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Storytelling and Creative Writing: Critical Literacy Practices in a Community Learning Center in Central Java

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Abstract

Despite providing flexible, accessible and relevant learning opportunities to Indonesia's marginalized groups, the equivalency program is looked down upon and its students are labelled with the stigma of second-class students. By co-constructing qualitative data through document analysis, site visits and interviews with the principal, facilitators and students of *Omah Dongeng Marwah*, a community learning center which provides a high school equivalency program in Kudus Central Java, the current study challenges such stereotypes by exploring critical literacies as practiced in the community learning center. This study argues that meaningful literacy practices, especially storytelling and creative writing, can be effective and viable mechanisms to enhance literacy learning, and build student agency and voice. Our findings reveal that storytelling might contribute to the improvement of reading skills as students are exposed to diverse narratives, while creative writing offers a space where students can practice articulating their ideas and feelings in authentic and meaningful ways. More importantly, storytelling and creative writing as practiced in the learning process have given underprivileged students opportunities and agency to define themselves despite being marginalized.

Keywords: *creative writing, critical literacy, equity, school equivalency, storytelling*

Introduction

The last decade has witnessed an increased attention on education in Indonesia, especially on equity and literacy as the main indicators for educational achievement (Sakhiyya & Wijaya Mulya, 2023). The concerns on equity in education aim to provide equal opportunities to all students despite their socio-economic background. It ensures that everyone has access to education and is able to develop basic literacy and other foundational skills required for employment. This concern is paramount given that Indonesia's education system, in terms of size and scale, ranks fourth in the world after the United States, China and India. Statistics Indonesia recorded that from 2019 to 2023, the average school dropout rate across educational levels has increased to 33.21 percent (BPS, 2023). The increasing dropout rate can be attributed to a combination of economic, social, cultural and educational factors, many of which have been exacerbated by the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, including school closures, financial hardship, and the shift to remote learning (Irhamni & Sahadewo, 2023; Zuilkowski et al., 2019).

One way to address equity in education is the school equivalency program, in *Bahasa Indonesia* called *Kejar Paket.* According to Government Regulation Number 19 of 2005 concerning National Education Standards, school equivalency programs are categorized under non-formal education which are designed to eradicate illiteracy by providing equivalency certificates. *Kejar Paket* A is equivalent to primary school, B for middle school, and C for high school. Those who do not finish their schooling or have dropped out can transfer back and continue their schooling through the equivalency program. This is provided not only by the government institutions (schools and other institutions), but also by community learning centers. According to Rosmilawati (2016), the majority of students enrolled in Indonesia's equivalency education programs come from structurally disadvantaged backgrounds. These include children from low-income families, ethnic minority communities, those living in geographically remote or hard-to-reach areas, and

vulnerable populations such as street children. Rosmilawati (2016) further highlights several interrelated factors contributing to school dropout among Indonesian youth. The main determining variables among them are poverty and geographical isolation, which limit access to formal education. Additional barriers include physical disabilities, a lack of motivation or aspirations toward education, and poor educational support systems, especially those in remote geographical regions. These challenges deepen existing gaps in educational access and opportunity.

Despite its foundation on principles of equity and inclusion, the equivalency education program in Indonesia continues to be marginalized and its students frequently face stigma, often being viewed as second-class learners (Ramadhan et al., 2023). The stereotype entailed to equivalency programs is that it offers lower-quality education tailored to those who are academically behind or unable to survive in the formal system (Hoppers, 2005). It assumes that education must follow a linear, uninterrupted path by progressing from primary to secondary and then to higher education. Students who cannot follow this linear path are often labelled as 'failures' or 'dropouts,' regardless of their individual and family circumstances. These assumptions overlook the broader structural and socio-political barriers, such as poverty, geographic isolation, discrimination, and cultural expectations, that prevent many young people from completing formal education (Cameron & Heckman, 1993). Such a formal educational system reinforces exclusion rather than addressing its root causes and nurturing a more inclusive ecosystem.

