

Enhancing Literacy for Migrant Children Through Guided Free Reading: A Case Study At ICC Al Anshar Bahau, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This program aims to improve the literacy skills of Indonesian migrant children at ICC Al Anshar Bahau, Malaysia, through guided free reading strategies. The background to this activity is the low reading ability of migrant children due to limited access to formal education, a lack of appropriate reading materials, and the absence of interest-based learning methods. This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a Participatory Action Research design. The subjects consisted of 10 children aged 6–12 years, as well as volunteer teachers and institution managers. Data were collected through participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation, then analyzed using thematic techniques. The program was implemented over four weeks in eight sessions, during which the children chose books according to their interests and were actively guided in the reading process. The results of the activity showed a significant improvement in four aspects of literacy: interest in reading, ability to read simple sentences, storytelling expression, and independent learning. Notably, 80% of the children demonstrated measurable progress in reading fluency by the final session, as assessed through informal reading assessments. Teachers also experienced a transformation in their teaching approach from drilling methods to dialogic and contextual learning. The main challenges, such as limited book collections and study time, were addressed through community partnerships and flexible schedules. This program demonstrates that guided free reading strategies are effective in enhancing literacy engagement among marginalized children and fostering community collaboration in providing alternative education. The activity also supports the achievement of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for higher education institutions, particularly in the areas of impactful community service and off-campus learning.

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INTRODUCTION

Literacy is an important foundation in individual development, not only in the context of education, but also in social, cultural and economic life. Literacy skills, especially reading and writing, are the main tools in obtaining information, building understanding, and developing critical thinking and creativity. This is affirmed by UNESCO (2017) which states that literacy is key to sustainable development and is a human right that supports the fulfillment of other rights. In the current era of globalization, challenges in literacy development are increasingly complex, especially among vulnerable groups such as migrant children. Research by Dryden-Peterson (2015) shows that migrant and refugee children often lag behind in literacy achievement due to language, cultural differences and limited access to an inclusive formal education system.

Children from migrant families often face legal constraints, economic limitations and socio-cultural inequalities that make it difficult for them to access proper education in their country of residence. In the Malaysian context, Kudo and Hashim (2016) note that Indonesian migrant children in Peninsular Malaysia often do not have legal documents, so they are not accepted into public schools and are forced to rely on alternative education institutions. Literacy in this case is not only understood as an academic skill, but as a basic right of children that must be fulfilled to ensure equality of life opportunities in the future (UNICEF, 2020). This has a direct impact on their low literacy levels which can affect social engagement, economic participation and cultural integration in the local community (Kirk & Winthrop, 2007).

ICC Al Anshar Bahau, Malaysia, is one of the non-formal education institutions that seeks to fill the gap in access to formal education for Indonesian migrant children. This institution reflects the spirit of the community in providing the right to learn for children who are systemically marginalized. However, limited facilities, unprofessional human resources and a lack of appropriate teaching materials are major obstacles in creating an optimal literacy environment. This phenomenon is in line with the findings of Arphattananon (2018), who highlighted that many community education institutions in Southeast Asia have not been able to deliver quality literacy programs due to lack of government support and limited teaching materials.

Initial observations of children at Al Anshar ICC showed that most were not able to read and write well. This indicates a lack of early literacy stimulation. As Baiti et al. (n.d.), literacy stimulation is an important key in the development of language and early literacy skills, which should be done with interactive and fun methods. In practice, learning activities in these institutions are conventional and do not take into account the diverse learning styles of migrant children. In addition, the reading materials available are mostly donated books that have not been curated according to children's developmental levels or interests. This finding is reinforced by Hijjayati et al. (2022), who emphasized that reading materials that are not age and socially appropriate for children can significantly reduce reading motivation and hinder literacy development.

In response to this problem, *guided free reading* strategies were introduced as an approach that is more suited to the character and needs of migrant children. This approach emphasizes children's freedom to choose reading materials according to their interests, as well as active assistance from teachers. This strategy is in line with the results of Guthrie and Wigfield's (2000) research, which shows that interest-based learning approaches can increase student engagement and comprehension in reading activities. Furthermore, research by Reutzel et al. (2005) proved that when children are given

the opportunity to choose their own reading, they are more motivated to read and have a positive perception of literacy.

