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Teacher Responsive Strategies in Early Literacy Development: A Case Study in Suburban Jakarta

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the responsive strategies used by teachers in developing early childhood literacy in suburban Jakarta. A qualitative desciptive collective case study involved observations and interviews in six urban Jakarta early childhood institutions, with data analyzed thematically using Miles and Huberman's interactive model. Data were thematically analyzed using the lens of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). The findings show that teachers implemented responsive strategies through contextual learning media, role-play activities, individual support, and children's participation in classroom decision making. However, challenges remain, including the dominant use of worksheets, limited attention to phonological awareness and reading comprehension, the prevelence of English-baesd litercy media over the mother tounge, and suboptimal parental involvement in home literacy activities. The study concludes that early literacy development should be balanced, meaningful, and culturally grounded. Strengtening teacher capacity in implementing comprehensive responsive strategies are building active partnerships with families is essential for establishing a strong foundation for early literacy.

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1. Introduction

The term literacy, etymologically, comes from the Latin *literae* (letters), which in English is known as *literate* and is conventionally interpreted as the ability to read and write (Shanahan & Lonigan, 2010). In its development, this term has expanded and is associated with various aspects such as financial literacy, digital literacy, and civic literacy. In the context of early childhood, the term literacy refers to early literacy, which is the initial form of reading and writing skills that begin at an early age. This concept became increasingly well-known after Marie Clay introduced the term "emergent literacy," which emphasizes that children build an understanding of symbols, words, and texts long before they can read formally (Gavelek & Raphael, 2021; Hilaski, 2020; Jalongo, 2014). Early literacy develops through children's everyday interactions with the environment, texts, images, and conversations (Brock & Rankin, 2008; Machado, 2017; Moran & Senseny, 2016) and is closely related to children's language development, social interactions, and contextual experiences (DAP: NAEYC Position Statement, 2020; Slicker & Hustedt, 2020).

Important components of early literacy include phonological awareness, print awareness, vocabulary, and comprehension (Gordon & Browne, 2011; NELP, 2008). Research shows that children's early literacy skills, such as letter recognition, phonological awareness, and print comprehension, affect their reading achievement (Baroody, 2016; Sadler, 2007; Walgermo et al., 2018; Webb & Williams, 2018). Early literacy is a critical foundation in children's development to form reading, writing, communication, and logical thinking skills later in life (Langeloo et al., 2020; Neumann et al., 2019; Shanahan et al., 2008). This statement is supported by several studies that reveal that intense early literacy experiences at an early age have implications for children's later academic success (Delgadova, 2015; Schryer et al., 2015; Towson et al., 2020). Children who develop basic language and literacy skills at preschool will enter elementary education better prepared to learn and write (Borisova, 2013; Clarke, 2021; Majzub & Rashid, 2012).

Early childhood teachers have a strategic role in developing early literacy in preparing a safe, contextual, and meaningful learning environment. Teachers are not only teachers but also facilitators and designers of learning experiences that are fun, flexible, and appropriate to children's development (Gestwicki, 2017; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2016). Teachers' learning strategies greatly determine the success of children's mastery of early literacy. Children need learning that uses a responsive, creative approach and is appropriate to their developmental stage. The success of

early literacy development requires teachers to use learning strategies specifically designed for early childhood (Wolf et al., 2018). Responsive strategies emphasize the importance of teacher sensitivity to children's individual needs and the ability to design contextual, fun, and meaningful learning activities. Responsive teachers will use cultural knowledge and previous experiences as a bridge to developing early literacy in schools (Hilaski, 2020; Wearmouth, 2017). One important approach that needs to be applied is a responsive strategy, which is a strategy that is sensitive to the individual, social, and cultural needs of children. In this study, teacher responsiveness refers to the Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) approach, which emphasizes the importance of using children's cultural backgrounds, life experiences, and learning styles as the basis for developing learning (Gay, 2000, 2015). CRT is relevant to early literacy because it allows young children to learn to read and write meaningfully through materials, approaches, and interactions that are appropriate to their reality.

Observations in several early childhood units show a variety of responsive strategies used by teachers to develop early literacy in early childhood. The facts show that there is a wide variety of variations in early literacy development for early childhood. Some teachers have used contextual and fun strategies, such as using children's names on letter cards or integrating role-playing activities with early literacy. However, practices are still found that emphasize mechanical repetition, such as worksheets, and the use of less culturally and linguistically relevant media to children. Early literacy development practices in early childhood education units in Indonesia, especially in the suburban areas of Jakarta, which are characterized by diverse backgrounds and disparities in access to education, have not been studied in depth. Therefore, this article aims to analyze these learning practices through the lens of early literacy development theory and responsive pedagogy and provide recommendations for strengthening early literacy development in early childhood.