This article aims to challenge such stigma by arguing that meaningful literacy practices are practiced in *Omah Dongeng Marwah* (ODM), a community learning center as well as high school equivalency provider in Kudus Central Java. It is a local educational institution outside the existing formal education system like homeschooling (Nugroho, 2023) which offers a learning space comparable to that of formal schooling. Their learning process and critical literacy practices, such as storytelling and creative writing, can be effective and viable mechanisms to enhance

literacy learning, and build student agency and ownership of their own ideas and identities. Given the stigma and poor attention given to the equivalency program, we employ the notion of 'critical gaze' to turn our attention away from traditional schooling and the conventional educational system into more alternative ones (Nayler & Keddie, 2007). We argue that it is important to shift our critical gaze in relation to the ways in which the equivalency program is positioned in society and in the everyday practice and pursuit of more equitable educational practices and outcomes to contribute to a more inclusive, flexible and locally relevant approach to education (Nugroho, 2023; Rosmilawati, 2016). To pursue this argument, this study is driven by the question: How do storytelling and creative writing practices in a community learning center challenge stigma and support learner's agency?

In so doing, this paper begins by synthesizing relevant literature related to equity in education, critical literacies, and storytelling as well as creative writing. Then we provide a brief description of the contextual development of non-formal education in Indonesia. The third section follows with a methodological framework of our study. Next, we present the findings of our research to demonstrate that storytelling and creative writing develop students' literacy and build their agency and identities.

Literature Review

This research is built on and seeks to contribute to three specific areas of research; they are equity in education and critical literacies as well as storytelling and creative writing. The first is equity in education, which refers to 'the idea of making education more inclusive and equitable' (Ainscow, 2020, p. 7). One of the seminal works in the discourse of equity in education is Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970). Freire asserts that education can be a powerful tool to empower marginalized communities and transform unjust social structures. However, he is deeply critical of formal education systems, particularly for perpetuating what he

calls the "banking model" of education. In this model, learners are treated as passive recipients of knowledge, rather than active participants in their own learning. This hierarchical structure in learning and education system reinforces existing inequalities and limits opportunities for critical thinking and social change. Freire (1970) argues that transformative education is dialogical and rooted in the lived experiences of learners, which would enable individuals, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds to question and challenge the social conditions that marginalize them.

While international scholarship has extensively examined educational inequality and the transformative potential of education (e.g., Apple, 2001; Giroux, 1988), the Indonesian context has received relatively less attention. Nevertheless, recent studies have begun to shed light on the complex interplay of gender, class, and identity politics in Indonesian educational settings. Adriany (2019), for instance, explores how gendered assumptions in early childhood education in Indonesia reflect broader societal inequalities, and how these assumptions limit girls' participation and agency. Her work illustrates that even in the earliest stages of schooling, equity is often shaped by cultural norms and institutional structures. Similarly, Sakhiyya et al. (2023) highlight how class-based inequalities are reproduced in schools through curriculum content and classroom practices that privilege certain forms of knowledge and cultural capital over others. In another study, Sakhiyya and Wijaya Mulya (2023) show how educational discourses in Indonesia are shaped by neoliberal agendas, which often depoliticize equity and sideline structural issues in favour of individual achievement narratives. These works, taken together, paint a sobering picture of how formal education in Indonesia may inadvertently reinforce the very inequalities it aims to address. Additionally, Rosser et al. (2005) examine the politics of inclusion in Indonesian education, especially how state policies often focus more on expanding access rather than transforming learning conditions. Their work critiques how inclusion is often reduced to enrolment numbers,

without critically addressing the quality and relevance of education for marginalized groups. This is where Freire's framework becomes particularly relevant because the idea of inclusion is not merely about being present in the classroom but being meaningfully engaged in learning processes that empower.

