Literacy Skills of Students in a Remote Area

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ABSTRACT

Purpose Research. The research objective was to identify the literacy skills of Merangin 53 Remote Junior High School students. **Research Method.** This study used a qualitative method with an ethnographic approach. The data were collected through interviews, observation, and documentation. **Analysis Data**. The Spradley model was used in the analysis. The analysis steps consisted of determining participants, interviewing, making an ethnographic record, asking descriptive questions, analyzing the interviews, making a domain analysis, asking structural questions, making a taxonomic analysis, asking contrast questions, discovering cultural themes, and writing an ethnography **Results.** Literacy topics of Merangin 53 Junior High School students encompassed access to information, lack of literacy skills, literacy learning methods that rely on the teacher, guidance and mentoring, and literacy for effective school activity. **Conclusions.** Some topics collected from literacy skills included the influence of culture and the situation in the remote school. Some influences on literacy skills encompassed difficult access to roads, internet connections, transportation, and students' socioeconomic conditions.

Keywords: Information literacy, remote school, Merangin

A. INTRODUCTION

The font used is In 2022, the Government of the Republic of Indonesia will enhance human resources in remote areas. One of the focuses is the digitization of education. This is done to minimize learning loss and the learning gap between schools in urban areas and those in frontier, outermost, and underdeveloped regions across Indonesia.

One of the government's breakthroughs in addressing such disparities is focusing on essential aspects such as literacy and numeracy. Jorosi and Isac (2008) assessed that literacy and numeracy skills can be related to the quality and academic achievements of schools, the role of teachers in facilitating reading, writing, and accessing information, the application of literacy concepts as guidelines for teachers and school librarians to improve literacy skills, and the connection of literacy with student-centered learning models. The role of

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schools in enhancing literacy skills can be achieved by implementing literacy in the curriculum, having adequate libraries, having librarians or teachers actively encouraging students to read diligently, fostering high curiosity, and providing services so that students can access information. (Mahwasane, 2017).

According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology's report in 2021, there were 9,449 particular areas in Indonesia. This was based on the geographical regions categorized as remote areas. Schools in these areas are also classified as remote and receive affirmative education policies.

The object of this study was 53 Junior High School of Merangin Regency. The complete address of this school is Ngaol Ilir Street, West Tabir District, Merangin Regency. This school is categorized as remote due to its distant road access and unavailability of internet and handphone signals. The researchers collected preliminary data on teachers in Merangin 53 Junior High School. The school is far from the community's life; rain often damages the road. The road is small, making it difficult for vehicles to reach the school. It can only be passed by big motorcycles, said one of the teachers at the 53 Junior High School of Merangin Regency. In addition, the community's interest in sending their children to the school is also decreasing. In 2022, there were 12 teachers and 18 students in 53 Merangin Junior High School. These numbers are shown in detail in the following table.

Table 1. The Number of Teachers and Students in Merangin 53 Junior High School in 2021/2022

	Student			Teacher	
	VII Class	**VIII Class**	**IX Class**	**Civil Servant**	**Honorer**
Number of Individuals	3	4	12	6	6
Total		19			12

Rural schools face numerous challenges, ranging from low literacy quality and lack of interest in learning to students' lack of awareness to pursue education and work in the public sector (Rahmadi, 2020). Furthermore, the lack of facilities and infrastructure for reading and learning and limited access to information consequently lead to students' insufficient knowledge about the outside world (Yanto et al., 2020).

Based on the statements from the Merangin 53 junior high school teachers, student literacy was evident in several aspects. Some students could not yet write, some could only write per paragraph, and some could read but still needed to understand the meaning and significance of the text. Additionally, students at Merangin 53 Junior High School have not been taught to read and write according to the standard since elementary school. Students should be taught gradually in the learning process, and the learning material should be repeated intensively. In addition to that, they also need to be taught simple things that are easily understood and require special attention from the teacher. The problem mentioned above is depicted in a quote from an interview with one of the Indonesian language teachers at Merangin 53 Junior High School as follows.

"Sometimes they found it hard to read, and to write. Writing and reading are still lacking, they need to be more intense. It is better to teach simple materials first."

"They have not been provided with adequate reading and writing skills since the Primary School."

"They can already read per paragraph. It is just they do not understand what they have read. It's like we're reading Arabic letters but don't know their meaning and significance because we're not used to reading them."

