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The Role of Rumah Baca Soka as a Community Reading Center in Building a Culture of Literacy

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ABSTRACT

Community Reading Centers (CRC) hold a critical role in educating the public and expanding access to knowledge, functioning as literacy centers, agents of social change, character builders, and skill developers. This study aims to determine the role of Rumah Baca Soka as a community reading center in building a culture of literacy within its community. Utilizing a qualitative method with a case study design, data were collected through direct observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation, and subsequently analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model. The findings reveal that Rumah Baca Soka, as a community reading center, plays a strategic role in building community literacy through various functions: serving as an information center, broadening horizons and knowledge, providing educational entertainment, facilitating character development, and offering skills training. Strong community enthusiasm, volunteer involvement, an adequate book collection, and external support support the success of this CRC. Scientifically, this research contributes to enriching the literature on CRCs as community-based empowerment spaces that serve dual functions: as literacy centers, social interaction spaces, and means of developing life skills.

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community; community education; community reading center; culture; literacy

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INTRODUCTION

Literacy is an important asset in dealing with today's developing world. Strong literacy not only improves one's ability to read and write but also to think critically, solve problems, and adapt to change. With good literacy, people can more easily access information, participate in public discussions, and make decisions that positively impact their lives. According to UNESCO, the level of interest in reading in Indonesia is 0.001%, which is very concerning (Rahmawati, 2020; Wicaksono & Karniawati, 2024). Central Connecticut State University ranked Indonesia 60th out of 61 in the World's Most Literate Nations in March 2016 (Kementerian Komunikasi dan Digital, 2020; Aulia et al., 2024). It highlights the urgent need to improve literacy awareness and efforts in Indonesia. From the 2018 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), compared to the OECD average, the average reading skill of Indonesian students is 371 or 80 points lower. The previous six rounds of PISA showed that Indonesian students' reading skills in junior high school and rural schools were consistently poor. Junior high school students' reading ability is 27 points below the national average, while rural students' reading ability is 24 points below the national average. As Indonesia improved access to kindergarten education, the reading gap between Indonesian kindergarten students decreased from around 30 points in the 2009-2015 PISA rounds to 16 points (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2019). The National Alibaca Index calculation in 2018 showed an average of 37.32%, which was in the low literacy activity category (Solihin et al., 2019).

In the following years, Indonesia saw an increase in literacy. The Literacy Development Index (LDB) in 2024 scored 73.52, exceeding the target of 71.4 and surpassing the previous year's score of 69.42. It marked an outstanding performance. In the same year, the national reading level increased

to 72.44, placing it in the medium category and exceeding the target of 71.3 and the previous year's score of 66.7 (Nisa, 2024). From these data, it is evident that literacy interest and skills are increasing in Indonesia.

This increase in literacy interest and skills cannot be separated from adequate infrastructure support, including well-equipped reading spaces. Reading spaces such as libraries, reading parks, and literacy corners provide easy and convenient access for people to read and learn. With a variety of high-quality, diverse reading materials—ranging from books and magazines to digital media—these reading spaces can become the center of recreation and educational literacy activities. One concrete form of this effort is through the Community Reading Center, which not only provides access to literacy but also serves as a non-formal education program.

Community Reading Center (CRC) is a non-formal education program that seeks to empower communities while preserving education. In the interest of the country, this program encourages the growth of literacy and reading culture (Kalida, 2016). CRC is more accurately described as a community-based library or a reading center located in the community and managed by the local community in a simple, self-supporting, self-financing manner (Nufus et al., 2022). By using the facilities and activities provided by CRC, the community can obtain lifelong non-formal education (Dwiyantoro, 2019). According to Kalida (2016), CRCs play an important role in building an environment that inspires and motivates the community, thereby increasing their interest and motivation in reading and writing (literacy). It aims at creating a culture of learning in society. By providing a conducive learning environment, CRC helps foster a sustainable learning culture, which is essential for building a competitive, intelligent society. CRC needs to enrich its book collections and resources, ensuring the availability of varied, high-quality reading materials to encourage the growth of a reading culture in the community. In addition to being a reading space, CRC offers a variety of activities through three primary services: *widya pustaka*, *widya loka*, and *widya budaya*. Collaborating with schools, local communities, and other relevant parties is also a strategic step to expand the reach and impact of literacy activities, fostering a strong culture of literacy in the community.

Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology defines literacy as the ability to read, observe, listen, write, and speak to access, understand, and utilize things effectively (Hasanah & Silitonga, 2020). According to Irianto and Febrianti (2017), literacy skills play an important role in determining the success of the younger generation. Good literacy makes it easier for them to understand various information, both orally and in writing. In everyday life, literacy is the main factor supporting the development of the younger generation's various competencies Rosyidin (2020), argues that the progress of a society or nation is determined or at least influenced by the conditions of an advanced literacy culture on the one hand and, on the other hand, by literacy conditions driven by literary development. The purpose of literacy culture is to foster a mindset strengthened by reading and writing. Through this process, it is hoped that meaningful works will result from these literacy activities (Jatnika, 2019).

Over the last 10 years, research on community reading centers has been rapid, as has their development in Indonesia. There is research on the management and supporting and inhibiting factors related to community reading centers (Misriyani & Mulyono, 2019). There is research on the role of the Global Youth Literacy Community and community reading centers for early childhood (Nufus et al., 2022; Saepudin et al., 2017). In addition, there are also discussions of the role of CRC in building interest in reading (Dwiyantoro, 2019; Saepudin & Mentari, 2016; Yusniah et al., 2022). Based on several previous studies with similar themes, there are differences in the subject criteria and the analysis methods used in this study. Research on the role of community reading centers in building a culture of literacy is important for providing the latest data and analysis on its current role in literacy

development. Thus, this research adds to the literature on community reading centers in Indonesia and offers a novel contribution to previous research.

The community reading center studied is Rumah Baca Soka in Salatiga. Rumah Baca Soka has been operating since 2013 and continues to grow each year, with expanding book collections, literacy programs, and increased community participation. It has succeeded in increasing the local community's interest in literacy through programs such as reading services, tutoring, skills training, socialization, and others. In addition to serving as a reading space, it also serves as a center for community empowerment and education. Therefore, this study aims to analyze and determine the role of Rumah Baca Soka as a community reading center in building reading interest, enhancing literacy skills, and increasing community participation in literacy activities.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach, which is an approach to studying naturalistic object situations based on post-positivism (as opposed to experimentation), and is appropriate for exploring social phenomena in depth within a natural setting. The qualitative approach is grounded in post-positivist thinking and positions the researcher as the primary instrument in the field. It emphasizes meaning over generalization, utilizes data triangulation, and adopts inductive data analysis methods (Sugiyono, 2021). The research design uses a case study, a research method that offers a comprehensive approach to uncovering specific problems or cases across individuals, groups, and organizations (Hidayat, 2019).

The main objective of this research is to explore the role of Rumah Baca Soka as a community reading center in building a culture of literacy within the local community through its programs, facilities, and community engagement. The objective of this qualitative method is to reveal the meaning of literacy practices at Rumah Baca Soka and to understand the processes and strategies used to build a community literacy culture. This research does not aim to generalize, but rather to present the depth of information and the richness of the data related to the local context. This method was chosen to explore the roles and impact of Rumah Baca Soka in building literacy from the perspective of its stakeholders.

This research was conducted at Rumah Baca Soka, a community reading center in Salatiga City, Central Java. The research location was chosen because Rumah Baca Soka offers a diverse literacy program and actively promotes literacy. The main instrument in this research is the researcher himself, as is common in qualitative research. The main emphasis of qualitative research is on information about current fluctuations, not on the sample sizes of data sources (Sugiyono, 2021). The data collection techniques used include direct observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Interviews were conducted with five informants, including CRC managers, CRC members, and local officials who are familiar with CRC activities. Observation was used to document daily activities at the CRC and community involvement, while documentation included activity archives, photographs, and written reports from management.

