

Research Article

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Grassroots Pedagogy and Civic Learning: Volunteer-Driven Literacy Education in Rural Indonesia

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Abstract

Background/purpose. Rural Indonesia continues to face significant disparities in foundational literacy achievement, particularly in communities with limited pedagogical support and learning resources. Volunteer-led literacy initiatives have emerged as community-driven solutions to bridge the gap between formal schooling and local learning needs. However, little is known about how volunteers conceptualize and enact pedagogy, and how these practices influence informal learning outcomes and community norms. This study examines Warabal (Warung Baca Lebakwangi), a volunteer-based literacy center in West Java, to understand how grassroots actors develop and sustain community literacy pedagogy.

Materials/methods. This research employed an interpretive single-case study with clearly defined boundaries (setting, actors, activities, and timeframe). Data were collected through forty-five hours of participant observation, semi-structured interviews with 26 participants (15 volunteers, 8 parents, 3 key informants), two focus group discussions, and local documentation. Purposive maximum-variation sampling, saturation checks, and bias-mitigation strategies ensured data credibility. Thematic analysis involved iterative coding, intercoder agreement checks, method and data triangulation, and member validation. Ethical approval was obtained from an Institutional Review Board, with written parental consent for all child participants.

Results. Findings indicate three interconnected pedagogical dynamics: (1) volunteers function as para-pedagogues using storytelling, bilingual scaffolding, and individualized guidance; (2) cultural values such as *gotong royong* embed literacy practices within communal routines; and (3) informal pedagogy strengthens children's reading confidence, social communication, and positive behavioral norms. Mini-descriptive indicators show consistent attendance (10–15 children per session), increased reading confidence (reported by 12 of 15 volunteers), and improved politeness and communication skills (reported by 7 of 8 parents). Volunteer participation also fostered personal empowerment, leadership, and civic engagement.

Conclusion. The Warabal case demonstrates that volunteer-driven literacy activism constitutes an effective, culturally grounded model of grassroots pedagogy. Volunteers bridge formal and informal learning spaces by mobilizing local cultural resources, relational trust, and adaptive teaching strategies. These findings underscore the importance of formally supporting community-based literacy programs to advance inclusive, equitable, and sustainable learning in rural Indonesia.



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1. Introduction

Literacy is widely recognized as a foundational skill for individual empowerment, social participation, and economic development (World Bank, 2023). However, in many rural regions, achieving functional literacy remains challenging—especially reading comprehension, critical literacy, and sustained reading habits (Kumar et al., 2024). In Indonesia, national assessments and educational surveys illuminate this gap. For example, the Indonesian National Assessment Program (INAP) found that 46.83 % of students scored in the “less” category for reading competency (Indonesian Ministry of Education & Culture, 2024). Moreover, a survey by the Indonesian Statistical Agency (BPS) reported that only 32.4 % of primary school students expressed a strong interest in reading (BPS, 2024).

These gaps are not merely about access to schooling or textbook quality; they reflect deeper challenges in cultivating a reading culture, resource distribution, and pedagogical practices adapted to local contexts. Many rural schools lack well-curated library collections, and existing libraries often carry materials misaligned with students’ interests (e.g., too advanced, foreign-centric, or lacking relevance to local life). The Ministry of Education’s data shows that as of 2018, only 50 % of school libraries had book collections that suited student interests (Nadifa & Zulvani, 2024).

As formal schooling systems struggle to bridge these gaps, community-based literacy initiatives have emerged as complementary. Volunteers—community members, mothers, university students, retired teachers—have started establishing reading corners, mobile libraries, reading clubs, and “reading houses” (Rumah Baca) across rural Indonesia. These grassroots efforts draw on local social networks, cultural capital, and commitment to mutual development. A recent study on “Analysis of reading ambassadors and literacy mother programs in Indonesia using unsupervised machine learning” in Indonesia traced how volunteer networks enhance the literacy ecosystem, showing improved reading engagement among children and increased parental involvement (Firstia et al., 2025).

To address these gaps, this study is situated within a clearly articulated interpretive epistemological foundation. Rather than treating literacy as a neutral technical skill, this research understands literacy practices as socially constructed activities shaped by cultural norms, relational dynamics, and lived community experiences. Existing scholarship acknowledges the rise of volunteer-based literacy initiatives across Indonesia; however, previous studies rarely examine how volunteers conceptualize pedagogy, how they negotiate local cultural expectations, and how their volunteer work leads to changes in community norms and informal learning outcomes. These gaps show that there is an insufficient understanding of the pedagogical reasoning, epistemic foundations, and socio-cultural processes through which volunteer-driven literacy activism produces educational impact in rural Indonesian contexts. This study therefore fills a critical gap by analyzing the pedagogical logics, cultural embedding, and civic consequences of volunteer-led literacy practices in Warabal, West Java, using a single-case interpretive design that foregrounds local meaning-making.