Other studies conducted as efforts to measure and enhance literacy involve using the Grapogame game via smartphones. The provision of this game under teacher supervision is designed to measure spelling, vocabulary, and arithmetic tests. After being studied, Grapogame positively impacted students' spelling abilities (Folotiya et al., 2014). In Indonesia, particularly in the remote areas of Papua, literacy skills were measured using the Egra game, which focused on measuring students' reading and comprehension abilities (Nursalim & Sudibyo, 2018).

Based on the problems obtained by the researchers from journals and the field studies, the researchers aimed to focus on exploring literacy skills in students of Merangin 53 Junior High School and the cultural and social aspects that affect students' literacy skills.

B. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research method with an ethnographic approach. Ethnography is an approach in qualitative research to explore phenomena based on behavior, values, and language within a community. In practice, ethnography is conducted through in-depth interviews and observations, where researchers engage in participants' lives and interpret participants' behaviors (Cresswell, 2014).

The study was conducted at 53 Junior High School of Merangin Regency. The subjects involved in this study were students of 53 Junior High Schools of Merangin Regency. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling. Participants were selected based on predetermined criteria. Some of these criteria included being students of 53 Junior High School of Merangin Regency, both male and female, aged between 13 and 18 years old, and capable of explaining their literacy skills. This study also interviewed significant others and key informants in the field. The interviewees included the headmaster of 53 Junior High School of Merangin Regency, teachers, parent representatives, and community leaders.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews by preparing a general guide for in-depth explorations. The researchers also observed participants, the school environment, and the significant others' living environment. Another data collection technique was documenting photos and videos of participants' activities and actions at school. Data analysis was

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conducted using the Spradley model. The stages of data analysis in the Spradley model consist of determining participants, interviewing, making an ethnographic record, asking descriptive questions, analyzing the interviews, making a domain analysis, asking structural questions, making a taxonomic analysis, asking contrast questions, discovering cultural themes, and writing an ethnography (Spradley, 2006). As for the validity of data using triangulation techniques, the validity procedure involves comparing these findings with other relevant findings; research results with observations and documentation, as well as comparing them with various empirically published studies through journals, proceedings, books, and other scholarly works (Craswell, 2014).

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Merangin 53 Junior High School is in Ngaol Ilir Village, West Tabir District, Merangin Regency. The school was established in 2005, initially located in Ngaol Village. There are 12 civil servants (PNS) and honorary teachers, with 17 students counted when the researcher visited the school in May 2023. The distance from Bangko to Ngaol is approximately 69 kilometers, with a travel time of 2 hours and 30 minutes. The school is considered remote due to poor road access, impassable by car, lack of asphalt and concrete, no internet and telephone access, and far from residential areas. The school is situated amidst the forests and hills of Merangin.

The route to the school passes through rocky roads, yellow soil, and steep slopes. Upon entering the school, a suspension bridge and a school gate with wooden and wire fences are crossed. The school has several buildings, including the principal's office and the administrative office, teachers' room, classrooms, library, laboratory, toilets, and other facilities supporting learning media.

In the classrooms, there are chairs and desks, whiteboards, markers, cabinets, and information boards. Adjacent to the classrooms, there is a library that collects textbooks, storybooks, and other books. The school receives book grants from the government annually. As for the laboratory, there is a lack of equipment for both science (IPA) and social studies (IPS), the room remains empty.

Student learning activities were progressing well, with most students enjoying learning at the school, which follows the 2013 curriculum. Students and teachers often arrive late due to poor road access; sometimes, school is closed during rainy days. Students also frequently arrive late due to waking up late and hitching rides with their friends. Students must own a motorcycle because the distance between residential areas and the school is quite far, which is also why few Ngaol and Talentam village residents choose to attend Merangin 53 Junior High School. Many residents need help to afford motorcycles so their children can attend school. The low number of students challenges the learning process at Merangin 53 Junior High School, with classes sometimes combined from grades 1 to 3 and teachers often teaching only one student. Students' enthusiasm for learning has decreased; they are less active in class, shy to ask questions, and find

it challenging to understand lesson materials. They require intensive guidance, especially in literacy, reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Teachers come from Ngaol, Talentam, Bangko, Muaro Bungo, and Kerinci. Local teachers from Ngaol include Taufik, Titi, Sesmawani, Aprizal, Ruslan, Syahril Budiman, and Rudi. Non-local teachers usually stay at locals' when teaching, typically spending three to four days in Ngaol, equivalent to 12 hours per week. Teachers teach in shifts. During weekends, they would return to Bangko for three days.