Given these persistent challenges, it is essential to shift our 'critical gaze' to alternative educational forms that hold potential for equity and transformation (Nayler & Keddie, 2007). Scholars such as Nayler and Keddie (2007) and Nugroho (2023) have argued for the importance of community-based and informal education programs in offering more context-sensitive, participatory, and inclusive pedagogies. In Indonesia, programs like the community learning centers and the equivalency education program serve as spaces where critical and empowering education can take root. Following Janks (2010), we argue that these alternative sites embody practices of critical literacy where students learn to read not just texts, but the world around them, and act to change it. These forms of education may provide the pedagogical hope needed to realize a more equitable future.

The second area of research is critical literacies. Studies in this area have repeatedly identified that, unlike the functional literacy approach which predominantly emphasizes students' abilities to read and write, critical literacies focus on power and seek to reveal power relations at work to discover what is at stake in both social practices and the textual interface (Janks, 2010). Personal values, cultural experiences, socio-economic background and ideologies are valued and accommodated when literacies are seen as a social practice (Street & Lefstein, 2007; Street, 2003). Reading and writing activities are not merely accomplished competences to tick the boxes, rather they become much more meaningful and empowering as they enable individual interactions with texts, both fiction and non-fiction (Zacher Pandya et al., 2021). For instance, Retnaningdyah (2018) studies the literacy practices of Indonesian female domestic workers in Hong Kong where literacy is a tool

not only for gaining employment but also for asserting agency despite these people being considered as the most subordinate in the economic structure. In a similar vein, Sakhiyya et al. (2023) explore how female activists in Serang West Java engage in critical literacy practices as part of their efforts to empower themselves and other women for gender equality and social justice. Dewayani (2013) explores how street children in Indonesia, despite being excluded from formal educational systems, develop their own literacy practices that are deeply embedded in their cultural and socio-economic environments. In sum, critical literacies open up a space for meaning making and identity construction (Dewayani, 2013; Dewayani & Retnaningdyah, 2017; Retnaningdyah, 2015; Sakhiyya et al., 2023b).

Thirdly, previous studies on storytelling and creative writing have highlighted that these two pedagogical tools serve not only as an effective means of knowledge transmission (Prins, 2017; Santos, 2024), language learning and development (Abasi & Soori, 2014; Flynn, 2016), and socio-emotional development (Cekaite & Björk-Willén, 2018; Sunday, 2018); but also as a way of shaping and reshaping one's identity (Dewayani, 2013; Mowafy, 2022; Roig et al., 2018). This is because both storytelling and creative writing encourage active participation, enhance cognitive skills, and foster deeper understanding of complex concepts (Abasi & Soori, 2014; Cekaite & Björk-Willén, 2018). While storytelling can make abstract or difficult concepts more accessible by embedding them in a narrative context (Webb, 2017), creative writing allows learners to stimulate imagination by developing original ideas in a structured way by making sense of difficult topics through the lens of personal or fictional narratives (Prins, 2017; Santos, 2024). In sum, storytelling and creative writing can be employed not only as tools to express one's views and values in a creative manner, but also as mechanisms for self-discovery which enable learners to reflect upon their own struggles and lives. In the Indonesian context, however, this issue remains under-explored, especially when such pedagogical techniques are applied within a community learning

center. This article responds to this call by offering a nuanced analysis of how storytelling and creative writing can channel critical literacies in a community learning center such as *Omah Dongeng Marwah*.

The Development of Non-Formal Education in Indonesia

Historically, the development of Indonesia's modern and formal education system has been shaped by colonial legacies and post-independence nation-building priorities. The modern, formal education system in Indonesia was introduced during the Dutch colonial era as part of the Ethical Policy in the early 1900s (Sakhiyya et al., 2023). This policy aimed to extend limited educational opportunities to native Indonesians, especially the elite indigenous class or *priyayi,* primarily to create a trained administrative class that could support colonial governance. However, access to this formal education remained restricted, and only a small elite benefitted. Before European colonialism, the nature of education in the Indonesian archipelago was largely informal or non-structured in terms of its curriculum and learning process. Learning occurred in community settings, through religious institutions such as *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools), and in family and communal spaces, where knowledge was passed down orally and experientially (Wijaya Mulya et al, 2024). Until today, *pesantren* remains playing its roles in catering the educational, spiritual, and social needs of communities, both in rural and urban settings (Isbah & Sakhiyya, 2023). It serves not only as a center for religious instruction but also as a space for character building, cultural transmission, and, increasingly, the integration of formal curriculum. However, the perception is that non-formal education was seen as a complementary system to formal schooling.

