

# A Scrutiny to Pre-School Children' Activity Fostering the Fundamental Aspect of Literacy

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this seven-month study is to closely examine the pre-school children's activity which represents the stepping stone of reading interest as the fundamental aspect of literacy. The subject chosen were 38 students of two Prekindergarten–Kindergarten in Landungsari village, a citified area of Malang city, East Java Province, Indonesia. Doing initial survey, holding structured interview, reinvigorating the existing facilities, and networking with the local social units were the integrated approach done to intensify the study performed. Furthermore, the role of family and volunteers whose attention was dedicated to children development was also observed to find out their support in nurturing children to love reading. Aside from pilot data and primary data, secondary data from the local government recording the people's education within the environment of the observed subjects were used as references to the prevalent reading culture. The result of the research disclosed that 28 and 15 children attending the two Prekindergarten–Kindergartens exposed their self-development through creativity based on their imagination after listening to the selected storytelling materials. Additionally, building visual communication and increasing numeric vocabularies were crucial indicators of the research subjects to love reading. The rise of this reading interest, nevertheless, cannot be detached from the collaboration between teachers or guides of the pre-schoolers and the individuals who are committed to the education of early age children; not to mention a conducive atmosphere and supporting programs from both formal and informal institutions.

**Keywords:** Pre-school children, reading interest, fundamental aspect of literacy, education

## Introduction

Education is believed as the bridge to achieve qualified human development, in which literacy will undoubtedly take its predominant role as a buffering pillar. The six standards of literacy determined by the United Nations of Development Program (UNDP, 2016): the ability of reading and writing, numeration, sciences, financial, digital, culture and citizenry; clearly signifies that reading, which profoundly leads to writing skill, is the bedrock of literacy. This, of course, becomes a serious challenge for Indonesia because the current facts reveal that not all of Indonesia's vast areas which reached successful infrastructure development, including the utilization of technology advancement, can simultaneously cover the accomplishment of human quality development. Previous study<sup>1</sup> found that the main source of this problem was a covert disreputable literacy. Unfortunately, the same tendency was also discovered within University students<sup>2</sup>.

Numerous countries with high literacy rank enforce their people, especially young generation, to be "digital citizens". In the last two decades or so, governments of those countries had been boosting the use of Information Technology to speed up their literacy rate. If "youth literacy rate measuring the percentage of the population ages up to 24 that can, with understanding, both read and write a short simple statement on everyday life" (UNDP, 2016) is used as a standard to rank worldwide human index development, in Indonesia, it will uncover the ill reading culture of its young generation. Reading score of Indonesian elementary school students issued by the Program for International Student Assessment or PISA demonstrated stagnant trend; i.e.: 196 in 2012 and

<sup>1</sup> See Herminingrum (2017): "Mobile Life, Communication Technology, and Disreputable Literacy". In T. Kerr *et.al* (eds), *Urban Studies: Border and Mobility* (pp. 353 – 358). London & New York: Taylor & Francis Group.

<sup>2</sup> Idem. (2020). "The Dichotomy of Proliferating Information Technology in Globalization of Education". In *Humaniora Journal* (pp. 240 – 248), Yogyakarta: Universitas Gadjah Mada.

197 in 2015 (Info-Tempo, 2018). The report of literacy rate of 185 countries worldwide, recorded in Human Development Index (HDI), has placed Indonesia at position 113; far below Singapore that occupied the 5<sup>th</sup> rank and the 30<sup>th</sup> of Brunei Darussalam (UNDP, 2016). Even compared to its fellow Asian developing countries' literacy rate: Malaysia: 59, Sri Lanka: 73, and Thailand: 89; Indonesia's rank could be classified as poor.

At the same time, Central Connecticut State University carried out a research on literacy behavior of 61 developing countries. From the list issued, Indonesia took its position at the 60<sup>th</sup>, the second lowest after Botswana. This performance underscored how lack of reading proficiency becomes a big constraint for Indonesia today and in the future. Domestic surveys showed that this weak point did not only exist in rural or remote places, but also within the areas in the developing, densely populated island of Java which is identified as Indonesian center of modernity. This anomalous socio-cultural phenomenon, of course, is crucial to be scrutinized.

