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Reading Difficulties among Elementary Students in a Rural Area: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the factors that influence reading difficulties among elementary students in a rural area. Based on observations and interviews, the study reveals limited language skills due to the use of local dialects, impacting comprehension and decoding abilities. Phonetic awareness also requires improvement, with difficulties in recognizing and distinguishing letters. Cognitive deficiencies, particularly in working memory, affect reading comprehension. Some students display varying attentiveness, with some preferring activities like drawing, hindering engagement in reading tasks. The home literacy environment and parental involvement significantly influence reading proficiency. The absence of preschool education affects students' foundational literacy skills upon entering primary school. Recommendations include personalized approaches and early childhood education advocacy to enhance reading skills in rural students.

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1. Introduction

Comprehension stands as the ultimate objective of reading, requiring the reader to construct a mental representation of the author's world. The cognitive process of reading involves deciphering words and extracting meaning from the material. This intricate task of comprehension relies on the ability to recall visual representations embedded in terms and phrases that carry significance. Reading holds paramount importance, serving as both a source of information and a method for understanding a given text (Lailiyah et al., 2019) Developing the capacity to discern valuable information from unreliable sources is crucial, in determining what information is appropriate and what is not (Yustisia et al., 2023)

Furthermore, reading is a skill that should be cultivated at the early age. Achieving literacy success mandates the instruction of reading comprehension. A foundational aspect of reading comprehension is fluent word reading, which pivots on automaticity and accuracy during the initial stages of reading (Schaefer & Kotzé, 2019). Within these foundational skills lie phonological awareness, recognizing and manipulating a language's sound structure; word recognition, identifying printed words and linking them to phonological and semantic meaning; and reading fluency (Schaefer & Kotzé, 2019)

However, the scope of reading transcends the mere acquisition of skills essential for comprehending texts and excelling in an educational environment. It operates within a contextual framework, emphasizing the power of language to position speakers and their written creations amidst the multifaceted spectrum of societal hierarchies and viewpoints characteristic of any culture. This involves acknowledging elements like race, gender, socioeconomic status, and authority (Parlindungan et al., 2020).

As early reading skills are crucial for a child's educational development, these skills lay the foundation for future academic success and are essential for effective communication and comprehension. Pratiwi (2020) argued that, early literacy and writing abilities strive to assist children in expressing thoughts and emotions to others. If a child struggles with reading, it will impede his knowledge acquisition. This is because these abilities serve as the foundation for future lessons. Reading simple words and phrases fluently and easily is an essential benefit of early reading for elementary students (Rafika et al., 2020).

This research paper explores the critical components of early reading skills and their importance. Educators and parents must understand that children's preparedness for reading encompasses more than just fundamental reading abilities. It also encompasses additional significant elements that impact reading skills, such as lack of enthusiasm, parental educational history, and teacher engagement (Majzub & Kurnia, 2010). Exploring such factors can help the teacher design a tailored teaching method for students with difficulties in early reading at the elementary level, especially in rural areas.

The proposed study aims to analyze the initial factors of reading difficulties experienced by elementary school students, especially in the rural area. Additionally, this article contains ideas about theoretical and practical reviews regarding factors of that contributing in reading difficulties faced by the elementary students especially in the rural area. This study seeks to contribute to our understanding of students' challenges in acquiring reading skills by examining the performance of struggling and proficient readers and exploring potential contributing factors. The findings may have implications for educators, policymakers, and interventions to improve reading instruction and support for struggling readers in the early grades.

2. Method

The case study approach is a research methodology that involves in-depth investigation and analysis of a particular individual, group, event, or phenomenon within its real-life context. It aims to provide a detailed and comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing primary students' reading skills and how they learn them. The subjects of this study were students in grades 1 to 4 at an

elementary school in a rural area of Malang, Indonesia who had difficulty reading. A total of 32 students participated in the current study.

