Collaboration between Indonesia's Government and UNICEF in Improving Education: The Case of the Early Grade Literacy Program in Papua

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to discuss the Indonesian government's efforts to establish international cooperation in the education sector, with a particular focus on United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). It particularly examines how UNICEF can contribute to addressing literacy challenges in Merauke District, Papua—one of the areas where students exhibit low reading and writing skills in the early years of primary education. From an international relations perspective, it highlights how education diplomacy can strengthen local capabilities through global cooperation, exemplified by UNICEF's Early Grade Literacy Program. Drawing on interviews and program report analysis, this study revealed a significant reduction in non-readers, from almost half to less than a quarter, while the number of students who could read and comprehend texts fluently almost doubled. Creative engagement, like the use of songs, teaching aids, and parent education campaigns, proved the effectiveness of international cooperation at a local scale. These findings not only support the inclusive education targets in the SDGs but also reinforce the strategic role of education diplomacy in addressing disparities in marginalized areas.

KEYWORDS

Education; Indonesia; International Cooperation; Papua; UNICEF

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INTRODUCTION

This article examines the Indonesian government's efforts to establish international cooperation in the education sector, with a particular focus on United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The partnership between the two parties focuses on improving basic literacy skills in Merauke[1] Regency, Papua Province, by referring to the analysis of the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) baseline and endline results from the 2021–2022 school year. The EGRA test measures a student's ability to read each letter, syllable, and word, as well as listening ability, reading fluency, and reading comprehension (Stern & Nordstrum, 2014). To this end, this article presents the EGRA test results to determine the extent to which the quality of education in Papua has improved.

The quality of education is one of the critical issues that needs serious attention in Papua, one of the poorest regions in Indonesia. It is certainly encouraged to be improved through the formal education process in schools. Formal education in Indonesia begins with basic education, which focuses on teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic skills. This ability is the initial foundation of all student learning processes to understand advanced learning such as science, mathematics, technology, high-order thinking skills (HOTS), and even character education. However, the 2014 national early grade reading assessment survey showed that only 47 percent, specifically in eastern Indonesia (East Nusa Tenggara, Maluku, and Papua), only 23 percent of second-grade students read fluently and understood the meaning, meaning they were eligible to continue to third grade. Then, in 2015, baseline data showed that almost half of grade 2 and 3 students (48.5 percent) in Papua and West Papua provinces were non-readers compared to 5.9 percent nationally (United Nations Day for South-South Cooperation, 2022). This trend reflects structural challenges shared across Southeast Asia, where subnational disparities in human capital severely affect foundational literacy outcomes (Sari & Tiwari, 2024).

Papua's illiteracy rate is also still among the highest, with data from the Central Statistics Agency in 2020 at 20.38 percent (BPS Provinsi Papua, 2020). The latest data recorded that only 36.1 percent of third-grade elementary school children in Papua have literacy skills such as reading and understanding their reading content. They are based on a survey by the humanitarian organization Wahana Visi Indonesia (WVI) in late 2022 in Sentani, Biak, Central Mountains, and Asmat (Pristiandaru, 2023). Based on data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) 2022, Papua is classified as the province with the most illiterate population because only about 18.81 percent of people can read (BPS Provinsi Papua, 2021). Illiteracy in Papua is more pronounced when the population is far from urban and education service centers rather than in urban areas. The disparity is most pronounced in the highland districts where illiteracy rates range from 48 percent to 92 percent (Nielsen, 2015). Although Merauke Regency 2017 has shown a downward trend in the illiteracy rate

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[1]In this article, Merauke refers to a region that was part of Papua Province before the *pemekaran* (partition) that led to the creation of South Papua Province in 2022.

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from 4.63 to 1.70 percent in 2020 (Asimiyati et al., 2019), improvements still need to be made to alleviate this illiteracy problem.