This guided free reading program is also consistent with *Merdeka Belajar* policy from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia, which emphasizes the importance of a flexible learning approach, based on the interests and needs of students. In addition, structurally, this program supports the achievement of several Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) of higher education such as impactful community service (KPI 7), students learning off campus (KPI 2), and collaboration with communities (KPI 6), as stipulated in Permendikbudristek No. 3 of 2020.

This study aims to identify the literacy conditions of migrant children at ICC Al Anshar, analyze the factors that cause low literacy skills, and evaluate the effectiveness of guided free reading strategies in overcoming these obstacles. The results of this study are expected to be a real contribution that not only addresses the local needs of the migrant community in Bahau, but can also be replicated in similar contexts in other regions. The relevance of this research is reinforced by previous studies such as by Thomas & Thomas (2009), which emphasize the importance of community-based approaches in improving the learning outcomes of children from minority and marginalized groups.

METHOD

This research used a descriptive qualitative approach with a *participatory action* research design in the context of community service. This approach was chosen because it is able to capture the social dynamics and real conditions faced by migrant children in the process of improving their literacy, and allows active collaboration between researchers and community partners to create contextual and sustainable changes (Sugiyono, 2021; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research Location

This research was conducted at ICC (Indonesian Community Center) Al Anshar, a non-formal education institution located at ICC Al Anshar Bahau, Jalan Angsana 2, Taman Angsana Indah, 72100 Bahau, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia. It serves Indonesian migrant children who do not have access to formal education due to legal and economic barriers. ICC Al Anshar is managed independently by the Indonesian migrant worker community in Bahau and surrounding areas.

Research Subjects

The subjects of this study were 10 migrant children aged between 6 and 12 years who participated in learning activities at ICC Al Anshar. They were selected based on their active involvement in the literacy activities implemented. Supporting informants included: 2 volunteer teachers/community teachers and 1 manager of ICC Al Anshar. This study was conducted in four main stages based on the *Participatory Action Research* cycle proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), namely planning, action, observation and reflection. The first stage, planning, began with identifying literacy problems through initial discussions with teachers and program managers. From the results of this discussion, an activity plan was developed that focused on implementing the guided free reading strategy. In addition, reading materials that are suitable for children's interests and ages are selected and research instruments are prepared in the form of observation sheets, interview guides and documentation formats. The second stage is action, which is the implementation of the literacy program that lasts for four weeks with a frequency of two sessions per week, so there are a total of eight sessions. In each session, children

were given the opportunity to read selected books independently or with a facilitator, with guidance from the teacher during the reading process as well as a light discussion after reading. The next stage was observation, where researchers observed children's activities during the sessions, including their engagement and interaction in the reading process. Observation data was recorded through observation sheets, field notes, and documentation in the form of photos and videos. The last stage is reflection, which is conducted together with the teacher and manager to evaluate the whole activity. This reflection includes an assessment of the children's progress as well as the effectiveness of the program. The reading strategies used, which then became the basis for adjusting the approach at a later stage based on the findings in the field.

Data Collection Technique

Participatory Observation

The researcher made direct observations of the teaching and learning process, children's involvement in guided free reading sessions, and interactions between teachers and children. Observations were conducted systematically over eight sessions using an observation guide and field notes. This technique is important in qualitative approaches to capture the authentic dynamics of social interactions (Spradley, 1980).

Semi-structured Interview

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with mentor teachers, institution managers, some parents, and children who were actively involved. Interviews were used to explore perceptions, experiences and constraints related to literacy activities. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and thematically analyzed.

Documentation

Supporting data was collected in the form of:

- Photos of literacy activities
- Teachers' daily notes
- Student work such as writing and drawing

Documentation serves to strengthen observation and interview data through triangulation (Moleong, 2019).

Data analysis technique

Data analysis in this study was conducted using a thematic analysis approach as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis process began by carefully reading the raw data in the form of field notes, interview transcripts, and visual documentation. From the initial reading, researchers marked important parts to be arranged into initial codes based on patterns of behavior, responses, and experiences that appeared repeatedly. These codes were then grouped into main themes, including reading interest, literacy skills, children's involvement in activities and the impact of the guided free

reading strategy. Furthermore, the researcher compiled a thematic narrative that described the interrelationships between the data and showed the dynamics that occurred in the field systematically.

To maintain the validity and validity of the data, this study applied several verification strategies. First, triangulation of techniques and sources was carried out, namely by combining data from observations, interviews, and documentation. Second, time triangulation was used, where data collection was carried out in different time spans to avoid temporary bias. Third, the researcher conducted *member checking*, confirming the provisional findings with informants, especially teachers and program managers, to ensure that the interpretation of the data was in accordance with their experiences and intended meanings.

