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Enhancing Literacy through Culturally Responsive Pedagogy: Exploring the Intersection of Language, Culture, and Inclusive Education in Indonesian Elementary Schools

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Culturally Responsive Pedagogy; Educational Equity; Inclusive Literacy Practices; Local Knowledge Integration; Participatory pedagogy

Abstract

Literacy development in Indonesian elementary schools remains uneven because formal curriculum expectations do not always align with learners' sociocultural realities, local languages, and unequal access to learning resources. Although culturally responsive pedagogy and inclusive education have been widely discussed, limited comparative evidence explains how these approaches are enacted across urban, semi-urban, and rural school contexts in Indonesia. This study employed a qualitative multiple-case study design in three public elementary schools in South Sulawesi. Data were collected from 12 teachers, 3 principals, and 24 fifth-grade students through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, student small-group discussions, and document analysis. The data were analysed thematically through deductive and inductive coding to identify patterns relating to literacy access, instructional adaptation, student participation, digital inclusion, and curriculum-context tensions. The findings indicate that inclusive literacy practices were shaped by the interaction of material access, teacher agency, culturally familiar texts, dialogic learning, and institutional support. Urban schools had stronger print and digital resources; however, meaningful participation still depended on teachers' capacity to mediate texts, tasks, and classroom interaction in contextually relevant ways. Semi-urban schools demonstrated active adaptation through local stories, collaborative routines, and flexible questioning, whereas rural schools relied on oral storytelling, visual support, local dialect mediation, and community-based examples to broaden participation despite limited infrastructure. The study offers original comparative evidence showing that culturally responsive pedagogy functions as a practical mechanism for inclusive literacy within unequal school ecologies. Theoretically, it extends literacy-as-social-practice perspectives by linking participation, culture, and equity in classroom literacy processes. Practically and at policy level, the findings highlight the need for localised literacy materials, differentiated teacher professional development, stronger school-based learning communities, and more equitable distribution of print and digital resources so that literacy instruction can respond more directly to learners' cultural, linguistic, and material conditions.

Kata kunci

Pedagogi Responsif Budaya; Keadilan Pendidikan; Praktik Literasi Inklusif; Integrasi Pengetahuan Lokal; Pedagogi Partisipatif

Abstrak

Pengembangan literasi di sekolah dasar Indonesia masih berlangsung secara tidak merata karena tuntutan kurikulum formal belum selalu selaras dengan realitas sosiokultural peserta didik, keberagaman bahasa lokal, serta ketimpangan akses terhadap sumber belajar. Meskipun pedagogi responsif budaya dan pendidikan inklusif telah banyak dibahas dalam kajian pendidikan, bukti komparatif yang menjelaskan bagaimana kedua pendekatan tersebut diterapkan pada konteks sekolah perkotaan, semi-perkotaan, dan perdesaan di Indonesia masih terbatas. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain studi kasus kualitatif multikasus pada tiga sekolah dasar negeri di Sulawesi Selatan. Data dikumpulkan dari 12 guru, 3 kepala sekolah, dan 24 peserta didik kelas V melalui observasi kelas, wawancara semi-terstruktur, diskusi kelompok kecil peserta didik, dan analisis dokumen. Data dianalisis secara tematik melalui pengodean deduktif dan induktif untuk mengidentifikasi pola akses literasi, adaptasi pembelajaran, partisipasi peserta didik, inklusi digital, serta ketegangan antara kurikulum dan konteks lokal. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa praktik literasi inklusif dibentuk oleh interaksi antara akses material, agensi pedagogis guru, teks yang dekat dengan budaya peserta didik, pembelajaran dialogis, dan dukungan institusional. Sekolah perkotaan memiliki sumber daya cetak dan digital yang lebih memadai, tetapi partisipasi bermakna tetap bergantung pada kemampuan guru memediasi teks, tugas, dan interaksi kelas secara kontekstual. Sekolah semi-perkotaan menunjukkan adaptasi aktif melalui cerita lokal, rutinitas kolaboratif, dan pertanyaan fleksibel, sedangkan sekolah perdesaan mengandalkan narasi lisan, dukungan visual, mediasi bahasa lokal, dan contoh berbasis komunitas untuk memperluas partisipasi meskipun infrastruktur terbatas. Studi ini memberikan kontribusi komparatif orisinal dengan menunjukkan bahwa pedagogi responsif budaya berfungsi sebagai mekanisme praktis bagi literasi inklusif dalam ekologi sekolah yang tidak setara. Secara teoretis, penelitian ini memperluas perspektif literasi sebagai praktik sosial dengan mengaitkan partisipasi, budaya, dan keadilan. Secara praktis dan kebijakan, temuan ini menegaskan pentingnya materi literasi yang terlokalisasi, pengembangan profesional guru yang terdiferensiasi, komunitas belajar sekolah yang lebih kuat, serta distribusi sumber daya cetak dan digital yang lebih adil.

1. Introduction

In contemporary educational discourse, literacy is increasingly understood not simply as an isolated cognitive skill, but as a fundamental educational right closely linked to social justice, inclusive development, and participatory citizenship (Cerna et al., 2021; Gatcho et al., 2024; Margas, 2023).

In Indonesia, this issue is particularly urgent because literacy development unfolds within a highly diverse educational landscape marked by multilingualism, persistent economic disparities, and decentralized schooling structures. National initiatives such as the *Gerakan Literasi Nasional* (National Literacy Movement) and the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* (Independent Curriculum) signal a strong policy commitment to

strengthening literacy as a lifelong competency essential to personal and national development. Yet substantial inequalities remain, especially among learners in rural communities, indigenous populations, and economically disadvantaged contexts (Mezzanotte, 2022; Zickafoose et al., 2024). These challenges are not only caused by limited infrastructure or material resources, but also by the ongoing mismatch between curriculum policies, teacher preparedness, and the socio-cultural realities of students in various educational settings (Finnanger & Prøitz, 2024; Kim, 2024).

Conventional literacy instruction in primary education has often emphasized decoding, memorization, and standardized performance. Although these dimensions remain important, such approaches may be insufficient in contexts where students bring varied linguistic repertoires, cultural experiences, and levels of access to learning resources. In response to this limitation, this study adopts literacy as a social practice as a broader theoretical orientation and examines culturally responsive pedagogy as an instructional approach to inclusive literacy development. Within this study, culturally responsive pedagogy refers to teaching that connects literacy learning to students' lived experiences, local cultural knowledge, and meaningful forms of classroom participation. Inclusive pedagogy is used as a complementary orientation that emphasizes equitable participation for all learners without treating difference as deficit. This conceptual distinction also aligns the manuscript more consistently with the argument of culturally sustaining teaching (Paris & Alim, 2017).

