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## The Application of Literacy in the Community Through the Rimba Bulan Reading Room

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### ABSTRACT

Community literacy is an essential foundation for building civilization and competitive human resource quality in the digital era. The low reading interest among communities, especially in areas with limited access to library facilities, poses a serious challenge to national literacy development. The Rimba Bulan Reading Room emerges as a community-based alternative solution to enhance community literacy culture. This article aims to analyze the implementation of community literacy through the Rimba Bulan Reading Room using a descriptive approach. The methods employed include direct observation of literacy activities, interviews with managers and participants, and documentation studies of programs. Research findings indicate that The Application of Literacy in the Community Through the Rimba Bulan Reading Room successfully increased children's and adolescents' reading interest through various programs such as shared reading, mobile reading corners, creative writing training, and book discussions. Supporting factors for success include active volunteer participation, local community support, and collaboration with various parties. Constraints faced include limited operational funding, insufficient new book collections, and program continuity. This research recommends strengthening managerial capacity, diversifying funding sources, and establishing strategic partnerships with government and private sectors for the sustainability of community literacy programs.

**Keywords:** community literacy, community reading space, *community-based literacy*, literacy movement, *lifelong learning*

### INTRODUCTION

*Literacy* is a basic skill that is a prerequisite for full participation in life in the 21st century. UNESCO (2017) emphasizes that *literacy* is not just reading and writing but also includes the ability to access, understand, analyze, and utilize information for self-development and social participation. In the digital era, *literacy* skills are an essential asset to face rapid change. Indonesia, with its large population, faces serious challenges in *literacy* development. The results of PISA (2018) rank Indonesia 72nd out of 77 countries. OECD (2019) shows low *literacy* skills and *literacy* culture, which impacts the quality of education and the nation's competitiveness.

The *literacy* gap is increasingly visible in areas with limited access to reading resources and library facilities (Taylor & Clarke, 2025). Specifically, data from the Ministry of Education and Culture (2020) indicate that approximately 40% of villages in Indonesia lack adequate library infrastructure, with existing facilities often suffering from outdated collections (averaging more than 10 years old) and limited operational hours (less than 3 days per week) (Omar, 2024; Schouten et al., 2020; Yusriadi, Sugiharti, ..., & 2024, 2021). In rural areas of Central Java, where this study is located, the *literacy* rate among children aged 7–15 years remains at 68%, significantly below the national average of 95.4% (BPS, 2021). Furthermore, a preliminary survey conducted in the research location revealed that only 23% of households possess more than 10 books, and 67% of respondents reported never visiting a library in the past year. This situation creates a critical *literacy* vacuum, especially affecting children and adolescents who lack alternative learning

resources beyond formal schooling (Chavula et al., 2025; Quarterly & 2025, 2025; Shabalala & Photo, 2025).

This empirical reality encouraged the birth of a community-based *literacy* movement, exemplified by the *Rimba Bulan Reading Room*, which emerged in response to the public's low interest in reading (Sulaiman, 2024; Turalba-Khalil, 2024; Wicaksono, 2025). Established in 2018 by a group of young activists and educators following the closure of the only village library due to budget constraints, this reading room seeks to provide access to reading and create a conducive *literacy* ecosystem for children and adolescents.

More than just a place to read, the *Rimba Bulan Reading Room* offers an interactive *literacy* program based on community participation in management, provision of reading materials, and *literacy* activities. This bottom-up approach makes the reading space adaptive to local needs and aligns with the concept of lifelong learning (Faure et al., 1972), who emphasized the importance of lifelong learning. Thus, the community reading room becomes a tangible vehicle for the community to access and develop knowledge independently (Kurniadi et al., 2025; Sutrisno & Junaidi, 2025).