The data above demonstrates the importance of improving the quality of education in Papua. This has become a special concern for the government during President Joko Widodo's administration. The administration incorporated literacy policies into the development of Nawacita (Kompas, 2014) by including this Nawacita in the Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJM) for 2015-2019 and through the relevant ministries issued by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology (Kemendikbud Ristek) Regulation No. 23 Year 2015 on Cultivating Budi Pekerti in support of the Nawacita goal of creating a superior generation. In addition, the Widodo's administration, through the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology, with support from the UNICEF and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)[2], launched the Early Grade Literacy (EGL) program which aims to improve teachers' skills and children's reading and comprehension skills.

The main strategies of the EGL program include teacher capacity building through training and mentoring, provision of contextualized learning materials, community mobilization, and policy advocacy for scalability through prioritizing local government resources to promote sustainable development (United Nations Day for South-South Cooperation, 2022). The Ministry of Home Affairs (MoHA), which oversees provincial and district governments, also provided a circular letter to governors and separately to district heads across Indonesia to support the UNICEF literacy program. The Minister of Home Affairs Regulation reinforced the circular on the Guidelines for the Preparation of the 2020 Regional Government Work Plan (No. 31/2019), which emphasizes that in the Development of Education Affairs, local governments need to "pay attention to the implementation of school literacy education by referring to the applicable laws and regulations." In this case, local governments must "improve and develop school literacy education in the provinces and districts/cities" (Kemendikdasmen, 2022).

UNICEF's Early Grade Literacy (EGL) program with the Government of Indonesia and the Papua Regional Government from 2015 to 2024 represents a strategic international collaboration to strengthen national education policy through literacy program innovation in Papua. The presence of UNICEF not only supports program operations but also enriches global education governance with creative and participatory approaches that engage local stakeholders. By directing attention toward marginalized regions, this study offers empirical insights into the adaptation of global initiatives to local contexts, with the objective of catalyzing positive social transformation. The findings of this study also contribute to

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[2] Although the role of DFAT is acknowledged, this study focuses solely on UNICEF in order to examine institutional cooperation between international organizations and countries (sub-national entities). This focus is also due to limited access to specific DFAT data relevant to the topic

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strengthening the existing body of literature on international relations by providing a concrete example of how middle-income countries, such as Indonesia, collaborate with multilateral institutions to achieve the objective of providing quality and inclusive education.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

International Cooperation

The concept of International Cooperation Theory has emerged as a critical component within the domain of international relations, addressing the manner in which states and other actors engage in cooperative endeavors grounded in mutually agreed principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures (see Barrett, 1999; Milner, 1992; O'neill et al., 2004). The evolution of the theory from a traditional state-centric paradigm to a more inclusive framework has been a subject of considerable scholarly attention. This evolution has been marked by the incorporation of additional actors, such as intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), companies, political parties, and ethnic and terrorist groups (Saeri, 2012). This approach finds particular pertinence in complex global contexts, where rational choice and game theory are employed to elucidate the dynamics of collaboration among entities confronted with shared challenges (Dai et al., 2010).

Under an institutional lens, international cooperation is regarded as a mechanism in which institutions serve a mediating role, aiming to reduce barriers such as national pride, political tensions, and mistrust between states. A notable actor in this context is international organizations, which, by leveraging their credibility, expertise, and financial resources, are able to foster a conducive environment that facilitates the realization of agreements that might otherwise be challenging to achieve bilaterally. A notable illustration of this mechanism is the role of UNICEF, which functions not only as a provider of technical assistance and funding, but also as a strategic mediator in overcoming various structural obstacles in efforts to enhance the quality of education in areas necessitating particular attention (Schiff & Winters, 2010).

In the context of this theory, UNICEF plays a very significant role as an independent actor in promoting international cooperation, especially on issues related to the welfare and rights of children. As part of the United Nations (UN), UNICEF has built strategic partnerships with various global actors to ensure that every child in the world gets the rights they deserve, including the right to education (Bahter, 2020). Through innovative initiatives and cross-country collaboration, UNICEF proves how an international organization can catalyze practical international cooperation (Pratiwi, 2024).