The peak of education massification in Indonesia occurred during the New Order regime, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, when the country benefited from the oil boom (Leigh, 1999). With increased national revenues, the government invested heavily in both formal and non-formal

education sectors as part of its broader development agenda. Non-formal education programs were bolstered through state-supported initiatives and community-driven efforts, particularly in rural and marginalized regions where formal education infrastructure remained underdeveloped. One of the key innovations during this period was the establishment of *Pusat Kegiatan Belajar Masyarakat* (PKBM), or Community Learning Centers, which provided vital services such as literacy programs, life skills training, and equivalency education for school dropouts and adults. These centers played an essential role in expanding access to education for those left out of the formal system. According to the Ministry of Education and Culture, there are currently 10,411 community learning centers across Indonesia, with West Java hosting the largest number at approximately 2,275 centers (Kemdikbud, 2024). These centers offer flexible and context-sensitive learning opportunities, making them critical platforms for achieving educational equity. As highlighted by Sakhiyya and Wijaya-Mulya (2023), PKBMs serve as accessible alternatives that respond to the diverse needs of Indonesia's marginalized populations.

However, despite their contributions, community learning centers continue to face multiple challenges. They are often perceived as inferior to formal schools (Hoppers, 2005), suffer from the social stigma surrounding non-traditional learners (Ramadhan et al., 2023), and deal with bureaucratic issues related to the recognition of equivalency credentials (Rosmilawati, 2016). Yet, as shown in our study of *Omah Dongeng Marwah*, a PKBM in Central Java, these centers can also become transformative spaces. By fostering joyful learning environments and rebuilding student confidence and identity, such centers challenge prevailing stereotypes and help learners overcome structural and economic barriers.

Method

This study is based on a qualitative study conducted in 2023 on *Omah Dongeng Marwah*. In co-constructing the qualitative data, we conducted site visits, and interviews with the principal, teachers and students of the *Omah Dongeng Marwah*. During site visits and observation, we focused on *Omah Dongeng Marwah*'s storytelling and creative writing processes. We also looked at other literacy practices such as extensive reading and book discussion. In the interviews, the questions asked were around the school's philosophy and aspirations; literacy practices, especially storytelling and creative writing; and their perceived contribution to surrounding communities. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and then co-constructed together with field notes.

In addition to observation and interview data, we also undertook document analysis of both the Community Learning Center and Equivalency Program policies from the legal basis of both entities, that is the National Constitution 1945 article 31 stating that 'all citizens have the right to education and the government must provide it', and the National Education System Number 20 Year 2003 up to its curriculum structure. Such information is useful to understand the legal framework of the Equivalency Program and Community Learning Center.

In analysing the qualitative data, we use thematic analysis techniques modelled by Braun and Clarke (2006). Driven by the research question specified in the introduction section, the emerging themes were then explored inductively. More specifically, the analysis begins with generating, reviewing, naming and articulating the codes and themes that emerge from the data. The keywords that emerged in the analysis are storytelling, creative writing, confidence, identity, meaningful, agency and voice. These keywords are central to the critical literacy practices at *Omah Dongeng Marwah* in their pursuit of providing an inclusive and equitable education. They are described in detail below.

Findings and Discussion

This study highlights two main critical literacy practices as performed in the *Omah Dongeng Marwah* community learning center, that is, storytelling and creative writing. Our findings demonstrate that both storytelling and creative writing provide an alternative avenue of literacy improvement and empowerment by enhancing students' voice, agency, and engagement in the learning process. Storytelling and creative writing when undertaken in a meaningful way can serve as a vehicle for improving reading skills as students are exposed to diverse narratives, whereas creative writing offers students the opportunity to practice writing in authentic, meaningful ways.

