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Enhancing Early Childhood Literacy through Reading Corners: A Phenomenological Study at Thiflah Early Childhood Education, Aceh Besar

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Abstract

This study explores the effectiveness of reading corners in enhancing literacy among early childhood learners at Thiflah Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Aceh Besar, Indonesia. Employing a phenomenological research design with qualitative methods, this study aims to understand the subjective experiences of educators and learners about literacy enhancement strategies. The research incorporated observations, interviews, and documentation, with a focus on the role of the reading corner in fostering literacy. Results indicated significant improvements in children's engagement and comprehension in reading, writing, and arithmetic, attributed to the interactive and play-oriented learning environment. However, challenges such as insufficient resources and reliance on student teachers with limited experience were identified. The findings suggest that the reading corner approach, aligning with Indonesia's National Literacy Movement, can be a viable model for enhancing early literacy in various educational settings. The study recommends further research into the effectiveness of reading corners in diverse ECE contexts and emphasizes the need for resource enhancement and teaching methodology improvements. These insights are crucial for developing engaging, child-centric learning environments for early literacy development and overall child growth, contributing significantly to Indonesia's National Literacy Movement.

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Introduction

The significance of early childhood literacy transcends national borders, impacting societies and educational disciplines worldwide. Literacy during the formative years is critical in shaping a child's future, laying the foundation for cognitive, emotional, and social development. It extends beyond academic achievement, fostering critical thinking and lifelong learning. The phenomenological exploration of literacy corners, as seen in Thiflah Aceh Besar, represents a strategic and innovative approach to enhancing literacy in young children. This initiative is pivotal for local educational advancements and serves as a model with potential global applications in early childhood education. The importance of literacy-rich environments and positive childhood experiences in fostering optimal development has been emphasized in recent studies (Erickson & Best, 2023; Roby et al., 2023).

Reading is an individual's mental process toward a text (Afnida & Suparno, 2020; Kotze et al., 2021; Whyatt et al., 2023). In a narrow sense, reading means analyzing text composed of letters and attempting to interpret it as a whole (Kruger & Kruger, 2017). In a broader sense, reading is when a reader utilizes literary texts for their benefit (Basyiroh, 2017; Siregar et al.,

2020). In other words, reading is a process in which an individual internalizes what they read and utilizes it in every stage of their life (Wang & Humblé, 2020). Thus, it can be concluded that reading is the most effective learning activity through which an individual can enhance themselves in terms of critical thinking, developing new and different perspectives, understanding themselves and the world, and interpreting events and situations they will encounter (Paquot & Bestgen., 2009; Wang & Humblé, 2020).

Cultivating a reading interest is challenging (Simbolon, 2014). An individual may have intrinsic motivation to enjoy reading, undoubtedly due to a long process (Huang et al., 2022; Miyamoto et al., 2020). Therefore, the most accessible primary target is educating children from an early age to develop their interest in reading. There are numerous ways to assist children in cultivating their reading interest (Master et al., 2023; Wildová & Kropáčková, 2015), one of which is by encouraging them to visit libraries. According to Morris, (2012), a library science professor at Drexel University, Philadelphia, USA, "Children should be accustomed to visiting the library before school age. This is a crucial starting point for their intellectual, academic, and social inspiration". Familiarity with books and literacy from an early age will make it easier for them to be interested in learning (Masitah et al., 2022). According to Grøver et al., (2023), books are "exciting" for them. Discussing reading interest in Indonesia, the AN 2021 results are consistent with PISA findings over the past twenty years, indicating that Indonesian children have low reading literacy scores, remaining significantly below the OECD country average, highlighting the root problem of literacy in Indonesia. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek) remains committed to enhancing the literacy capacity of Indonesia's young generation (Asyhari, 2017).

