

UNVEILING THE EARLY LITERACY GAP: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF TEACHING STRATEGIES IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SCHOOLS AS A BASIS FOR DESIGNING SOLUTIONS TO READING DELAYS

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ABSTRAK

Kesenjangan literasi dini di Indonesia menunjukkan kondisi darurat yang mencerminkan persoalan struktural dalam sistem pendidikan nasional. Merosotnya skor PISA Indonesia, terutama pada aspek membaca, menjadi indikasi rendahnya efektivitas kebijakan pendidikan, khususnya dalam implementasi strategi pengajaran di sekolah dasar. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis perbedaan strategi mengajar literasi antara sekolah negeri dan swasta, guna merancang solusi berbasis bukti terhadap keterlambatan membaca anak usia dini. Metode yang digunakan adalah studi pustaka dengan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif dan fenomenologis. Data dianalisis secara tematik dari berbagai sumber sekunder, termasuk laporan PISA, asesmen nasional, artikel jurnal, dan media sosial. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa sekolah swasta umumnya unggul dalam hal kualitas guru, variasi metode pembelajaran, ketersediaan sumber belajar, serta keterlibatan orang tua. Sementara sekolah negeri menghadapi tantangan besar seperti beban administratif guru, keterbatasan infrastruktur, dan rendahnya partisipasi keluarga. Ketimpangan ini berdampak signifikan terhadap perkembangan literasi anak dan memperkuat siklus marginalisasi sosial. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa upaya perbaikan literasi dini harus mengedepankan prinsip keadilan distribusi (*equity based*), memperkuat kapasitas guru, meningkatkan akses literatur dan teknologi, serta mendorong kolaborasi antara sekolah dan keluarga. Pendekatan holistik dan kontekstual menjadi kunci dalam membangun fondasi literasi yang adil dan berkelanjutan.

Kata kunci: literasi, kesenjangan, pendidikan, strategi mengajar

ABSTRACT

The gap in early literacy in Indonesia reflects an urgent situation that mirrors structural issues within the national education system. The decline in Indonesia's PISA scores, particularly in reading, indicates the low effectiveness of educational policies, especially in the implementation of teaching strategies at the elementary school level. This study aims to analyze the differences in literacy teaching strategies between public and private schools in order to design evidence based solutions to address early childhood reading delays. The method used is a literature review with a descriptive qualitative and phenomenological approach. Data were analyzed thematically from various secondary sources, including PISA reports, national assessments, journal articles, and social media. The analysis revealed that private schools generally excel in terms of teacher quality, variety of teaching methods, availability of learning resources, and parental involvement. In contrast, public schools face significant challenges, such as teachers'

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<i>administrative burdens, limited infrastructure, and low family participation. This disparity significantly impacts children's literacy development and reinforces the cycle of social marginalization. The study concludes that efforts to improve early literacy should prioritize equity based principles, strengthen teachers' capacity, increase access to literature and technology, and foster collaboration between schools and families. A holistic and contextual approach is key to building a just and sustainable literacy foundation.</i>	
Keywords: literacy, educational, inequality, teaching strategies	

I. INTRODUCTION

Reading literacy skills constitute one of the fundamental prerequisites for ensuring children’s academic and social success from the early stages of formal education. Literacy is not merely understood as the ability to decode or recognize words, but rather as a complex cognitive process that involves text comprehension, meaning making, and critical thinking (Anggraini, 2016). Poverty (2019) emphasizes that low levels of early childhood literacy significantly contribute to what is referred to as *learning poverty*, a condition in which children at the age of ten are unable to understand simple texts. This condition ultimately hampers educational progress as well as the social and economic development of both individuals and nations.

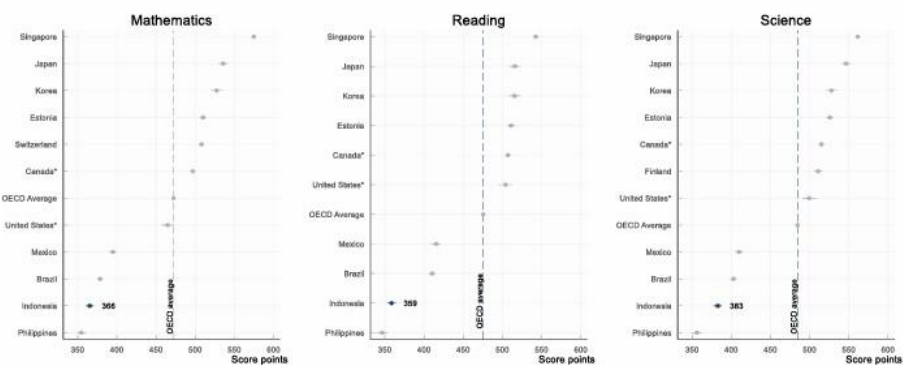


Figure 1. PISA Score Index in Mathematics, Reading, and Science (OECD, 2023)