Storytelling: Building Confidence and Identity

As its name suggests, *Omah Dongeng Marwah* (ODM) carries deep symbolic meaning. *"Omah Dongeng"* translates to "house of stories," while *"Marwah"* refers to dignity and identity. Together, the name reflects the center's vision: to provide a space where learning is grounded in storytelling, allowing students to reconnect with their identities, rebuild their confidence, and find joy in learning, especially in the face of the economic, social, and emotional barriers that often accompany dropping out of formal education. Storytelling becomes both a pedagogical tool and a therapeutic process, enabling learners to reshape their narratives and imagine new futures.

The founding of ODM was driven by a critical reflection on the harsh and often traumatic experiences that the founders and many of the students had endured in formal schooling. As recounted by the head of ODM, the organization emerged from "a cul-de-sac in formal education," where punishment and humiliation were routine. One of the triggering moments was when a student had their socks burned by a teacher simply because they were the wrong color, such an incident that left deep emotional scars. This and similar experiences prompted the formation of

an alternative learning environment that rejects such authoritarian practices. Below is the interview with the head of ODM:

Omah Dongeng Marwah was born out of the cul-de-sac in formal education. We did not feel comfortable learning in formal schooling. For example, only due to coloured socks, they were burnt by the teachers and it caused trauma for the students. These kinds of stories have contributed to the establishment of ODM. For those reasons, tutors of ODM do not want to reproduce the ways formal teachers bring themselves during learning processes. What I mean is that perhaps it is good to be firm to students, but that response might embarrass them and create trauma.

At ODM, the learning environment is intentionally designed to be humane, empathetic, and non-traumatizing. Tutors, many of whom are themselves survivors of punitive schooling, are committed to breaking the cycle. Discipline, when necessary, is handled gently and privately, never intended to embarrass or shame the learner. The center emphasizes emotional healing and mutual respect between students and tutors. Rather than reproducing the rigid hierarchies of formal education, ODM fosters a community of care, creativity, and shared growth—where students are seen, heard, and valued. This approach exemplifies an alternative, equitable model of education rooted in compassion and cultural relevance. The head of ODM continues the way the learning center creates a humane learning atmosphere:

Therefore, the way we resolved the trauma of formal schooling here is done secretly or taking the case with the individual only. The tutors here are also mostly victims of fierce teachers... Therefore, as much as possible, we do not apply such treatment to students. We create a humane learning atmosphere.

During classroom visits and observation, it is evident that students are not hesitant in telling their stories. The learning facilitators or tutors handle the students with aplomb, and it is actually a long pursuit of the right formula to tell stories.

Before ODM was established, we held a Storytelling Training Workshop. We brought in experts from Semarang and then we opened it to the public. The workshop participants who we considered suitable were the ones who eventually became mentors here. Although we realise that our skills are not yet experts in the field of storytelling, we have received fundamental concepts and methods of storytelling.

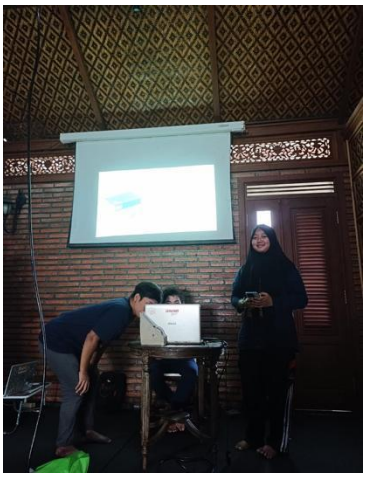
It is interesting to observe that storytelling at ODM functions not merely as a cognitive exercise in narrative recall, but as an emotionally resonant and self-reflective practice. As Fialho (2019) argues, storytelling enables individuals to engage with fiction in ways that deepen self-awareness and allow personal meaning-making. In this context, learners are not just repeating stories. They are, instead, re-authoring their own identities and experiences through the act of telling. This process appears to have a significant impact on students' self-confidence and their ability to express themselves publicly.