However, despite these encouraging trends, the scholarship remains underdeveloped in several areas: How do volunteers in rural literacy programs conceptualize their role as educators? What pedagogical innovations do they adopt under resource constraints? How do local cultural norms, social trust, and collective values support or impede their work? Moreover, what are the pathways through which volunteer literacy activism influences community educational norms and learner outcomes?

This study explores Warabal (Warung Baca Lebakwangi), a volunteer-led literacy hub in West Java, Indonesia. Warabal was founded in 1997 and has since grown into a dynamic grassroots learning space, mainly sustained by community volunteers. It integrates storytelling, after-school reading clubs, peer tutoring, and occasional mobile library outreach. Because Warabal is deeply embedded

in its community and has been maintained for decades, it offers rich terrain to investigate how volunteerism becomes pedagogy, how local volunteers internalize educator identities, and how they negotiate challenges of scale, sustainability, and legitimacy.

Specifically, this study asks: (1) How do Warabal volunteers conceptualize and enact literacy pedagogy within their community context? (2) How do the practices of volunteer-driven literacy activism contribute to informal learning outcomes, community educational norms, and individual empowerment? By situating volunteer literacy activism in the theoretical lenses of participatory pedagogy, informal education, and learning communities, this research aims to contribute to educational theory and practice, especially in underserved rural settings. It also offers policy-relevant insights for bridging formal and nonformal learning systems to pursue SDG 4: inclusive, equitable, quality education for all.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Conceptualizing and Enacting Literacy Pedagogy in Community Contexts

Libraries and community reading spaces as pedagogical hubs. Contemporary research positions libraries and community reading centers as instructional spaces that catalyze teaching–learning innovation—especially in resource-constrained rural settings. Empirical work shows libraries function as “learning hubs” that scaffold teacher practice and student engagement, not merely as repositories of books, e.g., study from Mdozana-Zide & Chimbi (2025) on rural/school libraries as hubs for pedagogy. Multi-country evidence further documents rural libraries’ role in lifelong learning through curated programs, small-group instruction, and informal classes (Belete et al., 2022; Munshi et al., 2024). Staff perspectives research also details how public libraries deliberately design programs for college-readiness literacy, revealing the pedagogical intent of librarianship in community contexts (Hands & Candela, 2024).

Community literacy pedagogy frequently aligns with situated learning and communities of practice: novices (children, new volunteers) learn by participating in meaningful joint activities; expertise is distributed and grows through practice (Morton, 2012; Towney, 2020). Reviews and state-of-the-art pieces synthesize how learning spaces evolve from static rooms to dynamic, socially-constructed environments that support collaboration, storytelling, and problem-based tasks—core methods seen in volunteer-led literacy work (Papaioannou et al., 2023). Conceptual and practice articles chart how “third-space” collaboration between professionals and community actors creates practically-based learning in informal venues (Emms et al., 2024). In adult and community education, institutionalized community learning centers (CLCs) are shown to integrate literacy with civic, health, and vocational agendas, reinforcing participatory pedagogy at the neighborhood scale (Belete et al., 2022; Majola et al., 2025).

Studies in library and education journals converge that volunteers perform instructional mediation: read-alouds, small-group tutoring, and program design tuned to local culture and learner needs (Gallagher et al., 2023; Ritter et al., 2006; van Diggele et al., 2020). Staff- and volunteer-focused surveys highlight intentional practices (scaffolding, multimodal resources, peer learning) that mirror formal pedagogies while staying flexible to context (Rangkuti et al., n.d.). In higher-ed and youth contexts, meta-analytic work on community-engaged learning (CEL) points to gains in academic, social, and citizenship outcomes—underscoring that participatory, community-anchored pedagogy reliably produces learning benefits (Aaen & Nørgård, 2015; Oliver et al., 2023; Whitmore, 2023).

Evidence from Asia and comparable settings documents how storytelling grounded in local culture, peer tutoring, and experiential print-rich tasks (e.g., reading environmental print) strengthen decoding and comprehension while building identity and belonging (Benabbes & AbdulHaleem Abu Taleb, 2024; Catur Nugroho, 2020). Case and review articles emphasize locally relevant texts and

learner-centered routines as the pedagogical “engine” of community programs (Wang & McLaughlin, 2024). Rural/school library studies also stress aligning collections and activities with learner interest and the local curriculum—where volunteers often lead responsive curation (Merga & Mat Roni, 2025).

2.2. Contribution of Volunteer-Driven Literacy Activism to Informal Learning Outcomes

Recent impact studies and meta-analyses prove that community-based tutoring and cross-age mentoring improve reading outcomes for early and primary learners, with measurable effects for both tutees and tutors. A randomized trial and a meta-analytic update report small-to-moderate gains in foundational reading, fluency, and broader academic indicators, supporting the efficacy of scalable volunteer tutoring models (Cortes et al., 2025). Complementary work shows informal learning spaces improve wellbeing and social integration—mechanisms that plausibly mediate persistence in reading and school engagement (Geister et al., 2025).