Indonesia faces significant challenges in achieving learning outcomes among 15-year-old students, as reflected in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 report. Indonesia’s average scores declined across all three core domains assessed mathematics, reading, and science compared to its performance in 2018. Historically, Indonesia’s performance in PISA 2022 represents one of the lowest achievements since the country first participated in the assessment in 2001. Reading and mathematics scores were recorded at levels comparable to those in 2003, while science scores approached the results achieved in 2006. This trend indicates a sharp regression in learning quality following a period of gradual improvement up to 2015, which was then followed by a decline during the 2015-2022 period. Notably, reading literacy experienced the most significant decrease, with a 19 percentage point increase in the proportion of students failing to reach the minimum proficiency level (Level 2) compared to 2012. These findings suggest that the majority of

students have not yet mastered basic skills in information comprehension, critical thinking, and problem solving within real life contexts (OECD, 2023).

In the domain of mathematics, only 18% of Indonesian students reached the minimum proficiency level (Level 2), far below the OECD average of 69%. At this level, students are expected to recognize and interpret simple situations mathematically without explicit instructions, such as comparing the distances of two routes or converting prices between currencies. By contrast, more than 85% of students in high performing countries such as Singapore, Macao (China), Japan, Hong Kong (China), Taiwan, and Estonia achieved this level or higher. Furthermore, almost no Indonesian students were classified as “top performers,” namely those reaching Level 5 or 6 in the PISA mathematics assessment, whereas the OECD average shows approximately 9% of students in this category. At these levels, students demonstrate the ability to model complex situations mathematically and to select, compare, and evaluate problem-solving strategies effectively. East Asian countries such as Singapore (41%), Taiwan (32%), Macao (29%), Hong Kong (27%), Japan (23%), and South Korea (23%) recorded the highest proportions of students at this level. Out of the 81 countries and economies participating in PISA 2022, only 16 had more than 10% of students achieving Level 5 or 6 (OECD, 2023).

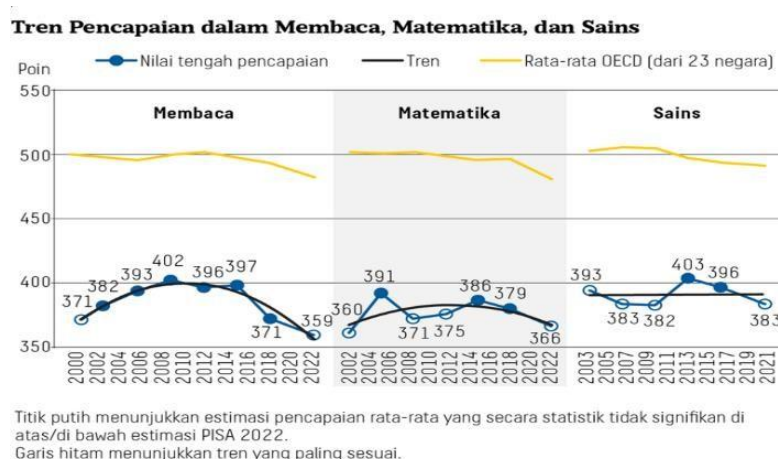


Figure 2. Average PISA Scores from 2000 to 2022 (OECD, 2023)

The sharp decline in reading literacy scores is not merely a curricular issue, but also reflects deep disparities in educational practices across different types of schools, particularly between public and private institutions. One of the most striking indicators of this gap lies in differences in teacher quality and instructional strategies. Private schools especially those located in urban areas and managed with professional governance tend to demonstrate advantages in several respects: their teachers are generally better trained in literacy based approaches, have greater access to continuous pedagogical professional development, and operate in classrooms with smaller student teacher ratios, enabling more personalized and responsive learning practices. Instructional strategies employed in these schools are also more varied, ranging from phonics based methods and project based learning to interactive digital literacy approaches.

