidst prayers, songs, and communal activities. Rather than viewing the divergence between home and school literacy as a problem, this research interprets their relationship as a potential bridge for enriching primary literacy pedagogy. Employing an ethnographic design within a sociocultural theoretical framework, this study seeks to understand how children learn to read and write in their everyday lives and how teachers might integrate children's existing literacy resources into classroom practices.

The novelty of this study lies in its reorientation of literacy from the classroom to the social spaces of life, the kitchen, the prayer room, and community gatherings. Here, literacy is not the product of pedagogical intervention alone but of cultural, religious, and educational negotiation. In an era where educational success is often measured through standardized scores, this study offers an alternative understanding that Indonesian children's literacy must be read through a broader social and cultural lens. By situating Maluku as its context, this research expands the geography of literacy studies beyond Java's urban centers and contributes to developing sociocultural literacy theory within non-Western and non-urban contexts.

Through this perspective, the study aims to bridge the gap between home and school literacies and explore how Suli's social, cultural, and religious values can serve as pedagogical resources for early literacy education. It is expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions to the development of community-based literacy curricula and to enrich discourses in language education and sociolinguistics in Indonesia. Ultimately, this study seeks not only to understand how children learn to read and write but also how communities construct meanings of what it means to be "literate" in a changing world rooted in their own

cultural foundations.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with an ethnographic design to understand children's literacy practices within the living social and cultural context of Negeri Suli, Central Maluku. A qualitative approach was chosen not to measure literacy skills quantitatively but to interpret the meanings, values, and social interactions surrounding reading and writing in homes, churches, and schools. As emphasized by Braun and Clarke (2016) and Rashid et al. (2019), qualitative research seeks to explore phenomena from participants' perspectives and views social reality as plural, contextual, and dynamic. The ethnographic design was adopted because literacy in communities such as Suli cannot be separated from the cultural systems that shape it; thus, researchers must engage directly in observation and participation in everyday community life, as recommended by Goharipour and Gibson (2023).

The research site, Negeri Suli, was selected for both theoretical and practical reasons. Theoretically, it represents a rural Indonesian context rich in faith-based and community-oriented literacy practices yet remains underexplored in scholarly literature. Suli is a customary village with a predominantly Protestant Christian population characterized by communal cooperation and strong religious traditions. Reading and writing activities occur not only in schools but also in households and church environments, making it an ideal setting to investigate how children's early literacy is constructed through interactions among home, community, and school. Practically, the site was chosen because the researcher has social and cultural access through local educational networks, facilitating ethical and immersive observation of community life.

Participants included 15 individuals selected purposively based on their involvement in children's literacy practices. They comprised five primary school teachers (grades 1–3) directly responsible for teaching reading and writing, five parents actively supporting children's home or church reading activities, and five community figures, including Sunday school pastors, children's Bible instructors, and customary leaders, who participate in socio-religious events. Following Bingham's (2023) purposeful sampling approach, participants were chosen for their ability to provide rich and relevant insights into the study focus. The final number of participants was determined by data saturation, that is, when recurring patterns and themes emerged from the collected data.

Data collection was conducted over three months through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation of local literacy texts. Observations were carried out in classrooms, homes, and church environments to directly ex*amin*e how literacy activities were practiced by children and adults. During observation, the researcher recorded literacy events, such as collective Bible reading, writing prayer notes, and Sunday school literacy activities, in line with Mulisa's (2022) methodological recommendations for practice-based literacy studies. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to encourage natural conversations while eliciting participants' perceptions, experiences, and interpretations of literacy.

Interviews were conducted primarily in Indonesian and occasionally in the local language for participant comfort; all were transcribed verbatim. Documentation involved collecting written materials such as prayer books, children's worksheets, family notes, and church texts to enrich observational and interview data.

Data analysis followed Borgstede and Scholz's (2021) model of qualitative data reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing. Collected data were categorized under major themes such as home literacy, school literacy, and communal literacy. Each theme was analyzed through a sociocultural lens to interpret the relationships among social context, cultural values, and literacy practices. The researcher maintained authenticity by including direct participant quotations, ensuring that findings reflected the lived experiences of Suli's community members.