Studies of libraries’ community engagement tie programs explicitly to SDG-4 (quality education), documenting how outreach, partnerships, and volunteer leadership embed reading as a community value and normalize out-of-school learning (Bangani, 2024). Staff-perspective research indicates libraries intentionally cultivate “college-literacy” pathways—parent workshops, study skills, and reading clubs—thus shifting communal expectations about learning beyond school walls (Hands & Candela, 2024; Szabo et al., 2014). Multi-country evidence on CLCs shows similar norm shifts: when literacy is connected to livelihood, citizenship, and health content, communities increasingly view learning as lifelong and socially shared (Ahmed, 2014; Belete et al., 2022; Hanemann & Robinson, 2022).

Scholarship on volunteer teaching reports that values alignment, perceived impact, and professional growth sustain participation; volunteers evolve identities as educators and community leaders, stabilizing programs. Recent articles on “why volunteer to teach” and service-learning pedagogy highlight reciprocal learning benefits for the volunteers (leadership, agency) alongside learner gains—an empowerment loop that undergirds program durability (He et al., 2025). In library settings, communities-of-practice pieces document how peer mentoring among volunteers/librarians institutionalizes know-how (e.g., read-alouds, small-group facilitation), reducing turnover shocks (Association, 2020; Goudreau, 2022).

Emerging work shows rural libraries partner across sectors (health, social services) and function as “community health ecosystems,” with programming that broadens participation and trust—factors associated with equitable learning access and women’s leadership in community education (Lenstra et al., 2023). Such cross-sector roles often originate in volunteer initiatives (gardens, nutrition + reading days, mobile outreach) and later attract institutional support, reinforcing a virtuous cycle from activism, legitimacy, resources, and broader impact. Case studies and program reports in the public library literature describe these trajectories (Bossaller et al., 2025). While connectivity constraints persist, rural library studies emphasize pragmatic, community-adapted steps toward digital literacy (offline tablets, curated media, blended activities) that expand literacies beyond print (Nugroho & Nasionalita, 2020; Smit et al., 2024). Reviews and case work recommend incremental, interest-driven digital experiences—typically planned and stewarded by volunteers—to build confidence and sustain participation.

3. Methodology

3.1. Reserch Design

This study employed a qualitative single-case study design to examine how volunteers at Warabal conceptualize and enact literacy pedagogy in their everyday context. A case study was

chosen because the phenomenon under investigation is deeply embedded in its real-life setting and requires multiple sources of evidence to be understood holistically (Creswell, 2015; Crowe et al., 2011). Following a constructivist–interpretive epistemology, the study assumes that pedagogical practices, literacy routines, and volunteer meaning-making emerge through social interaction and are shaped by local cultural norms. Within this orientation, the study uses a holistic single-case design with embedded subunits, in which volunteers, parents, and key informants serve as analytic units nested within the broader case of the Warabal literacy center (Maulana et al., 2025; Yin, 2018). To ensure clarity of scope, the case boundaries were explicitly defined: (1) the setting was limited to Warabal in Lebakwangi, West Java; (2) the actors consisted of volunteers, parents/caregivers, and community informants; (3) the activities included storytelling sessions, reading clubs, after-school tutoring, and parent–child literacy engagements; and (4) the timeframe covered a focused three-week field period supplemented by retrospective narrative accounts. These boundaries guided case selection, ensured methodological consistency, and strengthened the internal coherence of the research design.

We employed a combination of in-depth interviews and participant observation to gather data, alongside a review of relevant documents and media. The goal was to construct a rich narrative of how various community actors perceive and contribute to Warabal as volunteer-run community learning space and library in Lebakwangi (peri-urban/rural West Java). Activities include: weekend storytelling, after-school reading clubs, early childhood read-alouds, peer tutoring/homework help, periodic mobile library outreach, and parent engagement sessions. The setting is modest (one main room + small yard), relies on donations, and is facilitated primarily by women volunteers with rotating youth support.

3.2. Sampling and Participants

We used purposive sampling to identify participants actively involved in Warabal. We used purposive, maximum-variation sampling to ensure representation across roles, tenure, age, and gender. Volunteers ($n = 15$): 10 women, five men; ages 17–55; roles included program coordination, read-aloud/storytelling, peer tutoring, circulation, and parent outreach. Tenure ranged from <1 year to >10 years. Parents/Caregivers ($n = 8$): to triangulate learner outcomes and norm shifts. Key informants ($n = 3$): 1 founder/senior facilitator, one local primary teacher, one village official (for contextual and policy insights). Inclusion criteria for volunteers: active facilitation for ≥ 3 months, willingness to be observed/interviewed, and availability during data-collection window. We conducted in-depth interviews with 15 individuals from January 2024 to February 2025.

