

## POLICY BRIEF

# BASIC LITERACY: BUILDING CHILDREN'S POTENTIAL AS LEARNERS



INOVASI is an education program partnership between the Governments of Indonesia and Australia. It aims to find and understand ways to improve student learning outcomes - specifically those related to early grade literacy and numeracy at the school and classroom level.



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Inovasi Untuk Anak Sekolah Indonesia



INOVASI Pendidikan

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## WHY DOES BASIC LITERACY MATTER IN INDONESIA?

Basic literacy is the foundation for all learning, including for science, technology, mathematics, character education and higher-order thinking. Literacy is recognised as a key skill for the 21st century, and the national literacy movement (*Gerakan Literasi Nasional*, or GLN) has identified four strategies for schools: disseminating and coordinating strategy through local government and technical units; engaging literacy, arts, science and community organisations at the regional level; training literacy trainers in the regions; and literacy mapping.

The policy context for literacy is evident in President Joko Widodo's nine-point agenda, known as *Nawa Cita*<sup>1</sup>. Points 6 and 8 state that literacy is key to increasing people's productivity and competitiveness and can help revolutionise the nation's character base. The importance of literacy is also highlighted in the five-year medium-term development plan for 2015–2019. The Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC) Regulation No 23 of 2015 concerning character development is intended to operationalise the *Nawa Cita* objective of creating a 'superior generation'. Specifically, it mentions developing a reading culture. Reading is expected to create a more informed generation and help strengthen the nation's values.

The President's new policy platform is to prioritize the development of human capital over the coming five years (2020 - 2024). Since basic literacy is the foundation of all learning, it must be a priority. In simple terms, it is not possible to prepare young people for the current and future workplace if they have not first received a solid grounding in literacy and numeracy in early grades.

The national government's focus on improving literacy through policy and programs, such as the school literacy movement and the national literacy movement, has created a momentum around building a reading culture in communities and schools. However, major gaps are evident from a national and sub-national perspective. Indonesia lags behind its counterparts in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) on basic literacy and is thus behind in national and international benchmarking tests (PISA, 2015<sup>2</sup>; PIRLS, 2011<sup>3</sup>). Children who do not learn to read fluently in the early grades quickly fall behind their peers in all areas of learning and the gap widens over time.

In October 2018, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MoHA), which is the line ministry responsible for provincial and district government, issued a circular letter directed to governors and separately to district heads across Indonesia, with the support of UNICEF's literacy program. The circular letters, based on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Number 4 (ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all), instructed sub-national governments, particularly education offices, to improve school literacy according to current regulations and programs related to School Literacy Movement (*Gerakan Literasi Sekolah* or GLS).

This circular was reinforced by the Minister of Home Affairs Regulation on the Guidelines for Preparation of Regional Government Work Plans for 2020 (Number 31/2019) which underlines that in the education sector, local governments must "pay attention to the implementation of literacy in schooling based on the applicable statutory provisions."

The letters refer to the early-grade literacy models tested in the *Rural and Remote Education Initiative for Papuan Provinces* program as an example. This is important because there are many types of literacies and literacy teaching models in practice. The dissemination guidelines attached to the circular letters specifically refer to the early-grade literacy teaching models developed by the UNICEF Papua and West Papua team, which work well in the Papuan context. Programs related to improving school literacy can be integrated in the regional development plan documents, including regional medium term development plans (RPJMD) and budgeted in the APBD (regional expenditure budget) or other legitimate funding sources.

## WHAT DO WE KNOW?

The national focus on reading culture is based on a recognition that literacy levels are worryingly low:

🔍 Results of the national early grades reading assessment (EGRA, USAID/RTI, 2014)<sup>4</sup> show that only **47%** of grade two students can read fluently and comprehend the text meaning, ready to move on to the third grade. In Eastern Indonesia (East Nusa Tenggara, Maluku and Papua) the figure is only **23%**.

🔍 PISA results from 2000 to 2015 show that Indonesian student scores range from **370–400**, which is well below the average PISA score of 500<sup>5</sup>.

🔍 Results from the PIRLS in 2011 that evaluated the reading outcomes of fourth grade students, ranked Indonesia **45<sup>th</sup>** out of 48 participating countries, with a score of **428** (below the score average of 500)<sup>6</sup>.