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore teachers' responsive strategies in the development of early literacy in early childhood education settings. The study focused on naturally occurring classroom activities and teachers' explanations of their pedagogical decisions, with emphasis on the use of learning media and resources. This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore teachers' responsive strategies in the development of early literacy in early childhood education settings. The study focused on naturally occurring classroom activities and teachers' explanations of their pedagogical decisions, with emphasis on the use of learning media and resources.

Data were collected from six early childhood units in the suburban area of Jakarta. The participating institutions were situated in South Jakarta, Central Jakarta, East Jakarta (three institutions), and West Jakarta. No institutions from North Jakarta or Kepulauan Seribu were included due to accessibility constraints and the distribution of available observer networks in urban areas. These schools are located in areas that typically characterized by mixed residential and commercial neighborhoods, growing housing complexes, and diverse family backgrounds.

The institutions were selected through simple random selection from a list of early childhood education settings available to the observers in each area. The purpose of site selection in this qualitative study was not statistical representativeness, but to ensure variation of contexts and to enable in-depth exploration of teachers' responsive strategies.The rationale for using multiple sites across different Jakarta regions was to capture variation in school contexts, resource availability, and classroom practices in urban early childhood settings. Within the selected institutions, teacher participants were recruited purposively based on the following criteria: (1) currently teaching in early childhood classrooms, and (2) directly involved in planning and implementing daily learning activities. To protect confidentiality, the names of schools, teachers, and specific locations are not disclosed. Codes were used instead of real names, and any identifying details were removed from the report. Participation was voluntary, and teachers were informed that they could withdraw at any time without consequences.

Data were collected through non-participant classroom observations and open-ended interviews with teachers. A total of ten teachers were observed. In two of the schools, three teachers were observed in each institution, while in the remaining four schools only one teacher was observed per institution. Observations focused on learning activities during regular classroom sessions, particularly on how teachers used learning media, organized learning environments, and interacted with children. Open interviews did not follow a rigid structured protocol; instead, teachers were invited to talk freely about their use of learning media and learning resources in general classroom practice. Although interview questions were broad, analysis in this article specifically concentrates on the subset of data related to early literacy development.

The study was conducted over a three-month period, from October to December 2024. The preparatory phase (October 2024) involved obtaining institutional permissions and coordinating with observers and participating schools. Classroom observations and open-ended interviews with teachers were carried out primarily in October and November 2024. During this period, field notes were written immediately after observation sessions to preserve contextual details. The subsequent phase, spanning November to December 2024, focused on data management and analysis. Interview recordings were transcribed, observation notes were organized, and initial coding was performed. Thematic analysis was then carried out through iterative reading, categorizing, and abstraction of themes. In the final

stage, preliminary interpretations were revisited and refined through peer debriefing with research team members to enhance analytical rigor and credibility of the findings.

Data were analysed using thematic analysis following Miles and Huberman's interactive model. The analysis process consisted of four interconnected activities. First, data reduction was carried out through repeated reading of interview transcripts and observation notes, followed by open coding to identify meaningful segments of data. Second, data display was conducted by organizing codes into visual matrices and category tables to support comparison within and across cases. Third, conclusion drawing involved the abstraction of categories into key themes that described responsive strategies in early literacy practices. Fourth, verification was performed through iterative review of the data, peer debriefing, and repeated checks between raw data, codes, and emerging themes to ensure credibility and analytical rigor.