Sampling followed a maximum-variation purposive strategy to ensure heterogeneity of perspectives across gender, age, tenure, and pedagogical roles. This rationale aligns with the interpretive aim of capturing diverse meaning-making processes rather than representativeness. Saturation was systematically monitored: no new analytical codes emerged after the twenty-third interview, indicating thematic sufficiency. Potential biases—such as overreliance on senior volunteer narratives—were mitigated through triangulation across parents, key informants, and observations, alongside reflexive memoing by the researcher.

3.3. Data Collection

Data collection in this study followed the logic of methodological triangulation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018), combining prolonged participant observation, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and document analysis to ensure depth, credibility, and contextual understanding of pedagogical practices at Warabal.

Participant observation consisted of 45 hours structured by an observation protocol that captured interactional patterns, spatial organization, instructional scaffolding, and cultural routines

embedded in literacy sessions. Semi-structured interviews were developed through a three-stage process—literature review, preliminary design, and pilot testing with two non-participant volunteers—to refine question clarity and ensure alignment with the interpretive framework. Two focus group discussions were facilitated using moderation strategies such as turn-taking prompts, conflict-minimizing rules, and stimulus vignettes. These procedures ensured that the FGDs generated collective reflection rather than dominance by senior members. All data collection tools were standardized to enhance consistency and transparency across sessions.

Two focus group discussions were organized to deepen collective reflection and peer validation. The first FGD involved six senior volunteers who discussed the evolution of Warabal’s pedagogy, community recognition, and sustainability strategies. The second FGD brought together seven younger or newly joined volunteers to explore their learning experiences, challenges, and the peer mentorship system that supports knowledge transfer within the community. Both FGDs lasted approximately seventy-five to ninety minutes and encouraged participants to discuss how they adapted teaching materials, handled learner diversity, and integrated local storytelling traditions into lesson plans. All interviews and FGDs were transcribed verbatim in Indonesian, and translated into English for analysis. Translation accuracy was verified through back-translation by bilingual reviewers familiar with local linguistic nuances. Ethical protocols emphasized voluntary participation, informed consent, and the right to withdraw at any stage, following guidance from the American Educational Research Association (AERA, 2021).

3.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through an iterative thematic process involving open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Two coders independently analyzed 20% of transcripts, achieving substantial intercoder reliability (Cohen’s $\kappa = .81$). Themes were derived through constant comparison across interviews, observations, FGDs, and community documents. Triangulation occurred at four levels: method triangulation (observations, interviews, FGDs, documents), data triangulation (volunteers, parents, key informants), source triangulation (different sessions and timepoints), and investigator triangulation (dual coders + external auditing). Member checking with volunteers further strengthened the credibility of interpretations.

The adequacy of the three-week field engagement was also assessed in relation to the analytic process. Although the temporal window was relatively short, the combination of sustained daily observations, maximum-variation interviews, and retrospective accounts generated sufficient depth to reach thematic saturation. Saturation was confirmed when no new analytical codes emerged after the twenty-third interview, consistent with guidelines for qualitative sufficiency (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Furthermore, long-standing volunteers—some with more than a decade of involvement—provided rich historical narratives that enabled temporal triangulation beyond the immediate field period. The iterative coding cycles, member checking, and triangulation across methods and data sources strengthened interpretive robustness, ensuring that the analytic outcomes remained credible despite the focused duration of fieldwork (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018).

4. Results

4.1. Community-Embedded Literacy Pedagogy by Warabal Volunteers

Warabal volunteers understand their pedagogical role as *pendamping*—companions who guide children through literacy learning in a way that is emotionally supportive, culturally situated, and attuned to each child’s pace of development. This approach reflects a community-informed pedagogy in which teaching is inseparable from care work and relational trust. Rather than positioning themselves as formal instructors, volunteers emphasized that their primary objective is to “make children feel safe first, then help them want to read,” as one senior volunteer explained.

Observations showed how volunteers frequently kneeled beside children, offered patient one-on-one guidance, and used familiar local references such as household objects, village stories, and playful analogies to build early comprehension. These practices demonstrate that literacy instruction at Warabal is anchored in affective labor, slow-paced scaffolding, and intimate interpersonal connection—features that resonate with literacy-as-social-practice frameworks.

At the same time, pedagogy at Warabal is deeply tied to local cultural norms, especially values of *gotong royong* and collective care. Volunteers consistently framed literacy activities as part of a broader communal responsibility rather than an individual initiative. This cultural embedding was visible in how literacy sessions were interwoven with community routines: mothers assisting with book circulation, teenagers acting as co-facilitators during busy days, and neighbors hosting reading groups in their courtyards when the main space became too crowded. One volunteer recounted how parents gradually shifted from skepticism to active participation after recognizing that “reading together has become part of our village’s habit.” By aligning pedagogical work with existing cultural rhythms—religious study groups, *arisan* meetings, and communal gatherings—volunteers ensured that literacy learning was legitimate and socially acceptable within the community. This alignment also enabled new participants to join organically, strengthening Warabal’s position as a culturally rooted learning hub.