The study of community *literacy* practices such as the *Rimba Bulan Reading Room* is important because it has the potential to serve as a model for sustainable *literacy* empowerment (Hendrawan & Bafadhal, 2025; Rubiyad & Fajriyah, 2025). What makes the *Rimba Bulan* model particularly unique and replicable are four distinctive aspects: (1) its zero-budget operational model relying entirely on volunteer labor and community donations, making it adaptable to resource-poor contexts; (2) its hybrid programming that combines traditional *literacy* activities with digital *literacy* and creative arts, addressing multiple dimensions of 21st-century skills; (3) its intergenerational approach engaging children, youth, and adults simultaneously, fostering family and community cohesion; and (4) its flexible, non-formal structure operating outside institutional constraints, allowing rapid adaptation to local needs and preferences. These characteristics distinguish it from government-sponsored libraries and conventional NGO *literacy* programs, which typically require substantial external funding, follow standardized curricula, and operate within rigid administrative frameworks. The success of national *literacy* depends not only on government policies but also on community initiatives. Given Indonesia's vast archipelagic geography and the central government's limited capacity to reach remote communities, grassroots *literacy* initiatives like *Rimba Bulan* represent a scalable and sustainable alternative pathway to achieving national *literacy* goals (Hendrawan & Bafadhal, 2025; Novrita, Oktavia, & Sari, 2025). The experience of managing community reading rooms can serve as a reference for developing similar models across various regions.

Based on this foundation, this study aims to analyze the implementation of *literacy* programs in the *Rimba Bulan Reading Room*, identify its supporting and inhibiting factors, and evaluate its impact on reading interest and community *literacy* culture. Specifically, this research addresses three critical gaps in existing literature: (1) the lack of empirical documentation on volunteer-based *literacy* models operating without institutional funding; (2) limited understanding of how community *literacy* initiatives navigate the tension between traditional print culture and digital media consumption among youth; and (3) insufficient evidence on the long-term sustainability mechanisms of grassroots *literacy* movements in rural Indonesian contexts. By examining these dimensions, this study contributes novel insights into community-driven educational alternatives that challenge the predominant top-down approach to *literacy* development.

This research is expected to make a theoretical contribution to the development of community *literacy* and non-formal education studies, especially community-based *literacy* models as alternatives for empowerment (Mahu, 2025a, 2025b). Practically, the results can be used for evaluation by reading room managers, serve as policy references for the government, and inspire communities to develop *literacy* movements in other regions of Indonesia (Marwan, Harahap, Humaizi, & Ridho, 2024; Nasrullah, Laksono, Prayogi, Parmin, & Inayatillah, 2024).

The concept of *literacy* has evolved from focusing solely on reading and writing skills to encompassing complex social practices. Street (1984) distinguishes between an autonomous model, which views *literacy* as a technical skill, and an ideological model, which emphasizes *literacy* as a social practice related to cultural context and power relations. In line with this, Barton and Hamilton (1998) emphasize that *literacy* is situated—that is, it is exercised differently in each domain of life such as home, workplace, and community. This view highlights the importance of understanding the diversity of *literacy* practices in society. The UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (2020) adds that *literacy* is the foundation of lifelong learning and a human right essential for participation in modern society. Therefore, improving *literacy* must be a shared responsibility across sectors, not limited to formal education.

Freire (1970), through *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, views *literacy* as a means of liberation and the formation of critical consciousness (*conscientização*), enabling society to read and change its social reality. This thinking reinforces the *literacy* paradigm as a tool of empowerment. Delors (1996), in the UNESCO report *Learning: The Treasure Within*, affirms the four pillars of 21st-century education—learning to know, to do, to be, and to live together—all of which are rooted in *literacy* skills. In this context, the community reading room acts as a center for continuous learning. Kern (2000) expands this understanding with seven dimensions of *literacy*: interpretation, collaboration, convention, cultural knowledge, problem-solving, reflection, and language use, underscoring the importance of a holistic and participatory *literacy* approach.