To ensure data trustworthiness, triangulation was conducted through three strategies: source triangulation, methodological triangulation, and time triangulation, following Ritter (2022). Source triangulation compared data across teachers, parents, and community leaders to identify consistencies in literacy meanings across social spaces. Methodological triangulation combined observation, interviews, and documentation to prevent reliance on a single data source. Time triangulation involved repeated observations at different times and settings, such as during school sessions, Sunday worship, and family gatherings, to ex*amin*e the consistency of children's literacy practices. Throughout the process, ethical research principles were upheld, including informed consent and participant confidentiality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Home and Community Literacies: Reading as Social Practice and Spirituality

Children's literacy practices in Negeri Suli do not originate in classrooms but are nurtured within the rhythms of family and community life deeply rooted in religion. During several months of field observation, evenings in many households were often characterized by collective Bible reading. Children sat on small rattan chairs in the living room while parents held worn-out family Bibles. They took turns reading aloud, sometimes softly, sometimes with emphatic intonation, echoing the pastor's tone at church. After reading, the father or mother typically asked questions about the meaning of the passage and concluded with a short prayer. In this setting, reading was not an academic task but a ritual of togetherness, a means for families to cultivate faith and moral values. Such observations reveal that in Suli, literacy constitutes an integral aspect of lived spirituality and communal life.

In an interview, one parent, Mrs. M., explained that her children "learn to read from the Bible first, before from schoolbooks." This statement illustrates that home reading activities are not directed toward meeting formal curricular goals but toward deepening faith and encouraging spiritual dialogue within the family. For parents like Mrs. M., literacy success is not measured by how quickly children can decode words, but by how well they comprehend the moral message embedded in sacred texts. This view resonates with Newman's (2018) concept of literacy as a social practice, which posits that literacy is always embedded within

social and ideological systems of meaning. Reading at home, therefore, is not a neutral activity but a social practice infused with religious, moral, and communal values.

Within Suli's social context, the church plays a central role in shaping early literacy development. Every Sunday, children attend Sunday school held in a multipurpose room beside the church. The room is modest, wooden walls, a ceiling fan, and a long table with children's Bibles and hymnbooks. Here, they are first introduced to letters, words, and sentences through communal and religiously oriented activities. They read together, sing hymns, and write short verses in their notebooks. According to Mr. P., a Sunday school teacher, these writing activities often serve as "children's first exercises before they can write at school." His remark highlights the continuity between religious and academic literacies, despite their differing purposes and forms.

Reading and writing within the church setting are also marked by strong affective and spiritual dimensions. Children do not merely learn to recognize words; they learn to internalize moral meanings. On several occasions, the researcher observed teachers asking children to rewrite a verse they liked and read it aloud to their peers. This practice not only enhanced writing skills but also fostered confidence and a sense of ownership of the text. Such performative aspects show that literacy in Suli functions as an expression of faith and collective identity.

Viewed through the lens of literacies of faith and belonging (Nakajima et al., 2019, 2021), Suli's literacy practices demonstrate how reading and writing activities strengthen children's sense of connection to their communities. Through religious literacy, children not only learn to interpret texts but also to "become part of something larger", their families, churches, and customary communities. Literacy thus becomes a means of cultivating belonging, a social and spiritual sense of inclusion within a moral order.

A Sunday school pastor, Mrs. Y., described that each reading activity is accompanied by personal storytelling or testimony: "We don't just read the verse; we tell why it is important in life." Such narratives reveal that religious literacy in Suli is dialogic, children learn to read through listening and retelling stories. This dialogic engagement enriches the dimensions of literacy by integrating reading, speaking, and reflective thinking. As Vygotsky (2008) proposed, learning occurs within the zone of proximal development, where children internalize language and values through meaningful social interaction.