Libraries, as central institutions for knowledge and culture, extend beyond merely providing reading materials. They offer various services and programs that enrich educational and cultural experiences for various user groups. These services include lending various reading materials, offering research facilities, providing study spaces, and hosting educational and cultural events, thereby playing a crucial role in supporting literacy, lifelong learning, and scientific research (Luthfiah, 2016). Libraries are not merely about books but about serving the communities and fostering literacy and learning. With technological advancements, libraries have transformed, offering digital access to their collections and services, thus broadening information accessibility (Akabane & Okamoto, 2020; Riady et al., 2023). This aspect of library management involves comprehensive planning and resource management, encompassing the efficient management of book collections, staff, budget, and technology. These efforts ensure libraries remain relevant, accessible, and beneficial to all society segments, delivering diverse and inclusive services that meet the changing needs of library patrons (Hermawan et al., 2020; Nurzannah et al., 2019).

Extensive research has been conducted on the impact of social and environmental factors on early literacy development. Salminen et al. (2021) highlight the role of knowledgeable others in shaping young children's literacy and numeracy skills, emphasizing the significance of social contexts. Simpson et al. (2023) contribute to this understanding by demonstrating how online professional development enhances early childhood educators' literacy skills. Similarly, the work of Shmis et al. (2014) on integrating modern, child-centered spaces in kindergarten design underscores the importance of physical environments in learning. These studies underscore the multifaceted nature of literacy development, integrating both human and environmental elements.

Numerous studies have focused on the efficacy of various literacy interventions. Research has shown that programs like HeadsUp! Reading can significantly improve the literacy practices of early childhood educators and the literacy skills of preschool children (Jackson et al., 2006). The impact of educators' self-efficacy on literacy outcomes in children with disabilities has also been discussed, highlighting the importance of teacher confidence and competence (Guo et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2023). Meanwhile, mixed results have been reported on the effectiveness of

educational technology in early literacy, suggesting a need for more nuanced approaches to technology integration in educational settings (Bautista et al., 2024).

Various factors, including health, family dynamics, and pedagogical approaches, influence literacy development. Research exploring the relationships between literacy, early childhood development, women, families, and health has advocated for educational interventions considering these interconnections (Puchner, 1995). The need for practical teaching approaches in nursery schools has been emphasized, underlining the role of educators in facilitating pre-reading literacy development (Wildová & Kropáčková, 2015).

Recent research has expanded our understanding of early literacy through various lenses. Erickson and Best (2023) underscores the importance of promoting literacy-rich home environments, while Roby et al. (2023) focus on the impact of positive childhood experiences in pediatric primary care. Dharamshi (2019) examines the influence of deficit views of education on the practices of U.S. literacy teacher educators, revealing the impact of educators' attitudes on literacy development. Yuan et al. (2024) bring attention to the evolving role of digital home literacy environments in China, highlighting the growing importance of technology in literacy education. These studies demonstrate the diversity of factors that influence early literacy development.

Despite significant advancements in understanding early literacy development, there remain gaps and controversies in the field. The role of physical environments, such as literacy corners, especially in unique contexts like Thiflah Aceh Besar, requires further exploration. Disagreements persist regarding the most effective strategies for literacy promotion, including the role of educational technologies and diverse methodologies. This study aims to address these gaps by focusing on the phenomenological experiences of young children in literacy corners, exploring an area that has been relatively under-researched in early childhood literacy.

This study focuses on the role of reading corners in early childhood education centers in Thiflah Aceh Besar and their impact on enhancing literacy among young learners. It seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how these environments contribute to literacy development, integrating both theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence. The aim is to contribute significantly to existing literature by presenting a unique perspective on early literacy development in a specific cultural and educational context. This research aspires to broaden the scope of knowledge in this crucial area of educational research, potentially influencing future literacy initiatives and educational policies.

Methods

This study employed a phenomenological research design with a qualitative approach to explore the phenomenon of early childhood literacy improvement strategies through a reading corner at Thiflah Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Aceh Besar. Phenomenological research is a qualitative research approach aimed at understanding and describing the subjective experiences of individuals or groups in a specific context (Creswell, 2012). In the Early Childhood Education (ECE) context, phenomenological research focuses on understanding individual experiences regarding various aspects of early childhood education, such as those of preschool children, ECE teachers, or parents. The study's focus was to ascertain the role of the reading corner in enhancing literacy at Thiflah ECE Aceh Besar.