The data analysis of this research is Miles and Huberman's interactive model, which includes data collection, reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing. According to Miles and Huberman, the qualitative data analysis process is interactive and continues until data saturation (Sugiyono, 2021). Data collection is done through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. This process was iterative and took place simultaneously throughout the research. Data reduction involved selecting relevant information, which was then presented descriptively for further analysis. Conclusions were drawn based on patterns, themes, and relationships in the data. To ensure validity, triangulation techniques were used across data sources, methods, and the timing of data collection. The research steps are shown in Figure 1.

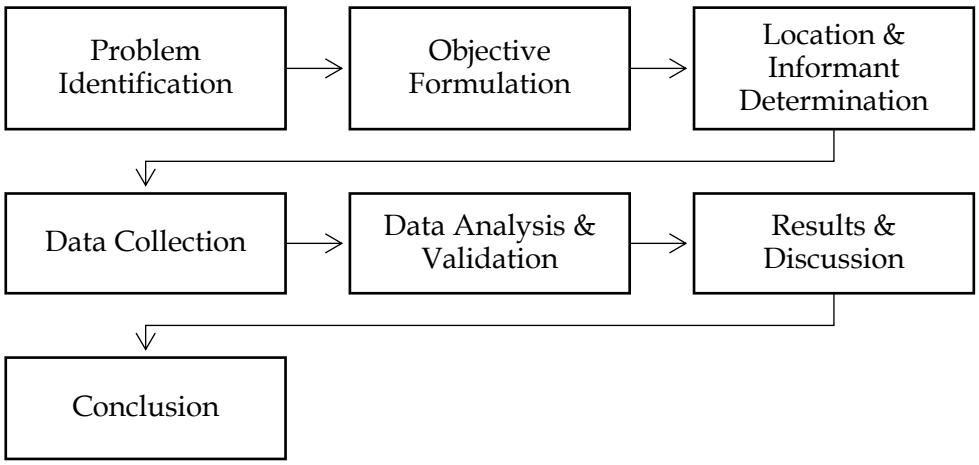


Figure 1. Research Steps

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A community reading center is a facility that provides scientific literature and other reading materials tailored to the community's needs while presenting a range of educational content (Yusniah et al., 2022). CRC is present in the community to participate in educating the nation and maintaining the sustainability of non-formal education programs. One effort is community empowerment, especially in developing literacy and increasing interest in reading. In addition, CRCs organize various self-development activities and training programs to enhance insight and knowledge, enabling people to grow into superior, creative, and high-quality individuals (Uyun et al., 2023). CRCs play an important role in improving literacy and community knowledge by providing access to open reading materials for all groups. CRCs support lifelong learning, foster a culture of reading, and help create a more intelligent and more independent society through inclusive education services. According to Dwiyantoro (2019), the role of CRC is: 1) source of information; 2) broadening horizons and knowledge; 3) educational entertainment; 4) character and moral development; and 5) skills learning.

Rumah Baca Soka, as a community reading center, offers programs including tutoring, reading and storytelling classes, an educational park, life skills training, dance and fine arts training, and the facilitation of local community activities and affairs. These programs have been well implemented and developed due to the community's participation and enthusiasm in following the programs. Access to reading materials is reflected in the availability and variety of book collections, in line with the community's needs and reading interests, and in the condition of the books at Rumah Baca Soka, which remain good and well-maintained. An easy borrowing system can increase public access to reading materials and reflect the quality of CRC services. The programs at Rumah Baca Soka, a community reading center, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Programs at Rumah Baca Soka

Problem	Name of Program	Target
There are three stunted toddlers.	Training on making healthy, balanced nutrition meals	Three parents of stunted toddlers
There are cases of early marriage in the neighborhood.	Socialization of the minimum age of marriage to prevent stunting	Ten mothers from the PKK (Family Welfare and Empowerment Organization) with teenage children
	Socialization of youth reproductive health	Volunteers and five teenage girls