🔍 The 2016 Indonesian National Assessment (AKSI)<sup>7</sup> results revealed that almost half (47%) of grade four students sampled were in the lowest band of literacy for their year level, while in **11 out of 24** provinces, **over 60%** are in the lowest band.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup><https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2014/05/21/0754454/.Nawa.Cita.9.Agenda.Prioritas.Jokowi-JK>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisa-2015-results-in-focus.pdf>

<sup>3</sup><https://timssandpirls.bc.edu/pirls2011/international-results-pirls.html>

<sup>4</sup>Stern, J. and L. Nordstrum. 2014. Indonesia 2014: The National Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) and Snapshot of School Management Effectiveness (SSME) Survey. Jakarta, Indonesia: USAID

<sup>5</sup><https://www.oecd.org/pisa/PISA-2015-Indonesia.pdf>

<sup>6</sup>[https://timssandpirls.bc.edu/pirls2011/downloads/P11\\_IR\\_FullBook.pdf](https://timssandpirls.bc.edu/pirls2011/downloads/P11_IR_FullBook.pdf)

<sup>7</sup><https://puspendik.kemdikbud.go.id/inap-sd/>

<sup>8</sup>INAP is now referred to as the Asesmen Kinerja Siswa Indonesia (AKSI)

INOVASI evidence paints a similarly worrying picture of learning quality. INOVASI's work at sub-national level in 17 partner districts/cities has identified three main problems contributing to students' poor performance and weak literacy levels: (1) the lack of a curriculum or methodology for teachers to teach reading in the early grades as it is falsely assumed that all children entering grade one are already able to read; (2) the lack of teaching knowledge and skills in how to teach reading and literacy; and (3) the limited access to appropriate reading material, especially in remote areas but also across the country in general. There is not enough engaging and age-appropriate children's literature available in the country. A fourth contributed factor, which is discussed in a separate policy brief, is that a large number of children enter formal schooling having had no previous experience of *Bahasa Indonesia*, the national language and the language of school. Children who don't master basic reading skills in early grades, quickly fall behind their peers and never catch up, never able to make sense of the education that follows.

INOVASI's 2018 baseline research<sup>9</sup> found that alarmingly high rates of children in grades 1-3 in North Kalimantan, East and West Nusa Tenggara failed to pass a basic literacy test of recognizing letters, syllables, and words.

FIGURE 1: PERCENTAGE OF GRADE 1-3 STUDENTS WHO PASSED THE BASIC LITERACY TEST

Province	Percentage of students who passed the basic literacy test	Percentage of students who passed by gender	
	Total	Girls	Boys
NTT	19%	25%	14%
NTB	61%	69%	55%
NORTH KALIMANTAN	52%	58%	48%
EAST JAVA	80%	85%	76%

Word and syllable recognition were consistently the lowest scored basic competencies amongst students who did not pass the test, followed by letter recognition. Again, grade one students scored lowest, particularly those in NTT.

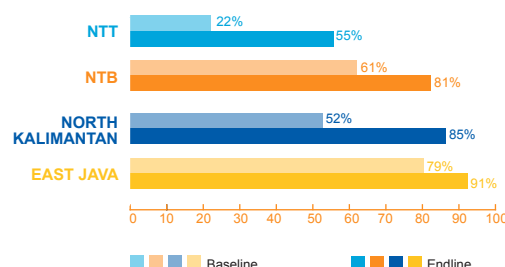
FIGURE 2: PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS WHO DID NOT RECOGNISE LETTERS, SYLLABLES AND WORDS

Province	Letter recognition	Syllable recognition	Word recognition
NTT	58%	70%	78%
NTB	22%	30%	35%
North Kalimantan	24%	37%	46%
East Java	10%	12%	18%



With the right pedagogical training and concepts however, student literacy learning outcomes are proven to improve. Initial INOVASI endline data<sup>10</sup> from semester one pilots on Sumba Island showed a 150% increase in the number of students who passed the basic literacy test. By district, the percentage increases were 207% in West Sumba, 91% in Southwest Sumba, 337.5% in Central Sumba, and 148% in East Sumba. When it came to student comprehension scores, there was a 10.41% increase for Sumba Island as a whole. Boys benefited from the pilots more than girls, with a larger percentage increase in literacy scores.