3. Result And Discussion

3.1. Result

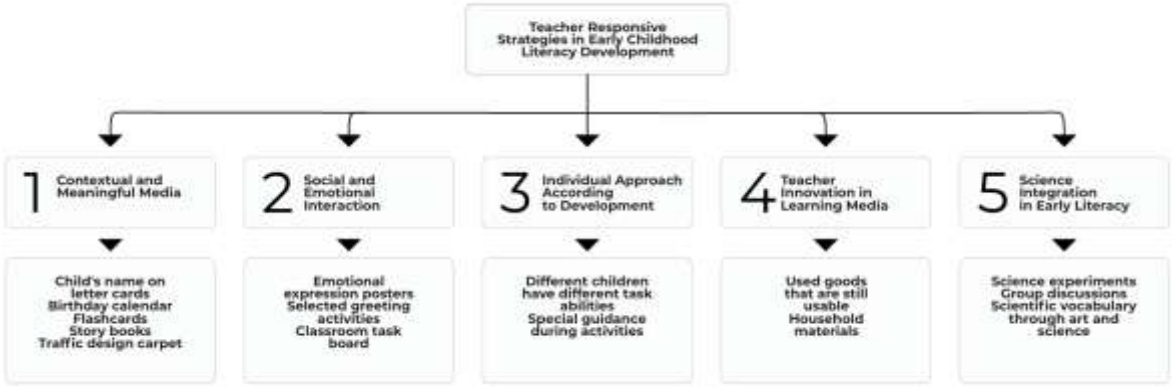

Figure 1. *Research Findings Chart*

3.1.1. Contextual and Meaningful Learning Media

Teachers use learning media include picture books, letter cards, flash cards with specific themes, letter posters, emotional expression posters, worksheets, and sandpaper letters. Teachers also use a calendar board to show the day and date each day.

"Children change the date, day, month, year, and weather on that day by hanging paper on the calendar board." (CL.A.7)

Still related to the date, the teacher also made a calendar for the children's birthdays that was attached to the wall. The teacher attached the child's name to each month listed and wrote the child's date of birth.

We make letter cards from the children's names. So they are happy and quickly recognize the first letter of their name." (CW.A.2)

Whiteboards were available in all six observed institutions. Teachers used the whiteboard to write the day and date, sequence of activities, and introduce letters to children. In one institution, the whiteboard was used more specifically as a medium for letter recognition, where children copied letters modeled by the teacher onto paper using pencils.

The number of media with text available in the classroom, most still use text in English, not Indonesian, or use English text that is then translated into Indonesian. For example, the teacher's flashcards mainly include pictures and text, but the explanations are in English. The letters in the flashcards consist of the alphabet (a-z) and hijaiyyah letters. In addition to flashcards, sandpaper letters are used for sensory letter recognition. The child reads the letters and feels the shape of the letters.

"The letters on sandpaper letters are made from a rough surface like sandpaper that is attached to the card so that children can feel the texture of the letters when they touch them." (CL.E.2)

Letter cards were used as learning media in all institutions. Teachers used letter cards that could be attached to the whiteboard. To teach how letters are formed, teachers used rhymes associated with number shapes, such as "number 1 looks like a fence," "number 2 looks like a duck," and "number 3 looks like a flying bird." In addition, teachers grouped children into two teams. Letter cards were placed on a table, and when the teacher mentioned a word such as "BOLA *(ball)*," children searched for the letters B, O, L, and A from the table, came to the front, and attached them to the board.

Storybook reading activities were found in five of the six institutions. Children listened to stories read aloud while viewing the pictures in the books. Picture books and pop-up books were commonly used. After listening, children were asked to retell the stories or participate in question-and-answer sessions about the book content. Teachers also conveyed key messages, including knowledge and moral values contained in the stories.

Some early childhood institutions provide books stored on bookshelves. The arrangement of books is not always in the reading corner, but there are special shelves in classrooms without reading corners that children can freely access.

"Book media including story books in Class A." (CL.F.1)

"The storybooks in class B4 are exciting for children to read, not too many sentences but easy to understand, and the pictures are exciting." (CL.D.9)

"In the classroom, there are various books in the form of picture story books, thick books (board books), interactive books with textures or sounds, and books with basic themes such as letters, numbers, colors, shapes, animals, or simple stories." (CL.D.8)

As for the early childhood institutions that prepare reading corners, books are placed specifically on bookshelves. The room is also arranged so that children sit comfortably while exploring the existing books.

"The reading corner is on the 2nd floor, close to classes Kindergarten A and Kindergarten B. The books in the reading corner are well maintained so that they are comfortable and interesting for children to learn and read." (CL.E.1).

However, books have not been used explicitly for book-based early literacy development activities such as reading (story reading), explaining themes with books, sharing reading with friends, or providing special time to read books alone.

Based on observations, it is known that there are early childhood units that provide carpets with illustrations of road traffic maps. Children use the carpet as a medium to express themselves in micro role-playing activities. Children design story scenarios, such as carrying goods, going to a gas station, simulating an accident, and then taking their car to the repair shop. In this activity, children relate their daily experiences to role-playing activities. In addition, early childhood units were also found to provide household equipment in miniature form, such as wardrobes, tables, and chairs, so that children can use them for macro role-playing.