The community *literacy* movement emerged as an alternative to a top-down institutional approach. Purcell-Gates (2007) emphasizes that *literacy* programs must be rooted in local practices relevant to people's lives. This is reinforced by Heath (1983), whose study demonstrated that *literacy* practices differ among communities and impact children's learning experiences. Thus, *literacy* programs need to value local practices as their foundation. Within the framework of Communities of Practice, Wenger (1998) explains that *literacy* develops through participation in shared practice and the formation of learner identity. The community reading room, therefore, functions as a social space where people interact and build shared meaning through *literacy* activities.

In Indonesia, community reading gardens (TBM) play an important role in improving national *literacy*. Kalida and Mursyid (2015) note that successful TBMs usually have visionary leadership, active community participation, diverse programs, and strong networks. Hidayat, Suryani, and Wibowo (2020) show that TBMs in rural areas increase reading access and build a long-term reading culture. Meanwhile, Rahmawati (2018) found that TBMs face challenges related to funding, volunteering, and adaptation to the digital era. However, innovative TBMs that combine digital technology and creative activities are able to survive and continue growing.

Syarifudin and Makmun (2019) identified five main factors for successful community *literacy*: community ownership, program diversity, cross-sector partnerships, impact measurement, and adaptive leadership. Sari and Wibowo (2021) added that contextual differences between urban and rural areas affect program effectiveness; in rural areas, strong social bonds are often key to success. Nurhadi (2019) shows that participatory communication strategies and integration of

*literacy* activities with local culture, such as art and folklore, increase community participation and attract younger generations.

Sustainability is the main challenge for TBMs in Indonesia. The Community Reading Park Forum (2019) reported that many TBMs ceased operations due to a lack of leadership regeneration, unstable funding, and volunteer burnout. The Ministry of Education and Culture (2020), through the Master Design of the National *Literacy* Movement, emphasizes the need for technical support, access to funding, and cross-agency collaboration to strengthen the *literacy* ecosystem. Legally, the Republic of Indonesia (2007), through Law No. 43 of 2007, requires government support for libraries and TBMs, but implementation remains uneven across regions. This condition highlights the need for stronger synergy between national policies, regional support, and community participation to ensure the sustainability of the community *literacy* movement.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive method to understand the application of community literacy through the *Rimba Bulan Reading Room* in its natural context. The descriptive method was used to systematically portray the implementation of literacy programs, activities conducted, community participation, and their impacts.

The research took place at the *Rimba Bulan Reading Room*, located in an area with limited access to formal library facilities. This location was chosen because the reading room exemplifies an active community literacy movement with a structured program. Data collection spanned one month to allow observation of various literacy activities.

Participants included managers and volunteers involved in planning and implementing programs, children and adolescents actively engaged in literacy activities, community leaders and local government officials who supported the initiatives, and donors and partners contributing to the reading room's development. Subjects were selected based on their direct experience and knowledge of literacy activities at the reading room.

Data were gathered through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Observations focused on the types of literacy activities, implementation methods, participant engagement, learning atmosphere, and interactions between facilitators and participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with managers, volunteers, participants, and other stakeholders to explore topics such as the reading room's history, vision and mission, programs, challenges, and community impact. Document analysis included institutional profiles, membership records, activity reports, photographs, and social media posts to complement the observational and interview data.

Data analysis followed Miles and Huberman's (1994) interactive model, consisting of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involved selecting and organizing relevant information related to the research focus. Data were then presented in narratives, tables, and charts to identify patterns and relationships. Conclusions were drawn after verification through supporting or comparative data to maintain validity.

Data validity was ensured through triangulation of sources, methods, and time. Source triangulation compared information from managers, participants, and community leaders. Method triangulation involved cross-checking observations, interviews, and documents. Time triangulation was conducted by collecting data at different intervals to confirm information consistency.

Initial findings indicated that the *Rimba Bulan Reading Room* ran diverse literacy programs targeting all community levels. These included weekly Reading Together sessions to encourage

early reading habits and comprehension skills in children; Creative Writing Training for adolescents and young adults to develop writing skills across genres, with works published via the reading room's social media; monthly Book Discussions to foster dialogue and critical thinking; and Digital Literacy programs to teach the community how to access information critically, detect hoaxes, and use technology for learning.