The research at Thiflah Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Aceh Besar was conducted using a combination of observation, interviews, and documentation techniques, with the principal and classroom teachers serving as key informants. A phenomenological approach guided the data transcription process, emphasizing identifying patterns and meanings in the respondents' experiences. A meticulous cross-checking procedure was employed to enhance the study's reliability and validity, triangulating data obtained from various sources, including observations, interviews, and documentation. This rigorous approach to data analysis focused on uncovering patterns and meanings within the participants' shared experiences, thereby

ensuring that the study's findings authentically represented the phenomena under investigation.

In terms of data analysis, the study utilized a phenomenological approach to data interpretation. This involved an in-depth examination of the transcripts to identify themes and patterns that emerged from the data. The analysis process was iterative, constantly comparing data segments to refine and define categories and themes. The research findings were contextualized within the broader literature, incorporating relevant books and national and international scientific articles. This was done to ensure that the research contributes meaningfully to the existing body of knowledge and is worthy of consideration by other researchers in the field.

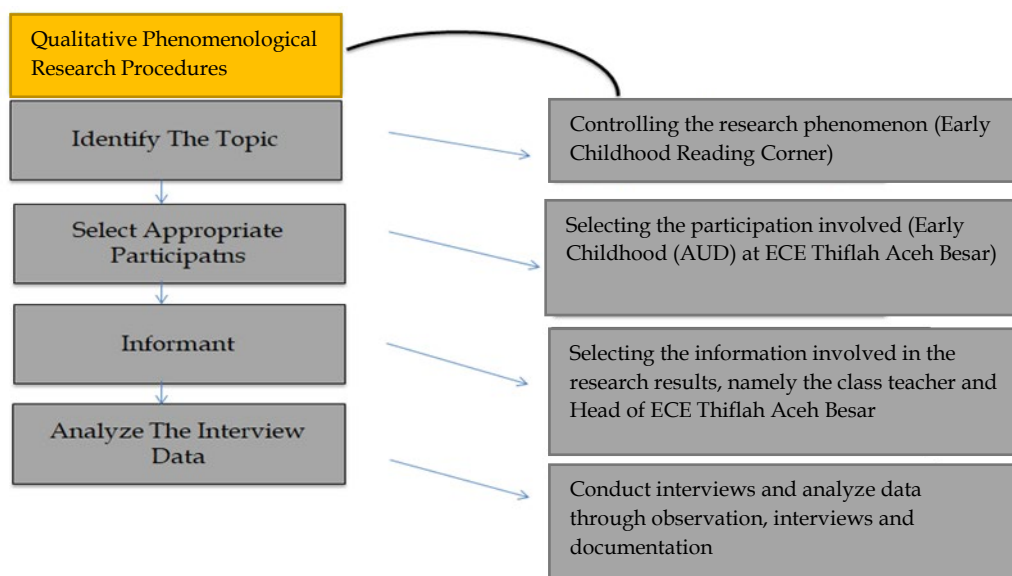


Figure 1. Phenomenological Research Procedures (Creswell, 2015)

The study's methodology and procedures were designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of the reading corner in enhancing literacy at Thiflah ECE Aceh Besar. By focusing on the participants' subjective experiences and employing a rigorous methodological approach, this research aimed to contribute significant insights into early childhood literacy development strategies.

Result

Early childhood literacy refers to the fundamental abilities taught to preschool-aged children in early childhood education (ECE). This form of literacy encompasses reading, writing, and a wide range of skills and knowledge crucial for children's early development. The importance of early childhood education (ECE) cannot be overstated, as this period is critical in a child's development. Early childhood literacy aids in developing foundational skills and knowledge necessary for success in school and everyday life. Moreover, a play and exploration-oriented approach is often employed in early childhood literacy to make learning enjoyable and engaging for children.