Thus, elaborations on the effort to accelerate children's reading habits in the previous studies inspire the present research. The field observation is executed in Landungsari Village, located at Dau District, Malang Regency, East-Java Province of Indonesia. This location was selected by consideration that the result of the seven-month research could become an example of how a citified area hid literacy problem. Prior to that, a preliminary survey was also done to explore whether 'reading for pleasure' was ever experienced by Elementary School students. The data obtained would serve as the parameter to examine the root of reading culture within the children of preschool age.

## **Literature Review**

The role of reading skills as the holistic first step for literacy cannot be neglected. Previous researches stated that developing children's reading ability in early stage can build the future academic achievement. In psychological point of view, even though the precise age to start learning to read is still debatable, reading is undoubtedly believed as "one of the most valuable skills developed during childhood" (Kern and Friedman, 2008). The signs of children's readiness to read and develop early literacy are influenced by their environment and personal characteristics. The interconnectedness of both conditions, as a result, is strongly influenced by the differences in parental education and other factors relating to the cultural habits of children since their tender age (Suggate, Schaughency and Reese, 2013). Reading as the fundamental aspect of literacy will reach an optimal result when it begins at the early age of childhood: a golden phase determining the quality of the new generation (Info-Tempo, 2018). With their growing love for reading, children will continuously find new ideas, facts, and experiences for their future (Saville-Troike, 2006). That is why children of prekindergarten and kindergarten age, together with the environment provoking their reading culture, were observed.

A research performed by Halsall and Green (1995) revealed that children who live in a stimulating place where reading and writing are common activities will experience success with reading culture. A conducive environment will increase children's motivation for reading, "they will expend more effort learning to read, spend more time reading, and in turn will become successful, engaged readers" (Sperling and Head, 2002: 233). These findings were supported by Baroody and Diamond's research (2014) on reading among pre-school children which suggested that children who start to learn reading and literacy activities need reasonable literacy environment. Components supporting the growth of reading culture like selecting reading materials for children of pre-school age, however, is also remarkable (Halsall and Green, 1995). For example, Zhao, *et.al*; asserted that "picture book reading ... has been advocated as an activity to promoting children's language and literacy skills during the preschool years" (2014: 5).

In prompting reading interest especially of the children of pre-school age, 3-6 years old, the teachers not only should have sufficient competency to guide but also to provoke them to develop their own motivation from the first reading step. This moment is prominent because encouraging children's participation at their own

developmental level is likely to increase interest and attention (Sperling and Head, 2002; Kucirkova, Messer and Whitelock, 2012) which represent motivational factors.

The term pre-school age – among others used by Kern and Friedman (2008), Kucirkova, Messer and Whitelock (2012), Suggate, Schaughency and Reese (2013) Baroody and Diamond (2014), and Amosun and Ayo-Vaughan (2016); in Indonesia also refers to the stages of formative years. It is divided into six groups. The first is baby, 0-1 year, followed by the second stage of developing baby from 2 to 3 years old. The third is children of early age, 3-6 years old, which can be classified as play group, and children of pre-elementary school age of 6-8 years old.

By absorbing International grants, surveys and studies had been done by Indonesian government and educational institutions to detect students' reading skill quality. Survey pioneered by IEA (International Education Achievement) which was executed in 2000, was purposed to record Indonesian Students' reading score based on PISA (Programme for International Students). Successively, researches supported by EGRA (Early Grade Reading Assessment) and USAID were carried out by ACDP (Analytical and Capacity Development) Indonesia to confirm students' reading competency of the early stage of elementary school students. In 2012, the subjects were taken from 184 Elementary Schools which consists of 4,233 students from seven provinces throughout Indonesia. The same research was continued in 2014 and the result showed that less than a half of 4,182 students observed had proper reading skills. This, of course, is a serious problem. Since then, Indonesian government, apart from the literacy movement initiated by NGOs and individual concerns, established institutions under educational program to empower reading culture.

### **Research Objective**

Low reading skills of the elementary school students and disreputable literacy in general, including university students studied, is apprehensive. So far, however, there is no existing research that digs out the root of the poor Indonesian reading culture. Therefore, this research aims to observe the ground floor of reading culture which is assumed to be shaped since childhood in the period of pre-school age. It should be noted that due to Indonesia's huge population and vast area, this study is limited in its scope, although it hopefully can serve as a model for similar areas.