Worksheets are still the main learning activity for training children to write. Using pencils or colored pencils, children are asked to write, colour pictures, draw lines, and connect one picture to another.

"For example, a picture of fire has the benefit of lighting and heating when going camping, and has the danger of fire, children will draw lines connecting the pictures." (CL.B.3)

"Kindergarten uses several media that help children learn such as worksheets as learning media that can involve children directly." (CL.F.3)

"Children are given a paper with pictures of several animals, and underneath is the animal's name written in English. Children are asked to cut out the names of the animals and then stick them on the picture of the animal accordingly." (CL.B.1)

3.1.2. Social-Emotional Interactions

Children are asked to choose a picture card with a description in English that shows movements, such as hugging, high-fiving, bowing, waving, and several other movements. When a child takes a picture card with a "hug" before entering or leaving the class, the child will hug the teacher first as a sign of greeting. This activity builds the child's sense of security and social attachment to the teacher.

The child's feelings are written in circular symbols, showing anger, sadness, happiness, and surprise. The teacher asks how the child feels every day before the learning activity begins. The child is asked to show an emotional poster that represents his feelings. The child is also allowed to tell the teacher about his feelings. This trains children to be sensitive to their feelings while developing speaking skills.

"Early literacy is also introduced to develop children's independence and responsibility. The teacher makes a media board, such as a Class Jobs board, with pockets that say "pray, clean up, line up, paper and book." (CL.A.6).

The teacher places several children's names in each pocket. If the child's name is in the pocket that says "pray," then the child leads the prayer before and after the learning activity. If the child's name is in the "paper and book" pocket, then the child distributes worksheets to their friends. Meanwhile, if the child's name is in the "line-up" pocket, the child leads the line. If the child's name is placed in the pocket that says "clean up," the child is responsible for cleaning and tidying up the class.

Dramatic play areas were identified in two of six institutions. These areas were equipped with household materials arranged to resemble a home environment and were used for role-play activities such as buying and selling, cooking, or pretending to be chefs. Role-play activities were explicitly linked to thematic learning. For example, under the theme "Holiday at the Beach," children assumed roles such as lifeguard, restaurant waiter, father, mother, grandmother, grandfather, or siblings. Before role-play began, teachers read related storybooks and facilitated discussions to help children select roles. Teachers used open-ended questions, such as "What if someone needs help at the beach?" and "What would you serve in a beachside restaurant?" to stimulate children's imagination before engaging in role-play.

3.1.3. Individual Approach

Based on field findings, teachers actively use responsive strategies by combining early literacy development activities according to children's interests and needs. The classroom walls are covered with letter and number posters, emotion icon posters accompanied by text captions, and other illustrated posters. Teachers have picture cards, letter cards, word cards, and emotional expression cards that invite children to express themselves through movement or body language when entering and leaving the classroom.

Individual approach were observed when younger children or children who have not yet developed literacy are given simpler materials. At the same time, those who are more capable are invited to construct sentences or explore themes in more depth. For example, in the letter stringing activity, children arrange letters by inserting thread and beads according to the order of the words. Children need fine motor coordination when inserting the thread into the holes and arranging the letter beads to form the correct word. For younger children, teachers assist so that children can do it correctly. This assistance ensures that children understand how to string, choose letters, arrange the order, and arrange them into the desired word form. Another example is when children are invited to learn simple writing in their own way, such as sticking a collage of two hands after learning how to wash hands, which is then continued by writing an explanation on the paper.

> *"…there are two palms that have been drawn on paper and added with various colors and small objects. At the bottom, the child makes writing related to the activity of washing hands." (CL.D.3)*

3.1.4. Teacher Creativity

To introduce early writing, teachers did not immediately use pencils and paper. Instead, children were invited to write on trays filled with rice. Children formed letters using their fingers in the rice. Teachers also used sand as an alternative medium for early writing practice. Using the same method, children wrote in the sand without writing tools. Teachers also use ice cream sticks, origami paper, leaves, and loose parts to create interesting learning media to develop early literacy.