In doing their work, teachers from Ngaol, especially contract workers, often assist teachers from Bangko. *Access* is the main obstacle preventing teachers from always being able to come to school. For female teachers, they have to hitch a ride in a pick-up truck to get to school. Sometimes, they are forced to take leave if the vehicle is unavailable. As for male teachers, they can ride their motorcycles, specifically large trail bikes.

Local honorary teachers from Ngaol are willing to assist government teachers from Bangko, especially when they cannot attend school. Likewise, government teachers assist honorary teachers, particularly in managing teaching numbers (NUPTK), proposing honors, PPPK tests, and other matters. Merangin 53 Junior High School has five government teachers and seven honorary teachers. Another problem related to teachers is the high rate of teacher turnover. Various reasons lead to teachers leaving, including not being able to withstand living in Ngaol, having families that cannot relocate to Ngaol, demanding access to basic amenities such as roads, signals, and market access, lack of vegetable stalls, inadequate daily necessities, and insufficient healthcare facilities.

Locals can only shop for kitchen utensils and household necessities once a week if they have a car and spare time. Similarly, residents only visit midwives or nurses with limited facilities when sick. Sometimes, if the illness is severe enough, the sick person has to be taken to the Muaro Kibul Community Health Center with a travel time of around 100 minutes. Furthermore, the reason for teachers' relocation is feeling exhausted from having to commute to school every week. They leave on Monday at 6 am and arrive at school around 8 or 9 am. It is exhausting for teachers; they must wear regular clothes first and then change into work attire upon arriving at school. The obstacles during the journey are also quite diverse, ranging from rain to impassable roads, and sometimes vehicles break down or malfunction.

The Literacy Skills of Students in a Remote School

Accessing Information

Accessing information for students in remote schools is conducted both within and outside the school. In school, they typically utilize books from the library. They read during classroom learning sessions using books for physical education, the Indonesian language, and other subjects. Generally, students only

read books at school because almost all students do not purchase books. At school, they only read during the class lessons.

> *"learning and reading are the activities at school, reading physical education books, Indonesian Language Books".*

> *"Yes, generally, they literacy only exists in school."*

Accessing information also occurs outside of school. Typically, they access information through mobile phones (Handphone) and television. When accessing information through mobile phones, students go to locations that provide Wi-Fi. They access various social media platforms, including Facebook, Whatsapp, and TikTok.

> *"They watch on TV, each at their own homes, sometimes through YouTube, but in certain places, where there is WiFi, there is a transmitter available in Ngaol, you just have to pay for the voucher, the signal is good if you are on the west side of Ngaol.*

> *"Reading and accessing information on Facebook."*

> *"They access TikTok more often, looking at many videos. They make a status update on Facebook, update their photos, present themselves and their beauties."*

When accessing social media platforms, students use them to communicate with family and people around them. Additionally, they use them to obtain important information in the community, especially in the Ngaol community, or other external information. Students are also becoming interested in using TikTok, where they usually watch beauty content and influencers showcasing various contemporary styles.

> *"reading and accessing information on Facebook, for instance, the information regarding an accident."*

> *"it can be said that they are interested in literacy and education, they are more attracted to videos about beauty, beauty makeover, something like that."*

Low Literacy Skills

In Merangin 53 Junior High School, some students have not mastered fundamental literacy skills such as reading, writing, and arithmetic. Some students could not read texts, struggling with spelling words and sentences. Additionally, some students need help comprehending reading materials and cannot identify the main ideas in each paragraph. Some students also needed help writing sentences and paragraphs; they could only write two to three lines.

> *"they don't understand what they read, their reading skills are minimum, they must be instructed and supervised."*

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"there must be a teacher to supervise when they read, because they do not understand what they are reading."
"No, it's more about connecting letters, words, r-e-a-d."

The students' willingness to read was relatively low; they were not very interested in reading books in the library, and their motivation to read was minimal both during class and outside of study hours. Some also feel bored when the teacher tells them to read in class. Additionally, there was a lack of awareness among students regarding reading books and other information.

"Motivation indeed, locals are surely lacking the motivation to read."

"that's their weakness, its more about the interest to read, and once they read, they read slow."