On August 21, 2023, observations revealed that the head of Thiflah Early Childhood Education Center in Aceh Besar acknowledged the significance of the National Literacy Movement (GLN). To support the government in this movement, the head of Thiflah ECE Center has been keen on establishing a reading corner according to government guidelines. This effort aligns to foster moral development as outlined in Regulation Number 23 of the Ministry of Education and Culture 2015 concerning the Cultivation of Character. Furthermore, the head of Thiflah ECE Center has recognized the commitment of the Directorate of Early Childhood Education to preparing children from an early age to be skilled, knowledgeable, and well-rounded individuals as future citizens of Indonesia.

During a conversation with the head of Thiflah ECE Center, the following was noted:

"To strengthen literacy, why? For me, fostering motivation to read and establishing a positive relationship with reading are essential parts of early childhood education. This effort also supports the government, especially the Ministry of Education and Culture, in educating young children. Thiflah ECE Center in Aceh Besar has implemented a reading corner since 2019. During this process, we prepare relevant and children's favorite books such as the alphabet and writing books, drawing games, Hujaiyah learning books, and others that encourage children's motivation to read." (Interview with the head of Thiflah ECE Center on August 21, 2023)



Image 2. Reading corner at Thiflah ECE Center in Aceh Besar

Further observations on August 24, 2023, revealed that Thiflah ECE Center's reading corner is conducted thrice weekly. This practice helps children become accustomed to reading. Each session typically begins with guidance from teachers or student teachers at Thiflah ECE Center, emphasizing the importance of reading to broaden one's worldview. The guides also provide intrinsic motivation by reminding children to enjoy reading, after which they are free to read. This approach was described by a teacher at the center:

"The reading corner at Thiflah ECE Center greatly assists us teachers in providing ideal literacy for children. We are also supported by student teachers who have been serving here for several weeks. The reading corner has a positive impact on the children. We conduct it three times a week. Essentially, the children here are very fond of new things, which makes them happy and enables them to obtain new information from the reading corner. We also encourage parents to motivate their children to love books." (Interview with a teacher at Thiflah ECE Center on August 24, 2023)

The changes in the children of ECE Thiflah in Aceh Besar are pretty significant in the reading corner program. Teachers acknowledge that the reading corner in ECE Thiflah in Aceh Besar has made children understand learning, such as reading, writing, and arithmetic, more quickly. At least three benefits can be derived from the reading corner program at ECE Thiflah in Aceh Besar. First, children are more active in learning because they are not given formal one-way instruction in the reading corner program but can read whatever they like. Second, children can explore themselves according to their reading interests. Third, children get new information from the reading corner program at ECE Thiflah in Aceh Besar. This is recorded from an interview that has been converted by the researcher as follows:

Interview with the head of ECE Thiflah in Aceh Besar

"There is a significant difference in the presence of the reading corner now. Information from parents indicates that their children often reflect more during reading activities in the reading corner than when teachers explain formally in class. The children repeat situations or information from the reading corner to their parents. This is certainly a positive situation for us as the driving body at ECE Thiflah in Aceh Besar. Children are more active in learning because the reading class is designed informally, unlike other classes. Children can also develop their reading interests through the reading corner, and even children reflect their attitudes towards what they read from relevant books in the reading corner." (Interview with the head of ECE Thiflah in Aceh Besar on August 24, 2023).

Interview with a teacher at ECE Thiflah in Aceh Besar

"When teaching in class, we observe that children became more active in class after the reading corner was established. Given that the reading corner provides new information outside formal classroom learning. We often find in class that children frequently learn from stories they encounter through the reading corner. Teachers and PLP students guide the reading corner, so children digest what they get from the reading corner faster." (Interview with a teacher at ECE Thiflah in Aceh Besar on August 24, 2023).