In contrast, many public schools face significant structural challenges. The quality of instruction in public schools is often constrained by high student teacher ratios, limited learning resources, and the predominance of one way, lecture based teaching methods. Teachers in public schools are also frequently burdened with administrative and bureaucratic responsibilities, which reduce the time and energy available for developing innovative

instructional materials. Moreover, a considerable number of public schools particularly those in peripheral and rural areas lack adequate access to supporting literacy materials, digital learning media, and literacy focused professional training. As a result, many students do not receive sufficient early literacy stimulation, leading to delays in the development of strong reading foundations.

This phenomenon reveals a systemic gap in the quality of literacy instruction at the primary education level. Such disparities affect not only short term academic achievement but also exacerbate long term social inequality. If left unaddressed through comprehensive intervention, the broader national vision of education to cultivate a generation that is intelligent, critical, and competitive will be difficult to realize. Therefore, a critical and in-depth study is needed to systematically examine how literacy teaching strategies are implemented in public and private schools and how these gaps might be effectively bridged.

Parental choice of educational institutions has thus become a crucial consideration, particularly in relation to the quality of education provided to children. Parents with stronger economic capacity tend to prefer private or religious schools, which are perceived to offer better educational quality than public schools. Although this phenomenon does not occur uniformly across Indonesia, education observers regard it as a warning signal that warrants serious attention within the education system (Wahyuni, 2024). In this context, various factors drive parents to choose private schools, most notably the perception of superior educational quality, along with better facilities and learning environments that are more supportive of children's development (PERWITA & WIDURI, 2022).

Nevertheless, despite differences in quality between public and private schools, both types of institutions play an equally important role in serving society. Both are required to enhance their quality management by implementing comprehensive evaluation systems. Such evaluations aim to monitor and continuously improve instructional quality, thereby fostering more effective learning environments for students (Islam et al., 2024). These improvements are essential to ensure that all students whether enrolled in public or private schools have equitable access to high quality education that is relevant to the demands of the contemporary era.

Accordingly, this study aims to conduct a comparative analysis of teaching strategies in early literacy instruction between public and private schools. The analysis focuses on instructional approaches, teacher quality, parental involvement, the use of learning media, and institutional support for literacy learning. By identifying existing gaps as well as best practices across both types of schools, this research is expected to serve as a foundation for designing more equitable and evidence based policy solutions and instructional strategies, particularly in addressing early reading delays at the primary education level.

II. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach using a library research method combined with a phenomenological examination of the realities of basic literacy education in Indonesia (Moleong, 2017). This approach was selected because it enables a comprehensive and reflective mapping of the problem based on valid written sources, including official statistical data, research reports, scholarly articles, as well as news coverage and evolving dynamics on social media. The primary objective is to critically analyze literacy disparities between public and private schools, with particular emphasis on the quality of early reading instruction strategies in lower grade classrooms as the foundation of early literacy.

In accordance with the library research approach, the primary data for this study were collected from a range of credible secondary sources. These sources include: (1) international studies such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) from 2000 to 2022 published by the OECD, which document the declining trend in Indonesian students' literacy scores; (2) national reports such as the National Assessment and the Indonesian Education Profile issued by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology; (3) peer reviewed journal articles discussing literacy strategies in public and private schools; and (4) recent news reports from national media outlets and social media content that present public testimonies, real life practices, and complaints regarding the quality of basic education in Indonesia. To further enrich and sharpen the analysis, the researcher also conducted observations of literacy learning phenomena on social media, such as videos of reading instruction in high performing private schools and parental complaints in public schools regarding children's reading delays. These narratives were systematically examined to capture contextual insights that are not always revealed through formal data but nonetheless reflect genuine socio cultural dynamics within society.

The data were analyzed thematically through several stages: information gathering, identification of key issues, classification of data into major themes (such as teacher quality, teaching methods, institutional support, and access to literacy materials), and critical interpretation by linking statistical data with observed social phenomena. This method allows flexibility in exploring both knowledge sources and empirical realities, while supporting a rigorous, contextual, and evidence based analysis (Creswell, 2018).

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The *Merdeka Belajar* (Freedom to Learn) policy initiated by the Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology is fundamentally aimed at promoting learning flexibility and prioritizing contextual, student centered instruction (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). However, in practice, this curricular reform has not yet been implemented evenly across educational institutions. Many schools, particularly public elementary schools in peripheral and remote areas, face substantial challenges in translating this policy into transformative classroom practices (Yuliana, 2023). One of the most prominent challenges is the limited availability of human resources and supporting facilities, which directly affects the effectiveness of early literacy learning.