The need for contextual and inclusive pedagogical approaches is increasingly evident, particularly in primary education in Indonesia, where teachers often operate under conflicting pressures. On the one hand, they are expected to implement ongoing curriculum reforms and improve student literacy outcomes; on the other, they continue to face unequal access to critical educational resources, including textbooks, digital infrastructure, and professional development opportunities related to inclusive teaching (Losberg & Zwozdiak-Myers, 2024; Pasaribu et al., 2023; Woodcock & Anderson, 2025). These constraints contribute to an overreliance on conventional, test-oriented teaching practices, limiting opportunities for adaptive, contextual, and culturally responsive learning experiences (D'Andrea Martínez et al., 2023; Urton et al., 2023). These challenges are further exacerbated in rural and geographically remote areas, where the digital divide and limited teaching resources significantly limit students' engagement with various forms of literacy learning (Mezzanotte, 2022; Mustafa et al., 2024). Nevertheless, schools and local communities possess valuable cultural assets, including oral traditions, local narratives, and multilingual practices, which have significant potential to support more meaningful and relevant literacy instruction when pedagogically recognized and systematically integrated into classroom practice (Anderson et al., 2025; Hoyte-West, 2024; Kurniawati, 2021; Sari et al., 2022).

This study aims to examine how culturally responsive pedagogy can support literacy development and student participation in Indonesian primary education. Using literacy as social practice as a broad theoretical lens and inclusive pedagogy as a normative orientation, the study analyzes how context-responsive literacy practices interact with

curricular expectations, teacher perspectives, and community-based resources across different school settings. Central to the inquiry is the following research question: In what ways can culturally responsive and inclusive literacy practices enhance literacy achievement and engagement among diverse student populations in Indonesia's elementary schools?

This study makes three contributions. First, it offers empirical evidence by providing comparative qualitative evidence from three different elementary school contexts in South Sulawesi. Second, it provides contextual insights by demonstrating how literacy instruction is shaped by the interaction of the Independent Curriculum (*Kurikulum Merdeka*), local cultural repertoires, and unequal educational infrastructure in Indonesia. Third, it provides analytical insights by combining literacy as a social practice, inclusive pedagogy, and culturally responsive pedagogy to explain how participation is enabled or constrained across diverse school ecologies. In doing so, it goes beyond the general claim that cultural relevance is essential and demonstrates how inclusive literacy practices are negotiated at the intersection of structural inequalities, teacher agency, and local knowledge.

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to reposition literacy instruction as a context-responsive educational practice, rather than simply a technical classroom routine. In a culturally and socially diverse system like Indonesia, literacy development depends not only on curricular mandates but also on the extent to which schools enable learners to encounter texts, meanings, and structures of participation that are recognizable, relevant, and equitable. By examining this issue in urban, semi-urban, and rural settings, this study contributes to the current debate on how inclusive and culturally grounded literacy instruction can support more equitable educational opportunities in primary schools. In this regard, this research is also in line with the aspirations of the UN Sustainable Development Goal 4, specifically promoting inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all, by highlighting how context-sensitive literacy practices can reduce inequalities and expand equitable opportunities for literacy participation (Gatcho et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2022; Zickafoose et al., 2024).

This study enriches the growing field of educational research that views literacy not as an isolated skill but as part of a dynamic social framework, while emphasizing the need for teaching practices that uphold cultural relevance and prioritize educational equity (Paris & Alim, 2017). Grounding its analysis in the Indonesian educational landscape, this study offers valuable perspectives on how global commitments, such as UN Sustainable Development Goal 4, which promotes inclusive and quality education, can be operationalized through teaching reforms rooted in local contexts. Beyond contributing to national policy discourse, this study seeks to motivate teachers, principals, and curriculum designers to envision classrooms as inclusive and dialogic learning environments capable of fostering meaningful educational change.

2. Literature Review

Literacy in elementary schools is shaped by the interaction of social practices, culturally responsive pedagogy, inclusive pedagogy, and educational inequality. In a context characterized by social diversity and uneven infrastructure, literacy learning cannot be separated from cultural relevance, digital access, and the level of pedagogical support available to teachers and students. This perspective is particularly important in Indonesia, where differences in urban, semi-urban, and rural schools influence how literacy participation and engagement are realized in classroom practices (González-Pérez & Ramírez-Montoya, 2022; Olateju Temitope Akintayo et al., 2024; Vygotsky, 1978).

2.1 Conceptual and Theoretical Orientation

Three key concepts are at the heart of this research. First, literacy is understood as a social practice. From this perspective, reading and writing are not neutral technical acts, but rather socially contextualized activities shaped by culture, identity, interaction, and power (Anderson et al., 2025; Gambrell & Pressley, 2023; Minor, 2023). Second, inclusive pedagogy is understood as a normative orientation that seeks to support the meaningful participation of all learners without viewing differences as disabilities (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Spratt & Florian, 2014). Third, culturally responsive pedagogy is used as the primary teaching concept in this research because it emphasizes the use of students' cultural knowledge, linguistic repertoires, and lived experiences as resources for teaching and learning (Anyichie & Butler, 2023; De Jesus-Reyes, 2024).

These concepts are interrelated, but not interchangeable. Literacy as a social practice provides an overarching theoretical lens through which to interpret literacy development. Inclusive pedagogy provides a normative commitment to access, participation, and equity (Finkelstein et al., 2021; Woods et al., 2015). Culturally responsive pedagogy provides a teaching mechanism through which literacy learning becomes socially meaningful and pedagogically accessible (Anderson et al., 2025; D'Andrea Martínez et al., 2023). This distinction is important because research on literacy and inclusion in diverse educational contexts often overlaps conceptually, yet analytical rigor is required when examining how participation and learning actually manifest in classrooms. In this study, culturally sustainable pedagogy serves as a reinforcing conceptual framework because it emphasizes that instruction must not only recognize learners' cultural identities but also maintain and affirm them over time (Paris & Alim, 2017; Stein et al., 2025).

2.2 Literacy as a Social Practice in Elementary Education

Over the past three decades, literacy theory has undergone a major shift from viewing literacy as an autonomous, context-agnostic skill to understanding it as a socially situated and culturally mediated practice. Rather than a neutral set of technical skills, literacy is now widely understood as embedded in ideological frameworks, cultural values, and social relationships (Anderson et al., 2025; Gambrell & Pressley, 2023; Minor, 2023). Supporting this view, (Vygotsky, 1978) sociohistorical theory argues that learning develops through mediated social interactions, cultural tools, and shared language.

Therefore, literacy development cannot be separated from the social context in which learners interpret texts, negotiate meaning, and participate in communicative practices.

This perspective is particularly relevant in the Indonesian educational context, where literacy learning takes place in a multilingual, socially stratified, and regionally diverse environment. Existing studies have raised concerns about the sustainability of rigid, textbook-centered teaching practices that often fail to connect with students' lived experiences and can marginalize local linguistic and cultural realities (Durán-Martínez et al., 2024; Hehakaya & Pollatu, 2022; Hoyte-West, 2024; Windayanti et al., 2023). These concerns suggest that literacy instruction may remain formally structured yet socially disconnected from the learners it purports to serve. For this reason, literacy as a social practice provides an important foundation for examining whether literacy instruction in Indonesian elementary school classrooms enables students to engage with texts in culturally recognizable, dialogic, and meaningful ways.

