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TEACHERS' STRATEGIES IN ADDRESSING LOW LITERACY TO STRENGTHEN STUDENTS' CHARACTER VALUES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis strategi guru dalam mengatasi rendahnya literasi siswa serta kontribusinya terhadap penguatan nilai-nilai karakter di SMP Takhassus al-Qur'an Bonang Demak. Fenomena rendahnya minat baca, kesenjangan kemampuan dasar literasi, serta pengaruh faktor sosial ekonomi dan pola asuh keluarga menjadi latar belakang utama penelitian ini. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus deskriptif. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, dan dokumentasi terhadap 26 partisipan yang terdiri atas enam guru, satu kepala sekolah, satu pengelola perpustakaan, dan delapan belas siswa. Analisis data dilakukan secara interaktif melalui reduksi data, kategorisasi, penyajian tematik, dan verifikasi untuk mengidentifikasi pola dan makna yang muncul.

Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa rendahnya literasi tidak hanya dipengaruhi oleh keterbatasan fasilitas, tetapi juga oleh rendahnya motivasi intrinsik, lemahnya kemampuan dasar membaca, keterbatasan ekonomi keluarga, dan perubahan pola asuh di era digital. Strategi guru seperti variasi pembelajaran, pemanfaatan perpustakaan sebagai ruang belajar alternatif, program wakaf buku dan gawai, serta penerapan peer teaching terbukti berkontribusi dalam meningkatkan keterlibatan siswa sekaligus menguatkan karakter seperti tanggung jawab, empati, komunikasi santun, dan berpikir kritis. Penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa literasi merupakan praktik sosial yang berfungsi sebagai medium integratif antara pengembangan kognitif dan pembentukan karakter. Implikasinya, penguatan literasi memerlukan pendekatan ekosistem yang melibatkan sekolah, keluarga, dan kebijakan pendidikan yang berkelanjutan. Penelitian selanjutnya disarankan memperluas konteks dan menggunakan desain longitudinal untuk mengkaji dampak jangka panjang strategi literasi berbasis karakter.

Keywords:

*School Literacy,
Teacher Strategies,
Character Education*

ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze teachers' strategies in overcoming low student literacy and their contribution to strengthening character values at Takhassus al-Qur'an Bonang Demak Junior High School. The phenomena of low reading interest, gaps in basic literacy skills, and the influence of socioeconomic factors and family parenting patterns are the main background of this study. The research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive case study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation of 26 participants consisting of six teachers, one principal, one librarian, and eighteen students. Data analysis was conducted interactively through data reduction, categorization, thematic presentation, and verification to identify emerging patterns and meanings.

The results of the study show that low literacy is not only influenced by limited facilities, but also by low intrinsic motivation, weak basic reading skills, family economic constraints, and changes in parenting patterns in the digital age. Teacher strategies such as learning variety, utilizing libraries as alternative learning spaces, book and gadget *wakaf* programs, and the application of peer teaching have been proven to contribute to increasing student engagement while strengthening character traits such as responsibility, empathy, polite communication, and critical thinking. This study confirms that literacy is a social practice that functions as an integrative medium between cognitive development and character building. The implication is that strengthening literacy requires an ecosystem approach that involves schools, families, and sustainable education policies. Further research is recommended to expand the context and use a longitudinal design to examine the long-term impact of character-based literacy strategies.

A. INTRODUCTION

Literacy is the main foundation in modern education systems and is a prerequisite for lifelong learning. Reading and writing skills are no longer understood as mere technical skills, but as a fundamental right of students to access knowledge and continuously develop themselves (Zaenuri et al. 2020). From a global perspective, literacy is positioned as a strategic instrument for sustainable development that strengthens individuals' capacity to respond to social and economic dynamics (Priyonggo et al. 2021). The development of digital technology has further expanded the meaning of literacy through the emergence of e-books, online learning platforms, and internet-based access to information, which requires critical digital literacy competencies (Maslihah et al. 2021). Thus, literacy has become a basic need for students as well as a pedagogical challenge that must be taken seriously by teachers (Kappassova et al. 2025).