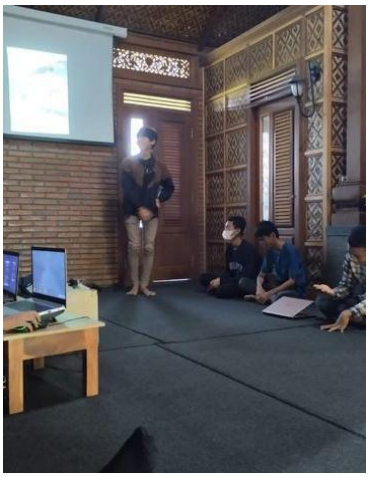
This connection between storytelling, confidence, and self-expression is strongly affirmed in our interview with one of the facilitators below:

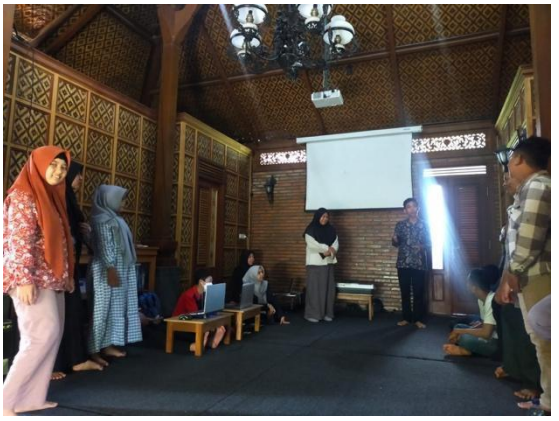
There might be some children who lack confidence to speak ... Well, speaking in front of many people can be scary ... We believe that public speaking has a powerful influence, because when we start to feel comfortable here and then accepts the habits here by telling stories, well, we will try to explore: how can I tell stories in front of many people without being shy or being insecure? We had this one learner. In the beginning, he didn't want to speak in front of many people because he had a trauma during his elementary school. He didn't want to talk. Now here, he dares to speak in front of many people. So it's more about public speaking skills and self-confidence.

The above interview quote illustrates how storytelling within a safe and supportive environment becomes a tool for healing past trauma and fostering new capacities. The transformation of a once-silent learner into

a confident speaker shows how storytelling can scaffold both communication skills and emotional resilience.







Storytelling, therefore, can be a viable and effective tool to acquire literacy, build student confidence and re-shape their identities. By valuing students' unique stories and perspectives, ODM demonstrates that equivalency programs can be a transformative educational experience, building literacy and empowering individuals to navigate and shape their futures.

Creative Writing as a Site of Meaning Making

Another core literacy activity at ODM is creative writing, which provides students with the freedom and encouragement to develop their own ideas and select research topics that resonate with their personal experiences. This practice not only fosters autonomy and motivation but also cultivates a deeper engagement with the writing process (Webb, 2017). Unlike functional literacy approaches commonly used in formal schools which often prioritize mechanical skills and standardized outputs, ODM uses creative writing which aligns with the principles of critical literacies. As Zacher Pandya et al. (2021) argue, critical literacies enable students to approach literacy as a relevant, engaging, and personally meaningful activity. At ODM, students are encouraged to write about topics that matter to them, such as family, community issues, or social justice concerns. This approach transforms writing from a task into a form of expression and empowerment, making learning an active, participatory, and reflective process that builds both literacy and voice.

In the value system of '*Nata Bersama'*, these discussions are crucial as they encourage values such as creating, learning, and exchanging perspectives. For example, '*mencipta*' (to create) is a term not commonly used in Javanese, but it holds the same meaning. It encourages creativity. Similarly, if someone becomes a mentor, they continue learning. Discussions are an integral part of the learning process, especially for writing, it can be a brainstorming process. After expressing themselves, children engage in discussions to further develop their understanding and deepen their writing. In '*Nata Bersama'*, it is important to instill these values, and interactions should be conducted in a respectful manner.