The research procedure encompasses three distinct stages. The preliminary stage commences with surveying the school to assess students' reading skills. Exploring relevant books and research references to substantiate the study's foundations was also done. The second stage entails the implementation phase, wherein copious data is diligently collected. Finally, the completion stage unfolds, involving an in-depth analysis of the amassed data. The researchers meticulously examine the observations, interviews, and documentation findings, drawing comprehensive conclusions and insights for the research.

3. Results and discussion

Based on the results of observations and interviews about students' initial reading difficulties, the researcher will discuss the findings obtained by the researcher. The following discusses the results of the study. Several factors seem to contribute to the difficulties of early reading at an elementary school in a rural area of Malang, Indonesia.

3.1 Language and phonological awareness

Language skills in remote areas can be characterized as somewhat deficient. This circumstance arises due to the daily usage of the local dialect, resulting in a limited grasp of Indonesian and English among the students. Consequently, these learners frequently encounter challenges in comprehending and interpreting words or sentences while attempting to solve problems. Furthermore, their reading proficiency needs to be improved, as the researcher identified a notable number of students ranging from grade 1 to grade 4 who exhibit difficulties in reading fluently. In the context of learning to read, the stimulation of phonological awareness promotes phonological awareness and prevents the development of learning disabilities (Amorim et al., 2020; Veríssimo et al., 2021). A study conducted by Abdon & Barrios (2022) which aimed to record the success rate of ten Filipino kindergarten students attending a public school in Calaca who participated in a 30-minute integrated Phonological Awareness (PA) intervention resulted in substantial distinctions of Phonological Awareness (PA) and letter knowledge between Batangas Tagalog and English both before and after the intervention. The research showcases that implementing Phonological Awareness (PA) intervention in the native language holds significant promise as an effective and enduring approach to enhancing the early reading abilities of Filipino kindergarten students.

Furthermore, students' proficiency in phonetic awareness in SDN Sukolilo still needs to be improved. Many students in the lower grade levels need more familiarity with the alphabet. Additionally, challenges persist among some students in distinguishing certain letters, notably 'd' and 'b', as well as 'q' and 'p'. Moreover, it was observed that even some upper-grade students, particularly those in grade 4, encounter slight difficulties when attempting to read a word with endings clearly. Additional supporting evidence indicates that Phonological Awareness (PA) programs implemented

during early childhood education have enduring impacts on word recognition skills and reading comprehension abilities, even as students' progress to the later years of elementary education (Amorim et al., 2020).

3.2 Cognitive and processing abilities

The working memory of students significantly influences their reading comprehension abilities. Working memory is the cognitive system that temporarily holds and manipulates information while engaged in mental tasks. In reading comprehension, working memory plays a crucial role in processing and integrating various text components, such as decoding words, understanding sentence structures, and connecting ideas across paragraphs.

Students working memory at an elementary school in a rural area of Malang, Indonesia, particularly concerning reading comprehension, exhibits a degree of deficiency. Notably, most students there need more support during question-and-answer tasks to read and seek answers from the preceding pages. Furthermore, a subset of students frequently inquiries about answers before engaging in the reading process or searching for relevant information. These observations suggest that students in rural settings may encounter challenges in efficiently retaining and manipulating information while engaging with textual content, thus impacting their reading comprehension abilities.

Moreover, it has been observed that some students in rural areas display varied levels of attentiveness during educational activities. While some students exhibit attentiveness, others tend to be engrossed in their own world, often demonstrating a preference for activities such as drawing. Fostering engagement to address this issue is needed, including incorporating ice-breaking activities before and during lessons. However, a personalized approach must be adopted when students display indifference, does not pay attention to the lesson, and resort to doing something else, for example, drawing. Special attention to the disengaged student, encouraging them to focus on the lesson content first and, subsequently, permitting them to draw as a reward for their active participation. This approach seeks to balance maintaining attentiveness during learning and acknowledging individual preferences, fostering a conducive learning environment for all students in the rural setting.