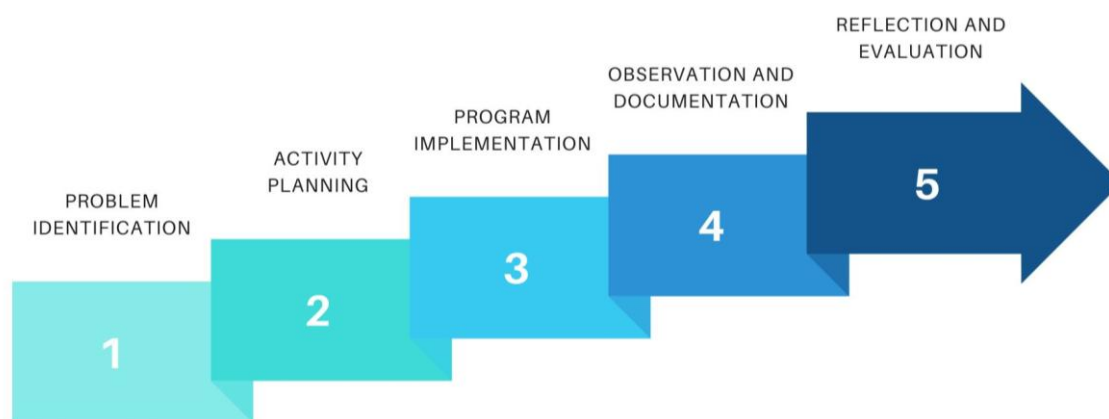


FIGURE 1. PAR Process Flowchart

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Initial Condition of Migrant Children's Literacy

Based on the results of observations and initial interviews conducted at ICC Al Anshar Bahau, Malaysia, it was found that of the ten migrant children aged 7 to 12 years who became research subjects, seven children were not able to read fluently, while the other three children were still at the letter recognition stage. This indicates that there are serious obstacles in the early literacy development of migrant children. Some of the main factors contributing to their low reading skills include the lack of access to early childhood education, the lack of learning support from the home environment and the lack of availability of reading materials that are appropriate to the age and developmental level of the children. Most of these children's parents work in the informal sector and have low levels of education, so they are unable to provide optimal learning assistance. In addition, the learning environment is also less supportive due to the limited collection of books that are interesting and relevant to children. This finding is in line with the results of research by Hijjayati et al. (2022) who stated that the availability of quality literacy media determines the acceleration of children's early literacy skills and that children from underprivileged families tend to experience limitations in accessing reading materials that can stimulate their interest and ability to read.



FIGURE 2. ICC Al Anshar migrant children reading together in the learning room

Education Challenges in Non-formal Institutions

In addition to the poor initial literacy conditions of migrant children, major challenges are also found in the institutional aspect of ICC Al Anshar as a non-formal education provider. This institution faces various limitations that directly affect the quality of the teaching and learning process. Based on the results of observations and interviews, some of the main challenges faced include the lack of adequate learning facilities- children learn with makeshift desks, use damaged blackboards, and access bookshelves that mostly contain used books and are not well organized. In terms of teaching staff, most of

them are volunteers from migrant communities who do not have a formal education background, so they have not been exposed to pedagogical methods suitable for elementary school-age children. The learning methods used are still very conventional, relying on memorization and *drilling* without the help of interesting visual tools or active learning strategies. Furthermore, the reading materials available are mostly donated, but have not gone through a curation process, making them unsuitable for children's developmental age or interests.dredew

This condition illustrates the weakness of the supporting ecosystem in creating meaningful learning experiences. Arphattananon (2018) argues that community- based non-formal education institutions in Southeast Asia often experience limited resources, both in terms of facilities, teaching materials and teaching capacity. As a result, the quality of education in these institutions relies heavily on local initiative and creativity in working around these limitations. Thus, these challenges need serious attention so that literacy improvement programs can run optimally and sustainably.

Implementation of the Guided Free Reading Strategy

The guided free reading program was implemented over eight sessions in a span of four weeks, with each session lasting 90 minutes. This strategy is designed based on the *reading for pleasure* approach, which is literacy centered on children's interests and comfort, and supported by active assistance from facilitators. The aim is to create a reading experience that is enjoyable, relevant and sustainable in order to increase children's emotional and cognitive engagement in literacy activities.