The framework of culturally sustainable pedagogy further reinforces this orientation by emphasizing that instruction must not only acknowledge cultural differences but also actively sustain learners' identities, languages, and practices (Paris & Alim, 2017; Stein et al., 2025). In literacy education, this implies that texts, tasks, and interaction structures should create spaces for learners to connect reading and writing with familiar forms of meaning-making. Recent research also suggests that culturally responsive literacy practices can support student motivation and engagement when classroom tasks connect to learners' identities, interests, and lived experiences (Anyichie & Butler, 2023). This argument is particularly relevant to this research because it helps explain why literacy practices rooted in local narratives, oral traditions, and community-based knowledge may be particularly important in elementary school settings characterized by sociocultural diversity.

2.3 Inclusive Pedagogy and Culturally Responsive Literacy Instruction

Inclusive pedagogy is grounded in the principle that learner diversity should be anticipated in instructional design rather than treated as an exception or remediation problem. It seeks to create participation structures, learning opportunities, and forms of support that enable varied learners to engage meaningfully from the outset (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Losberg & Zwozdiak-Myers, 2024). In literacy instruction, this means that access is not secured merely by placing students in the same classroom. Rather, it depends on how texts, tasks, grouping arrangements, teacher preparedness, and instructional supports are organized to broaden participation across differences in language background, reading ability, confidence, and prior experience (Finkelstein et al., 2021; Urton et al., 2023).

Culturally responsive pedagogy complements this perspective by focusing more directly on how instruction can connect literacy learning to students' cultural and linguistic realities. Rather than assuming a universal learner profile, culturally responsive instruction leverages students' prior knowledge, community experiences, and communicative repertoires to make literacy activities more meaningful and accessible (Anyichie & Butler,

2023). In this study, this distinction is analytically important: inclusive pedagogy addresses who should be able to participate, while culturally responsive pedagogy addresses how participation can be made meaningful through instruction. Classroom practices such as collaborative reading, local storytelling, open-ended questioning, and context-based literacy tasks are understood not simply as engaging techniques, but as manifestations of equity-oriented and culturally meaningful literacy instruction. The integration of culturally diverse texts can further strengthen inclusive learning by enabling teachers to accommodate diverse student voices, foster cross-cultural understanding, and promote cultural representation in classroom practices (De Jesus-Reyes, 2024).

Recent scholarship from the Global South and other diverse educational contexts strengthens this argument by showing that inclusive literacy improvement depends not only on formal access to schooling, but also on culturally responsive materials, local language recognition, community engagement, and equitable digital support. In the Philippines, (Gatcho et al., 2024; Serey et al., 2024) emphasize that literacy challenges must be addressed through context-sensitive policies that respond to local learning conditions rather than through uniform approaches alone. In Ghana, (Ntim, 2024) shows that the use of learners' first language alongside a second language can bridge literacy development while affirming students' linguistic identities. Similarly, studies on regional and minority languages indicate that literacy initiatives become more sustainable when historically marginalized linguistic repertoires are recognized as legitimate educational resources (Espinosa Zárate et al., 2023; Hoyte-West, 2024). Inclusive teaching in bilingual and plurilingual primary contexts also requires flexible scaffolding, collaborative classroom dynamics, and attention to learners' linguistic backgrounds (Durán-Martínez et al., 2024). Mustafa et al. (2024) further demonstrate that technology integration in rural schools is shaped by infrastructure, teacher preparedness, institutional support, and contextual constraints, indicating that digital inclusion must be understood as both a pedagogical and structural issue. Taken together, these studies suggest that inclusive literacy becomes more effective when culturally responsive pedagogy is supported by equitable resources, meaningful digital access, and instructional practices that connect school literacy with students' lived experiences.

2.4 Structural Inequality, Sociocultural Marginalization, and Digital Inclusion

Literacy inequality in Indonesia is closely tied to broader patterns of structural and sociocultural marginalization. UNICEF (2022) identifies substantial levels of learning poverty in rural settings, where many children do not reach basic reading proficiency by the age of ten. These disparities are intensified by uneven access to books, the mismatch between home and school language, and the limited availability of materials that reflect learners' sociocultural backgrounds (Durán-Martínez et al., 2024; Mezzanotte, 2022). From this perspective, literacy inequality cannot be reduced to individual learner ability. It is produced through wider arrangements of language recognition, material distribution, and educational opportunity.

The digital divide adds another layer to this inequality. Learners in disadvantaged contexts often have more limited access to multimodal texts and contemporary literacy tools, narrowing opportunities to participate in the wider range of literacy practices required in present-day schooling (Cerna et al., 2021; Mezzanotte, 2022; Silverman et al., 2025). Scholarship on digital inequality in the Global South further shows that educational disadvantage cannot be explained by device access or connectivity alone. Digital inclusion is mediated by territorial disadvantage, uneven institutional support, limited teacher preparedness, and restricted access to meaningful digital learning opportunities (Espinosa Zárate et al., 2023; Heeks, 2022; Johansen et al., 2022; Mustafa et al., 2024). This argument is central to the present study because it frames digital inclusion not as a separate technical issue, but as part of the broader ecology of literacy participation.

2.5 Research Gaps and Analytical Positioning

Although scholarship on literacy, inclusion, and culture has expanded substantially, several gaps remain. First, much of the recent literature examines inclusive pedagogy, multilingual literacy, or digital inclusion separately rather than analysing how these dimensions intersect within elementary literacy instruction (Emmanuel Lucas Nwachukwu et al., 2024; Jackson-Summers et al., 2024; Manganello & Baldacci, 2024). Second, many studies are either policy-oriented or based on single-site interventions, leaving limited comparative evidence on how inclusive literacy practices are enacted across contrasting school contexts (Bal et al., 2021; Hu, 2024; Losberg & Zwozdiak-Myers, 2024). Third, research from Indonesia and the wider Global South still provides insufficient cross-context analysis of how urban, semi-urban, and rural conditions mediate access to literacy resources, teacher adaptation, student participation, and the integration of culturally responsive and digitally inclusive practices within the same regional setting (Gatcho et al., 2024; Hoyte-West, 2024; Mustafa et al., 2024).

The present study responds to these gaps by examining literacy instruction across three public elementary schools in South Sulawesi representing urban, semi-urban, and rural contexts. Its analytical focus is organized around four interrelated concerns: unequal literacy access, variation in instructional adaptation and participation, uneven digital inclusion, and tensions between curricular standardization and contextual responsiveness. In this way, the study does not treat culturally responsive pedagogy, inclusive pedagogy, and literacy as social practice as parallel background theories. Instead, it uses them as a connected interpretive framework for examining how participation is enabled, constrained, and negotiated across diverse school ecologies. This positioning also clarifies the study's contribution: it provides comparative qualitative evidence from Indonesia while refining how inclusive literacy practice can be understood at the intersection of structure, pedagogy, and local knowledge.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative multiple-case study design to examine how culturally responsive pedagogy operated as a practical mechanism for inclusive literacy

teaching across three contrasting elementary school contexts in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. A qualitative case study was appropriate because the study aimed to capture how literacy was enacted as a social practice through classroom interaction, material use, teacher judgment, and institutional support rather than to test a fixed intervention. The design therefore enabled the study to compare how resource conditions, local culture, student diversity, and curriculum expectations shaped literacy participation in urban, semi-urban, and rural schools.