"for them, reading is boring, thus making them unable to find the meaning of what they've read."

Literacy learning that relies on teachers

Literacy is related to the learning process of students at school. Literacy and learning must go hand in hand. Merangin 53 Junior High School's learning models are still teacher-oriented; they heavily rely on teachers. Teachers bear significant responsibility in the learning and literacy process.

"They believe that education is in the teacher, not in the book; they find it difficult to understand it from sentences, and they are solely relying on teachers."

"So they rely on their teachers to register for high school, especially for online registration, as they may not fully understand the requirements and procedures."

In striving for literacy among students at Merangin 53 Junior High School, the teachers teach students as they would in elementary school. The teachers must teach by spelling out words and sentences, keeping the instruction as simple as possible so that students can listen and understand what is being taught. Additionally, teachers must focus on dictating and explaining the material slowly in each lesson.

"Yes, it should be taught by the teachers like elementary school, spelling out the letters is what should be focused on."

"The teacher says or dictates it, then the teacher explains how to read it."

Providing direct examples is an effective learning method for teachers at Merangin 53 Junior High School in literacy. Students will need help understanding the material if the teachers only explain the definition or concept. For example, when the teacher talks about fiction in the Indonesian language subject, if the

definition of fiction is explained, they will need help understanding. Instead, the teacher directly shows examples of fiction, such as the SpongeBob movie, which is purely fictional and not based on actual events. Another example is a story about a tiger turning into a human.

During other materials, such as poetry, the teacher directly writes poetic words on the whiteboard and reads them aloud. This is what poetry means: writing beautiful and poetic words. Only then will students understand what poetry is. This also applies to other subjects, such as Physical Education, where they prefer to practice directly, playing badminton, soccer, volleyball, and other sports.

Learning and literacy are also carried out by explaining the material, asking them to read books, giving assignments, and directly checking and assessing them. The teachers always evaluate students' literacy skills. At this point, students are very enthusiastic about learning to write diaries and exciting stories about their lives in and outside of school. They can write two pages when asked to freely write anything they want to pour into their respective notebooks.

"Lately, I've been asking them to write, mostly diary entries and inspirational stories about something memorable that happened here, right after school. It's more about writing for now."
"Writing freely. "If they write about soap operas, I'll accept that too. Whatever reflects their daily lives."

Guidance and Mentoring

Guidance and mentoring are provided to students who need help to read, write, and do arithmetic. When students first enter the school, the teachers conduct reading tests on new students to identify their basic literacy skills. Sometimes, teachers separate students based on their literacy abilities, distinguishing between those whose basic literacy skills are already good and those who still need to be proficient.

"Some want to enroll in this school; we test their literacy skills, we accept everyone, but how do we prioritize this child, how can we ensure they graduate, that they can read. Especially for those who can't, we prioritize them first."

Students whose reading, writing, and arithmetic skills still need to improve will receive intensive guidance for two semesters. This involves providing attention by allocating time to teach students how to read. Some students may also come directly to the teacher's home or residence for instruction.

"Yes, it's intense and focused on that person, there's a specific time that needs to be allocated for one or two children."

"The students come around 4 o'clock in the afternoon, some of them come to the house to learn how to read."

The teachers teach students who cannot read gradually, starting from how students connect letters and syllables, reminding every spelling uttered, and repeating sentences continuously until they can read and follow junior high school lesson materials.

Literacy for School Success

Students' literacy skills influence activities at school. For students with good literacy skills, they can follow lessons at school smoothly. In addition, they do not have difficulties when continuing their education to high school, vocational school, or Islamic boarding schools. They can even compete with students from other schools in Merangin.

"Students who can read generally attend the school smoothly; they also continue their education."

Students with low literacy skills will need help adapting to the learning curriculum in junior high school. Additionally, the students will feel that they are left behind by their peers who can already read, lag in lessons, and regret not thoroughly studying when they are younger.

"Feeling constantly left behind, so afraid to go to school. After four months of school, they said they couldn't keep up with the learning, sir."

Another impact is their embarrassment when continuing to junior high or vocational school. It is not uncommon for them to also be bullied by their peers because they cannot read and understand lessons. Some alumni decide to stop or not continue to senior high school due to their lack of literacy skills.

"They felt embarrassed at Bangko High School, especially in full day school, because they are the ones that couldn't keep up. Even though there wasn't much learning at that school."