Although literacy plays a central role in education, practices in Indonesia show that reading culture is still relatively low. The results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) place Indonesian students' literacy achievements at the bottom of the rankings compared to a number of other countries. This condition is reinforced by (Farhan et al. 2021) which points to the low number of student visits to school libraries in Demak, as well as research (Alimuddin 2022) which notes a decline in the number of library visitors in Manado. These facts indicate a gap between the availability of learning resources and their optimal utilization by students.

Conceptually, literacy has evolved beyond the traditional understanding of reading and writing skills. The concept of multiliteracy encompasses information, media, technology, economic, and even moral literacy (Darmiyanti and Taufik 2021). This perspective emphasizes that literacy is closely related to character building, because through reading and critical reflection, students learn to understand values, norms, and social ethics. (Rinto Andriono and Novita Dewi 2023) states that literacy is an integrated domain that involves language, thought processes, attitudes, habits, and individual orientation in social life. Therefore, low literacy not only affects academic achievement but also has implications for the weak internalization of character values such as responsibility, discipline, empathy, and critical thinking skills (Mukarromah et al. 2023).

School libraries as ideal learning resource centers should be representative spaces in building a culture of literacy. (Alfriansa Agustina et al. 2022) Emphasizes that libraries have a strategic function in fostering a love of reading, cultivating information literacy, and developing critical thinking and active learning communities (Putra et al. 2023). However, reality shows that some school libraries are still seen as administrative complements for accreditation purposes, rather than as inspirational spaces that encourage intellectual exploration. Limited facilities, suboptimal management, and a lack of innovation in reading room design are factors that influence students' low interest in making the most of the library.

Low literacy levels have a direct impact on character building in students. Quality literacy enables students to understand differences, develop empathy, and build analytical and self-reflective skills. UNESCO (2017) emphasizes that literacy is an important foundation for strengthening moral values and social participation. From a behavioristic perspective, literacy skills can be formed through consistent reinforcement in the learning environment (Mukarromah et al. 2023). This means that the habit of reading and positive interaction with various learning resources have the potential to shape adaptive behavior and strong character.

In this context, teachers have a strategic role as agents of cultural change in literacy at school. Teachers not only perform the function of knowledge transfer, but also play a role in the transfer of values. (Sukmawati et al. 2023) emphasizes that teachers act as motivators, facilitators, and role models in building a conducive literacy ecosystem. Digital transformation opens up opportunities for teachers to integrate technology-based learning resources, interactive multimedia, and online platforms to increase student engagement (Hendrik 2024). However, the effectiveness of these strategies requires a contextual understanding that is appropriate to the characteristics of the students and the school culture.

The phenomenon of low literacy is also inseparable from the social and cultural dynamics that develop within families and school environments (Amanda Putri et al. 2023). The dominance of digital media often makes students passive consumers of information rather than critical processors of information. This condition has an impact on weak analytical and reflective skills, as well as a lack of depth in understanding the meaning of what is read (Anita Candra Dewi 2024). In fact, quality literacy requires a balance of cognitive and affective engagement so that students not only understand the text literally but are also able to interpret the values and moral messages contained within it (Lili Kurniasih et al. 2025).

From a character education perspective, literacy serves as a vehicle for internalizing values through a dialogical process between readers and texts. When students read narratives, inspirational stories, or argumentative texts, a process of forming perspectives and attitudes toward social reality takes place (Sari et al. 2020). This process becomes an effective medium for instilling values of responsibility, honesty, tolerance, and social awareness. Thus, a weak reading culture reduces students' opportunities to experience a deep reflective process. Literacy is not merely a formal academic activity, but a social practice that shapes individual identity and character (Domu et al. 2023).