Analytically, the study distinguished between inclusive pedagogy and culturally responsive pedagogy while treating them as closely connected. Inclusive pedagogy was used to examine how teachers widened access and participation for learners with different literacy profiles, whereas culturally responsive pedagogy was used to analyse how teachers connected texts, tasks, and classroom interaction to students' lived experiences, local knowledge, and linguistic repertoires. Literacy as social practice served as the broader theoretical orientation for interpreting how these pedagogical choices became meaningful within particular school contexts.

3.1 Research Design

The study was conducted in three public elementary schools representing urban, semi-urban, and rural contexts in South Sulawesi. The sites were purposively selected to capture meaningful variation in geography, infrastructure, sociocultural environment, and access to literacy resources. One school was in Enrekang City, one in Alla District, and one in Taulo Village. This contrastive case selection supported cross-case comparison rather than statistical generalization.

A total of 39 participants were involved: 12 classroom teachers, 3 school principals, and 24 fifth-grade students. Teachers were selected because they were directly involved in literacy instruction and had at least three years of teaching experience, allowing them to reflect on classroom adaptation, learner diversity, and curriculum demands. Principals were included because they provided the institutional perspective on school resources, teacher support, digital infrastructure, and curriculum implementation. Student participants were selected in consultation with teachers to ensure variation in gender, participation profile, and literacy readiness. Fifth-grade students were chosen because they had experienced several years of formal literacy instruction and could respond meaningfully to guided questions about classroom learning. To maintain confidentiality, all participants were assigned pseudonymous identifiers. Teachers are coded as T01-T12, principals as P1-P3, and student small-group discussion records are reported using group-based identifiers: UG1-UG2 for the urban school, SG1-SG2 for the semi-urban school, and RG1-RG2 for the rural school.

The sample size was considered appropriate for qualitative case study inquiry because the emphasis was on depth, triangulation, and contextual variation. The combination of teachers, principals, students, classroom observations, and school documents enabled the study to examine literacy practice from multiple angles and to compare recurring patterns across the three school ecologies.

3.2 Research Instruments

This study used four complementary data collection instruments: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, student small group discussions, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers and principals to explore their understanding of inclusive and culturally responsive pedagogy, teaching practices, school-level supports, and perceived challenges in addressing diverse learners' needs. The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions that allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences while remaining aligned with the research focus. Each interview lasted between 20 and 45 minutes.

Classroom observations were guided by a structured observation protocol that focused on key indicators of inclusive literacy practices across four domains: access to literacy resources and digital infrastructure, adaptability of teaching and pedagogical practices, student engagement and affective participation, and curriculum and contextual tensions. Observations were conducted across multiple sessions at each school, with each session lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Field notes documented the teaching process and patterns of student engagement.

Student small-group discussions were used as a supporting data source to capture students' perspectives on literacy participation, emotional responses to classroom activities, the relevance of culturally familiar materials, and their perceptions of digital learning opportunities. Rather than functioning as formal individual interviews, these discussions were conducted in small groups after observation cycles and were designed to corroborate patterns identified in teacher interviews and classroom observations.

Document analysis was conducted on lesson plans, instructional materials, and student literacy outcomes. These documents were examined for inclusivity, cultural relevance, and responsiveness to varying literacy levels. This analysis provided insight into the alignment between planned instruction, classroom implementation, and student learning outcomes. All instruments were reviewed by two experts in inclusive education to ensure content validity. The observation protocol was piloted in a non-participating school to refine its indicators and improve clarity.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection took place over sixteen weeks, from August to November 2024, with approximately 12 to 15 days of fieldwork at each school. Classroom observations were conducted as non-participant observations during two to three literacy sessions at each location, with sessions lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Teacher and principal interviews lasted between 20 and 45 minutes. Small group student discussions and document collection were scheduled iteratively so that issues emerging in one data source could be followed up in subsequent observations or interviews. Student discussions were documented through researcher notes and condensed discussion records rather than full individual interview transcripts.

All interview transcripts, observation notes, student discussion notes, and documentary materials were organized and imported into NVivo to support systematic coding and data retrieval. The analysis followed a six-phase thematic analysis procedure. First, the researchers familiarized themselves with the complete data set through repeated readings of the interview transcripts, observation notes, student discussion notes, and documentary materials. Second, open coding was used to identify meaningful segments related to literacy access, contextualized teaching, participation, digital barriers, and curriculum pressures. Third, similar codes were grouped into focused categories through constant comparison across data sources and school contexts. Fourth, these categories were examined across cases to identify convergences, divergences, and context-specific patterns. Fifth, these categories were refined into four main themes: access to literacy resources and digital infrastructure, instructional adaptability and pedagogical practices, student engagement and affective participation, and curriculum and contextual tensions. Sixth, these themes were interpreted in relation to the study's research questions and theoretical framework.

The coding framework combined deductive and inductive logic. Theme-level categories were based on the conceptual framework, while lower-level codes were refined from recurring data patterns. Illustrative codes included local narratives used, task differentiation, limited digital access, positive influences, and curriculum misalignment. Representative quotes from teacher interviews, principal interviews, classroom observations, and selected student discussion notes were retained throughout the process so that final claims remained traceable to the underlying data. In this way, student discussion notes were primarily used to corroborate observed patterns of engagement, emotional responses, and perceived relevance, rather than as the sole basis for thematic claims.

Several strategies were used to strengthen trustworthiness. Triangulation was achieved by comparing evidence across interviews, observations, student discussions, and school documents. Peer debriefing was used to review code boundaries and thematic interpretations. Member checking with selected participants was conducted to confirm the accuracy of emerging interpretations. An audit trail documenting coding decisions, category refinement, and theme development was maintained to support reliability and transparency.

3.4 Researcher Positionality and Ethical Considerations

The researchers' backgrounds in education and literacy studies supported contextual understanding during fieldwork, but reflexive attention was required to avoid treating familiar school practices as self-evident. Reflexive notes were therefore maintained during data collection and analysis in order to record assumptions, emerging interpretations, and potential bias. Interpretive decisions were further discussed within the research team to keep claims grounded in the data rather than in prior expectations.

Prior to data collection, institutional and school-level permission was obtained from participating schools through a formal partnership statement signed by the principal. This

study was conducted as non-clinical educational research and did not involve medical treatment, psychological interventions, or procedures that could harm participants. Informed consent was obtained from teachers and principals, while additional safeguards were applied to student participation through parental consent, student assent, anonymization of all reported data, and the use of pseudonymous school identifiers in cross-case reporting. This study adhered to the principles of voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, respect for participants' rights, and protection of personal data.