The interview excerpt above highlights the significant role of creative writing and the local value of *Nata Bersama* in fostering a culture of learning, creativity and mutual respect. Within the *Nata Bersama* framework, discussions are central as they promote key values such as creating, learning and exchanging perspectives. These discussions are not

just about exchanging ideas but also about fostering creativity, as seen in the use of the term '*mencipta*' (to create), which encourages individuals to express their thoughts and ideas through creative writing (Webb, 2017). Writing becomes a tool for self-expression, but it is through discussion that the written ideas are further developed, refined and deepened. The role of the mentor in this system is also crucial, as being a mentor does not only involve teaching but also continuous learning. This highlights the reciprocal nature of learning in *Nata Bersama*, where both the mentor and the mentee learn and grow through interaction.

It is interesting to note that students at ODM demonstrate a growing awareness of the constructed nature of stories and other writing genres. This is evident in how they engage with the creative writing process. It is seen not as a one-time task, but as an evolving craft that involves reflection, revision, and refinement. Many students engage in vigorous editing of their drafts, suggesting that they are not only thinking critically about the ideas they express but also actively seeking to improve the clarity, coherence, and impact of their writing. This level of engagement reveals that students are beginning to understand writing as a recursive process and storytelling as a purposeful act shaped by choices in language, structure, and tone.

This development, of course, does not happen in isolation. Facilitators at ODM play a crucial role in mentoring students throughout the process. They act as attentive readers and responsive guides who provide constructive feedback, helping students notice inconsistencies, expand on underdeveloped ideas, or enhance their expression. This mentoring relationship is fundamental, as it fosters trust and creates a supportive space where students feel safe to explore and improve. As Simac et al. (2021) emphasize, adult mentoring is a cornerstone of effective youth programs, particularly in literacy development, where encouragement and guidance are essential to helping young people find and refine their voice. The interview with the Head of ODM confirms this:

Our role is to accompany and guide them to stay on their passion. In the past, we brought in experts to teach the children. We brought in make-up experts, film experts and so on. But for now, we accompany students in developing their passion due to financial limitations.

Another important thing to note is that during the brainstorming and creative writing process at ODM, translanguaging practices naturally emerge, with students fluidly shifting between Bahasa Indonesia, Javanese, and occasionally English. This dynamic use of multiple languages allows learners to express their ideas more fully and authentically, reflecting the realities of their bi- or multilingual lives. Rather than restricting language use or insisting on standard forms, facilitators at ODM embrace students' diverse linguistic repertoires, encouraging them to think, speak, and write in the language they are most comfortable with. This pedagogical approach affirms that all languages hold value and are essential tools for meaning making. By not correcting or interrupting this process, facilitators foster an inclusive learning space where students are treated as whole individuals. As Turnbull (2019) suggests, such translanguaging practices support deeper engagement and identity formation in multilingual contexts which eventually contribute to creative writing.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that a community learning center and equivalency provider in Kudus, Central Java called Omah Dongeng Marwah (ODM) offers an alternative educational approach that not only improves literacy but also empowers students by enhancing their voice, agency, and engagement in the learning process. Our findings reveal that storytelling at ODM builds students' confidence and strengthens their sense of identity, while creative writing becomes a space of meaning-making, enabling learners to engage in literacy practices that are deeply connected to their lived experiences. Storytelling functions as a tool for

improving reading comprehension and self-expression, while creative writing allows students to develop critical thinking and narrative skills in ways that are both authentic and transformative.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the growing body of work on critical literacy and culturally relevant pedagogy (Janks, 2010; Freire, 1970; Zacher Pandya et al., 2021). It shows how critical literacies, when situated within a non-formal and community-based educational setting, can challenge the dominant, functionalist models of literacy often found in formal schooling. Rather than treating students as passive recipients of knowledge, ODM positions them as active participants in their learning, encouraging them to engage with texts, share their experiences, and articulate their aspirations. By valuing students' unique stories and voices, ODM exemplifies how alternative education spaces can foster equity, inclusion, and empowerment. In doing so, it reimagines literacy not just as a set of skills, but as a dynamic, relational, and transformative practice that equips learners to navigate and shape their social worlds.

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