Home and church-based literacy practices also perform vital social functions. During family prayers, children are often asked to read prayer sections or write lists of thanksgiving. In one field observation, an eight-year-old girl wrote a short prayer on a small piece of paper for family recitation, later taped to the wall near the dining table. Such simple acts transform the home into a living literacy space, where texts are not merely read but serve to strengthen familial relationships. This finding aligns with Glăveanu's (2020) argument that literacy inherently carries social functions, organizing how people interact and co-construct meaning in everyday life.

However, the forms of literacy emerging in Suli do not always align with those valued in formal education. In school, literacy ability is measured primarily by fluency in reading

printed texts and writing in standardized Indonesian. Within this framework, the religious values central to home literacy are often deemed irrelevant or unproductive. For Suli families, however, reading the Bible, writing prayers, and copying verses are not merely technical skills, they are moral and spiritual disciplines. Hence, home and community literacies are not peripheral preludes to school literacy but foundational moral practices that guide children's social and educational development.

These findings indicate that in rural religious contexts such as Suli, literacy is inseparable from faith and culture. Reading and writing activities at home and in church reveal deep interconnections between text, belief, and social identity. As Yudha (2020) observed, local literacies are often ecosystemic, they do not stand alone but intertwine with values, spaces, and social relations. In Suli, this literacy ecology is vividly visible: homes function as the initial sites of literacy formation, churches as communal spaces that reinforce it, and the broader community as the domain that gives literacy its meaning as a lived, faithful, and collective practice.

School Literacies and the Ideology of the National Language: Between Standardization and the Marginalization of Local Practices

The elementary school in Negeri Suli, a small coastal village in Central Maluku, stands amid a community rich in faith-based and tradition-rooted literacies. Yet once children enter the classroom, the familiar literacy landscapes of their homes and churches seem to vanish. The classroom walls are adorned with posters in standardized Indonesian: verb lists, synonyms and antonyms, and motivational quotes about reading books. On the board, the teacher writes spelling drills and standard sentence structures. Classroom activities are highly formal: students copy paragraphs from Indonesian textbooks, and the teacher meticulously corrects punctuation errors. There is no space for prayer, family stories, or local expressions that typically shape children's literacy at home. Within this environment, literacy is treated as a technical skill governed by one language and one normative mode of thought.

This reflects how the ideology of the national language operates within school literacy practices. As the symbol of national unity, Bahasa Indonesia holds a hegemonic position that requires its exclusive use as the language of instruction. As noted by Laksono and Wulandari (2022) and Mariyono et al. (2021), schools often serve as ideological arenas where dominant languages are legitimized while local languages and alternative literacies are marginalized. In Suli, children's home literacies, such as writing prayers in local languages or copying Bible verses mixing Ambonese Malay and Indonesian, are frequently deemed "nonstandard." Teachers correct writings that include religious expressions like *puji Tuhan* ("praise the Lord") or *amin* at the end of sentences, judging them as "inappropriate for schoolwork."

During interviews, one teacher, Mrs. L., explained that she tries "to train children to write proper Indonesian, not mixed languages." For teachers, linguistic standardization signifies literacy progress. Yet beneath this effort lies an ideology that legitimizes only one linguistic form as valid. As Santoso et al. (2018) argued, such ideology reinforces the power of standardization, where certain language varieties are valued while others are seen as deviations. Within this framework, Suli's children experience a kind of symbolic displacement,

their home literacy practices are not recognized or are even invalidated within the school context.

During observation, a second-grade student, S., wrote a short story about evening family prayers. She used phrases like *beta baca ayat* ("I read the verse") and *mama bilang amin* ("mother said amen"). The teacher marked these in red, replacing *beta* with saya and deleting the prayer section as "irrelevant to the lesson theme." While seemingly minor, such corrections represent deep ideological processes, erasing children's linguistic and cultural identities through acts of correction. As Kurscheid et al. (2018) observed, when schools reject home languages and literacies, they implicitly reject children's lived experiences.