The steps for implementing the activity include four main stages. First, self-selection of books, where children are given the opportunity to choose their own reading materials from a curated shelf according to their favorite genre and reading level. This process is important as it allows children to feel in control of their learning activities. Second, active mentoring, where the facilitator accompanies the child during the reading process, helps understand difficult vocabulary, and builds a dialog about the content of the reading. Third, light discussion, which provides space for children to retell the contents of the book, either orally, through short writing, or in the form of simple drawings. Fourth, appreciation and motivation, which is realized in the form of star stickers or praise for each child who completes the reading or shows enthusiasm. This approach not only boosts the child's confidence, but also strengthens the positive relationship between the child and the book.

For example, one of the migrant children, Reza (10 years old), was initially unable to read whole texts and showed reluctance to open books. However, after two weeks of the program, he was actively choosing picture storybooks about animals, reading with the help of the facilitator, and redrawing the content of the stories he had read. Reza even asked for additional sessions to read further stories. Similarly, Liana (8 years old) initially only recognized a few letters, but by the end of the fourth session, she was able to read one simple sentence and confidently re-explain it in the form of pictures and short sentences.

The transformation demonstrates the success of interest-based reading strategies and active mentoring. According to Guthrie and Wigfield (2000), freedom to choose reading materials has a significant impact on children's motivational engagement in reading. They state that when children are given autonomy in choosing what to read and are supported in understanding the content, their cognitive and emotional engagement will increase dramatically. This is also reinforced by Vygotsky's theory of *scaffolding*, where social support from facilitators becomes an important bridge in the development of children's literacy skills. This dialog-based approach allows children to actively construct meaning, so that they are not only passive recipients of information, but also active learners

who relate reading to their own experiences.

Changes in Children's Literacy Behavior

After implementing the guided free reading program for four weeks, there were significant changes in the literacy behavior of migrant children at ICC Al Anshar. These changes were seen in four main aspects: interest in reading, reading ability, storytelling expression and learning independence. Before the program started, most children showed disinterest in books. They tended to be passive, reluctant to take the initiative to read, and only did reading activities if directed by the teacher. Their reading skills were still very basic; the majority could not read simple sentences, and some children still had difficulty recognizing letters completely. In terms of expression, children are also not confident to retell the content of the reading, either orally or in visual form such as drawing.

However, after attending eight sessions of the interest-based program and being actively accompanied, positive changes began to appear. The children began to show enthusiasm in choosing books independently, reading with curiosity, and actively participating in light post-reading discussions. Six out of ten children were able to read simple sentences fluently, and some had started to understand the basic structure of the story. In the retelling activity, the children were more expressive, confident, and even creative in retelling the content of the story they read through drawings or short writings. They no longer waited for the teacher's command to read, but began to read independently when they had free time. These changes are summarized in the following table 2.

TABLE 2. Changes in Children's Literacy Behavior Before and After the Program

No	Literacy Aspect	Before Program	After Program
1	Interest in Reading	Children are reluctant open a book	Enthusiastic to choose and read the book by themselves
2	Ability Reading	The majority cannot yet reading	6 children can read simple sentences
3	Storytelling Expression	Passive and not confident	Active, expressive, and confident when telling stories
4	Learning Independence	Waiting to be told or guided	Starts reading on his/her own without direction

This transformation is also evident in the true story of one of the program participants, Aisyah, a 9-year-old child. Before participating in guided free reading activities, Aisyah was only able to recognize vowels and often showed fear when asked to read in front of her friends. However, after four sessions of personalized mentoring and reading picture books that matched her interests, she was able to read a short paragraph and even retell the story with a cheerful expression. Aisyah's experience shows the success of interest-based approaches and positive mentoring, as confirmed by Baiti et al. (n.d.), that children's early literacy develops more optimally when supported by a pleasant atmosphere, emotional support and relevant reading materials.

Furthermore, the literacy development graph compiled from the observation results of each session also shows an increasing trend in the scores on all four aspects of literacy. These graphs reinforce the finding that the program is effective in forming positive literacy habits in migrant children who have not previously experienced fun and meaningful reading experiences.

The graph reinforces the finding that the program is effective in forming positive literacy habits in migrant children, who have never had a fun and meaningful reading experience before. Thus, the guided free reading program proved capable of not only developing technical reading skills but also building positive and sustainable literacy attitudes and behaviours.