The child-centered and culturally grounded approach has observable consequences for children’s literacy confidence, behavior, and communication. Volunteers reported that 12 of the 15 regularly attending children demonstrated increased willingness to read aloud, engage in story retelling, and attempt unfamiliar words during the three-week observation period. Parents echoed these improvements: seven out of eight interviewed caregivers observed noticeable changes in politeness, communication skills, and emotional expression. One mother explained, “*Dulu anak saya marah kalau disuruh baca. Sekarang dia malah cerita kembali isi buku ke saya*” (“Previously, my child became upset when asked to read. Now he retells the stories to me on his own”). Field notes captured similar patterns: children voluntarily requested specific storybooks, initiated peer reading, and increasingly used polite expressions such as *maaf* (sorry), *tolong* (please), and *terima kasih* (thank you), which volunteers consistently modeled during the sessions. These behavioral shifts suggest that Warabal’s pedagogy fosters not only technical literacy but also communicative confidence and socio-emotional development.

In addition to benefits for children, volunteer pedagogy contributes to community empowerment and identity formation among the volunteers themselves. Senior volunteers—some with more than a decade of involvement—described how their work at Warabal shaped their self-understanding as educators, community leaders, and role models. One volunteer reflected, “*Saya menemukan diri saya di sini. Awalnya hanya membantu, lama-lama jadi panggilan hidup*” (“I found myself here. At first I only helped, but over time it became a calling”). Younger volunteers repeatedly described experiences of learning-by-doing, gaining confidence in leading storytelling sessions, facilitating peer learning, and managing classroom dynamics. This reciprocal learning cycle—children learning from volunteers, volunteers learning from children and peers—creates a community of practice that sustains Warabal’s pedagogical ecosystem. The sense of personal and collective empowerment expressed by volunteers illustrates how literacy activism operates simultaneously as education, social participation, and civic identity formation.

For example, one volunteer noted: “We tell and retell stories until the children see themselves inside them,” illustrating how storytelling becomes a dialogic, identity-affirming process. Parents similarly observed changes in communication habits, with one mother stating, “My child now says ‘thank you’ and ‘sorry’ without being reminded.” These qualitative accounts align with observation data showing steady attendance (10–15 children per session) and volunteers’ reports that 12 of 15 children demonstrated increased reading confidence over the three-week period.

4.2. Impacts on Informal Learning, Community Norms, and Empowerment

At the heart of Warabal's literacy practice is storytelling—an approach that bridges cultural heritage with functional literacy. Volunteers frequently used folktales (*cerita rakyat*), local legends, and everyday narratives to teach reading comprehension, vocabulary, and moral reasoning. Observations showed that storytelling sessions were dialogic rather than performative: facilitators invited children to co-create endings, act out scenes, or relate stories to their home life.

"We do not read just to finish the story," explained Sari, a volunteer. *"We tell and retell until the kids see themselves inside it."*

This reflects what Barton & Hamilton (2012) describe as literacy as social practice, where reading is intertwined with local meaning-making rather than treated as a technical skill. Similar findings in the UAE and Indonesia also show that storytelling pedagogy fosters reading motivation and cultural continuity in rural education settings (Alkilani & Zhang, 2025; Sakhiyya et al., 2025).

The volunteer-driven literacy practices at Warabal have yielded concrete learning benefits for children and adults in this rural community. Children acquire early literacy skills and a love of learning in an informal setting that feels more like a family gathering than a classroom. Many young participants begin recognizing letters and developing pre-reading abilities through play-based and one-on-one support, preparing them for formal schooling. More importantly, the children absorb positive behaviors and social skills as part of the learning process. Volunteers observe that over time, children become more respectful and articulate in communication – a notable change in a community where, previously, coarse or improper language among kids was common.

For instance, Ibu Entik reported that when she first started, some local children frequently used a rude slang ("paci") in their speech. Still, through consistent, gentle correction and modeling of polite words, she "managed to help the children change that bad habit". Similarly, by instilling routines like saying magic words ("please," "sorry," "thank you"), the program has improved children's manners and confidence in daily interactions. These outcomes, though informal, are significant precursors to academic success and personal development. Another evident outcome is cultivating reading habits and intellectual curiosity among the youth. Because Warabal provides access to books and a space to read for pleasure, children with little exposure to print now regularly engage with storybooks. Volunteers note cases of children coming to the library as non-readers, eventually learning to read simple books independently, and even helping each other in peer learning. The long-term educational trajectories of Warabal's children further attest to these learning gains. Volunteers take pride in seeing former participants continue to succeed in education. Ibu Santi, for example, expressed joy upon seeing children she once taught in the Warabal playgroup advance through school, "continuing their education up to college and achieving things – even working abroad", as a testament to the lasting impact of early literacy support. While many factors contribute to such success, Warabal's nurturing literacy environment gives these children a strong start and a positive attitude toward learning. The volunteer-driven approach – with its patient mentorship and emphasis on cognitive and character skills – has led to meaningful informal learning outcomes: children gain literacy foundations, social etiquette, self-esteem, and the motivation to pursue further education.