Children need free tutoring.	Tutoring classes for students from kindergarten to junior high school	30 children
Some children have a gadget addiction.	Learn and play together (singing and dancing)	30 children
The neighborhood has poor health and physical fitness.	Gymnastics, badminton, and ping-pong	25 PKK mothers and 15 men
The neighborhood lacks reading materials.	Book reading service	All residents
Digital literacy has not been introduced.	Computer operation services	30 children
The neighborhood needs skills for business ideas.	Training on making various cakes and sponges	Five mothers from labor families
The neighborhood needs a room for health services.	Posyandu ILP (Integrated Primary Service Post)	Babies, toddlers, and the elderly

Rumah Baca Soka provides books as community learning resources. The provided books can support the community in learning and finding information according to their needs. Some children read books to get information for their school assignments, some borrow comic books or general works, and some use computer facilities to search for information on the internet. The community uses community reading centers to learn and find the knowledge they need. In this case, CRC facilitates by providing various kinds of books to help meet the community's needs through reading. This can be seen from the results of an interview with YS, as the coordinator of Rumah Baca Soka:

> *"We have tutoring. It is more about helping the children to learn if we can. However, when we are unable to, the children can look for information from available books and the internet."*

The same thing was also expressed by M, as the manager of Rumah Baca Soka:

> *"There are three computer units that children can use to learn and search for information."*

Based on the interview, the first role of Rumah Baca Soka, as a community reading center, is to serve as a source of information, obtained from books and the internet, and to provide it to residents according to their needs. This is in line with one aspect of CRC as *widya pustaka,* which means that CRC provides a variety of library resources, both written and unwritten, such as textbooks, popular books, and general knowledge books, as well as various recordings on media such as cassettes, CDs, and DVDs. Rumah Baca Soka, as a community reading center, is not only a source of information and a place to add insight and knowledge, but also an educational entertainment space that offers engaging readings, such as novels, comics, stories, and other humorous materials. The CRC should be designed so that visitors feel comfortable and enjoy the learning process. This can be seen from the results of the interview with M:

> *"This community reading center is a place for various activities, such as children's learning activities with volunteers, women's gymnastics* (See Figure 2)*, table tennis, posyandu* (See Figure 3)*, Independence Day events, and community meetings. We also have a garden with various plants and statues for children to play and learn."*



Figure 2. Gymnastic Activity at Rumah Baca Soka



Figure 3. Posyandu ILP at Rumah Baca Soka

AP states the following as the secretary of the community association and the management of Rumah Baca Soka*:*

> *"This community reading center is expected to centralize all community activities, both learning and non-learning activities. I usually see children learning together with volunteers outdoors, in parks or gardens, so they do not get bored."*

Based on the interview with AP, another role of Rumah Baca Soka, as a community reading center, is as a place for educational entertainment. Educational entertainment activities are useful for providing fun learning experiences for children, developing physical skills, and fostering social attitudes within the local community. Activities at Rumah Baca Soka are flexible, allowing them to play while learning. This is also in line with Dwiyantoro (2019), who states that, in its implementation, recreational activities are used as a means for the learning experience. Through this learning experience, the community grows and develops to meet its educational goals.

Rumah Baca Soka, as a community reading center, fulfills its role by providing a diverse collection of books. The available book collection consists of various classifications, ranging from general reading books, religion, language, science, technology arts, literature, philosophy and psychology, computers, social science, geography, and history which reached 1,274 copies and various kinds of magazines, such as Tempo, Bobo, Kartika, Hati Beriman, Comics, and others which amounted to 485 copies. The data were obtained from 2024 activity reports. In addition to these reports, Rumah Baca Soka also received 1,000 copies of books from the National Library, but sorting and data collection have not yet been carried out.