4. Results

This section reports empirical findings from teacher interviews, principal interviews, student small-group discussions, classroom observations, and school documents across the urban, semi-urban, and rural schools. To maintain a clear distinction between findings and interpretation, the section first presents cross-case patterns and then illustrates them with representative interview excerpts, observation evidence, and selected student voices. Four interrelated themes emerged from the analysis: (1) access to literacy resources and digital infrastructure, (2) instructional adaptability and pedagogical practices, (3) student engagement and affective participation, and (4) curriculum-context tension.

4.1 Literacy Access: Structural Inequities and Contextual Adaptations

Cross-case evidence showed a clear gradient in access to literacy resources. As indicated in Figure 1, the urban school recorded the highest access score (87 percent), followed by the semi-urban school (68 percent) and the rural school (53 percent). Classroom observation data confirmed the same pattern: the urban school obtained 52 of 60 possible points for Domain 1, the semi-urban school 41 of 60, and the rural school 32 of 60. The difference was visible not only in the quantity of materials, but also in the availability of visual and digital supports that could be used during literacy lessons.

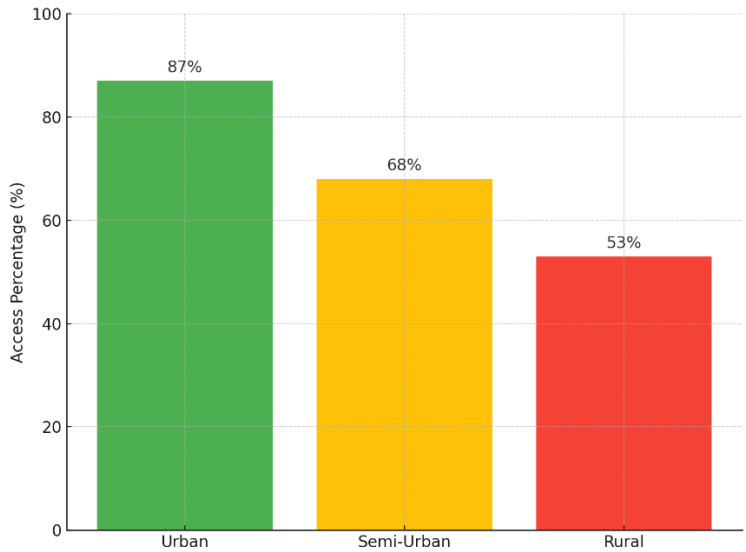

Figure 1. Access to Inclusive Literacy Resources by School Context (2024)

In the urban school, classrooms were supported by textbooks, supplementary books, reading corners, worksheets, picture cards, and occasional digital projection. Yet even in this relatively well-resourced setting, inclusivity depended on the range of materials available for different learners. As one teacher explained, the school had "enough basic materials, but not enough texts for struggling readers, multilingual students, and advanced readers at the same time" (T03). The principal similarly noted that the issue was no longer simple availability, but whether resources were "relevant and inclusive" for diverse learners (P1). Student comments pointed in the same direction. One urban discussion group observed, "When there are pictures or short slides, it is easier to understand the story and I want to answer" (UG2), suggesting that access mattered not only as provision, but as usable support for participation.

The semi-urban and rural schools faced more visible constraints. Semi-urban classrooms relied largely on printed textbooks, photocopied passages, teacher-made worksheets, and a small number of borrowed storybooks. Rural classrooms depended even more heavily on official textbooks, board work, copied texts, and teacher-made visual aids. In one rural observation session, the lesson was supported by a single textbook set, loose worksheets, and one teacher-owned picture book, while no digital device was used. These conditions limited both independent reading opportunities and the range of materials available to support different literacy levels. Student discussion records corroborated this pattern: one rural group commented, "Pictures help because the book is difficult, but the picture shows what the story is about" (RG1), highlighting how limited print access increased the instructional importance of visual mediation.

However, less formal access does not necessarily mean less contextual relevance. In semi-urban schools, teachers supplement standard materials with Bugis and Torajan stories and locally familiar examples. In rural schools, teachers often replace unfamiliar

textbook references with farming, family, and village activities. As T09 explained, students understood better when she replaced authentic examples with "farming, family, or community activities" they already knew. Student voices reinforced this pattern. One semi-urban group stated, "When the story is about things from our area, it's easier to retell it in my own words" (SG1). Together, these findings suggest that resource gradients are structural, but pedagogical responses to them are locally adaptive rather than passive.

4.2 Inclusion in Practice: Differentiation, Participation, and Student Engagement

Instructional adaptability was observed in all three schools, but its form and consistency varied. Observation scores for Domain 2 were highest in the urban school (60/72), followed by the semi-urban school (52/72) and the rural school (42/72). Urban classrooms showed the most systematic use of leveled grouping, guided questions, vocabulary supports, and differentiated follow-up tasks. Teachers more frequently adjusted task difficulty, varied response formats, and provided structured scaffolding before independent work.

This pattern was evident in teacher accounts. T01 explained that some students worked with guiding questions while others read independently and produced longer responses. T02 described the use of repeated reading, vocabulary preview, and sentence starters to support struggling readers and writers. Observation records from the urban site also showed that collaborative book-making, reading journals, and paired response activities widened participation, especially when visual prompts or word cards were added. Student discussion records pointed to the same mechanism. One urban group noted, "I like reading with my friend because if I do not understand a word, I can ask first before the teacher asks me" (UG1), indicating that peer-supported routines functioned as both literacy support and confidence support.

The semi-urban school demonstrated a different adaptive profile. Formal differentiation was less systematic than in the urban classrooms, but contextual adaptation was especially visible. Teachers simplified instructions, shortened passages, assigned oral roles in group reading, and used local stories to increase comprehension and participation. As T08 noted, she often began with familiar local examples before moving to the formal lesson. In the observations, this approach was most evident when a regional folktale was used as the central reading text and students were given alternative ways to respond through retelling, discussion, and short written answers. Students themselves described this sequencing as supportive: "If we talk first in a group, I am braver to answer later in front of the class" (SG2).

In the rural school, inclusive adaptation appeared more through oral scaffolding than through formal task differentiation. Teachers frequently simplified language, rephrased questions, used picture support, and allowed oral responses before asking students to write. T11 emphasized that even silent students had to be invited through "simpler questions, pictures, or short oral responses." Observation notes showed that when teachers used local narrative retelling and guided peer talk, students who were usually hesitant became more willing to contribute. Student discussion records confirmed this oral-first

pattern. One rural group stated, "I understand better when the teacher tells the story first before we read" (RG1). However, because lessons often remained whole-class and text resources were limited, the range of participation was still narrower than in the other two settings.

Across the three contexts, student discussion records consistently linked stronger participation to familiar content, collaborative sequencing, and accessible support rather than to textbook completion alone. In this sense, engagement emerged not simply when students were present in the lesson, but when instructional design reduced risk, widened entry points, and made literacy tasks socially and culturally recognizable.