Beyond individual learning, Warabal's activism has gradually shifted the community's norms and expectations regarding education and literacy. Initially, the idea of an informal, volunteer-run library or preschool was unfamiliar in the village. As noted, some community members were skeptical that learning activities were being conducted outside formal institutions, and in a home setting rather than a school or mosque. However, the sustained efforts of the volunteers over the years have normalized these practices and woven them into the community's social norms. Reading and learning have increasingly become collective values in the village culture. For example, what began as a small

reading circle has evolved into a community-wide "literacy movement" where it is customary for parents to bring young children to the Warabal library or PAUD for enrichment. Including mothers as library co-managers and participants in reading activities has also reinforced a norm that education is a shared family and community responsibility, not solely the domain of formal teachers or schools. Today, it is common to see mothers, volunteers, and children gathering for storytelling sessions or mini-lessons in someone's courtyard, a sight that might have seemed odd years ago but is now part of everyday life. Community leaders who once needed convincing are now supportive; indeed, volunteers eventually gained the endorsement of local authorities after demonstrating the tangible benefits of their programs.

The Warabal initiative has effectively created a local culture that values literacy. Neighbors donate books, and religious or social events occasionally incorporate a short reading activity or children's performance, signaling that learning is now intertwined with community celebrations. Moreover, the volunteers' respect for tradition – for instance, coordinating schedules around prayer times and using existing forums like arisan groups to discuss children's education – has shown that modern literacy goals can coexist with and even enhance local customs. The success of Warabal's model has inspired similar volunteer-led learning activities in nearby hamlets, suggesting a ripple effect on educational norms in the broader area. In summary, what was once a novel experiment (a volunteer community library and preschool) has become an accepted and admired norm: the community now expects that children should engage in reading from an early age, that learning can happen outside of formal school, and that educated, civically engaged volunteers are crucial contributors to the village's welfare.

The practices of volunteer-driven literacy activism in Warabal have empowered both the recipients of the program (children and their families) and the volunteers themselves. For children, the most immediate form of empowerment is having access to knowledge and mentorship that they would otherwise lack. Many of the children come from underprivileged backgrounds – some had working parents with little time, and others grew up in single-parent or disrupted households. These children gain academic support, personal attention, and encouragement through the volunteers' consistent guidance and care. This helps to compensate for gaps in support at home and gives the children a stronger sense of self-worth. One volunteer noted that her presence and mentorship are *"significant in helping these children develop better character"*, especially for those not receiving sufficient parental guidance. Over the years, children in Warabal's programs have grown into more confident individuals – several have become the first in their families to pursue higher education, which is a profound form of individual empowerment attributable partly to the foundation built by the literacy activism. Parents, too, feel empowered by the volunteers' work: mothers involved in managing the library develop leadership skills and a sense of agency in their community, and families increasingly see themselves as active stakeholders in their children's learning, rather than passive bystanders.

The volunteers themselves experience significant personal empowerment and growth. Engaging in this literacy activism has given them a strong sense of purpose and identity as change agents in their community. Many Warabal volunteers describe their work as a calling driven by empathy and communal values, but they also acknowledge the reciprocal benefits they receive. For instance, Ibu Narti (Entik) discovered her "true self as a volunteer" through her long journey with Warabal, eventually leaving her previous job to dedicate herself fully to the community preschool. Volunteers gain confidence in public speaking, curriculum planning, and community organizing by teaching and organizing – skills that have spillover effects in their personal and professional lives. Ibu Kis observed that some younger volunteers leveraged the experience and discipline they gained at the community library to advance their careers, even with modest formal education. "Academically, they might not have even finished primary school, but they have discipline and commitment – that is what we value,"

she noted of one volunteer's growth. This highlights how the program empowers volunteers by validating non-formal skills and providing avenues for personal development.

Additionally, the act of volunteering itself is often framed as spiritually and emotionally rewarding. Ibu Entik, for example, articulated that her goal in teaching was to earn "pahala" (merit in God's eyes), not a salary. Despite the minimal financial rewards, she works with sincerity and faith that "what we sow now will bear fruit in the future". This outlook empowers her to persevere through economic challenges, find fulfillment in service, and trust that her contributions are meaningful. Such narratives have a contagious effect: the dedication of core volunteers like her has inspired friends and neighbors to also contribute their time, even without monetary compensation, thereby spreading an ethos of collective empowerment.