One of UNICEF's key areas of focus is education. UNICEF ensures that every child has equal access to education without discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, social status, or

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geographic location. They work to reduce disparities in access to education by working with governments and educational institutions in various countries to design inclusive policies. UNICEF's interventions in education across Southeast Asia illustrate the evolving role of international actors in soft-power diplomacy through child-centered policy implementation (Boughton, 2018). UNICEF is also committed to improving the quality of education through the development of relevant curricula and effective teaching methods (Adhanofa et al., 2024). By providing technical assistance, UNICEF is helping countries improve the quality of teaching and learning, which will positively impact the well-being of children globally (Prayuda et al., 2020).

The cooperation mediated by UNICEF reflects the essence of international cooperation theory, demonstrating how global actors can overcome structural barriers to achieve common goals. With a collaborative and strategic approach, UNICEF has not only succeeded in championing children's rights but has also become a living example of how international cooperation can create meaningful change in the world. These initiatives demonstrate that cross-border collaboration is crucial for countries and the global community as a whole.

This study employs the framework of international cooperation theory to examine the institutional framework of UNICEF as an international organization within the educational context of the Papua region, with a particular focus on Merauke. This approach is distinct from prior research, as evidenced by a study by Witdianti (2018) that described an indigenous literacy strategy implemented in collaboration with UNICEF. Witdianti's strategy employed the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) test to assess children's literacy advancement in Papua. It indicates that a contextualized strategy integrating local values with contemporary learning methodologies can yield substantial enhancements in students' reading and comprehension abilities. Witdianti (2018) focuses on the integration of indigenous cultural content into EGR-driven literacy lessons from a pedagogical perspective. Conversely, this article employs international cooperation theory to analyze UNICEF's institutional mechanisms and multi-level governance structures in orchestrating the Early Grade Literacy program across Merauke.

The findings of Baker (2016) and UNICEF (2022) primarily adopt a quantitative lens, measuring the impact of EGRA-based interventions through pre- and post-test score gains, percentage increases in decoding and comprehension rates, and statistical analyses of program reach and efficiency (UNICEF, 2022). For instance, they document how intensive teacher training and innovative materials can lead to significant improvements in reading fluency across different groups of students. In contrast, our study employs a qualitative, theory-driven approach grounded in international cooperation theory. It examines how UNICEF's institutional design, governance mechanisms, and multi-level partnerships (national, provincial, and district) enable the localization and sustainability of Early Grade

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Literacy (EGL) in Merauke. Rather than emphasizing numeric outcomes, the study examines decision-making processes, stakeholder interactions, and policy adaptations. This approach unveils the diplomatic strategies and organizational structures that facilitate EGRA implementation. This transition from an emphasis on "what works" (Baker, 2016; UNICEF, 2022) to a focus on "how and why it works" sets our research apart by delving into the underlying cooperative frameworks that drive program effectiveness.

Furthermore, studies like Baker (2016), Boughton (2018), Stern & Nordstrum (2014), and The SMERU Research Institute (2012) frequently adopted a more restricted approach in examining the factors that influence program success, emphasizing technical aspects of implementation such as teacher training and the provision of teaching materials. This methodological preference offers a clear depiction of the direct impact of literacy programs on student learning outcomes. However, it does not thoroughly explore the dynamics of inter-agency collaboration and the strategic role of international actors in the context of education development in areas with geographical challenges and limited infrastructure. In contrast to these approaches, this study employs a more in-depth qualitative method to analyze the implementation of UNICEF's Early Grade Literacy (EGL) program in Papua, particularly in the context of cooperation between the Government of Indonesia and UNICEF using international cooperation theory.

By examining the effectiveness of the involved institutions and the mechanisms of cooperation applied, this study aims to illuminate how the policies and implementation of the EGL program reflect the principles of global cooperation in enhancing access to education for vulnerable groups. In addition to underscoring the role of UNICEF as an international actor, this study also explores how local policies respond to the intervention. The objective of this analysis is to assess the extent to which the principles of international cooperation can be adapted in the context of remote area education in Indonesia.