> *"We also use items that can be used or reused, such as plastic bottles and milk cartons. I mean, items are usually no longer used by children, but the packaging can still be used, and we reuse them at school. So, the shapes will be varied and not the same." (CW.D.1)*

Teacher-created and repurposed media were observed in five of the six institutions. Teachers used recycled or household materials as instructional tools. One institution prepared a "preparation center" that focused on early literacy activities integrated with art. Creative activities supporting early writing and fine motor development were documented. For example, during a "painting with forks" activity, children dipped forks or brushes into paint and created shapes or letters on blank paper. These activities simultaneously engaged children's imagination, creativity, and early writing skills.

3.1.5. Science and Literacy Integration

Integration of early science activities with early literacy development was found in four institutions. Teachers labeled containers and tools with words and symbols as part of science experiments such as rain and rainbow activities. Materials included water, oil, food coloring, baking soda, spoons, plates, cotton buds, dish soap, vinegar, scissors, chopsticks, and candy. In one of experiments with children, safety symbols were added to materials considered risky for children, for example marking vinegar bottles to indicate that they should not be consumed.

In another activity, "Earth and Space" experiments were linked to early literacy through labeling, oral explanations, and written symbols. This activity was documented in field notes as an integrated example of science learning and early literacy exposure.

> *"After learning about "Earth and Space", children can make whatever they want. Some use paper and drawing tools, such as coloured pencils, crayons, or markers, to draw planets and the sun. Some use paper cups and origami to make rockets. Some also use colourful plastic balls as the sun, then decorated with coloured pencils, crayons, star-shaped beads, and others." (CL.C.6)*

4. Discussion

This discussion interprets the key findings of the study in relation to existing literature and theoretical perspectives. The results show that teachers implemented contextual media, social–emotional interactions, individualized approaches, creative use of learning resources, and integration of science with literacy activities. These findings are discussed in light of culturally responsive teaching and current understandings of early literacy development.

Overall, teachers demonstrated partial alignment with Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) principles, particularly in efforts to connect learning with children's real-life experiences, interests, and identities. Activities such as role-play based on familiar social contexts and the use of children's names in literacy materials illustrate recognition of children's cultural and personal funds of knowledge. These practices resonate with the idea that culturally responsive pedagogy validates children's linguistic and cultural backgrounds as legitimate resources for learning (Abdal-Haqq, 2020; Gay, 2015). However, tensions were also evident. The widespread use of English-based learning media in predominantly Indonesian-speaking classrooms reflects a misalignment with CRT, which emphasizes the primacy of learners' home languages. From a CRT perspective, early literacy instruction should support meaning making through children's first language rather than prioritizing English for symbolic or market purposes. Several contextual explanations may account for this inconsistency: (a) limited teacher training in culturally responsive pedagogy, (b) institutional language policies that promote English exposure for school branding, and (c) persistent societal expectations of academic readiness in preschool settings. These structural factors help explain why teachers' practices were sometimes responsive at the activity level but less responsive at the language-policy level. The finding that teachers used children's names, familiar themes, and everyday situations as the basis for early literacy activities demonstrates an effort to connect instruction to children's lived experiences. Such practices are consistent with (Gay,

2013) argument that culturally responsive pedagogy requires teachers to "teach to and through" children's cultural backgrounds rather than treating culture as an add-on. In suburban Jakarta, where children come from diverse linguistic, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds, contextualized learning media enable children to engage meaningfully with print, symbols, and early writing. These findings also resonate with (Sisson et al., 2020), who found that culturally responsive pedagogies in early childhood classrooms emerged most strongly when teachers deliberately built on children's cultural knowledge and everyday practices.

The findings of this study show that early literacy media in suburban Jakarta are predominanly English-mediated, reflecting broader multilingual education dynamics in Southest Asia. Research in Malaysia has similarly shown that the prominence of English in school materials can create tension with the use of practices. Multilingual education in Chinese National Type Schools (SJKC), Malaysia, shows that early literacy develops best when the mother tongue is used as the main language of instruction. At the same time, English and Malay are recommended to be taugh as additional languages through second-language learning approach, rather than replacing children's first language in early literacy activities (Biang, 2025). In the Philipines, mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) has been shown to support learners' understanding and participation, including in subject such as mathematics, when instruction is delivered in the home language (Velasco, 2025). However, studies also report tensions between policy and practices, as dominant language ideologis and pressure to prioritize English can lead to inconsistent or uneven implementation of MTB-MLE in classroom (Tungul & Lapinid, 2024). In Indonesia context, research shows that teachers often navigate inconsistency between policy expectations and the diverse linguistic realities of children, especially where Indonesia, regional languages and English coexist (Rusdiansyah et al., 2025). In early childhood settings, these tension are reinforced by family language policies that prioritize early English literacy for social mobility, even when children primarily use Indonesian or local languages at home (Sadri, 2025). As a result, teachers in suburban Jakarta must balance children's home language with institutional pressures, understanding the need for culturally responsive early literacy practices.