Finally, the synergy between volunteer and community empowerment is evident in Warabal's sustained success. Volunteers like Ibu Santi, who initially struggled to balance family finances, managed to turn their volunteer role into a sustainable livelihood by offering extra tutoring and religious lessons to children. In doing so, she not only supported her own family but also expanded Warabal's educational reach. Her story demonstrates how volunteer-driven initiatives can evolve to empower the volunteers economically while aligning with the community's academic mission. In conclusion, the Warabal case shows that grassroots literacy activism can be a powerful catalyst for empowerment: children gain knowledge and confidence, community members embrace education as a norm, and the volunteers grow into more skilled, influential, and self-fulfilled individuals. Each of these outcomes reinforces the others, creating a virtuous cycle where literacy, learning, and empowerment feed into the community's sustained development.

5. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that Warabal's literacy practices operate as a form of grassroots pedagogy shaped by cultural norms, relational trust, and volunteer agency. Unlike formal instructional settings, volunteer-driven pedagogy at Warabal is characterized by improvisation, bilingual scaffolding, and culturally responsive storytelling. These practices reflect an interpretive pedagogical logic in which literacy is inseparable from community identity, emotional development, and social participation.

Importantly, Warabal's pedagogical style is culturally responsive and improvisational. Volunteers integrate local languages (Sundanese), stories, and neighborhood practices to anchor literacy in lived experience. Their willingness to co-opt social events, adapt materials, and embed literacy in communal routines (e.g., arisan, mosque gatherings) illustrates how pedagogy must negotiate with local norms rather than impose external designs. This is consistent with findings that effective community-based literacy initiatives succeed when they "meet learners where they are" culturally and socially. Moreover, the Warabal model demonstrates pedagogical resilience in resource-constrained environments. Volunteers transform scarcity into opportunity—using recycled materials, ambient print in the community, and peer-to-peer learning strategies. Such resourceful adaptation resonates with broader literature on volunteer tutoring and grassroots education, where volunteer programs are especially effective when they leverage local creativity and flexibility (Nickow et al., 2020).

The effectiveness of these practices can be understood through their alignment with established mechanisms in community-based literacy development. Storytelling enhances vocabulary and comprehension by situating texts within familiar cultural contexts; individualized attention supports early decoding skills; and communal participation reinforces children's motivation to read. However, several limitations also emerged: reliance on unpaid volunteers creates risks of burnout; material scarcity restricts the variety of literacy activities; and long-term sustainability depends heavily on a

small core of senior volunteers. These challenges mirror findings in global literature on volunteer-based tutoring programs and point to the need for structured institutional support.

The findings from Warabal demonstrate how community volunteers operationalize literacy pedagogy as a socially embedded and adaptive practice. Rather than being passive facilitators, the volunteers act as instructional mediators—designing lessons, leading read-alouds, and scaffolding peer learning tailored to children's needs. This aligns closely with the idea that libraries and community reading centers are not static repositories but dynamic pedagogical hubs that foster innovation in teaching and learning (Mdodana-Zide & Chimbi, 2025). As observed in Warabal, the reading house becomes a flexible classroom where storytelling, dialogue, and collective participation turn literacy into a shared social event. Such spaces resemble the "learning hubs" described by Munshi et al. (2024) and Belete et al. (2022), which in resource-limited contexts serve as lifelong learning environments through curated programs and informal small-group instruction.

Warabal volunteers' approach also reflects a situated learning model, where children and novice facilitators learn through meaningful participation within a community of practice. Their improvisational methods—adapting storybooks, reusing local materials, switching between Bahasa Indonesia and Sundanese—illustrate the process of learning by doing within an evolving collective (Morton, 2012; Towney, 2020). Such enactments parallel Papaioannou et al. (2023), who emphasize that effective community pedagogy transforms static learning rooms into socially constructed environments that encourage collaboration, storytelling, and problem-based inquiry. The Warabal volunteers thus operate as both educators and learners, co-constructing pedagogy through joint reflection and adaptation.

Furthermore, Warabal's literacy work demonstrates what Emms et al. (2024) describe as a "third-space" collaboration—bridging formal educational norms and community practice. The volunteers create hybrid spaces where professional and civic forms of knowledge intersect by involving mothers, religious groups, and local leaders in literacy programs. This resonates with Belete et al. (2022) and Majola et al. (2025), who find that community learning centers (CLCs) successfully integrate literacy with social and vocational goals, anchoring participatory learning at the neighborhood scale. Similarly, the Warabal model aligns with findings from Gallagher et al. (2023) and van Diggele et al. (2020), who note that volunteer instructors often employ multimodal, learner-responsive strategies—read-alouds, storytelling, peer tutoring, and contextual examples—that mirror formal pedagogy but remain culturally grounded.