On the other hand, learning strategies in the classroom still tend to be oriented towards completing the curriculum and cognitive achievement alone (Masita and Rifa'i 2024). Reading activities are often positioned as formal tasks, not as intrinsic and enjoyable needs (Putra et al. 2023). The lack of exploration of diverse reading sources and the lack of reflective discussion have prevented literacy from fully becoming a school culture. In such a situation, teachers are required to design innovative approaches that are able to integrate literacy activities with character building in a contextual and sustainable manner (Sari et al. 2020).

The role of teachers is becoming increasingly crucial because teachers are the figures closest to students' learning experiences (Aulia et al. 2023; Solehuddin et al. 2023). The strategies implemented—whether through reading habits before learning, integration of literacy-based projects, critical discussion of texts, or the use of digital media—are determining factors in the success of strengthening literacy and character (Kusnawan and Saepulah 2024). These strategies not only concern learning methods but also the attitude, exemplary behavior, and consistency of teachers in building an academic atmosphere that values the process of thinking and reflection.

Although various studies have discussed literacy and character education, most are still oriented towards quantitative approaches or general program evaluations (Lili Kurniasih et al. 2025). In-depth studies exploring teachers' experiences, strategies, and reflections in dealing with low literacy as part of character building are still relatively limited. This gap indicates the need for qualitative research that is able to understand the processes, meanings, and dynamics of educational practices in a contextual manner in the school environment (Nadiroh et al. 2023).

Considering the complexity of this issue, this study positions teachers as the main subjects who have unique experiences, reflections, and strategies in facing literacy challenges. This study aims to analyze teachers' strategies in overcoming low student literacy and reveal how these strategies contribute to strengthening character values. The focus of the study is directed at actual practices in schools, teachers' experiences in building a reading culture, managing learning resources, utilizing technology, and the process of internalizing character values through literacy activities. Theoretically, this study is expected to enrich the study of literacy and character education integration from a qualitative perspective. Practically, the results of this study are expected to provide strategic recommendations for teachers, school administrators, and education policy makers in designing literacy interventions that not only improve reading skills but also strengthen student character as part of the sustainable development of Indonesia's human resources.

B. METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive case study design. This approach was chosen because the study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers' strategies for overcoming low literacy and how these strategies contribute to strengthening students' character values in the real context of school. Case studies allow for contextual, in-depth, and holistic exploration of phenomena in a specific setting, so that the dynamics of literacy practices can be understood based on experiences and social interactions that take place in the school environment. This research is field research enriched with literature review as a theoretical basis and analytical comparison of empirical findings.

The research was conducted at Takhassus al-Qur'an Junior High School in Demak for four months, from September to December 2025. The location was selected purposively, considering that the school has a library-based literacy program and reading habits integrated with character education. The research subjects were determined using purposive sampling techniques with criteria for informants directly involved in the implementation of the school's literacy program. The research participants consisted of six subject teachers who actively applied literacy strategies in their teaching, one principal, one library manager, and eighteen students selected from grades VII, VIII, and IX based on their active involvement in literacy activities. Thus, the total number of participants in this study was twenty-six people.

Data collection was carried out using several complementary techniques. First, in-depth interviews were conducted with teachers, principals, and library managers to explore their experiences, strategies, and reflections on the implementation of literacy and character building. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was recorded with the informants' consent. Second, participatory observation was conducted to directly observe literacy activities in the classroom and library, including reading habits, reflective discussions, and the use of digital literacy. Observations were conducted twelve times during the research period. Third, documentation was used to analyze school literacy program documents, library activity schedules, activity reports, and student work as supporting evidence. In addition, a literature review was conducted to strengthen the conceptual framework and compare field findings with previous research results.

Data analysis was conducted interactively and continuously with reference to the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing and verification. In the data reduction stage, all interview transcripts and observation notes were coded through an open coding process to identify units of meaning relevant to the research focus. Next, the initial codes were grouped into categories and developed into main themes, such as literacy habituation strategies, literacy and character integration, digital literacy utilization, and implementation barriers and solutions. The data was then presented in the form of thematic matrices and descriptive narratives to facilitate interpretation. The final stage of drawing conclusions was carried out reflectively with verification through rechecking field data and discussions between researchers to ensure the consistency of the findings.