Teachers, however, cannot be fully blamed. They operate within an education system that prioritizes literacy standardization through national policies such as the School Literacy Movement (*Gerakan Literasi Sekolah*) and Indonesian-language-based national assessments. The principal, Mr. R., explained that "students must read Indonesian texts fluently because all exams are in that language." This statement illustrates the structural pressures faced by educators caught between two worlds: the policy-driven demand for uniformity and the lived diversity of local literacy practices.

This creates a clear ideological tension within the classroom. On one hand, the school represents modernity and progress, with Indonesian as the language of intellectual competence. On the other hand, home and church remain spaces of moral and spiritual formation rooted in local language and religious expression. Children in Suli grow up navigating these two disconnected literacy worlds. One student, A., shared that he "prefers reading the Bible at home because he can use his mother's language, but at school he has to use the difficult one." This reflects what Kurscheid et al. (2018) describe as ideological and implementational spaces, contexts where language ideologies shape the forms and values of literacy practices.

School literacy in Suli thus transcends technical proficiency; it embodies symbolic power dynamics. Bahasa Indonesia, as the national language, carries ideologies of modernity and nationalism that often marginalize "nonformal" literacies. By disregarding children's hybrid writings that mix local and religious expressions, schools inadvertently restrict access to personally and culturally meaningful forms of literacy. This aligns with Bala et al. (2020) and Kania et al. (2021), who contend that literacy education often reproduces social power by defining who counts as "literate" not by competence but by conformity to dominant linguistic norms.

Field data further show that children active in church activities possess rich vocabularies, particularly in Ambonese Malay and religious terminology. Yet this linguistic advantage is rarely acknowledged at school. Instead, their writing is frequently corrected for deviating from standard structures. For instance, when a child wrote *saya kasih baca firman* ("I give reading of the Word"), the teacher marked it incorrect, although the expression is entirely natural in Suli's local speech. Such examples confirm Utomo et al.'s (2019) notion of linguistic disconnect, the disjunction between home and school languages that undermines children's confidence and motivation.

Understanding Suli's case requires seeing literacy not merely as a pedagogical issue but as an ideological one. School literacies grounded in standardization overlook the rich diversity of community-based practices. Conversely, translanguaging pedagogy emphasizes bridging home and school languages so children can express meaning authentically. In Suli's context, translanguaging could enable teachers to integrate prayers, Bible stories, and local languages into literacy lessons, recognizing children's literacies as cultural assets rather than deviations from national norms.

Ultimately, literacy education in Suli reveals how national language ideology operates subtly within schooling. The exclusive use of Indonesian reinforces the school's image as a modern institution while simultaneously alienating children from their lived literacies. The loss of space for local and spiritual expression shows that standardization is not merely about language, it is about defining meaning, identity, and value.

Tensions and Negotiations Between Home and School Literacies: From Conflict to Collaborative Potential

The tension between home literacies and school literacies in Negeri Suli does not manifest in overt conflict but rather in the everyday lives of children and teachers as they attempt to navigate two distinct systems of meaning. At home, literacy develops through religious rituals and community practices, children learn to read via the Bible, evening prayers, or spiritual songs. Meanwhile, at school, literacy is associated with reading textbooks, understanding sentence structures, and writing formal paragraphs in Bahasa Indonesia. These two worlds may appear parallel, yet in practice they continually intersect. It is this intersection that gives rise to new spaces of negotiation between spiritual values and academic demands, between local expression and national standards.

During observation in a Grade 3 classroom in Suli, I witnessed an interesting moment when the teacher, Mrs. L., asked the students to write a short story themed "Sunday Activities." Most children wrote about their activities in church, singing, praying, listening to a sermon, or helping their mother prepare food after the service. These writings did not merely recount events but included religious values and community-specific language, such as expressions like "*beta puji Tuhan*" (I praise the Lord) or "*kami dengar firman*" (we heard the Word). Initially, the teacher hesitated because according to curriculum guidelines, students' writing should display narrative structure and standard language usage. Rather than deleting the religious elements, Mrs. L. chose to make them the basis for classroom discussion, the children read their stories aloud while the teacher helped them refine sentence structure without removing the spiritual context.