The studies analyzed in this research indicate that teachers in public schools tend to be more heavily burdened by administrative responsibilities and have fewer opportunities for continuous pedagogical competence development (Adekamisti et al., 2024). In contrast, teachers in private schools, especially those managed by professional foundations, more frequently participate in training and professional development programs focused on literacy instruction (Paramansyah, 2020). This disparity creates an imbalance in instructional quality, resulting in a gap between the national curriculum vision and the readiness of implementing institutions at the micro level.

These differences suggest that educational policies, regardless of how progressive they may be in narrative, will have limited impact without strong supporting structures at the implementation level. Educational transformation cannot rely solely on curriculum revision but must be accompanied by the restructuring of teacher training systems, the provision of adequate learning infrastructure, and the strengthening of school leadership (Giyanto et al., 2023). Without effective synergy between central and local authorities, disparities between

schools will continue to widen, and children from vulnerable groups will remain disadvantaged by an inequitable system.

This condition aligns with the concept of the policy practice gap in educational literature, in which nationally formulated policies often fail to be implemented consistently due to insufficient technical and cultural support at the school level. In the Indonesian context, educational reform should be grounded in the principle of equity-based implementation, namely the differentiated distribution of interventions and resources according to the specific needs of each school. Without such an approach, inequality will persist as a systemic issue that constrains the development of children's foundational literacy skills.

1. Teacher Quality and Professional Inequality in Literacy Instruction

One of the determining factors in the literacy gap between public and private schools is teacher quality. Numerous studies have shown that instructional quality is a key variable in determining the success of early literacy learning (Anggriyani et al., 2024). Teachers with a strong understanding of literacy strategies and adaptive pedagogical skills are better able to create learning environments that support the development of children's reading abilities. This study finds that teachers in private schools tend to demonstrate higher levels of instructional innovation and greater use of evidence based strategies.

Conversely, teachers in public schools are often constrained by high administrative workloads, limited access to ongoing professional development, and a lack of professional learning communities. These conditions create a domino effect that lowers instructional quality, particularly in literacy instruction, which requires individualized and interactive approaches. Effective early literacy learning demands specific techniques such as phonics-based instruction, the use of contextual storytelling, and multisensory learning that balances students' cognitive and affective development (Rohma, 2024). This inequality reflects differences in incentive structures and organizational cultures between the two types of schools. Private schools generally operate under autonomous management systems that allow them to tailor teacher training programs to actual classroom needs, whereas public schools depend on government provided programs that may not always align with local instructional realities.

This situation reinforces the argument that literacy reform cannot be separated from strategies to strengthen teacher capacity. Without competent and reflective teachers, any adopted instructional strategy is unlikely to achieve its intended outcomes. Therefore, it is essential for the government to develop a continuous and contextual system of teacher professional learning, particularly in regions with low literacy indices. Initiatives such as the *Guru Penggerak* program represent a strategic starting point but need to be expanded and strengthened to generate systemic impact.

2. Access to Learning Resources and Learning Environments

Access to learning resources constitutes a structural foundation for the development of early literacy skills. Schools that are well equipped with books, audiovisual media, and digital learning technologies tend to be more successful in cultivating a meaningful and engaging reading culture. This study finds that private schools generally have better library facilities, more comfortable reading spaces, and access to literacy based learning applications such as Epic, Kelas Literasi Sekolah, and Quipper. In contrast, many public schools, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas, do not even have adequate libraries or book collections that align with the cognitive development stages of young learners.

This disparity in facilities is closely linked to differences in funding models. Private schools typically have access to funding from parental fees and foundation donors, enabling continuous infrastructure development. Public schools, on the other hand, rely heavily on government funding allocations, which are often insufficient to meet the ideal needs of literacy education. School Operational Assistance (BOS) funds are frequently prioritized for administrative and basic operational expenses, causing the procurement of books and learning media to be neglected. This ongoing structural issue deprives children of the opportunity to grow within literacy-rich learning environments.

The literature consistently emphasizes that rich and meaningful literacy environments play a crucial role in reading development. Limited access to reading materials from an early age contributes to what is known as the literacy gap, referring to disparities in literacy abilities between children from resource-rich environments and those from literature-poor settings. This gap widens as children grow older and progress through higher levels of education, as limited exposure to texts restricts their reading experiences. In Indonesia, this phenomenon is clearly evident in the contrast between students in private and public schools, which reflects unequal access to instructional materials and technology.