3.3 Environmental factors

The literacy environment at home plays a pivotal role in shaping a student's early reading skills and overall language development. A rich and supportive literacy environment provides numerous opportunities for children to engage with language, books, and reading, positively impacting their literacy acquisition and comprehension abilities.

While environmental factors can certainly impact the learning process, it is parents and immediate family members who wield the most significant influence on a child's acquisition of literacy skills. The lack of parental involvement in supporting their children's learning, particularly reading, has exacerbated the problem. Interviews with the students at an elementary school in a rural area of Malang, Indonesia have indicated that many parents are heavily occupied as foreign workers, leaving

them with limited time and energy to assist their children with their studies. As a result, children might need more guidance and encouragement to excel in reading. In rural communities where parents are often engaged in agricultural or manual labor, they may need more time to actively engage in their children's education. This lack of parental involvement can limit reading support and encouragement at home. When parents actively participate in their child's reading journey, offering guidance, encouragement, and support boosts the child's confidence and motivation to explore and excel in reading. A study on the teacher participant of Veríssimo et al., (2021) believed that the work of preschool and primary school teachers is inadequate to overcome the difficulties faced, especially when considering the impact that the absence of parental support has on the learning process.

3.4 Early Education

Early education is crucial in nurturing foundational skills necessary for reading and comprehension. Because the encounters children have during their time in preschool and kindergarten shape their forthcoming journey in developing literacy skills (Rand & Morrow, 2021). With this early exposure, students can develop essential literacy skills, which can lead to further challenges in their academic journey. Many students at an elementary school in a rural area of Malang, Indonesia did not go to preschool, directly impacting their ability to recognize letters and numbers. Children who begin school with inadequate emergent literacy proficiency display a developmental trajectory in which they fall further and further behind their peers regarding their reading ability (Rachmani, 2020). The absence of preschools or early childhood education centers in rural areas can result in children starting formal education without prior exposure to basic literacy skills, putting them at a disadvantage compared to their urban counterparts.

Many students at an elementary school in a rural area of Malang, Indonesia still need to receive early school education in kindergarten, directly impacting their ability to recognize letters and numbers. Among these factors contributing to the student's reading readiness, the primary obstacle faced by teachers at an elementary school in a rural area of Malang, Indonesia revolves around the education system in Indonesia, where students are mandated to advance to the next grade regardless of their academic readiness (Siswantari et al., 2020). This situation poses a significant obstacle for teachers as they encounter students who have not acquired basic reading skills yet. In response, teachers are compelled to elevate the entire class, even if many students are not adequately prepared for the next academic level. This predicament creates a complex and demanding teaching environment, requiring educators to employ innovative and differentiated instructional approaches to cater to the diverse learning needs of their students. Despite their best efforts, this system places considerable strain on teachers, hindering their ability to provide individualized attention and support, potentially impacting the students' overall academic progress. As the backbone of the education system, teachers play a crucial role in nurturing young minds and fostering a love for learning. However, this systemic challenge at an elementary school in a rural area of Malang, Indonesia highlights the need for comprehensive reforms and a more flexible approach to education, prioritizing students' individual growth and development to ensure their academic success and overall well-being.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings from the observations and interviews about students' initial reading difficulties reveal several critical factors that warrant attention and intervention. The language and phonological awareness of students in remote areas appear to be somewhat deficient, with a limited grasp of Indonesian and English due to the prevalence of the local dialect. This deficiency contributes to challenges in comprehending words and sentences, as well as difficulties in reading fluently, especially among the young learner. Moreover, cognitive and processing abilities, particularly working memory, significantly impact reading comprehension skills. Students in rural areas demonstrate a degree of deficiency in working memory, hindering their ability to retain and manipulate information during reading tasks. Furthermore, environmental factors, such as the literacy environment at home, play a pivotal role in early reading skills development. A lack of parental involvement due to various constraints can limit reading support and encouragement at home, affecting students' progress. Additionally, the absence of early education opportunities in rural areas further impedes students' ability to recognize letters and numbers, posing challenges as they embark on their academic journey.

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