### **Research Methodology**

Because this study focused on specific case, learning by doing method was applied. The data obtained from survey, structured interview, and field observation served as the primary data. The secondary data were taken from the information and files provided by the local government of Landungsari Village. Integrated approach was employed to achieve positive synergy between the subjects observed and the agents committed in the research. They were the representatives of Landungsari Village Government Office, the local social units – the members of *PKK*<sup>3</sup>, school teachers or guides of Prekindergarten-Kindergarten; in Bahasa Indonesia is known as *PAUD*<sup>4</sup>; which exist in two *dusun* (hamlet), a sub-sub district administratively organized area in a village by local government. The research also involved student volunteers from Brawijaya University (Table 1).

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<sup>3</sup> *PKK* is the abbreviation of *Pembinaan Kesejahteraan Keluarga*. All of its members are mothers and woman activists. The purpose of the activities of this social organization is to improve family welfare, especially in terms of education and healthcare.

<sup>4</sup> *PAUD* stands for *Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini* or Education for Children of tender age, 3-6 years old. It is an arena where very young children begin to socialize with their environment.

Table 1: Groups involved in seven-month study

Group	Male	Female	Total
1. Representatives of the Village Government	2	-	2
2. Women/ Activists from local social units or <i>PKK</i>	-	4	4
3. Guides/ teachers of Prekindergarten-Kindergarten			
<i>PAUD 'Cahaya Bunda'</i>	-	8	8
<i>PAUD 'Kasih Ibu'</i>	-	4	4
4. Student volunteers from Brawijaya University	3	2	5

In accordance with the method used which entirely relied on the activities done during the observation, the participants were classified into two groups. Participants listed in Table 2 were children who attended the Prekindergarten-Kindergarten observed. The two Prekindergarten-Kindergartens chosen were *PAUD 'Cahaya Bunda'* or 'The Light of Mother's Heart', in *Dusun* Klandungan and *PAUD 'Kasih Ibu'* or 'Mother's Endless Love' in *Dusun* Rambaan. Because the activities done were meant to stimulate the interest in reading habits and the main target group was children in early developmental stage, a solid network was built. The networking participants were the individuals, mostly women, who were very concerned with Indonesian children's education. They examined the subject groups qualitatively based on their reaction towards certain set of given stimuli. As the collaborating agents of the action research, they moved in integrated manner together with the researcher to act, study, and value.

Table 2: Groups observed during field activities

Group	Male	Female	Total
1. Students of <i>PAUD 'Cahaya Bunda'</i>	10	13	23
2. Students of <i>PAUD 'Kasih Ibu'</i>	6	9	15

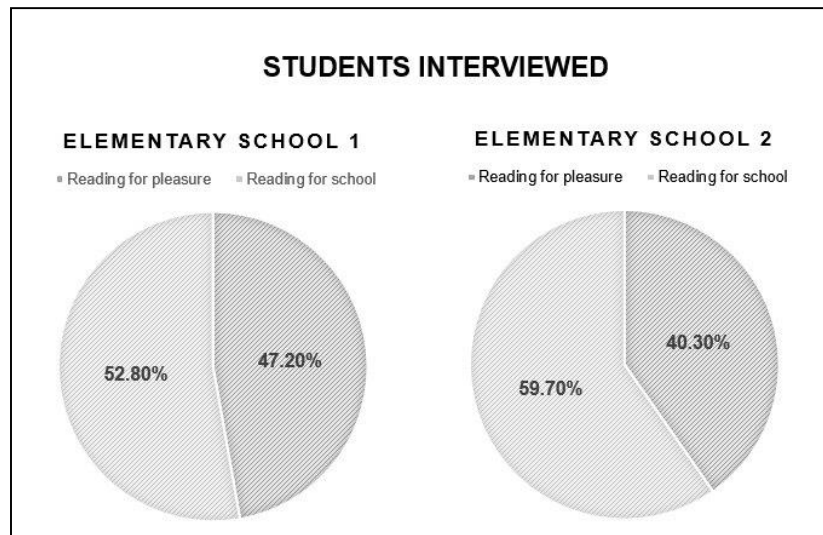
## Results and Discussion

The seven-month research was carried out based on the sequence of actions in accordance with each priority. Secondary data derived from the local government office was the first step leading to do the research. Prior to field observation, survey at Prekindergarten-Kindergarten in Landungsari Village was executed. Additionally, the data obtained from the interview were used to explore of the society's view about the importance of reading habits as the groundwork of literacy.