THE PERCENTAGE INCREASE IN NUMBER OF STUDENTS WHO PASSED THE BASIC LITERACY TEST



## WHAT ARE THE KEY ISSUES?

Strategic issues in basic literacy include:

1. There is no approved, systematic methodology for teaching reading in grade one – and no approved methodology for teaching remedial reading to children who fall behind in the early grades. Current interpretations of the national curriculum do not provide time or direction for early grade teachers to teach reading in the classroom.
2. Access to books is problematic in remote areas and the Centre for Curriculum in the Ministry of Education and Culture has approved only a limited list of titles for beginning readers. There must be a mind shift from considering children's literature and story books as entertainment and not 'real learning', to understanding that children's literature, stories and reading for pleasure are the foundation of literacy development. The function of approving non-text books for schools has now passed to MoEC's Language and Book Agency.
3. Few teacher training institutes (LPTK) include early-grade literacy courses in their primary teacher training curriculum or practicum programs, such as the professional education for preservice teachers' course.

<sup>9</sup><https://www.inovasi.or.id/en/publication/infographic-preparing-a-generation-for-the-21st-century-the-case-for-improving-early-grade-literacy-and-numeracy/>

<sup>10</sup>INOVASI Endline Data, Sumba Island, 2019

# POLICY IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

## NATIONAL

Policy recommendations and priorities at the national level include:

1. Review early-grade textbooks and teachers' guides to ensure that children are taught to read in a systematic way and that teachers encourage a reading culture through daily literacy activities in class.
2. Develop guidebooks regarding the primary teacher training curriculum (both PGSD, S-1 and PPG) to establish a systematic methodology for teaching reading and supporting literacy in primary schools. Regulations for use of teacher working groups (KKG) for continuing professional development (for both literacy and numeracy in particular) will help.
3. Expand the list of students' reading books to make more reading material accessible to communities, schools and local government by involving the district government in evaluating the need for books and ensuring their availability, in line with the local context. Recent changes to the process of book approvals under the Language and Book Body should improve the situation.
  - The Ministry of Education and Culture, Ministry of Religious Affairs, publishers and non-governmental agencies concerned with literacy and publishing children's literature need to coordinate to ensure suitable books are made available.
  - Possible strategies for national government to consider include providing tax incentives for book publishers to print and distribute books in remote areas.
  - The Ministry of Education and Culture could issue a regulation (*permendikbud*) to facilitate the procurement of local children's reading books in collaboration with the provincial, district or city level education offices, as well as with the local teacher training institutes. Such a regulation could decentralize the approval process, currently undertaken by the Ministry of Education and Culture's Language Body (Badan Bahasa) to make it faster, less centralized, and more.

## DISTRICT

Policy recommendations and priorities at the district level include:

1. Provincial governments could support and facilitate literacy activities in districts and cities in their respective provinces, working with teacher training institutes and other service providers to research locally contextual learn-to-read or reading culture programs, and to create and implement literacy programs for primary schools, using local government and state budget funds (APBD/APBN). The provincial language centres (Balai Bahasa) could support local writers and publishers to produce contextually relevant children's books.
2. District and city governments could commit to: (a) routinely assessing and reporting on early grade children's reading ability to inform parents and district offices on progress (e.g. individual semester reports to parents and aggregated reports to the district head); (b) rolling out literacy programs for students in all primary schools and to ensure they run continuously, they could provide an ongoing budget for students in regular primary schools and *madrasah*.
3. There are a number of excellent non-government agencies producing excellent early-grades reading material and children's literature in Indonesia. This includes traditional and digital books. Local governments can partner with these agencies to provide training and books and help establish good school and community libraries and community reading centres (*taman baca masyarakat*)<sup>12</sup>. Village funds (ADD) can also be used for village libraries and community reading centres.
4. The Ministry of Education and Culture and provincial government could collaborate with teacher training universities to develop literacy study centers, which serve to optimize literacy learning activities at the school level through research studies.

<sup>12</sup>Through its grants and partnerships program, INOVASI currently works with a range of these organisations, including Rainbow Reading Gardens, YLAI, Litara, The Asia Foundation and Save the Children.