4.3 Digital Literacy Inclusion: Emerging but Unequal

Digital literacy inclusion was the most uneven of the four themes. In the urban school, digital tools were present in several sessions through projected vocabulary images, reading applications, and short digital storytelling examples. The urban principal reported that the school could facilitate digital use "more consistently," but also acknowledged that not all teachers were equally prepared to use digital tools instructionally (P1). Observation data confirmed this mixed pattern: digital resources were available, but they functioned mainly as supplementary supports rather than as the central mode of literacy learning. Urban student discussion records showed positive affect toward these tools; one group commented, "I like it when we see digital stories because the lesson feels more interesting than only reading from the book" (UG2).

In the semi-urban school, digital integration was intermittent and dependent on infrastructure conditions. Teachers sometimes used a smartphone image, a video, or online material when the connection was stable, but these practices were not reliable enough to become part of routine lesson design. P2 noted that digital use still depended "too much on technical conditions rather than instructional planning alone." Observation records similarly showed that most literacy activities remained print- and orally based even when teachers expressed interest in expanding digital practice. Students recognized the same constraint. One semi-urban group stated, "We do not often use videos because the signal is not always good, but when we do, the lesson is more exciting" (SG2).

The rural school showed the sharpest gap between pedagogical aspiration and infrastructural capacity. Teachers occasionally used their own mobile phones to show short materials, but no student-facing digital tool was used in the observed literacy sessions. P3 described digital inclusion in the school as "more of an aspiration than an established classroom practice." Even so, the student data make clear that low access did not mean low interest. One rural group stated, "I want to make story videos like children in the city, but we do not have that in class yet" (RG2). Observation records likewise showed that attention and participation increased when lessons included picture cards, board visuals, or teacher-led storytelling supported by images, suggesting that multimodal interest was present even where digital infrastructure was absent.

Another noteworthy pattern was that digital access did not automatically produce pedagogical transformation. The urban school had the strongest infrastructure, but

meaningful digital use still depended on teacher confidence, lesson design, and time. The findings therefore distinguish between digital availability and digital enactment. Across the three settings, digital inclusion was shaped by the interaction of infrastructure, teacher readiness, and the school's capacity to connect tools to literacy goals.

4.4 Dialectical Tensions: Standardization and Contextual Responsiveness

Evidence from interviews, observations, and selected student discussion records showed a persistent tension between formal curriculum expectations and context-responsive literacy teaching. Observation scores for Domain 4 were 45/60 in the urban school, 49/60 in the semi-urban school, and 47/60 in the rural school. In this domain, higher scores reflected more visible negotiation between curriculum requirements and local adaptation, not the absence of constraint. These findings suggest that tensions between curriculum and context occurred across all locations, although they were mediated differently according to local resources, teacher roles, and students' literacy readiness.

Teachers across the three contexts described similar pressures, although with different intensity. Urban teachers referred to the difficulty of balancing mixed-ability classrooms with standardized pacing. T02 noted that curriculum texts sometimes required a level of complexity beyond what some students could manage without shorter passages and stronger vocabulary support. In the semi-urban school, the tension centered more on time and adaptation workload. T05 explained that required material was often "too much for the time and literacy level of the class," forcing teachers to simplify or extend the lesson. Student voices reflected the same mismatch from the learner side. One semi-urban group reported, "Sometimes the text in the book is hard, but the teacher explains it with examples we know" (SG1).

In the rural school, the mismatch was more explicit. P3 stated that curriculum implementation often became "a negotiation between official expectations and what students can meaningfully access." This pattern was visible in the observations: in one session the teacher moved away from the textbook sequence and relied on oral explanation and local examples to preserve comprehension; in another, the teacher translated a formal literacy target into a local narrative retelling task so that students could participate meaningfully. These adaptations did not remove curricular pressure, but they allowed the lesson to remain instructionally workable. Rural student discussions supported this interpretation, particularly when students described feeling less afraid to answer once the teacher used familiar words and local examples.

The semi-urban site offered the clearest observable example of balancing formal objectives with local relevance. Teachers retained the intended literacy outcomes while replacing or supplementing standard texts with local stories, oral presentation tasks, and culturally familiar examples. As P2 observed, the curriculum opened space for flexibility, but teachers did not always feel fully secure in using that space. Empirically, this made the semi-urban school a transitional case: it was neither resource-rich nor minimally

resourced, yet it showed the strongest visible effort to mediate policy demands through contextual teaching.

Overall, the results point to four linked empirical patterns. First, resource access followed a clear urban-to-rural gradient, but lower-resource settings often compensated through stronger local contextualization. Second, inclusive participation depended less on a single method than on the availability of adaptive routines such as scaffolding, grouping, simplification, and oral support. Third, digital inclusion remained uneven because infrastructure and pedagogical readiness did not develop at the same pace. Fourth, curriculum responsiveness was not a fixed policy condition but an ongoing practice of negotiation shaped by school context, teacher judgment, and the fit between formal materials and students' lived realities. Student discussion records strengthened these claims by showing that learners themselves noticed the value of familiar content, peer-supported participation, and accessible multimodal support.

5. Discussion

The results of this study indicate that inclusive literacy development across the three schools was shaped not by a single instructional factor, but by the interaction between material access, pedagogical mediation, student participation, and the institution's interpretation of the curriculum. Read through the lenses of literacy as a social practice, inclusive pedagogy, and culturally responsive pedagogy, the findings suggest that literacy participation becomes stronger when students encounter texts, tasks, and interactional structures that are materially accessible, culturally recognizable, and instructionally supported. The results further show that these processes were evident not only in teacher and principal accounts but also in students' descriptions of confidence, enjoyment, relevance, and digital aspiration. Cross-case evidence further complicates the simplistic urban-rural narrative. Urban schools benefit from the strongest resource base, but this does not automatically translate into fully inclusive practices. Semi-urban schools, despite having more moderate resources, demonstrate highly active mediation through local materials and collaborative pedagogy. Rural schools face the most acute structural constraints, yet culturally rooted oral and dialogic practices nonetheless create meaningful entry points for participation. Therefore, the contribution of this study lies not only in documenting inequalities but also in demonstrating how inclusive literacy is negotiated differently across contrasting school ecologies, rather than being implemented uniformly.

5.1 Access to Literacy: Structural Disparities and Local Innovation

The access gradient reported in the results, with urban, semi-urban, and rural schools showing progressively lower levels of literacy-resource availability, confirms that literacy opportunity is structured by material inequality rather than by learner disposition alone. The urban school's stronger scores reflected broader access to print, visual, and selected digital media, whereas the rural school relied on limited textbooks, shared materials, and almost no student-facing digital tools. This pattern supports the argument that literacy inequality is embedded in wider questions of infrastructure, distribution, and educational

support (Cerna et al., 2021; Mezzanotte, 2022; UNICEF, 2021). Importantly, the findings indicate that resource inequality affects not only what materials are present, but also what forms of participation become possible within literacy lessons.