The Concept of Quality Education: A Reflection on Sustainable Development Goal 4

Quality education is an essential foundation for realizing sustainable human development. UNICEF defines quality education as an inclusive and equitable process that provides all children with opportunities for lifelong learning, regardless of their background or circumstances (Khoirunnisa & Firmansyah, 2024). This process should occur in an environment that is safe, welcoming, and supportive of children's development. Tom Ward emphasizes this concept, explaining that quality education is not just about academic achievement but also about the combination of educators' skills, abilities, dedication, and care for students to prepare them for the challenges of life (Ward, 2022). This perspective reflects the complexity of quality education, which includes curriculum relevance, active engagement, and responsiveness to student needs.

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In the global context, the assessment of quality education is guided by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) point four, which includes a multifaceted framework to ensure inclusive, equitable education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. One of the key indicators is access to education, which ensures that every child, without discrimination, receives a quality pre-primary education that prepares them for the next level of education (Ghany, 2018). Graduation rates are also significant, with all children expected to complete free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education, resulting in relevant and practical learning. In addition, inclusive education is one of the priorities for ensuring child-friendly, disability-inclusive, and gender-sensitive education facilities, creating a safe and comfortable learning environment.

The interaction of various factors, such as the role of teachers, the curriculum, parental involvement, and the learning environment, influences the quality of education. Teachers play a key role in building a conducive learning environment with their competence and upbeat personalities. An optimistic and supportive teacher can increase students' motivation to learn. A well-designed curriculum is an important cornerstone, providing clear direction and relevance of materials that meet students' needs (Agung, 2010). Conversely, parental involvement also significantly impacts children's motivation and educational success, mainly through support in extracurricular activities.

The learning environment, including the family's socioeconomic status and the educational atmosphere, contributes to student achievement. In addition, technology integration is becoming an increasingly important aspect, especially in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Digital skills such as programming and digital responsibility support learning and prepare students for the future job market. UNICEF (2000) emphasizes the importance of a holistic approach to quality education, including attention to child nutrition, family support, and a community that supports learning (Febrineng, 2024). This is combined with relevant learning content, which includes literacy, social skills, gender equality, and peace, to equip students with competencies that support positive participation in society.

In Indonesia, collaborative efforts between the government and UNICEF are a clear example of realizing quality education, especially in areas such as Papua through the EGL (Early Grade Literacy) program. This program aims to improve the competence of educators through training and developing effective teaching methods (Comings, 2015). In its implementation, the program focuses on factors that affect the quality of education, such as improving teachers' pedagogical skills and providing supportive educational facilities. With this approach, the government and UNICEF strive to meet global education standards and ensure that quality education is accessible to all children, including in the most remote areas (UNICEF, 2021).

The discussion on quality education revolves not only around the infrastructure or curriculum aspects but also the education process that focuses on effective teaching methods

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relevant to students' needs. Through an inclusive and collaborative approach, quality education improves academic outcomes and shapes a generation ready to face future challenges. Thus, quality education becomes a strategic investment to realize a just, prosperous, and sustainable society.

METHODS

This article adopts a qualitative approach with the aim of analyzing phenomena in depth and presenting data descriptively (Bennett & Elman, 2007). The main focus of this paper is to explore the implementation of UNICEF's Early Grade Literacy (EGL) program in improving the quality of education in Papua, particularly in Merauke regency. The data used in this study consisted of primary and secondary data. This study integrates both primary and secondary data to offer a comprehensive understanding of the implementation of UNICEF's EGL program in Papua. Primary data was obtained through in-depth interviews with four key informants and they were selected by purposive and snowball sampling through recommendations from the Education Office (see table 1).

Table 1 Characteristics of Interviewee Participants

No	Subject of the interviewee	Initial name	Gender	Date of interviewee
1	The Head of the Primary and Secondary Education Local Content Curriculum Development Section at the Merauke District Education Office	YBK	Men	17th April 2024
2	Early Grade Teacher 1	IS	Women	19th April 2024
3	Early Grade Teacher 2	SH	Women	19th April 2024
4	Facilitator, Early Grade Literacy Program in Merauke District	RES	Women	12th April 2024

Source: Data collected through in-depth interviews (April 2024)

Prior to the interviews, authors obtained written approval from the education office in the form of a research permit and confirmed informed consent verbally at each session. The inquiries concentrated on the program implementation period, the implementation form in schools, field challenges, and informants' perceptions of the effectiveness of EGL. The qualitative information is reported using informants' initials and job titles to maintain anonymity, while secondary data analysis strengthens the field findings in assessing the policies, practices, and dynamics of international cooperation behind the program's success.