The credibility and validity of the data were maintained through source triangulation and method triangulation. Source triangulation was carried out by comparing information from teachers, students, principals, and library administrators, while method triangulation was carried out by combining interviews, observations, and documentation. In addition, member checking is carried out by reconfirming the interview results with the informants to ensure the accuracy of data interpretation. Peer debriefing is also carried out through discussions of the analysis results with two lecturers who are experts in education, as well as an audit trail in the form of complete documentation of the research process to ensure transparency and data traceability.

Ethical considerations were an important part of this study. The study obtained official permission from the school before conducting field activities. All participants were given an explanation of the objectives, procedures, and benefits of the study, and gave their written consent through informed consent. The identities of the informants were disguised to maintain the confidentiality and privacy of the data. Participation was voluntary without pressure, and the study was conducted to ensure that there were no negative impacts on the subjects involved.

The research indicators focus on four main aspects, namely teacher strategies in building a culture of literacy, creativity and innovation in the use of libraries and digital literacy, the integration of literacy in character-based learning, and the impact of these strategies on student character values, including responsibility, discipline, empathy, honesty, and critical thinking skills. Through this methodological approach, the research is expected to produce an in-depth description of teachers' strategic practices in overcoming low literacy while strengthening students' character values in the school environment.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Research Results

1. Actual Conditions of School Literacy Culture

SMP Takhassus al-Qur'an Bonang Demak has 175 students with a library collection of 700 books, including textbooks, supplementary books, teacher's manuals, and other supporting books. The available facilities include a reading room, an operator room, an internet network, and access to a digital literacy platform. Structurally, the school has provided sufficient facilities to support literacy activities.

The results of observations and interviews with library staff obtained data for the first six months of 2025, as follows:

Number	Month	Volume Visit	Class
01	July	4	Class 7
		2	Class 8
		2	Class 9
02	August	2	Class 8
		3	Class 9
03	September	3	Class 8
04	October	2	Class 7
		2	Class 8
		1	Class 9
05	November	5	Class 7
		10	Class 8
		3	Class 9
06	December	2	Class 7
		1	Class 9

.Data source: Umniyah, Library Officer.

However, library visit data for the six-month period shows a low level of participation. Of the total 175 students, only 42 students (24%) were recorded as visiting the library during the July–December 2025 period. This shows that the availability of facilities does not automatically correlate with their utilization.

The library staff said:

“The facilities are there, there are enough books, but few people come. Usually, when there is homework from the teacher, it gets busy.”

This quote indicates that a culture of literacy has not yet grown intrinsically, but is still instructional in nature.

2. Theme I: Literacy as a Formal Activity, Not a Necessity

Interviews with teachers revealed that some students do not yet consider reading a personal necessity. Literacy is still viewed as an academic obligation.

An Indonesian language teacher stated:

“If they are not assigned reading tasks, they rarely visit the library. So reading is still something they do because they are told to, not because they need to.”

Classroom observations also show that students are more interested in gadget-based activities than reading long texts. This phenomenon shows a shift in learning culture in the digital age.

This theme shows that low literacy is closely related to intrinsic motivation and learning habits.

3. Theme II: Basic Literacy Skills Gap

Findings in the classroom show significant variation in students' reading abilities. In a class of 30 students, only about half read fluently and comprehended the content of the reading material.

One teacher said:

“There are some students who still stumble when reading, let alone understand the content of the text. This is a big challenge in the classroom.”

This condition shows that the problem of literacy is not only a matter of interest, but also of basic skills that are not yet evenly distributed. Teachers intervene by adding extra learning hours and library-based learning to provide a more varied learning experience.

4. Theme III: Socioeconomic Factors and Access to Literacy

Most students come from lower-middle-class families. Interviews revealed that purchasing books is not a priority for families.

A homeroom teacher said:

“Some students don’t have textbooks at home. Their parents are more focused on daily necessities.”