However, the findings also show that low-resource environments did not simply produce pedagogical absence. In both the semi-urban and rural cases, teachers actively compensated for material scarcity by using local stories, oral retelling, familiar cultural references, and community-based examples. Student evidence strengthens this point. Semi-urban students reported that familiar stories made it easier to retell ideas in their own words, while rural students described picture support and teacher storytelling as helping them understand difficult texts before reading independently. This is analytically important because it suggests that culturally responsive pedagogy operated not as a decorative addition to the lesson, but as a mediating mechanism through which literacy remained socially meaningful under constrained conditions. In Vygotskian terms, teachers expanded access to literacy by using culturally familiar tools and interactional supports that linked formal learning to students' existing meaning systems (Vygotsky, 1978).

The urban case further demonstrates that increasing resources alone does not solve the relevance problem. Even where books, worksheets, and digital support are more readily available, teachers still report that many formal texts remain generic and require contextual mediation before students can fully engage. Student comments from urban schools point in the same direction: visuals and local familiarity make stories more understandable, suggesting that an abundance of materials alone does not guarantee meaningful access. These findings extend the literature by demonstrating that inequalities in literacy access are both quantitative and qualitative. Schools differ not only in the amount of material they possess, but also in the degree to which available material reflects students lived worlds. In this respect, the findings reinforce earlier concerns that textbook-centered instruction can remain formally adequate yet socially distant from learners' linguistic and cultural realities (Durán-Martínez et al., 2024; Hehakaya & Pollatu, 2022; Windayanti et al., 2023).

Taken together, these patterns suggest that literacy access should be interpreted on two levels. At one level, it is a structural issue concerning the unequal provision of books, media, and digital infrastructure. At another level, it is a pedagogical issue concerning whether available materials become recognizable and usable for diverse learners. The study therefore refines existing discussions of educational inequality by showing that culturally grounded adaptation can partially mediate scarcity, but cannot substitute for more equitable resource distribution. This is why local innovation should be treated as evidence of teacher agency, not as a reason to normalize structural under provision.

5.2 Inclusion in Practice: Differentiation, Participation, and Student Engagement

The results further indicate that inclusive literacy practice became most visible when teachers transformed learner diversity into a basis for instructional design rather than treating it as a problem to be managed after the fact. This finding aligns with Florian & Black-Hawkins' (2011) view that inclusive pedagogy requires teachers to extend learning

opportunities to all students rather than create separate provisions for particular groups. In the urban school, this was evident in leveled grouping, collaborative writing, reading journals, and differentiated follow-up tasks, reflecting Hu's (2024) argument that differentiated instruction enables teachers to respond to varied learning needs, abilities, and interests. In the semi-urban school, adaptation was less formalized but still visible through contextual questioning, group reading, and oral presentation. In the rural school, adaptation relied more heavily on oral scaffolding, simplified prompts, and selective modification within predominantly whole-class teaching. These patterns also resonate with Losberg & Zwozdiak-Myers' (2024) emphasis on flexibility, whole-class participation, and sustained professional commitment in primary inclusive pedagogy. Interpreted through this lens, inclusion is enacted through the anticipatory design of support, not merely through the physical co-presence of diverse learners in one classroom (Spratt & Florian, 2014; Urton et al., 2023).

A particularly important finding is that participation functioned as the clearest observable mechanism linking pedagogy to inclusion. Students who had previously been hesitant were more likely to contribute when literacy activities involved peer interaction, storytelling, open-ended questioning, or discussion anchored in familiar experience. The student evidence clarifies how this worked in practice: urban students described paired reading as safer because they could ask a friend before speaking publicly, semi-urban students explained that group talk made them braver to answer later in front of the class, and rural students reported being less afraid when teachers first used familiar words and oral explanation. This supports the view of literacy as social practice because participation was shaped through dialogue, shared meaning-making, and recognition of students' communicative repertoires rather than through isolated decoding alone. Nevertheless, the results also reveal an internal tension: broader participation does not mean perfectly equal participation. In several classes, stronger or more confident students still responded first, while quieter learners entered the lesson only after prompts, grouping, or peer assistance. These findings refine the general claim that collaboration supports learning by showing that dialogic structures expand participation only when they are intentionally organized to prevent dominant voices from monopolizing classroom interactions.

The affective dimension of these findings is equally significant. Students' enjoyment of reading together, willingness to share stories from home, and growing confidence during supported tasks suggest that inclusive literacy practice fostered not only academic engagement but also belonging. This interpretation is consistent with Ialuna et al. (2024), who show that culturally responsive teaching can strengthen teacher-student relationships and students' sense of school belonging. The results reinforce this through learner perspectives: students described familiar stories as easier to retell, discussion as less threatening than immediate performance, and picture or oral support as helping them remain emotionally present in the lesson. Anderson et al. (2025) similarly emphasize that culturally responsive literacy practices can support students' literacy motivation when reading activities are connected to learners' identities, joy, and lived experiences. This point matters because inclusion was often first visible in students' willingness to join,

speak, and remain emotionally present before it appeared in written performance. In this sense, affective participation should be understood as part of the learning process rather than as a secondary by-product of good teaching. These findings also align with studies showing that learner engagement and inclusive classroom climate are strengthened when students' cultural experiences, motivation, and participation needs are treated as central resources for learning (Anyichie & Butler, 2023; Margas, 2023).

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5.3 Digital Literacy Inclusion: Emerging but Unequal

The digital findings add another layer to the cross-case analysis by showing that digital literacy inclusion was uneven across school contexts, yet this unevenness cannot be explained simply by device ownership. The urban school had greater capacity to use digital reading applications, projected texts, and guided digital storytelling, while digital use in the semi-urban and rural schools remained intermittent or largely absent. This pattern is consistent with Heeks' (2022) argument that digital inequality in the Global South involves broader forms of adverse digital incorporation, not merely access gaps. Mustafa et al. (2024) similarly show that technology integration in rural schools is shaped by infrastructure, teacher preparedness, institutional support, and contextual constraints.

The present findings also show that students in low-access settings still expressed strong interest in technology-based literacy tasks. Semi-urban students described video-supported lessons as more engaging, while rural students expressed a desire to create story videos similar to children in urban schools. This suggests that digital exclusion in these schools was structurally produced rather than motivationally driven. Unequal digital participation emerged because infrastructure, institutional support, and pedagogical opportunities were uneven, not because students in semi-urban or rural contexts lacked interest in digital learning. Educational technology may support elementary literacy outcomes when it is meaningfully integrated into reading and writing instruction, but its benefits remain limited when schools lack the conditions required for sustained use (Johansen et al., 2022; Opoku et al., 2023; Silverman et al., 2025)

The study also demonstrates that digital inclusion is pedagogical before it is merely technical. In the urban school, where digital tools were relatively available, these tools became more meaningful when they were embedded in coherent literacy routines rather than used as isolated instructional additions. This finding is consistent with Mustafa et al. (2024), who argue that technology integration depends not only on infrastructure but also on teacher preparedness, institutional support, and contextual conditions. In settings where teacher confidence, connectivity, or equipment remained limited, digital tools tended to stay peripheral to literacy instruction. Student responses deepen this interpretation: urban learners associated pictures, slides, and digital stories with easier comprehension and greater willingness to participate, suggesting that the value of digital tools lies in how they are integrated into meaning-making practices rather than in their mere availability. Thus, digital inequality should be understood as part of the broader ecology of literacy participation, where access, pedagogical readiness, instructional time, and classroom design interact to shape learning opportunities (Kormos & Wisdom, 2021; Mezzanotte, 2022).