The success of the reading room's programs relied heavily on multi-stakeholder support. Volunteers managed administration, facilitated programs, and developed content. Local communities contributed as participants and donors, providing books and funds, demonstrating ownership of the reading room. Local governments supported the initiative by providing venues, promotion, and grants, reinforcing the reading space's legitimacy. The private sector, through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs and donor agencies, supplied books, equipment, and training. Educational institutions nearby also partnered by encouraging student participation and collaborating on literacy activities. These collaborative efforts made the *Rimba Bulan Reading Room* a sustainable and successful model of community-based literacy empowerment.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Profile of Rimba Bulan Reading Room

The Rimba Bulan Reading Room operates in a simple house provided by one of the local community leaders. The addition of collections comes from community donations, assistance from donor institutions, and purchases using operational funds. The organizational structure of the Rimba Bulan Reading Room consists of coordinators, treasurers, secretaries, and program coordinators. All of these positions are held on a voluntary basis without financial compensation. There are active volunteers who take turns running the reading room and facilitating literacy programs. The reading room operates with flexible operating hours adapted to the availability of volunteers.

### Implementation of Literacy Program

The Rimba Bulan Reading Room organizes various literacy programs that are tailored to the needs of the local community. These programs include reading, writing, discussion, and digital and functional training. In general, the details of the program can be seen in the following table.

Table 1. overview of the types of literacy activities

No	Program Name	Key Targets	Frequency of Activities	Main Purpose
1	Read Together	Children aged 5–12 years	Downloads	Fostering an interest in reading from an early age
2	Creative Writing Training	Adolescent	Periodic	Develop writing and self-expression skills
3	Book Discussion	Teens and adults	Monthly	Practice critical thinking and intellectual dialogue
4	Digital Literacy	Various ages	Thematic training	Improve the ability to use technology wisely

The table above provides an overview of the types of literacy activities carried out by the Rimba Bulan Reading Room. A more detailed explanation of the implementation, results, and impact of each program is presented in the following description.

#### a. Reading Together Program

The reading program is held every Saturday and Sunday morning with an average of 10-20 participants aged 5-12 years. The method used is read *aloud*, where the facilitator reads the story with an expressive intonation, followed by a simple discussion about the moral message and

characters in the story. Observations show that children are very enthusiastic and some start borrowing books to read at home. The success of this program can be seen from the increase in the number of participants over time. In the first year, the average number of participants was only 10 children, but through word-of-mouth promotion and parental support, this number increased significantly. Some parents also began to accompany their children, creating *a moment of family bonding through literacy*.

b. Creative Writing Training

The creative writing training was attended by adolescents and young adults with a total of about 40 participants during the study period. The program produced 75 papers published through various media. Some participants showed increased confidence in expressing ideas, even starting to send works to the mass media. The method used was in the form of a writing workshop with a combination of theory, hands-on practice, and feedback from speakers from local writers and journalists. This program shows that literacy is not only related to the ability to read, but also the ability to create and think reflectively.

c. Book Discussion

The book discussion activity was attended by 15-20 participants, most of whom were teenagers and adults. The books discussed are selected through a *voting* mechanism so that participants feel they have direct involvement. The themes raised are diverse, ranging from social, environmental, to self-development. The facilitator uses *the Socratic seminar* method to foster critical and argumentative thinking skills. As a result, an active community of readers with strong intellectual ties is formed. Participants also became more selective and reflective in responding to various public information.

d. Digital Literacy

The digital literacy program was attended by around 60 participants of various ages. The training material includes the ability to search for information, evaluate the credibility of sources, digital security, and social media ethics. The results of the evaluation showed an increase in participants' ability to identify *hoaxes* and verify information. Some participants even became digital literacy agents in their neighborhoods by sharing knowledge with families and surrounding communities.

e. Implementation of Literacy Program

The results of the study show that the implementation of various literacy programs in the Rimba Bulan Reading Room has a positive impact on increasing reading interest, forming a learning community, and developing a creative and critical literacy culture among the community. In general, the identified impacts can be summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Implementation of Literacy Program