The chosen subjects for this research were children of the play group ages, within the range of 3-6 years old, who commonly brought by their parents to enter the initial step of education through *PAUD* or Prekindergarten-Kindergarten. In context of literacy, these children are going into the phase of loving reading because there are elements of play within the reading materials related to their socializing activities. Due to that, before conducting a more thorough observation, a preliminary survey towards children of elementary school age was performed randomly to map their reading habits and to find out the root of the problem that could be scrutinized.

Pilot data obtained from the preliminary survey shown in Figure 1 uncovered that 'reading for pleasure' does not make an ideal portion compared to 'reading for school'. As many as 146 students from the total of 250 were interviewed in the first Elementary School, whereas 72 students out of 83 from the second Elementary School were interviewed. From the students interviewed in the first and second Elementary Schools, only 47.2% and

40.3%, respectively, admitted that they love 'reading for pleasure'. The numbers, which are less than 50% of the whole students of each school surveyed, illustrated that the trend of children reading interest was not so promising. This condition will influence students' motivation because "they rarely experienced" the interesting base to build their reading culture "while in school" (Fingon, 2012:72). Children have lost their opportunity to have reading competency because the environment "where reading and literacy activities are promoted in appealing ways and where there are ample opportunities to participate in literary activities are likely to have higher interest and rates of engagement in literacy activities" (Baroody and Diamond, 2014: 4). In this case, teachers' high commitment to shift "reading for school", which is close to the notion of "reading for punishment" (Kucirkova, Messer and Whitelock, 2012), to "reading for pleasure" is paramount.



It cannot be denied that 'reading for pleasure' is a solid basic to thrive reading habits; it is a key to open the door of literacy. However, to accurately meet the desired goal of developing reading culture, some supporting factors needs to be considered. One of them is the importance to select and classify the reading materials to be suitable with the reader's age. It is crucial to specify "good" or qualified reading material to achieve the skill of reading (Halsall and Green, 1995; Laksana, 2017). Choosing books for children should match "educational quality and socio-culturally relevant", not only to their age but also to their environment. Even, Kucirkova, Messer and Whitelock suggested that young children's preferences should be directed to "books that are written specifically for a particular child, have a personal meaning for the child and are socio-culturally appropriate" (2012: 446).

Consequent with the need of a proper medium for spreading reading habits, selecting reading material is a must to increase children's interest and motivation (Halsall and Green, 1995, Sperling and Head, 2002, Kucirkova, Messer and Whitelock, 2012). Besides to evoke children's reading habits, this selection process was done during this study to fit the bases of literacy as a means of character building of children since their early age. From the experiences gained through reading, their ability to express their imagination will be sharpened.

The observation towards the subjects' activity was performed in five weeks of the last two months of the research. It was aimed to obtain qualitative data which then were correlated to the data provided from the previous survey, enabling the discovered problems to be figured out. In that way, the effort to nourish reading interest in this study started from a very basic phase. Selecting reading material was a priority. Firstly, the story books which would be utilized were chosen based on the content of colorful and interesting pictures, as a form of visuals that easily appeals children of 3-6 years old. Because children within this age range is yet to be projected as subjects with reading ability, the main activity was aimed to evoke reading interest by being read to. With that reason, a set of chosen books that have been tailored to their age and socio-cultural environment was used for story telling material.

The participation of teachers of pre-schoolers is to motivate their students to 'love reading' by raising 'visual communication' as suggested by Saville-Troike, (2006) and Zhao, *et.al*; (2014). However, the fact shows that the activity to nourish the enjoyment of reading cannot solely be designated to teachers. Networking groups that are focused on increasing the reading interest of the children must be built. To support the research activities, collaboration between children and parents/siblings or children and their peer groups, was arranged as a routine activity. The groundwork of these activities are the results of research by Kucirkova, Messer and Whitelock (2012), Suggatea, Schaughency and Reese (2013), and Zhao, *et.al*; (2014). All these activities suggested a tendency of positive synergy when shared book reading was also applied. That is why, as well as to avoid the program from being smothered, picture books were donated directly to PAUD 'Cahaya Bunda' and PAUD 'Kasih Ibu' together with other learning properties such as stamps, color pencils, pallets, and other supporting facilities.