Beyond physical access, disparities are also evident in the digital dimension of education. During the COVID-19 pandemic, differences in technological capacity and utilization became increasingly apparent. Private schools with well-developed digital infrastructure were able to sustain literacy learning through learning management systems and online applications, while public schools faced challenges related to limited access to devices, internet quotas, and teachers’ digital competencies. As of 2023, the Ministry of Communication and Information reported that only 38 percent of public elementary schools had fixed internet connections, compared to 81 percent of private schools (Mustari, 2023). This disparity has direct implications for the quality of literacy experiences available to students.

These inequalities in learning environments highlight the urgency of reforming resource distribution through a needs-based allocation approach. The government must identify schools with low literacy indices and prioritize them in the distribution of teaching materials, book collections, technological devices, and teacher training in digital media use. In addition, initiatives such as the School Literacy Movement need to be revitalized through more adaptive and contextual strategies supported by tangible infrastructure. Without such measures, discussions on the importance of literacy risk remaining rhetorical narratives that fail to address the root causes of the problem.

Table 1. Differences between Public and Private Schools

Aspect	Public Schools	Private Schools
Teacher Quality	Teachers are often burdened with administrative tasks, receive limited continuous training, and experience unsystematic professional development.	Teachers more frequently participate in literacy training, are supported by professional management, and have access to learning communities.
Teaching Methods	Dominated by one way lecturing, minimal participatory approaches, and limited use of evidence based strategies.	Employ interactive, varied, and up to date methods, including contextual approaches based on digital literacy.

Learning Resources	Limited availability of children's books, inactive libraries, and restricted access to digital learning media.	Possess rich book collections, active libraries, and access to LMS platforms and literacy applications such as Epic or Quipper.
Learning Environment	Learning spaces are less stimulating, classrooms are overcrowded, and visual literacy elements are minimal.	Classroom environments are well organized, support literacy learning, include comfortable reading areas, and provide abundant visual learning media.
Parental Involvement	Many parents are less involved due to time constraints, low literacy levels, and lack of experience in supporting children's reading.	Parents are actively involved in <i>home literacy</i> programs, engage in regular reading at home, and participate in school-led parental training.

3. The Role of Family and Social Capital in Early Literacy

Beyond school-related factors, the home environment and family involvement play a crucial role in shaping children's early literacy foundations. Differences between public and private schools are also reflected in parental characteristics and the forms of support provided at home. In many cases, students attending private schools come from middle to upper class families who have more time, higher levels of digital literacy, and greater resources to support their children's learning. Storybooks, educational games, and routine shared reading activities are commonly practiced in these households. In contrast, many students in public schools come from lower socio economic backgrounds, where parents often face constraints in time, educational attainment, and literacy awareness.

This phenomenon reflects Bourdieu's theory of social capital, which emphasizes that educational outcomes are shaped not only by formal institutions but also by cultural inheritance and symbolic capital within families. Children from families with high cultural capital are more likely to develop in literacy-rich environments, as they grow up in atmospheres that support language exploration and textual meaning making. Conversely, children from literacy poor families often experience limited verbal interaction and insufficient cognitive stimulation from an early age. This condition helps explain why school based interventions alone are often insufficient to close literacy gaps that have already formed within the home environment.

The well-known study by Hart, Risley, and Kirby (1997), often referred to as the "30 million word gap," demonstrates that by the age of four, children from working class families hear approximately 30 million fewer words than children from professional families. This gap concerns not only the quantity of language exposure but also the quality of linguistic interaction. A similar pattern can be observed in the Indonesian context, where not all families are aware of the importance of shared reading, interactive dialogue, and providing age appropriate reading materials. The role of the family as the first and primary learning environment remains insufficiently addressed in national literacy policies.

Within this context, early literacy strategies cannot rely solely on schools. Family and community based interventions are essential. Some private schools have developed home literacy programs that actively involve parents in children's reading routines and creative

writing activities at home. These schools also organize parental training sessions to enhance parents' capacity to support their children's learning. In contrast, public schools tend to offer fewer such programs due to limitations in time and human resources. Strengthening family and community literacy thus becomes a key priority in addressing literacy disparities.

4. Socio Cultural Implications of Literacy Inequality

Literacy gaps at the primary education level do not only affect students' academic performance but also have broad and profound socio cultural consequences. Early literacy serves as a foundational skill for cross-disciplinary learning and is a prerequisite for active and productive social participation. When children lack adequate reading comprehension, they struggle to follow instructions, access information, and express ideas in written form. This situation creates a cycle of marginalization in which individuals with weak literacy skills face difficulties in higher levels of education, limited employment opportunities, and exclusion from public discourse. Reading delays thus represent an early manifestation of structural inequality.