No	Impact Aspects	Yield Indicators	Evidence of Field Findings
1	Increased Interest in Reading	Increased book borrowing	Borrowing administration data and participant testimonials
2	Formation of Learning Communities	Regular study and discussion groups are formed	Observation of community activities and documentation
3	Creative and Productive Literacy	The emergence of written works, poetry, and visual artworks	Participant's work
4	Changes in Information Behavior	Participants are more critical of digital information	Digital literacy interviews and training results

The table shows that the literacy program in the Rimba Bulan Reading Room has had a comprehensive impact, covering cognitive, affective, and social dimensions. Further details of each impact are described below.

### **Factors Supporting Program Success**

The Rimba Bulan Reading Room *program* has a number of supporting factors that contribute greatly to its success. These factors include volunteer commitment, active community participation, program variety, partnership networks, and support from the government and private sector. A summary of these factors can be seen in the following table 3:

Table 3. Factors Supporting Program Success

No.	Supporting Factors	Main Description
1	Volunteer Commitment and Dedication	Volunteers have high intrinsic motivation, work voluntarily with a strong social spirit.
2	Active Community Participation	The community plays a direct role in the program through donations, promotions, and the management of reading corners.
3	Program Variety and Innovation	The literacy program is creative, flexible, and reaches a wide range of ages and interests.

### **Literacy Program Challenges and Solutions**

The implementation of the *Rimba Bulan Reading Room program* is inseparable from various obstacles that affect its effectiveness and sustainability. These challenges include aspects of funding, book collections, sustainability of activities, limited infrastructure, and competition with digital entertainment. A summary of the main challenges and the solution efforts made can be seen in the following table:

Table 5. Literacy Program Challenges and Solutions

No.	Challenge Aspect	Problem Description
1	Funding Limitations	The source of funds is not fixed and depends on donations; difficulty in covering operational costs.
2	Book Collection Limitations	Donation books are irrelevant, the latest collections are minimal, and catalog management is not optimal.
3	Program Sustainability	Dependence on volunteers and lack of formal organizational structure.
4	Limitations of Infrastructure & Technology	Physical space is cramped, the internet is unstable, and digital devices are limited.
5	Competition with Digital Entertainment	Children and teens are more interested in <i>games</i> and social media.

### **Critical Analysis: Literacy as Empowerment**

The practice of literacy in the Rimba Bulan Reading Room can be analyzed through the lens of Freire's critical literacy theory which views literacy as a process of empowerment and social transformation. The programs run not only teach reading and writing skills, but also develop people's critical awareness of their social realities. Book discussion and digital literacy programs, for example, encourage participants to question the information they receive and develop independent thinking. This ability is important in the context of a democratic society where citizens need to make decisions based on accurate information and critical analysis. However, it should be admitted that the Rimba Bulan Reading Room has not fully implemented a critical literacy

approach in all programs. Many activities still focus on the technical aspects of literacy without linking them to broader social issues. In the future, the integration of a more explicit critical literacy approach can increase the transformative impact of literacy programs.

## CONCLUSION

The implementation of community literacy through the *Rimba Bulan Reading Room* has effectively enhanced the local literacy culture by employing a participatory and inclusive approach. Programs like reading together, mobile reading corners, writing training, digital literacy, and fairy tale classes have engaged people of all ages, resulting in increased reading interest, active participation, and creative community output. Beyond fostering reading habits, the reading room has cultivated a dynamic, information-critical learning community supported by committed volunteers, community involvement, program innovation, and backing from government and private sectors, creating a sustainable literacy ecosystem aligned with lifelong learning. Despite facing challenges such as limited funding, book collections, infrastructure, and competition from digital entertainment, these issues highlight the need for continued multi-stakeholder collaboration. Future research could explore strategies to overcome these challenges and assess the scalability and adaptability of this bottom-up literacy model in varied regional contexts.

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