The study further indicates that early literacy experiences in the observed institutions were still dominated by letter recognition, alphabet posters, and flashcards. Vocabulary development and early writing were beginning to be fostered through science experiments, emotional expression activities, and creative writing tasks using alternative media. However, phonological awareness and reading comprehension strategies were less explicitly addressed. Activities involving sound play, prediction, dialogic reading, or shared book reading were limited. This imbalance shows that teachers' practices are still evolving from a letter-focused orientation toward a broader conception of early literacy that includes meaning making, oral language, and comprehension, key components emphasized in contemporary early literacy frameworks (Bennett et al., 2018; Gunn et al., 2020). Studies in diverse early childhood contexts similarly highlight that responsive literacy practices requires intentional attention to comprehension, oral language, and children's cultural experiences rather than a narrow emphasis on alpabeth knowledge alone, wether in community based programs in India (Chattopadhyay, 2023) or in broader early childhood systems in Ethiopia (Diale & Sewagegn, 2021). These perspective reinforce the need for aerly literacy approach that move beyond isolated letter recognition toward culturally grounded, meeaningful, and dialogic literacy engagement in early childhood settings.

Another important finding relates to the limited visibility of active parental involvement in early literacy activities at home. From a CRT perspective, parental and community engagement is central, as children's home experiences form the basis of identity-affirming learning. Prior studies have consistenly shown that everyday literacy practices at home, shared book reading, writing names, discussing daily events, and talking about daily events-play a crucial role in developing children's early literacy skills while simultaneously strengtening emotional bonds between children and caregivers (Alshatti et al., 2020; Bojczyk et al., 2019; Wirth et al., 2020). Research on family-school partnership also demonstrated that when teachers intentionally share power and collaborate with families, children's literacy participation becomes more meaningful and culturally grounded (Hannon et al., 2020; Szech, 2020). Studies in Kuwait and Puerto Rico, further show that culturally situated home literacy practices can be powerful resources for children's identity and resilience, particularly in linguistically and social complex environments (Alshatti et al., 2020; Bryan-Silva & Sanders-Smith, 2021). The absence of systematic strategies for engaging parents in the present study therefore points to an important area for development in culturally responsive ealry literacy provision, namely building stronger bridges between classroom practices and the rich ealry literacy environments already present in children's homes.

Several implications arise from this study. First, teacher education and in-service professional development should explicitly address culturally responsive pedagogy and mother-tongue-based early literacy, moving beyond intuitive to theoretically informed practice. Second, curriculum guidelines and school-level language policies need to ensure that Indonesian, as the children's primary language, remains the foundation for early literacy, while English is introduced in meaningful and developmentally appropriate ways. Third, schools should build stronger partnerships with families by providing guidance for simple home-based literacy activities that draw on children's everyday lives. Finally, policymakers should recognize that culturally responsive early literacy practices are not only pedagogically desirable but essential to ensuring equity for young children in multilingual societies.

5. Conclusion

This study is indicate that teachers in suburban Jakarta are beginning to enact responsive strategies in early literacy development through contextual media, creative activities, and individual support tailored to children's different levels of readiness. At the same time, early literacy practices remain uneven, with stronger emphasis on letter recognition and worksheets than on phonological awareness, reading comprehension, and systematic family participation. The coexistence of responsive practices and these limitations suggest that early literacy provision is currently in transitional phase.

The findings also confirm that the Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) framework can effectively inform early literacy strategies in multilingual Indonesia settings. Teacher's effort to link instruction with children's everyday experiences and identities reflect core CRT principles, while tensions around the dominanca of English-based media higlight areas where cultural and linguistic responsiveness remains underdeveloped.

The result of this study have several practical and policy implications. Teacher education and in-service professional development can integrated CRT-informed early literacy strategies, particularly those that prioritize children's first language as the foundation for meaning making. Curriculum policy and school level language planning may also benefit from emphasizing mother-tounge-based early literacy, while English is introduced in meaningful and developmentally appropriate ways. In addition, parental engagement programs can be designed to support home-based literacy practices that build on family culture and everyday experiences.

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