Teacher and Community Reflections

Reflections that emerged from in-depth interviews with teachers and managers of Al Anshar ICC showed a significant change in the way they viewed the literacy learning process. Previously, the majority of teachers used a one-way approach with an emphasis on letter memorization and drilling as the main way to teach reading. However, after being involved in the guided free reading program, they began to realize the importance of a more contextual, interest-based and interactive approach. One of the teachers stated that the post-reading light discussion activity made the children more enthusiastic and emotionally involved in understanding the content of the book. This approach helps them see that reading is not just an academic activity, but also a fun and meaningful social process. Teachers also began to choose reading books that were more appropriate to the children's age and cultural background, as they realized that reading materials that are close to children's daily lives are easier to understand and more interesting to them. This reflects a deep reflective change, especially in understanding that literacy success depends not only on technical reading skills but also on emotional aspects, motivation and socio-cultural relevance.

The following picture documents one of the light discussion sessions where the children sit in a circle and tell each other the content of the book they have read. The teacher sits among them, not as an examiner, but as a facilitator who laughs and responds to the children's stories. This picture reflects the change in the teacher's role from a sole director to a supportive and dialogic companion.



FIGURE 3. Migrant children apply guided free reading through reading book media and digital book media.

Furthermore, the following graph of teachers' reflection results shows their improved understanding of contextual literacy principles. This graph is based on Likert scale scores (1–5) from teachers' reflective pretest and posttest results related to three main aspects: the importance of two-way interaction, age- and culture-appropriate book selection, and the role of children's emotions and interests in reading activities.

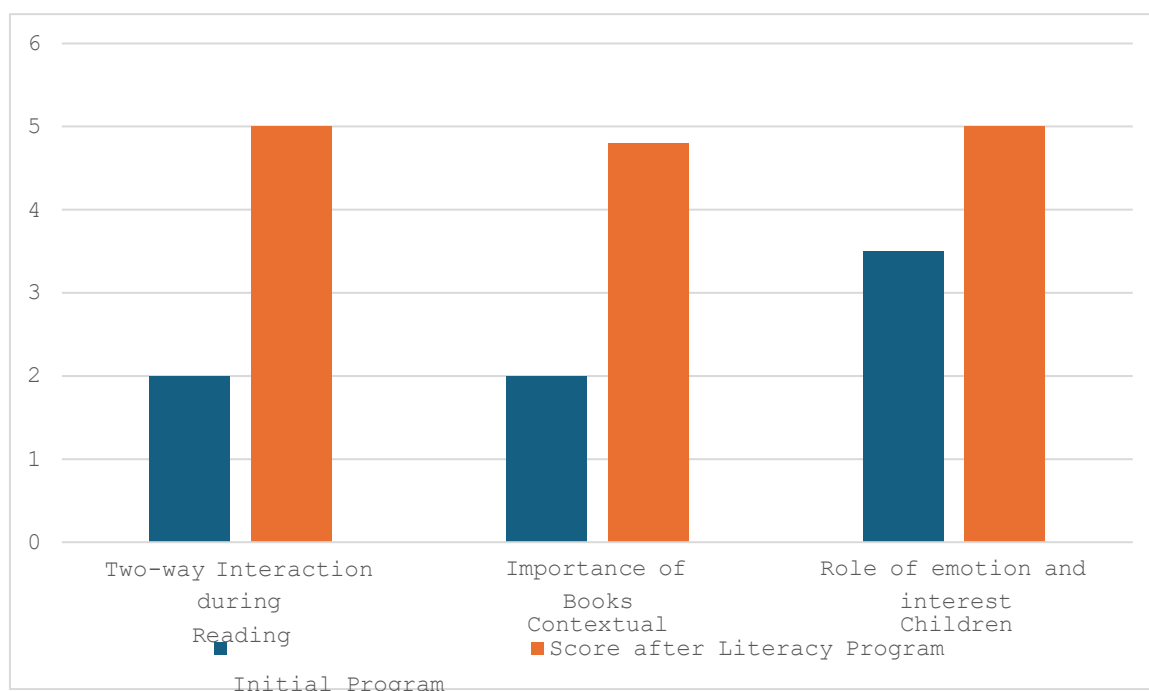


FIGURE 4. Changes in teachers' perceptions of children's literacy processes

The data in this graph shows that the teachers experienced a sharp increase in their understanding of these three aspects after undergoing mentoring and practice with the children. This change in view is in line with Barton's (2007) theory which emphasizes that literacy is a social practice. Literacy cannot be separated from the social and cultural setting of its readers and therefore, teaching methods must be able to adapt to the child's context. Literacy is not a neutral activity, but one that is full of meaning and emotional engagement. Therefore, teachers' openness to new approaches that are more responsive to children's needs is an important foundation in building a vibrant literacy culture in migrant communities like ICC Al Anshar.