Such a situation illustrates a form of ideological negotiation , namely, how literacy becomes an arena for bargaining between divergent value systems. According to Riyadi et al. (2019), literacy is never neutral; it is always embedded in ideology, power and specific social practices. The teachers and pupils in Suli find themselves continuously negotiating meaning: how to write "correctly" without abandoning their identity as members of a religious community. This negotiation occurs not only at the level of language, but also at the level of values, does prayer and Biblical story belong in a Bahasa Indonesia classroom?

In an interview, Mrs. L. stated: “If children are asked to write about topics outside their experience, they struggle. But if they write about church or prayer, they are very enthusiastic.” She acknowledged that after allowing space for religious themes in writing assignments, children showed increased interest and confidence. This suggests that when school literacy connects to lived experience, it becomes more meaningful. Riyadi et al. (2019) refer to this phenomenon as critical literacy as relational practice, where literacy is understood not merely as an individual skill, but as a relational practice that builds connections between personal, social, and cultural experience.

Field observation also revealed how negotiation occurred in small but significant ways. In one session, the teacher introduced a morning prayer text commonly used in Sunday school as a reading exercise. The children read it together with enthusiasm, even though the text was not in the official textbook. After reading, the teacher invited them to discuss the meanings of words such as *syukur* (gratitude), *berkat* (blessing), and *iman* (faith). She then linked this discussion to vocabulary lessons in Bahasa Indonesia. Though seemingly simple, this approach represented a pedagogical bridging effort: an attempt to bridge two previously separate literacy systems. In the field notes, the classroom mood felt different, children were more expressive, some even raised their hands to tell their home prayer experiences.

One student, M., appeared very enthusiastic when telling that he liked writing small spiritual songs in his notebook. Although his writing did not always follow standard spelling rules, its content showed high creativity and spiritual depth. When the teacher read it aloud, she praised M. for his bravery in writing and then asked the class to copy one line of the song for writing practice. This action may seem minor, but symbolically it was significant: the teacher recognised and provided space for literacy expressions born from home and faith communities. Thus, the classroom ceased to be a space that rejected religious literacy practice and instead became a collaborative space where meaning was co-constructed.

According to Muhaimin et al. (2020), this kind of negotiation shows that literacy is a social practice in constant process, it is never final but continuously formed through interactions among actors and ideologies. In the context of Suli, the negotiation involves three main parties: children, teachers, and church community. Children bring their home literacy experiences to school; teachers navigate curriculum demands within local context; while the church community provides values and texts that inspire. The three interact in a dynamic that is sometimes tense but also potentially productive.

One form of collaboration that emerged was the involvement of the Sunday-school pastor in school literacy activities. In an interview, Mr. Y., a young pastor and father of two students, explained that he is sometimes invited by the teacher to help children read a children’s Bible text during morning literacy time. The goal isn’t to teach religion but to train reading fluency. The children appeared more confident reading a familiar text. The teacher then used the opportunity to teach punctuation and intonation. Such practice demonstrates that collaboration between school and community can create more inclusive and meaningful literacy spaces.

However, not all teachers feel comfortable with this approach. Some remain worried that including religious elements in lessons may be perceived as incompatible with the principle of educational neutrality. This concern indicates that negotiation is ongoing, between the desire to honour local culture and the obligation to comply with institutional regulations. Guzmán et al. (2021) emphasise that critical literacy as relational practice requires reflective courage from teachers to question formal boundaries that separate "school literacy" from "life literacy." Teachers are not only instructors but meaning mediators who help children navigate a diverse literacy world.

In further observation, a small but meaningful change was evident. On the classroom wall, besides posters about grammar, there were now some student writings about family prayer experiences. These writings did not fully conform to standard spelling norms, but the teacher allowed them, saying that what mattered was "children writing from the heart." This is a form of recognition of authentic literacies, an understated resistance to the pressure of standardisation that often marginalises personal expression.