Warabal exemplifies a context-responsive and culturally situated pedagogy built on participation, storytelling, and moral development. The volunteers' integration of local values, such as *gotong royong* (mutual help) and religious ethics, transforms literacy education into social learning. Their work supports Merga and Mat Roni's (2025) argument that rural libraries thrive when volunteers curate materials aligned with learners' interests and community identity. The Warabal experience thus reinforces that sustainable literacy development in rural Indonesia depends not on imported teaching models but on community-authored pedagogical innovation rooted in everyday life.

The Warabal case also illustrates how volunteer-driven literacy activism generates multi-level educational impact—enhancing informal learning, shifting community norms, and empowering individuals. Children's improved reading readiness, social manners, and communication confidence mirror evidence from community tutoring research, where small-group and cross-age mentoring lead to measurable literacy gains (Cortes et al., 2025). Similarly, qualitative improvements—children reading aloud voluntarily, parents reporting better home study routines—echo findings that informal learning environments improve wellbeing and persistence in schooling (Geister et al., 2025).

Warabal's literacy activism also contributes to normative change, embedding learning as a social value rather than an institutional mandate. The gradual acceptance of community-run reading circles

and preschools reflects library patterns that link literacy to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4): quality education through local partnerships (Bangani, 2024). Hands and Candela (2024) show that such libraries intentionally cultivate "college-literacy pathways" by engaging parents and communities in study skills and reading clubs—an evolution mirrored by Warabal's integration of mothers into program management and outreach. As Ahmed (2014) and Hanemann & Robinson (2022) note, connecting literacy to livelihoods, citizenship, and health fosters a lifelong learning ethos, enabling communities to view education as a shared civic responsibility.

The study also reinforces how volunteering itself functions as an empowerment pedagogy. Warabal volunteers, particularly women, describe teaching as a process of personal growth and self-discovery—moving from passive participants to active community leaders. This finding parallels He et al. (2025), who identify values alignment and perceived impact as drivers of sustained volunteer engagement. Likewise, Goudreau (2022) observes that peer mentoring among volunteers creates informal professional development systems, stabilizing program quality and reducing attrition. In Warabal, experienced facilitators mentor newcomers, embodying a cycle of reciprocal learning consistent with the communities-of-practice framework.

Finally, Warabal's partnerships with local cooperatives and health programs echo the emerging recognition of libraries as community ecosystems that integrate education, social services, and wellbeing (Lenstra et al., 2023; Bossaller et al., 2025). Literacy activism becomes educational and developmental through these linkages, broadening participation and strengthening trust. In this sense, Warabal validates Smit et al. (2024)'s observation that incremental, interest-driven programs, guided by volunteers, sustain community engagement even amid technological or economic constraints.

In summary, the Warabal experience substantiates a growing consensus in contemporary scholarship: grassroots literacy activism is a legitimate form of community pedagogy. It simultaneously delivers learning outcomes, reconstructs communal values, and empowers individuals—especially women—to become agents of change. This aligns with the broader shift in educational theory toward recognizing informal, volunteer-based learning as integral to lifelong education and civic development.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how Warabal volunteers in rural West Java conceptualize and enact literacy pedagogy within their community, and how their volunteer-driven literacy activism contributes to informal learning outcomes, community educational norms, and individual empowerment. The findings reveal that community volunteers are not peripheral supporters of education but act as transformative pedagogical agents who bridge formal and informal learning through culturally responsive practices.

Warabal's literacy pedagogy is grounded in a philosophy of accompaniment, participation, and moral development, where learning is understood as a social and affective process rather than a technical one. Volunteers design learning experiences that connect children's lived realities with literacy activities, integrating storytelling, local languages, and character education into everyday sessions. In this sense, the Warabal learning space operates as a pedagogical hub—a locally driven center of teaching and learning innovation, echoing what Mdodana-Zide and Chimbi (2025) and Munshi et al. (2024) describe in their studies of community libraries as dynamic educational ecosystems. The volunteers' creative use of limited resources, improvisational teaching, and emphasis on local values demonstrate how situated learning can flourish in resource-constrained contexts.

Ultimately, Warabal illustrates how literacy activism evolves into a community pedagogical institution that reshapes local norms around education. Volunteers gain pedagogical confidence and civic leadership, while children develop foundational literacy and communication skills in ways that formal schooling alone has not achieved. Yet the study also underscores that such initiatives require sustained partnerships, resource support, and volunteer capacity-building to maintain their impact. Strengthening these community pedagogical ecosystems is therefore critical to advancing equitable literacy outcomes in rural Indonesia.

7. Suggestion

Policy support for programs like Warabal must extend beyond symbolic recognition. Local governments can provide micro-grants for learning materials, while universities can establish regular mentoring and training cycles for volunteers. Schools can create referral pathways that integrate community literacy activities into early grade reading strategies. These concrete steps would reinforce the pedagogical and civic contributions of grassroots literacy initiatives and enhance their long-term sustainability.

Declarations

Author Contributions. All authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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