The reading corner at ECE Thiflah in Aceh Besar also requires all children to participate in learning, such as exchanging information with peers and sharing experiences while learning to read to others. Guides and teachers act as final advisors in the children's conversations. Guides and teachers also perform internal motivation at the end of the reading corner meetings at ECE Thiflah in Aceh Besar. According to the head of ECE Thiflah in Aceh Besar, this method provides dynamic teaching to the children of ECE Thiflah in Aceh Besar.

Considering the above results, at least three crucial outcomes can be obtained from the reading corner at ECE Thiflah in Aceh Besar, which can be described as follows:

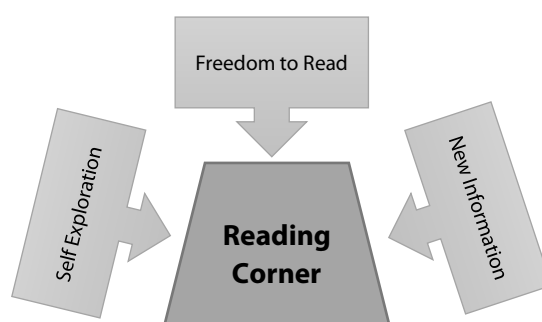


Image 3. Review results from the reading corner program at Thiflah ECE Center

The data review above resonates with the research by Wildová & Kropáčková (2015), which highlights that early childhood education must fully capitalize on its potential. This includes activities such as joint visits to the library, loud reading in kindergartens, collaborative "reading" tasks, and projects involving parents and their children, like creating a first book. Therefore, it is crucial to convince parents that it largely depends on whether their children will become readers.

According to Seker et al. (2012), preschool-age children face specific learning and early language development challenges. Preschoolers must develop language and literacy skills even as they still master their native language. Previous researchers agree that literacy-related programming for preschool children must be effectively conducted. Formal educational institutions should collaborate in enhancing children's literacy, mainly by providing adequate reading facilities for preschoolers.

Experts agree with the practices at Thiflah ECE Center, where the head has deeply considered the importance of literacy in early childhood education. The literacy movement is a widespread initiative in Indonesia, and the reading corner at Thiflah ECE Center supports the government's national literacy program.

Implementing the reading corner has significantly changed early childhood education at Thiflah ECE Center. However, challenges remain, such as the program's relative infancy (less than three years old) and the need for additional materials and resources. For instance, when children read books about Indonesian geography, the reading corner lacks supportive materials like miniature maps. Furthermore, student teachers are heavily involved in guiding the children, but their teaching experience is limited compared to the center's teachers.

Literacy understanding should be divided into two dimensions: initial and advanced. The initial literacy dimension involves the ability to understand the explicit content of a text, like in writing skills, enabling children to express simple ideas, opinions, and thoughts. Advanced literacy involves understanding across various fields, where in reading skills, the reader must comprehend not only the explicit meaning but also the implicit and highlighted meanings.

Thus, reading programs for early childhood must be conducted seriously and with total commitment. If these dimensions are implemented and understood in the reading environment, they can offer new ways to observe future results, addressing current challenges in managing early childhood literacy (Suta, 2022).

Discussion

The research undertaken at Thiflah Aceh Besar aimed to assess the impact of reading corners in early childhood education (ECE) on literacy development among young learners. This focus aligns with broader educational theories emphasizing the importance of literacy in early childhood, as it encompasses foundational skills in reading and writing and critical cognitive and language development. Literacy in early childhood, as supported by the National Literacy Movement (GLN) in Indonesia, is increasingly recognized as pivotal in shaping the foundational stages of learning and development. These perspectives highlight the role of literacy as a multifaceted construct in early education, integral to a child's overall developmental trajectory.

The findings of this study highlight that literacy in ECE extends beyond conventional reading and writing, involving a range of skills fundamental to a child's early development. The reading corner approach, implemented in 2019 at Thiflah Aceh Besar, is characterized by its playful and exploratory nature, which aligns with modern pedagogical theories advocating for interactive and engaging learning environments in early childhood education (Loh et al., 2024). This approach reflects the contemporary shift towards more dynamic and child-centric methodologies in early education, which are crucial for fostering a positive and foundational attitude towards learning and literacy among young children.