A further implication is that digital and local forms of literacy support should not be positioned as opposites. The findings point to a layered model of inclusion in which oral storytelling, contextual examples, print resources, visual supports, and digital tools can all function as pathways to participation, depending on available resources and teachers' pedagogical choices. In low-access settings, students valued oral-first explanation and picture support while also expressing curiosity about digital storytelling. This suggests that digital expansion should extend, rather than replace, culturally grounded literacy practices. The study therefore offers a balanced view of digital literacy inclusion: technology can widen multimodal participation, but only when it is integrated into context-responsive teaching rather than treated as a universal solution in itself.

5.4 Dialectical Tensions: Standardization and Contextual Responsiveness

The final theme, curriculum and contextual tensions, provides the clearest explanation for why inclusive literacy practices remain uneven even when teachers demonstrate strong adaptive intentions. In all three schools, teachers worked within the Merdeka Curriculum framework while also facing pressures of pace, coverage, and accountability. As Kim (2024) argues, curriculum reform does not automatically transform classroom practices because teachers interpret and negotiate policy demands within institutional and classroom constraints. The current findings support this argument by demonstrating that curriculum flexibility exists in principle, but in practice is mediated by local interpretations, teacher confidence, and resource conditions.

The semi-urban case is particularly revealing because, despite not having the strongest resource base, it demonstrates the most visible negotiation between formal competencies and local adaptation. This pattern is consistent with Finnanger & Prøitz's (2024) view that teacher engagement in curriculum processes does not always translate into meaningful influence unless teachers are supported in translating policy into classroom action. In contrast, schools in rural areas experienced the sharpest mismatch

between standard materials and student realities, while schools in urban areas demonstrated more selective adaptations rather than deeply transformative ones. These patterns suggest that the central issue is not whether policies formally allow for flexibility, but how that flexibility can be implemented in classroom practice. In this regard, Indonesian studies of the Independent Curriculum remain valuable for demonstrating that teachers often face practical challenges in interpreting curriculum flexibility, adapting teaching materials, and aligning classroom practices with students' actual conditions (Hehakaya & Pollatu, 2022; Mulyasa, 2023; Windayanti et al., 2023)

This theme also sharpens the theoretical contribution of this study. The findings suggest that contextual responsiveness is not external to curriculum implementation; rather, it is a means by which the curriculum can be taught to a wide range of learners. Teachers who incorporate family narratives, local stories, small group discussions, or oral explanations are not abandoning formal goals. They are engaging in what can be understood as a pedagogical negotiation: maintaining desired literacy outcomes while changing the pathways students can take to achieve them. Evidence from students makes the learner side of this tension more visible. When students report that teacher explanations, familiar examples, or oral retellings help them understand texts that felt difficult or distant, they demonstrate how curriculum mismatches are experienced in classroom participation itself. This insight aligns with Paris & Alim's (2017) argument that culturally sustainable pedagogy requires schools to affirm learners' identities and knowledge systems rather than asking students to leave these resources outside the classroom.

These findings also reveal clear institutional risks. When inclusive adaptations rely too heavily on individual teacher efforts, schools with fewer resources or weaker support structures will be at a disproportionate disadvantage. Therefore, while teachers' roles are crucial, they cannot fully support equitable reforms without institutional support, relevant materials, and ongoing professional development.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined how culturally responsive pedagogy, interpreted through literacy as a social practice and inclusive pedagogy, was implemented in urban, semi-urban, and rural elementary schools in South Sulawesi. Findings indicate that inclusive literacy practices are shaped by the interaction of material access, teacher adaptation, participation structures, and institutional flexibility. Urban classrooms benefit from a wider range of print and digital resources, but these advantages do not automatically translate into inclusive participation. Semi-urban classrooms, despite having more moderate infrastructure, often demonstrate strong pedagogical mediation through local stories, collaborative routines, and contextual explanations. Rural classrooms face the greatest barriers to books, digital access, and formal support, but teachers nonetheless create meaningful entry points through oral storytelling, local dialect support, and community-based examples.

Across all three environments, the most consistent pathway to stronger literacy engagement is not the availability of resources alone, but rather the combination of culturally recognizable materials, differentiated support, dialogic interactions, and responsive pacing. Students participate more actively when literacy tasks are connected to family life, village experiences, neighborhood routines, or familiar narratives. These findings also suggest that digital inequality should not be reduced to issues of technology ownership. Students across contexts express interest in digital learning, but schools differ significantly in terms of infrastructure, teacher confidence, and institutional support. Therefore, digital inclusion emerges as a pedagogical and structural issue, rather than a matter of student motivation.

This study further demonstrates that a key tension in literacy instruction lies in the gap between formal curricular expectations and the practical work of contextual adaptation. Although the Independent Curriculum creates room for flexibility, teachers and principals across settings still report uncertainty about how that flexibility should be implemented while meeting the demands of coverage and assessment. In this regard, inclusive literacy practices depend less on policy language alone than on whether schools have sufficient time, materials, interpretive support, and professional confidence to translate the policy into classroom action.

These findings lead to several recommendations. First, teacher development must move beyond general discourse on inclusion toward ongoing, practice-oriented training in differentiated literacy instruction, contextual text adaptation, verbal and visual scaffolding, and meaningful digital integration. Second, resource policies should prioritize underserved and rural schools by providing classroom libraries, leveled texts, visual instructional media, and basic digital devices supported by reliable connectivity where possible. Third, ministries and local education authorities should develop repositories of culturally rooted literacy materials that teachers can adapt across local languages, oral traditions, and community contexts. Fourth, curriculum guidelines for the Independent Curriculum (*Kurikulum Merdeka*) should provide clearer operational examples of how literacy competency can be achieved through context-responsive pathways rather than simply through uniform materials. At the school level, leaders should strengthen teacher learning communities, structured reflection on student participation, and partnerships with families and local cultural actors so that literacy instruction remains socially meaningful as well as academically accountable.

Overall, this research suggests that equitable literacy improvements in Indonesia will depend on how effectively schools connect structural supports with culturally responsive and inclusive pedagogy. Inclusive literacy practices are strongest where teachers are able not only to teach the curriculum but also to mediate it through the language, experiences, and participation needs of the students they encounter. Further research in other parts of Indonesia and with a longitudinal design would be valuable to examine how these practices develop over time and under different sociolinguistic and institutional conditions.

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Authors' Contributions

Ismail was responsible for the overall conceptual framework of the study, contributed to the drafting of the manuscript, and coordinated the data collection process in the field, as well as the integration and management of revisions. Umiyati Jabri designed the interview and classroom observation protocols and made significant contributions to the interpretation of the research data. Rahmat conducted the thematic analysis, synthesized the key findings, and prepared the initial draft of the manuscript. All authors collaboratively reviewed and approved the final version of the article.

Declaration of conflicting interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest to the article's research, authorship, and/or publication.