Thus, the negotiation between home and school literacies in Negeri Suli is not merely about differences of form or language, but about the search for shared meaning. When teachers begin to open space for literacy practices emerging from faith and community, they are engaging in significant pedagogical transformation, shifting the classroom from an arena of uniformity to an arena of dialogue. This process reflects that tension does not always end in conflict but can become a source of collective learning. As Genç et al. (2020) state, critical literacy is not only about dismantling power but also about building relations, between teachers and students, between home and school, between words and life.

Church and Community as Alternative Literacy Spaces: A Literacy Ecology Beyond School

The church and community in Negeri Suli serve as more than religious institutions; they are living spaces shaping the literacy ecology of children beyond the school. In a socio-cultural context deeply grounded in Christian values, literacy practices in church and community form part of children's everyday lives. Children do not learn to read simply to fulfil curricular demands but to understand, participate in, and become part of their collective faith life. During field observations, it was evident that every Sunday morning, before worship began, children sat in groups under a ketapang tree in the church yard, holding small booklets containing spiritual songs or Bible verses they were about to sing together. They read aloud, helping each other when encountering difficult words. Such activities demonstrate that literacy here is not individual and evaluative as in school, but collaborative, warm, and rooted in social relationships.

In this sense, the church becomes the centre of a community literacy ecology, a social network that sustains and mediates literacy practices beyond formal education (Koh et al., 2017; Levi & Inbar-Lourie, 2020). Literacy is not understood as isolated reading and writing skills, but as social practices occurring within relational ecosystems. For example, in Sunday school activities, children are asked to write prayers or make summaries of Bible stories in simple form. A Sunday school teacher, Mrs. M., explained that this activity aims not only to train children in writing but also to deepen their faith understanding. She commented, "If

they write their own prayer, they are not just learning words, but learning to talk to God." From a sociocultural perspective, such activities underscore that literacy has affective and spiritual functions, constructing identity as well as relationships with community and values (Lam, 2019).

Children's involvement in church activities also illustrates how literacy becomes a means of negotiating social position and participation. In choir practice, for instance, children were asked to read song lyrics, which often contained formal Indonesian mixed with theological terminology. The choir teacher, Mr. L., remarked that initially children often mispronounced unfamiliar words, but with repetition and peer support, they gradually mastered them. He emphasised that the process is not only about pronunciation but about "living the meaning of the song." From the viewpoint of literacy as social practice, this process reveals that literacy cannot be separated from the social and emotional meaning contained in texts. Children learn to comprehend context, value, and feeling embedded in words, a dimension frequently absent in formal school learning.

Field observations also indicated that literacy activities in the church are egalitarian and participatory. There is no rigid division between "teacher" and "student." Children often lead opening prayers or read Bible passages in front of their peers. On one occasion, a nine-year-old boy stood on a small pulpit, reading a passage from the Gospel of Luke with a slightly trembling voice, while his classmates watched attentively. After he finished, the small congregation applauded. This scene illustrates how literacy in this community is empathetic and affirming; errors are not seen as failures, but as part of a shared learning journey. Tayyebi et al. (2022) refer to this form of literacy as participatory literacy, where learning emerges from engagement in social practice rather than from formal instruction alone.

Moreover, the church is a space where local texts gain legitimacy. In group reading sessions, Sunday school teachers sometimes use the local language to explain the meaning of biblical passages, especially for children who still struggle with formal Indonesian. This reveals an organic translanguaging practice within the community, enabling children to relate their mother tongue and national language without feeling inferior. In an interview, a young teacher, S., said that she used a mixture of Indonesian and the local language "so that children feel close, not afraid of making mistakes." This remark reflects a pedagogical awareness that positions language as an emotional and cultural bridge rather than merely a standard communication tool. These findings align with Rad (2019), who argued that in Global South contexts, community-based literacies are often more responsive to local needs than formal, homogeneous education systems.