Secondary data were collected through a comprehensive literature study of books, journal articles, official reports, news, and other credible web sources. The literature study aimed to collect relevant literature to provide insight into the background, context and dynamics of UNICEF's EGL program, while interviews were conducted to obtain direct

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perspectives from relevant stakeholders. The data obtained was then analyzed using descriptive qualitative analysis techniques to systematically link the research findings with the research objectives (Muktaf, 2016). The analysis was conducted with descriptive qualitative data analysis techniques to develop a detailed narrative about the implementation of the EGL program, its impact on education quality, and the challenges and opportunities in its implementation. This research also uses a deductive approach in its writing method, starting with a general discussion of the cooperation between the Government of Indonesia and UNICEF in the field of education, then focusing on the implementation of UNICEF's EGL program and its impact on the quality of education in Papua. With this approach, this study makes a significant scientific contribution in understanding the effectiveness of international cooperation in improving education in areas that need special attention.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Cooperation between the Government of Indonesia and UNICEF in the Education Sector

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has been essential in the fight for children's rights worldwide. Founded on December 11, 1946, UNICEF was initially established to provide emergency relief to children affected by war in Europe, China, and the Middle East (Baughan, 2017). However, in 1953, the UN General Assembly expanded UNICEF's mandate, making it an official part of the UN. The organization focuses on providing humanitarian assistance and supporting the long-term well-being of children and mothers, particularly in developing countries. This commitment is realized through various strategic initiatives aimed at improving the quality of life of children, including in education.

UNICEF's presence in Indonesia dates back to 1948 when the organization provided emergency aid to prevent hunger and malnutrition in Lombok (Nugraha et al., 2022). In 1949, UNICEF worked with the Indonesian government to build a milk kitchen in Yogyakarta to improve children's nutrition (Widuri et al., 2023). During the Repelita era (1969), this collaboration expanded further to include technical and financial assistance for health and education programs. Over the decades, UNICEF has expanded its involvement, covering many sectors, including education, health, child protection, and poverty alleviation. Spanning from Aceh to Papua, UNICEF works as a government partner and a pioneer in research, publishing policy reports, and providing strategic advice to develop more inclusive policy directions.

In education, UNICEF has been a driving force behind innovations to address complex challenges. In the 1970s and 1980s, UNICEF focused on improving access to basic education, particularly in rural and underdeveloped areas, through school construction, teacher training, and curriculum development. The global "Education for All" (EFA) initiative introduced in 1984 became an important milestone that encouraged Indonesia to adopt

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strategies to increase school enrollment rates and reduce educational disparities (The SMERU Research Institute, 2012). UNICEF also introduced the Child-Friendly School (CFS) model, which creates a safe, inclusive, and effective learning environment (Susanti et al., 2021). Through this approach, UNICEF launched a program designed to improve girls' education by addressing the cultural and socioeconomic barriers that have been a hindrance.

In the 2000s, UNICEF's work focused on supporting the decentralization of education management, developing early childhood education, and integrating children with disabilities into the mainstream education system. Following the tsunami that hit Aceh in 2004, UNICEF played a critical role in rebuilding the education infrastructure and ensuring the sustainability of education in the affected areas (Safarina & Suzanna, 2021). In recent years, UNICEF introduced digital and distance learning programs, which proved crucial during the COVID-19 pandemic. The organization has also prioritized improving schools' water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities and integrating disaster preparedness into education programs, given Indonesia's high vulnerability to natural disasters.