In connection to the increasing reading habits, Curtis (2013: 372-76) gave teaching tip in "allowing meaningful assessment of all four literacy strands" that should be based on children's age, ability, and literacy experience. Furthermore, Saville-Troike (2006) clarified the interrelatedness of this order by saying that before the young children acquire the ability to communicate verbally, they will express their concepts or reactions toward the actions that they received by visual communications. In other words, children's love of reading can be arisen from mastering visual communication. When the visual communication, the first step of communication, is well-introduced to the very young children, it will set a strong foundation to shape the reading skill (Halsall and Green, 1995; Saville-Troike, 2006; Zhao, *et.al*; 2014). On this account, the study was arranged for the target subjects who were the children of the tender age attending Prekindergarten-Kindergarten or PAUD. Coloring and drawing were the highlighted activities for besides they manifest everything that children perceived, these two activities primarily also embrace creativity and imaginative ability; a process leading to 'love reading'.

Because the interest in reading firstly appears through self-motivation of the children, the education experts (Mikulecky and Jeffries, 1996) motivate the children at the beginning of the developmental stage to be avid readers by reading stories right before starting to introduce reading skills. This aims to stimulate the children's reactions through visual expressions by drawing or coloring exercises. The 38 subjects of the research, 23 students of PAUD 'Cahaya Bunda' and 15 students of PAUD 'Kasih Ibu' who must attend their schools three days in a week, from 07:30 to 10:30 each day, were studied by identifying their response during the story-telling performed. This activity, therefore, was executed by making it a habit for the children to draw or color pictures according to their imagination, after listening to the storytelling. The story-telling attracted the young children to listen and activate their curiosity. The process of translating perception then was expressed by drawing or coloring the pictures based on their imagination in visual form. Those activities are the stimuli for the children to enhance their visual responses first before stepping into verbal responses. This program, of course, turned out to be very effective to raise the awareness about the importance of literacy, especially from the students' mothers/ siblings.

The involvement of some parents and siblings in assisting the children's activity has strengthened the research's attempt to encourage children of Prekindergarten-Kindergarten age to have reading interest. It is equal to avocation given to "promoting children language and literary skills" (Zhao, *et.al*; 2014) in the early stage. The indicator was children's vocabulary building; i.e., the increase of numeric vocabularies, even though not more than five, obtained from 'colorful hats', 'a pair' (Table 3: 1.1 and 2.5), 'two mice' and 'colorful pencils' (Table 3: 2.2 and 2.5). So as the introduction to colors such as 'blue', or 'purple' and 'pink', which are not basic colors. Self-developing creativity can be examined from how these preschool age children expressed things they perceived from the storytelling based on their "ability and literacy experience". Take for example, upon hearing the word 'colorful' from the phrase 'colorful hats' and 'colorful pencils', by coloring the things mentioned, there will be various colors visualized which is different from one child to another.

*Table 3: Reading Material Used and Activities Observed in Prekindergarten-Kindergarten*

Prekindergarten Kindergarten	Picture books	Children activity		
		Listening to storytelling	Drawing/ Coloring	Self- development
PAUD (1) 'Cahaya Bunda'	1. Topi Warna-warni (Colorful Hats)	✓	✓	✓
	2. Pita Ungu (Purple Ribbon)	✓	✓	
	3. Mawar Merah (Red Rose)	✓	✓	
	4. Beruang Kecil (Little Bear)	✓	✓	
	5. Sepasang Sepatu Biru (A Pair of Blue Shoes)	✓	✓	✓
PAUD (2) 'Kasih Ibu'	1. Tupai dan Ikan (Squirrel and Fish)	✓	✓	
	2. Dua Tikus (Two Mice)	✓	✓	✓
	3. Buaya Merah Muda (Pink Crocodile)	✓	✓	✓
	4. Daun Hijau Kecil (Small Green Leaf)	✓	✓	
	5. Pensil Warna-warni (Colorful Pencils)	✓	✓	✓