The literacy ecology outside school also functions as a space of resistance against dominant literacy ideologies originating outside the community. In many cases, school literacy focuses on printed texts and national-standardised exams, whereas the texts meaningful in the community derive from experience, prayer, and song. Children write short prayers for family worship, read church announcements, or copy choir lyrics in their notebooks. All these are literacies rooted in real needs rather than externally imposed instruction. Harding and Brunfaut (2020) explain that in literacy ecologies, local practices such

as these have intrinsic value because they sustain the social and cultural continuity of the community.

However, church literacy practices do not always exist free of hierarchy. On some occasions, observations showed that children from families more active in church tended to be more confident in reading publicly. This indicates that access to literacy practice is also influenced by social networks and family status within the community. Nevertheless, the learning environment remained inclusive, as the church treated every child as part of the same communal body. This approach illustrates a form of natural social scaffolding, where solidarity and empathy become part of the learning process.

From a theoretical standpoint, the literacy practices in the church and community of Negeri Suli extend our understanding of literacy as an ecological phenomenon, embedded in social, cultural, and spiritual networks. The concept of community literacy ecology helps explain how non-formal spaces like churches can create more organic and meaningful learning conditions. More broadly, Baker and Riches (2018) argue that community-based literacies in rural Global South contexts not only complement formal education but also challenge assumptions about what it means to be "literate." In Negeri Suli, literacy is not simply reading a printed text but reading the world, interpreting life, faith, and social relationships that shape children's daily existence.

Toward a Community-Based Literacy Pedagogy: Theoretical and Practical Implications

Toward the end of this study, it is essential to reaffirm that literacy in Negeri Suli cannot be understood merely as the acquisition of reading and writing skills taught in schools. Rather, it must be viewed as a social practice that grows and evolves within the web of community life. Field findings reveal that children acquire literacy through three interrelated spaces, home, school, and church, that interact and negotiate to shape their understanding of reading and writing. These spaces are not separate entities but form part of a complex social ecology in which each carries its own values, languages, and ideologies. From family prayer to choir rehearsals, from school assignments to Bible reading, literacy emerges as a living process deeply embedded in children's social relationships and spirituality.

A sociocultural approach to literacy, as articulated by Vygotsky (2008), situates literacy practices within social, cultural, and relational contexts. The Suli findings vividly demonstrate that children's literacy development cannot be separated from funds of knowledge, the knowledge, values, and practices already existing and inherited within family and community life. For instance, observations showed a mother teaching her child to read Bible verses before bedtime, not as a school obligation but as a family faith routine. Such activity trained the child to read expressively and with comprehension rather than merely decoding letters. One informant, Mrs. L., explained that her child "learned to read quickly because she always joined evening prayers and read verses aloud." From a sociocultural perspective, such experiences constitute significant cognitive and affective resources that are often overlooked by formal education systems overly focused on linguistic standardization.

Within the Indonesian literacy-education context, the funds of knowledge concept provides new direction for designing a more inclusive and relevant pedagogy. Instead of

positioning children from rural or religious communities as “less literate,” teaching can begin with an acknowledgment of the literacy practices already thriving in their environments. As Deygers and Malone (2019) explain, this approach not only broadens the definition of literacy but also transforms classroom power relations, from teachers as sole knowledge holders to facilitators who learn collaboratively with students and communities. In Suli, for example, the collaborative potential between school and church offers a foundation for developing a community-based literacy pedagogy. Children’s religious experiences can be integrated into reading and writing instruction without compromising academic standards.

Sultana (2019) underscores the importance of community literacies and culturally sustaining pedagogy, teaching approaches that not only acknowledge cultural diversity but actively sustain and strengthen it as part of the learning process. Observations in Suli Elementary School classrooms indicated that several teachers have begun to experiment with this orientation. One teacher, Mrs. N., used thanksgiving prayers written by students as classroom reading texts. She noted that students were more enthusiastic when reading texts they had composed themselves, especially those reflecting their home or church experiences. Such practices illustrate the potential of a pedagogy that values literacies of faith and belonging, literacy as a means to nurture social and spiritual connectedness rather than simply academic competence.