One of UNICEF's flagship initiatives in Indonesia is the "Safe to Return Learning" program, designed as part of the post-pandemic recovery strategy (Aldela et al., 2024) . The program focuses on two provinces, South Sulawesi and Papua, with the support of the Government of Japan. The initiative includes education, health, child protection, and sanitation interventions. UNICEF also launched the program "Skills4Girls," designed to empower adolescent girls through the development of 21st-century skills, including STEM, digital technology, entrepreneurship, problem-solving, negotiation, and communication (Plourde et al., 2020). The program, which Clé de Peau Beauté supports, aims to help teenage girls optimize their potential to face the challenges of the modern world.

UNICEF and Indonesia's collaboration demonstrates how strategic partnerships can significantly improve the lives of children, especially those in vulnerable circumstances. With a data-driven approach and targeted interventions, UNICEF has helped ensure that children across Indonesia, regardless of background or location, have access to quality, inclusive, and sustainable education. This collaboration is a clear example of how international cooperation can make a real impact, making education the key to creating a brighter future for future generations.

UNICEF Education Program in Papua

One strategic step UNICEF has taken to improve education in Papua is through the Rural and Remote Education Initiative for Papuan Provinces program (Australian Government, 2017). This program addresses the geographical and social challenges faced by children in Papua and West Papua, particularly those living in rural and remote areas. With limited infrastructure and minimal educational opportunities, UNICEF launched various initiatives, including the Early Grade Literacy (EGL) program (UNICEF, 2021). This program

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demonstrates UNICEF's commitment to ensuring that every child in Papua has access to quality education regardless of background.

The EGL program, initiated in 2015, emphasizes the enhancement of reading and writing abilities at the foundational levels of primary education (grades one, two, and three). The program facilitates intensive training for educators, encompassing aspects such as classroom administration, literacy development, positive discipline techniques, and library management. This approach is further supported by the provision of contextualized teaching materials, customized to align with the local cultural and linguistic diversity, thereby enhancing learning retention and student comprehension. The efficacy of the program has been demonstrated by its implementation, as evidenced by the notable enhancement in the literacy levels of students (UNICEF, 2021). In 2018, in low-performing schools, the proportion of students who could not read dropped from 62 per cent to 26 per cent, while the proportion of students who could read increased from 6 per cent to 18 per cent (United Nations Day for South-South Cooperation, 2022).

Previous studies on education interventions in remote areas emphasize the importance of integrating infrastructure improvements with the development of contextualized teaching materials. For example, in the Rural and Remote Education Initiative for Papuan Provinces, Australian Government (2017) highlighted the importance of providing adequate learning facilities and locally relevant teaching materials. In addition, programs such as the post-pandemic "Safe to Return Learning" and "Skills4Girls" initiatives emphasize the need to combine technology support, teacher training and gender empowerment to create inclusive learning environments (Aldela et al., 2024; Plourde et al., 2020). Amidst these efforts, EGL offers a unique approach with a specific focus on improving literacy through intensive teacher training and the use of locally tailored teaching materials.

The data-driven approach adopted in the EGL program, through the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) test, enables precise identification of students' literacy needs so that interventions can be tailored accordingly. The uniqueness of this program also lies in the collaborative strategy that integrates aspects of education policy, teacher capacity building and community empowerment. By involving various stakeholders - from local governments, local communities and international organizations - EEGL has created synergies that have resulted in sustainable and measurable changes, such as a reduction in illiteracy rates and an increase in the ability to read with comprehension (Baker, 2016; Government & Indonesia, 2021).

Moreover, UNICEF's commitment to enhancing literacy extends beyond direct intervention, encompassing advocacy for policy reforms that foster an enabling environment for education. These policies include, but are not limited to, augmented funding, the strategic recruitment and retention of qualified teachers. The EGL program has been incorporated into the post-pandemic learning recovery strategy, with the Ministry of Home

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Affairs promoting a unified approach among districts to prioritize literacy. This comprehensive and evidence-based strategy ensures that children in Papua, irrespective of their geographical location, have equal opportunities to develop literacy skills, while also cultivating a learning ecosystem that engages parents and local communities.