In terms of sustainability, several teachers expressed their intention to continue applying guided free reading strategies even after the program ended. They noted the positive impact of this method on student engagement and comprehension. Moreover, they showed interest in modifying future lesson plans to include regular reading sessions, integrating more culturally relevant materials, and fostering interactive discussions as part of their daily teaching practices. Although challenges such as limited book access and time constraints remain, the teachers' reflective commitment to this approach indicates promising steps toward long-term transformation.

Obstacles and Solutions

In implementing the guided free reading program at ICC Al Anshar, there are a number of obstacles that are quite prominent, but can be overcome with appropriate and contextual solutions. One of the main obstacles is the limited collection of books owned by the institution, both in terms of number and variety of themes. Most of the books available are donations that have not gone through a curation process, so they are not suitable for children's interests and developmental levels. To overcome this, the service team built partnerships with the Indonesian diaspora in Malaysia and children's book donors to enrich the available reading materials.

The next obstacle is the very limited learning time. Migrant children often have to help their parents work, so they do not have a fixed study schedule. As a solution, a flexible and non-binding learning schedule was developed and a *literacy corner* was established outside the classroom that children can

access at any time, including during playtime or while waiting for their parents to come home from work.

In addition, most of the teachers or facilitators at ICC Al Anshar do not have a formal educational background in teaching children literacy. They previously taught using conventional methods such as memorization and drilling. Recognizing the importance of teacher capacity building, a short three-hour training was organized that focused on *reading aloud* techniques, *dialogic reading* and informal assessment strategies in early literacy. The training was designed to be practical and immediately applicable in daily activities.

This community-based training program has proven to be effective in improving the competence of facilitators. This is in line with UNESCO guidelines (2016) which emphasize that training that is intensive, applicable and based on the local context can significantly improve the quality of teaching in the community, especially in marginalized areas and vulnerable groups. With this approach, constraints that initially hinder the literacy process can be transformed into opportunities for sustainable local capacity building.

Social Relevance and Follow-on Impact

This program makes a real contribution in several important aspects, including improving the literacy of children from marginalized groups, strengthening the capacity of migrant communities, and direct implementation of Merdeka Belajar policy. Through an approach that focuses on empowerment and active involvement, this program not only improves children's reading skills, but also strengthens the role of migrant communities in supporting their children's education.

Furthermore, this program is highly relevant to the college's Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), especially KPI 2 which encourages students to learn off campus through active involvement in community service activities. In addition, the program accommodates KPI 6 through close collaboration with the community and the ICC manager, so that program development is carried out in a participatory and contextual manner. The tangible impacts generated are in line with KPI 7, in the form of improved children's literacy and positive changes in teachers' perceptions and practices in supporting literacy.

As affirmed by UNICEF (2020), literacy is a basic right that must be guaranteed by the state and the international community for every child, especially those living in marginalized areas and across countries. Therefore, this program not only has a local impact but also contributes to the fulfillment of children's basic rights globally.

CONCLUSION

The literacy mentoring program using the guided free reading strategy has proven effective in enhancing the literacy skills and behaviors of migrant children at ICC Al Anshar Bahau, Malaysia. This program successfully addressed the literacy access barriers faced by the children due to limitations in legal status, economic hardship, and lack of educational resources. By allowing children to choose reading materials based on their interests and providing active guidance from facilitators, the program significantly improved their reading interest, ability to read simple sentences, storytelling expression, and learning independence. In addition to benefiting the children, the program also shifted the teachers' perspectives towards a more contextual, interactive, and interest-based literacy approach. The guided free reading strategy not only enhanced technical reading skills but also fostered a supportive and socio-culturally relevant learning environment. Key challenges such as limited book collections, restricted learning time, and untrained teaching staff were effectively addressed through community collaboration, flexible scheduling, and practical short-term training sessions.

The program's impact was not only locally significant but also aligned with the Key Performance Indicators (IKU) of higher education institutions in terms of impactful community service, off-campus learning, and community collaboration. Through a participatory and interest-based approach, this program offers a practical and scalable model for improving literacy in marginalized settings. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that this model be adopted and replicated across other migrant communities as a strategic effort to ensure inclusive, equitable, and rights-based access to literacy education.

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