CRC facilitates learning by enabling residents to read and borrow books based on their interests and needs. It is expected that through reading, people can expand their knowledge, gain new experiences, and develop skills (Prabowo et al., 2023). Providing a reading space with books and tutors can increase children's interest in reading and insight (Solihatun et al., 2023). Not only books, but people can also use the computers and the internet that are already available. In addition to children learning and reading books at the CRC, some mothers read cookery books to practice at home, and others who are learning to be citizens read magazines to increase their knowledge. This can be seen from the results of an interview with YS, as the coordinator of Rumah Baca Soka:

> *"We received book donations from various volunteers and the National Library. A total of 1,000 copies have just arrived and have not yet been recorded. So, now we have 2,759 copies of the books. Usually, when there is a PKK activity, I bring the books and display them to attract the women's attention. Some take the recipe books to read."*

In addition, M, as the manager of Rumah Baca Soka, revealed this:

"Children also enjoy learning to use computers and the internet beside reading books there."

Based on the interview, it can be concluded that another role of Rumah Baca Soka, as a community reading center, is to provide insight and knowledge. It provides reading materials ranging from general works and practical science to textbooks to help students at school. It also provides internet access and computers that all residents can use to add insight and knowledge.

CRC can act as a place for character and moral development, especially for children. Rumah Baca Soka, as a community reading center, provides reading materials on psychology, religion, history, and the autobiographies of figures and artists. Activities that can foster character and morals at Rumah Baca Soka, as a community reading center, include learning together with volunteers every Saturday. In these routine activities, children not only learn in one place; they also learn outdoors, such as in nearby parks or gardens, as displayed in Figures 4 and 5. The learning carried out applies an exploratory model, with learning activities that involve children actively asking questions, discussing, and finding new information. This follows the results of the interview with YS:

"The children usually study in the park or garden near the Chinese cemetery with UKSW volunteers. They already know the schedule when they come here. They also study with their friends, learn to work together, and help each other."

This is in line with what AP said:

"There are regular activities for children with volunteers from Universitas Kristen Satya Wacana. These activities have a significant impact. Some children used to be victims of bullying at school; now they are braver, and their learning outcomes have improved."



Figure 4. Tutoring at Rumah Baca Soka



Figure 5. Learn and Play at Rumah Baca Soka

Uyun et al. (2023) state that various activities at CRC are organized to improve the quality of human resources, not only through literacy or education movements, as is generally done by CRC, but also by shaping the community's character and morality. This is considered the most fundamental aspect of human life. According to Hamid (2010), as quoted in Yusniah et al. (2022), CRC can act as a forum for character and moral formation, as it provides reading materials that include research on the brain, religion, and history, a collection of memoirs by figures or artisans, and one's educational experience.

The book collection owned by Rumah Baca Soka aims to facilitate community access to a variety of reading materials that foster insight, increase interest in reading, and hone the skills of the local community. In addition to providing reading materials on various skills, Rumah Baca Soka, as a

community reading center, also organizes art classes. Some managers teach children dance, calligraphy, drawing, and painting. Other activities include making art from used goods, training in making various cakes, including sponge cakes, and developing other skills. The following is the result of an interview with YS:

> *"As a manager, I also teach dance for the children. The children also learn to give speeches, host events, and recite poems to be performed during the Independence Day commemoration, activities organized by the Salatiga City government, cultural festivals, and cultural carnivals."*

M also conveyed the same thing:

> *"For me, I train in fine arts, such as calligraphy, drawing, and painting, so that the children have skills in the arts. I trained one child in calligraphy, and he won second place in a calligraphy competition. It was an achievement and a source of pride for him."*

Kalida (2016) shows that community reading centers in Indonesia offer a range of activities, including writing training, skills development, and speech competitions. One of the aspects available at CRC is *widya budaya*, a facility for the community to channel ideas and hone talents in various fields, such as writing, theater, dance, and batik. With the flexibility of space and time, CRC also helps preserve local culture. In addition, CRC and community libraries also function as organizers of cultural development services in the community, known as widya budaya services.