Comparatively, the results from Thiflah Aceh Besar resonate with findings by Wildová & Kropáčková (2015), which underscore the significance of maximizing literacy potential in early childhood and the necessity for collaborative efforts to enhance preschool literacy (Erickson & Best, 2023; Guevara et al., 2023). The effectiveness of the reading corner approach in Thiflah Aceh Besar corroborates these studies, indicating its potential as an influential model in fostering a proactive and engaging learning environment for young children (Dharamshi, 2019; Roby et al., 2023).

The positive impact of the reading corner in ECE Thiflah Aceh Besar can be understood in the context of its child-centric and interactive approach. This method encourages active engagement in learning and allows children to explore subjects of interest autonomously, echoing the developmental theories that highlight the importance of intrinsic motivation in early education (Su et al., 2023; Yuan et al., 2024). This approach is crucial in early childhood education as it facilitates a natural and enjoyable learning process, fostering a deeper connection with literacy and learning (Cash & Pianta, 2023; Scharf & Dera, 2021).

The significance of the reading corner lies in its potential to instill a lifelong love for reading and learning among young children. This approach, which enables children to select their reading material and engage with their peers, fosters a comprehensive understanding and appreciation of literacy, which is critical for their overall development and academic success (Lenhart & Lingel, 2023; Weber-Mayrer et al., 2018). Such methods signify a paradigm shift in early childhood education towards more engaging, interactive, and learner-centered teaching methods, essential for nurturing early literacy skills and cognitive development (Hussain & Sultan, 2010; Jasińska et al., 2022).

Encouraging, they warrant a cautious interpretation. Given the relative novelty of the initiative, it is imperative to continue research and evaluation to fully understand its long-term effectiveness and potential for adaptation in different educational contexts. The involvement of educators with diverse experience levels, such as student teachers, requires ongoing monitoring and professional development to ensure the consistency and quality of the learning experiences provided to the children (Jahreie, 2023; Rey-Guerra et al., 2022). This is essential to maintain the consistency and quality of the educational experiences provided to the children, ensuring that the benefits of the reading corner are sustained and expanded upon over time.

The implications of this study are significant and extend well beyond the confines of Thiflah Aceh Besar. They suggest that the reading corner approach could be effectively implemented in other early childhood education settings, particularly within the broader framework of Indonesia's National Literacy Movement. The success of this approach at Thiflah Aceh Besar demonstrates its potential as a viable model that could contribute substantially to achieving national literacy goals. Moreover, the study emphasizes the importance of creating learning environments that are engaging, interactive, and centered around the child. Such environments are crucial for enhancing early literacy development and fostering growth in young children, indicating a promising direction for future educational practices in early childhood settings.

Conclusion

In this comprehensive study conducted at Thiflah Aceh Besar's early childhood education center, the objective was to investigate the role of reading corners in enhancing literacy among young learners, with a keen focus on how these spaces contribute to the development of essential skills beyond basic reading and writing, aligning with the broader objectives of Indonesia's National Literacy Movement. The findings reveal that the initiative, championed by the center's head and resonating with the national literacy guidelines and character development goals as per the Minister of Education and Culture Regulation Number 23 of 2015, has significantly improved children's engagement and understanding in critical educational areas such as reading, writing, and arithmetic, attributed to the interactive and play-oriented learning environment. Despite facing challenges like the initiative's relative novelty, less than three years at the study, and limitations such as insufficient learning resources, particularly in subjects like geography, and a reliance on student teachers with limited experience, the positive impacts on early literacy development are undeniable. The study, therefore, recommends further research into the effectiveness of reading corners in diverse early childhood settings and suggests enhancing resource availability and teaching methodologies, highlighting the potential of this model for broader application within Indonesia's National Literacy Movement. This approach underlines the importance of creating child-centric, engaging, and interactive learning environments, essential for fostering early literacy and overall growth in young children, thus contributing significantly to educational practices in early childhood education and aligning with national literacy goals.

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