Discussion

Based on the findings presented by the researchers, there are several similarities and differences with other literacy studies. Regarding information access, the study conducted by Iranda, Pramudiani, and Rahman (2023) mentioned the digital-based literacy access abilities of high-achieving students by utilizing internet networks and laptops. Students can access informational content ranging from ebooks, journal sites, and articles to references for academic works. Meanwhile, students in remote schools have limited access to information when reading books in the library. If they want to use a mobile phone, it has to be outside the school by finding places that provide WiFi in their respective villages.

Students in remote schools also need higher literacy skills, with some needing help reading, writing, and doing basic arithmetic. They struggle to

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comprehend text and to write. The low literacy skills are due to a need for more motivation and interest in reading. This is consistent with the study of Sukma and Sekarwidi (2021), which stated that the inhibiting factors of literacy include students' lack of enthusiasm for learning, low understanding and awareness of literacy by students or teachers, and physical limitations and school facilities. Wulandari et al. (2021) added that students' level of enjoyment in reading affects their literacy skills.

Another theme the researchers found was learning that relies on teachers, where teachers dictate the material, and the learning focus is too dependent on the teacher. According to Silmiyati (2023), learning that relies on teachers makes students feel burdened, overlooked, and lacking motivation to develop their academic potential. This will also affect students' minds, which are not open to various sources of information and knowledge. In developing basic literacy skills for students in remote schools, the teaching methods employed by teachers are crucial in enhancing literacy abilities. Madu, Jediu, and Madu (2022) suggested that teaching literacy through guidance and mentoring involves strategies such as loud reading, mastering reading techniques, creating concept maps, and reviewing what has been read. McKinney (2014) argued that teachers must design explicit programs for information literacy development that support learning. These programs can facilitate students collectively, librarians, and teachers.

At 53 Junior High School, guidance and mentoring are conducted by teachers by identifying literacy abilities, where teachers administer tests to new students, divide students into those who can read and those who cannot, provide intensive guidance both at school and at home, teach reading slowly, recall the spelling of what they read, and persist until they can read and learn smoothly at school.

Literacy also contributes to smooth learning in schools. Rinnie (2006) noted that literacy practices in remote schools, especially literacy and numeracy, are valued and prioritized because, with good literacy and numeracy skills, students can adapt to the school curriculum. At Merangin 53 Junior High School, strong reading and arithmetic skills enable students to excel in school, and they can also continue their education in high school, vocational school, or Islamic boarding schools. Conversely, students who lack basic literacy skills feel embarrassed to learn at school, struggle to adapt to the curriculum, and are not respected by their classmates. Studies on information literacy in remote schools show uniqueness and distinctiveness compared to public schools. The school background and living conditions around the students influence the students' literacy abilities. The most prominent issue is related to access, which is not only related to the Internet and books but also to road infrastructure and transportation, as well as the availability of facilities and infrastructure in schools.

At Merangin 53 Junior High School, telephone and internet access are not available, public transportation facilities are non-existent, and some students do not have motorcycles, thus needing to hitch a ride with other students, which makes them lazy and undisciplined to come to school. Another equally important issue is the limited availability of teachers to come to school every day; they have to work shifts three days a week, which limits teaching and guidance time.

Additionally, students need to receive literacy guidance from their parents, requiring maximum and intensive teacher effort. Boer and Asino (2022) argued that the context and situation of the school affect learning and literacy. This context can include limited infrastructure, inadequate access and connections, and teachers' proficiency in learning technology.

Collaboration between teachers, students, and parents is crucial to enhancing literacy in remote schools. The role of parents and teachers is required to build a culture of literacy among students at school. According to Suragangga (2017), a literacy culture is formed by encouraging students to read for 15 minutes before studying, garnering support from parents and the community to succeed in literacy programs for students at school, setting an example in reading, and adopting literacy programs from schools and regions where literacy has already developed.

D. CONCLUSION

Merangin 53 Junior High School is a remote school in Merangin Regency, Jambi Province. The limitations in infrastructure, access, and teaching-learning facilities pose challenges to the educational activities at the school. This also contributes to the low literacy levels among students in the school. This study outlined five themes related to students' literacy skills, namely accessing information, low literacy skills, literacy learning relying on teachers, additional guidance and mentoring provided by teachers outside of school hours, and literacy skills for the smooth progression through school, both during junior high school and when students continue their education to higher levels such as Senior High School and university.

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