In response, teachers initiated a book and gadget donation program from alumni. This strategy demonstrates contextual adaptation to the socioeconomic conditions of students.

5. Theme IV: Changes in Parenting Patterns and Lack of Guidance

Interviews revealed that parental involvement in guiding their children's learning has decreased.

One teacher stated:

“Nowadays, parents are busy working. Children study on their own, sometimes without supervision.”

This phenomenon shows a change in parenting patterns in the modern era that has an impact on the culture of literacy at home. To overcome this, teachers implement peer teaching strategies so that students help each other and increase their academic responsibility.

6. Theme V: Literacy as a Means of Character Building

Observational data shows that students who are active in literacy activities tend to be more confident when giving presentations, more polite when expressing their opinions, and better able to appreciate the views of others.

One student stated:

“If you read often, it becomes easier to speak in front of the class.”

These findings show that literacy not only has an impact on cognitive aspects, but also on character building, such as confidence, empathy, responsibility, and critical thinking skills.

B. DISCUSSION

The results of the study indicate that low literacy is not solely a matter of facilities, but is related to motivation, basic skills, socioeconomic conditions, and family upbringing. These findings are in line with motivation theory, which states that learning engagement is influenced by the need for autonomy, competence, and social connectedness. In this context, teacher strategies such as varied learning and peer teaching reinforce these dimensions.

The findings regarding literacy as a formal activity are also in line with previous studies showing that a reading culture has not yet fully become an academic habitus

in many Indonesian schools. However, this study offers a new perspective that community-based contextual interventions—such as book waqf and peer teaching—can be adaptive solutions in low socioeconomic contexts.

From a character education perspective, these findings support the view that literacy is an effective medium for internalizing values. Reading activities encourage empathy, multiple perspectives, and reflective abilities. This reinforces the theory of multiliteracy, which views literacy as an integrative domain between the cognitive and moral.

On the other hand, this study also highlights the challenges of digital literacy. Internet access has not been fully utilized to strengthen critical literacy. Without guidance, technology has the potential to reinforce instant information consumption. Therefore, the integration of digital literacy needs to be directed towards the ability to evaluate information and reflect on values.

In practical terms, this study implies that strengthening literacy requires an ecosystem approach involving teachers, schools, families, and communities. Teachers play a central role as agents of literacy culture transformation through innovative and contextual strategies.

Theoretically, this study enriches the study of literacy integration and character education by emphasizing that literacy is a process of moral and intellectual identity formation. However, this study is limited to one school setting, so its generalizations are contextual. Further research could expand the research location or use a longitudinal approach to examine the long-term impact of literacy strategies on student character.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the low literacy level of students at Takhassus al-Qur'an Bonang Demak Junior High School is not solely due to limited facilities, but is influenced by multidimensional factors that include low interest in reading, gaps in basic literacy skills, family socioeconomic conditions, and changes in parenting patterns in the modern era. Although library facilities and access to digital literacy are available, their utilization is not yet optimal because literacy has not yet become an intrinsic learning culture. The findings of the study show that teacher strategies through learning variety, the use of libraries as alternative learning spaces, book and gadget waqf programs, and the application of peer teaching contribute significantly to increasing student engagement while strengthening character values such as responsibility, empathy, confidence, polite communication, and critical thinking. Theoretically, this study enriches the study of literacy integration and character education by emphasizing that literacy is a social practice that simultaneously shapes intellectual and moral identities, in line with the multiliteracy perspective that emphasizes cognitive, affective, and social dimensions. In practical and policy terms, the results of this study emphasize the importance of an ecosystem approach that involves teachers, schools, families, and continuous institutional support to strengthen character-based literacy, including digital literacy oriented towards critical thinking. Given the limitations of a single case study setting, further research is recommended to expand the scope of locations or use a longitudinal design to examine the long-term impact of literacy strategies on student character development,

so that literacy can be further affirmed as the foundation for the formation of human resources with integrity and sustainability.

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