This research found that Rumah Baca Soka, as a community reading center, plays a complex and strategic role in building a culture of literacy within the community. The function of the CRC is not limited to being a place to read; it has developed into a center for educational, social, and cultural activities.This aligns with Uyun et al. (2023). Through its various roles and activities, Ambu Seba Community Reading Center has increased community motivation in education, especially among parents. If previously they were less concerned about their children's education and activities, now their attention to the learning process and child development is increasing. Abhyasa et al. (2024) state that CRCs make a significant contribution to reviving a culture of literacy, especially in neighborhoods and among children who are outside the gadget overload zone. In the context of Rumah Baca Soka as a community reading center, this function is realized through open reading activities, tutoring, art training, and cross-age involvement in literacy activities.

The role of Rumah Baca Soka as a source of information and a means of expanding knowledge through computer use service programs aligns with Prahardika (2020), who found that Silayung Community Reading Center improved information literacy through positive internet activities. However, the novelty of this study lies in its application in a small urban environment (Salatiga), integrating an open learning approach and the use of simple technologies (such as computers and the internet) by children and homemakers. The findings add a new perspective on how CRCs adapt to the literacy needs of communities across ages and social backgrounds.

The educational entertainment activities, art training, and character development that are consistently run show that CRC also facilitates the development of moral values and social skills. This aligns with Sinaga et al. (2023), who emphasizes the importance of CRC in building community interest in reading. However, in this context, Rumah Baca Soka, as a community reading center, has been proven to facilitate character learning that impacts changes in children's behavior, such as increased self-confidence and communication skills, as reflected in the reports of YS and AP. One of the important contributions of this CRC is its success in fostering a collaborative culture through close relationships among managers, volunteers, and the community. This also aligns with Budianingsih

and Imandika (2021), who recognized the important roles of students and educators in improving the quality of community programs in both villages and cities. Social sensitivity encourages students to understand the needs of the environment and make the best contribution to society. In this study, the involvement of Universitas Kristen Satya Wacana volunteers not only supported CRC operations but also provided meaningful learning experiences for children directly. This shows that collaboration between formal and non-formal education can create a dynamic literacy ecosystem.

The success of Rumah Baca Soka as a community reading center is also inseparable from the community's enthusiasm, an adequate book collection, and support from the government and external partners. However, there are still challenges, such as limited human resources, simple facilities, and low public interest in literacy compared to the appeal of digital technology. Sinulingga and Krisswibowo (2024) and Maiseta and Siswanto (2019) confirm that the success of CRC is highly dependent on the program's suitability to the community's needs and on innovation in the implementation of activities. In this context, the involvement of student volunteers from universities not only strengthens the program's capacity but also creates a dynamic, participatory, and inclusive literacy ecosystem. This supports the formation of a community-based CRC management model that is oriented towards local needs and potential.

However, several challenges remain, including limited human resources, insufficient support for physical facilities, limited operational funds, and low public interest in reading, which is competing with the dominance of gadgets and social media. These obstacles align with those found by Fatwa (2021), namely that low community literacy is not only due to the availability of reading materials but also to a weak supporting ecosystem involving families, schools, and the social environment. Therefore, program innovation and strengthening family literacy are important strategies going forward. Scientifically, this research contributes to enriching the study of community reading centers as community-based empowerment spaces with several functions: as literary centers, social interaction spaces, and means of developing life skills. In practice, Rumah Baca Soka can serve as a reference for the development of other community reading centers that adopt a participatory approach and build on local potential. By prioritizing inclusivity, sustainability, and adaptability, CRC can play a key role in strengthening literacy culture across Indonesian society.

CONCLUSION

The role of Rumah Baca Soka as a community reading center in building a culture of literacy includes serving as a source of information, expanding insight and knowledge, providing educational entertainment, fostering character and moral development, and promoting skills learning. The programs implemented by Rumah Baca Soka, as a community reading center, aim to foster interest in reading and literacy habits in the local community. Community enthusiasm, volunteer involvement, an adequate book collection, and support from external parties support the success of this CRC. CRCs are not just reading facilities but adaptive, contextualized community empowerment spaces. Community-based approach, open space integration, and cross-age participation are the main strengths of Rumah Baca Soka CRC in building literacy and empowering the community.

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