These data were evaluated qualitatively from student self-developmental stage which can be interpreted as a motivational factor. The spirit to have reading culture for the children in early developmental stage was reflected by the enthusiasm of children of PAUDs when they listened to the storytelling. It was noted from the activity PAUD 'Kasih Ibu' around two months at the end of the program. That is, an increase of the number of donated books borrowed by the family members, mostly mothers, of the children in this PAUD. They reproduced the designed scheme to evoke the interest of reading for their very young children by performing storytelling at home while their responses are represented in drawing or coloring pictures as the expression of visual communication proposed by Sperling and Head (2002). This trend is promising because a research done by Kucirkova, Messer and Whitelock (2012: 450) showed that "parents' involvement in book construction and, in choice of book content, is considered as an empowerment tool for parents' reading engagement". This means, shared reading between mothers/ siblings and their young children at home has created a conducive atmosphere for evoking reading culture. The rise of reading interest for Prekindergarten-Kindergarten children in Landungsari Village has a good potential to be sustained. With the annotation that as far as reading environment, the participation of mothers or siblings and the ones who are concerned with the importance literacy, and proper supporting factors positively synergize with each other.

Saracho and Spodek (2010: 1319) affirmed that "literacy can be developed in variety of contexts and situation". Reading, telling, discussing, and building interaction through the stories are the examples of experiences to build literacy. On the other hand, the pilot data obtained from the preliminary survey clearly disclosed that the big challenge of increasing reading interest for children as the early-stage readers unexpectedly came from the two State Elementary Schools which nota bene are under government supervision. A single teacher, compared to the total of 22, who attempted to increase her students' reading interest by telling stories have not yet represented the national effort on the improvement of literacy performance for early readers. School as an important place for influencing and giving resources to children's literacy learning is not used properly.

Actually, promoting literacy, especially from formal education sectors or schools, has been done by the Indonesian Government since 2003 with the assistance from UNESCO through The United States Agency for International Development (USAID). By the passage of time, the existence of mobile libraries and independent mini-libraries started by certain communities shows that the awareness of the people on reading activities as the main basis of literacy has burgeoned. These initiatives in the past few years have also been supported by government through *Gerakan Literasi Nasional* (GLN) or National Literacy Movement, under the supervision of Indonesian Directorate of Language Development and Establishment (Hidayat, 2017). Even by the beginning

of 2017, the government also assisted to distribute aid books throughout Indonesia to ease the difficulty faced by literacy movement activists in getting reading materials. The spirit of inducing reading habits, of course, is a good opportunity but idealism is different from reality.

Although it may need a considerable amount of dedicated effort and time to foster reading interest for young children, this study exemplifies that there is still hope for such kind of activity. To strengthen the practice within the grassroot community, a strong collaboration between local woman activists, teachers or guides of *PAUD*, and the children's mothers or siblings had successfully propelled the children of Prekindergarten-Kindergarten age to start to love reading activity, thus shaping their ability to express their feelings freely through colors and drawings. As long as this type of positive synergy is maintained, it is not impossible to increase children's literacy level. This will lead young generation to qualified academic achievement and prepare them to be able to exert freedom of expression as one of the most important facets of human rights.

### **Conclusion and Suggestion**

It is true that high achievement in literacy rate most certainly will foster Indonesia to be one of the noteworthy countries in the world. That is why, preparing the young children to be the 'love reading' generation is unnegotiable. However, this study has proven that building literacy culture through increasing children's reading interest is not easy. In reality, there is an apparent low commitment of Landungsari Village people to encourage students or children to love reading in terms of shaping reading culture. Within the community, reading seems to be understood as a mere skill to know the sound of certain alphabets and nothing else. Whereas reading essentially does not only involve an ability to read but more importantly is also comprehending the materials. The seemingly common different concepts of reading may contribute to the limited understanding of the importance of literacy culture.

Even though interest and engagement of children of preschool age in evoking reading interest which were built by performing story-telling, enforcing visual communication, and sharing books with family shows positive trend; nurturing reading interest for children cannot be solely handled by formal education institutions. The high involvement of teachers or guides of the pre-school children is the first priority, but the contribution of all components of society is also highly needed. This means that reading habits as the bed-rock of literacy in building the sustainable home of Indonesian eligible human resources in the future should be improved. To a large extent, a solid literacy rate will undoubtedly promote academic achievement and support freedom of expression as a part of essential human rights.

Thus, this case study may suggest a beneficial model to tackle this problem, bearing in mind that similar areas in Indonesia are currently having a rise of infrastructure development but concealing poor literacy culture. By tracing the activity fostering reading interest of children of 3-6 years old who attend Prekindergarten-Kindergarten, hopefully the result of the research could help to address the fundamental aspect of literacy.

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