This condition is further exacerbated by the tendency of literacy gaps to align with social class and geographic divides. Children from economically disadvantaged families who attend under resourced public schools are more likely to experience reading delays. Meanwhile, children from middle and upper class families enrolled in private schools benefit from literacy oriented instruction and resource rich learning environments that reinforce their academic advantages. As a result, the education system fails to equalize opportunities and instead contributes to the reproduction of social inequality.

The long term impact of this disparity is the emergence of intergenerational inequality. Children who fail to acquire basic literacy skills are more likely to become adults with lower educational attainment, employment in informal sectors, and limited influence in political or public policy decision-making. Moreover, they are likely to pass on similar conditions to their own children, as they lack the capacity to create literacy rich home environments. Without structural interventions and affirmative policies, literacy inequality will continue to be transmitted across generations, widening social divides.

From a cultural perspective, literacy plays a vital role in identity construction and social integration in modern society. Literacy enables individuals to engage with national cultural narratives, understand historical contexts, and critically evaluate global information flows. Without these skills, individuals become more vulnerable to misinformation, hoaxes, and other harmful influences. Literacy disparities across social groups may lead to cultural polarization, unequal communication rights, and social exclusion. Therefore, equitable access to high quality literacy education is not merely an educational issue but also a matter of human rights and cultural democracy.

Recognizing this complexity, the state must position basic literacy as a central agenda in long-term national development. This can begin with strengthening affirmative policies for public schools in disadvantaged regions, developing cross-sector, data driven literacy monitoring systems, and mainstreaming literacy within regional development policies. In addition, literacy strategies should integrate culturally responsive approaches that are sensitive to local contexts, given Indonesia's rich linguistic diversity and oral traditions. Through holistic, intergenerational, and evidence-based approaches, literacy inequality can be addressed sustainably, enabling education to function as a tool for social emancipation rather than a mechanism for reproducing inequality.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study comprehensively reveals that the early literacy gap between public and private schools in Indonesia is not merely a technical issue confined to classroom practices, but rather a reflection of deep rooted structural and cultural problems within the national education system. These issues include unequal distribution of educational resources, limited institutional capacity in providing systematic teacher training, and insufficient attention to the socio cultural dimensions that shape children's literacy environments from an early age. Private schools, particularly those managed professionally and supported by strong economic foundations, are generally able to implement evidence-based literacy instruction strategies, provide greater opportunities for teachers' professional development, and create learning atmospheres rich in textual interaction and technology. In contrast, public schools often struggle with administrative bureaucracy, inadequate educational infrastructure, and limited active involvement of families and communities in the educational process.

The consequences of this disparity extend far beyond academic outcomes, generating cascading effects on the social, economic, and cultural dimensions of Indonesian children's lives. When early literacy fails to develop optimally, children lose a crucial foundation for understanding subject matter across disciplines, expressing ideas systematically, and participating actively in society. Reading delays therefore do not merely signal pedagogical failure, but also reinforce conditions of *learning poverty*, increasing the risk of social marginalization among children from disadvantaged groups and underdeveloped regions. Over the long term, this gap contributes to a cycle of structural inequality in which access to education and opportunities for social mobility become increasingly unequal across social strata.

Accordingly, a new paradigm is required in designing early literacy learning strategies one that goes beyond curriculum content and seriously considers distributive justice, social contextuality, and the empowerment of the broader educational ecosystem. Literacy strategies must be grounded in the principle of equity, meaning that interventions should be differentiated according to the specific needs and conditions of each school and learner. Reform efforts should not stop at the macro policy level, but must reach the micro level through initiatives such as community-based teacher training, strengthening parental involvement in home based learning, and fulfilling basic literacy needs, including libraries, digital media, and diverse, relevant reading materials. This holistic approach demands strong synergy among stakeholders, ranging from central government institutions to local communities.

Concrete actions that must be undertaken include national, data-driven mapping of literacy needs, strengthening affirmative programs for public schools with low literacy indices, and integrating family and community based literacy strategies into national education policies. The government must also ensure that digital transformation in education does not benefit only well established schools, but instead functions as a tool to bridge gaps in access to information and learning opportunities. Without sustained and systemic efforts, reading delays will remain a structural problem that undermines younger generations and hinders national development. Therefore, ensuring equity in early literacy education must be positioned as a top priority within Indonesia's human resource development agenda.

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