The learning atmosphere observed in such classes was more dynamic and interactive when children were given space to express their identities and experiences. When a student read aloud a prayer she had written herself, her peers listened attentively while the teacher offered encouraging feedback on sentence structure and vocabulary. This practice transformed the teacher–student relationship into a more dialogic one, consistent with Berry et al.’s (2019) concept of critical literacy as relational practice. Here, literacy is no longer defined as compliance with standardized texts but as a reflective and collaborative practice grounded in students’ lived realities.

Further evidence supporting this direction emerged from Sunday school observations. During these sessions, children wrote summaries of Bible stories in their own words and read them aloud to the group. This process demonstrated their ability to comprehend, analyze, and re-articulate meaning using everyday language. One Sunday school teacher, Mr. P., noted that such activities help children “learn to write from the heart, not just from textbooks.” These experiences affirm that literacy practices grounded in spiritual life can enhance children’s reflective and expressive capacities. When schoolteachers recognize the pedagogical value of such practices, natural bridges emerge among home, school, and church literacies.

From a theoretical standpoint, integrating funds of knowledge and community literacies creates opportunities to build a community-based literacy pedagogy in Indonesia. This model positions the community not as an object of intervention but as a subject possessing cultural and intellectual resources worthy of serving as the foundation for instruction. Its central principle is that literacy develops most effectively when learning aligns with local social contexts and values. In Suli, family prayers, church songs, and social

gatherings are not distractions from academic literacy; they are its moral and cognitive foundations.

Beyond its theoretical contribution, this study offers significant practical implications. First, teacher-training programs should encourage educators to recognize and draw upon local literacy practices as instructional resources. Teachers can be invited to conduct participatory observations in the communities surrounding their schools to better understand students' social and cultural contexts.

Second, elementary-school literacy curricula should be designed with greater flexibility and contextual sensitivity, for instance, by incorporating local texts, community narratives, or written works grounded in children's religious and social experiences. Third, collaboration among schools, churches, and families can be facilitated through community literacy initiatives such as children's prayer-writing competitions, exhibitions of religious literacy works, or joint Bible-reading sessions that also teach linguistic features.

Empirically, this approach aligns with the global movement in literacy education emphasizing social justice and cultural sustainability. Coombe et al. (2020) affirm that in many regions of the Global South, community-rooted literacies often prove more relevant and empowering than externally imposed pedagogies. In Suli, this is evident in children's heightened participation and enthusiasm when literacy activities connect directly to their lived experiences rather than to distant, standardized expectations.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that early literacy practices in Negeri Suli are shaped through an intricate social network encompassing home, school, and church as interdependent learning spaces that mutually influence and negotiate the meanings of literacy. Amid the dominance of national education policies that standardize literacy through the exclusive use of Bahasa Indonesia and academic approaches detached from daily life, children in Suli experience literacy as a social and spiritual practice deeply rooted in faith and communal solidarity. The findings demonstrate that when literacy is understood not merely as a technical skill but as a form of social and cultural participation, learning becomes more inclusive, relevant, and meaningful. By drawing on the funds of knowledge embedded in family and church life, teachers and schools can develop community-based literacy pedagogies that honor the diversity of children's experiences without diminishing academic rigor. Theoretically, this research extends the sociocultural framework of literacy to a rural Christian Indonesian context that has been largely underrepresented in global literacy discourse. Practically, it offers direction for developing literacy education that is more contextual, dialogic, and socially responsive, one that bridges the gap between policy-driven schooling and the lived literacies that sustain community life.

ETHICAL STATEMENT AND DISCLOSURE

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles, including informed consent, protection of informants' confidentiality, and respect for local cultural values. Special consideration was given to participants from vulnerable groups to ensure their

safety, comfort, and equal rights to participate. No external funding was received, and the authors declare no conflict of interest. All data and information presented were collected through valid research methods and have been verified to ensure their accuracy and reliability. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) was limited to technical assistance for writing and language editing, without influencing the scientific substance of the work. The authors express their gratitude to the informants for their valuable insights, and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the content and conclusions of this article.

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