Consequently, UNICEF's commitment to this holistic and data-driven approach ensures that children in Papua, irrespective of their geographical location, have equal opportunities to develop literacy skills. The EGL program is not merely a tool to address education challenges in Papua; it is also a practical model of international cooperation that integrates local communities, governments, and global organizations to create real change for future generations and meaningfully address education challenges. The integration of infrastructure improvements, the development of contextualized teaching materials, intensive teacher training, and education policy advocacy serves as a testament to the efficacy of this intervention model in fostering an inclusive and sustainable learning environment. Furthermore, it demonstrates that this approach can be replicated in regions grappling with similar challenges to achieve long-term educational transformation.

Implementation of UNICEF's Early Grade Literacy Program in Merauke, Papua

The Early Grade Literacy (EGL) program implemented in Papua, particularly in Merauke Regency, is one of UNICEF's strategic efforts to enhance the quality of education, with a specific focus on strengthening children's literacy skills in the early stages of primary education. The program is designed to support relevant and effective learning processes through various methods, such as intensive training for teaching staff, mentoring and supervision, and providing early-grade literacy manuals and contextualized teaching materials. With this approach, the EGL program aims to ensure that every child has an equal opportunity to develop the reading and writing skills that are essential for their education.

Implementing this program involves a comprehensive assessment to measure students' literacy competencies, one of which is the EGRA (Early Grade Reading Assessment) test. This test is used to identify students' reading ability based on several indicators, such as the ability to recognize letters, syllables, and words, reading fluency, and reading comprehension (Comings, 2015). Based on the EGRA test results, which is shown in table 2 as follows;

Table 2. EGRA Test Results

Reading Comprehension (PB) Answer Categories	EGRA Baseline Sample Analysis	Baseline in %	EGRA Endline Sample Analysis	Endline in %
Not a reader	175	50	79	22
Readers with reading	37	11	46	13

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comprehension				
Readers with limited understanding	56	16	68	19
Fluent reader with reading comprehension	84	24	171	47
Grand Total	352	100	364	100

Source: Dinas Pendidikan Kabupaten Merauke (2023)

The table shows the results of the EGRA test in several primary schools in Merauke Regency such as SD[3] YPPK Xaverius II, SD Inpres Polder, SD Inpres Seringgu, SD Muhammadiyah, SD Negeri 1 Merauke, SD Negeri 2 Merauke, SD YAPIS 1, SD YPPK Hati Kudus, SD YPPK St. Theresia Buti, SD YPPK St. Tarsisius Biankuk. The data of EGRA divide students into several categories that reflect their literacy needs. The first group includes students who still need to recognize letters or not a reader; the second group consists of students who are learning to recognize words with reading comprehension; the third group includes students who can understand short stories with limited understanding; and last group is fluent reader with reading comprehension. This division provides a reference for teachers to develop learning strategies that suit the needs of each group so that it can have a more significant impact on student progress.

In addition, the available data indicates changes that tend to increase in each category of reading comprehension. The category of readers with an understanding of reading rose by 2%, while readers with limited understanding rose by 3% and fluent readers with reading comprehension rose by 23%. In comparison, the category of non-readers fell 28%. This certainly shows the changes that have occurred with the EGL in Merauke. These results are in line with previous findings validating the EGRA as a reliable tool for measuring literacy in Indonesia (Brinkman et al., 2017). Indeed, it has not yet been seen when talking about significant results and improvements. Still, with the existence of teaching patterns and learning materials that are creative and liked by children, it is hoped that they can be further developed so that the SDGs target is a global common development goal.

Futhermore, the EGL program brings various innovations to the learning process. One of these innovations is the provision of interesting teaching materials, such as storybooks, letter cards, and song and dance-based activities adapted to Merauke's natural and cultural conditions. This approach creates a fun but optimal learning atmosphere to attract students, especially those in the early grades (UNICEF, 2024). Teachers from SD Cenderawasih Spadem, one of the program's target schools since 2022, reported that the literacy program has been very helpful in increasing students' enthusiasm for learning. IS and SH , teachers at the school, revealed that:

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[3] "SD" stands for *Sekolah Dasar* in Indonesian, which translates to elementary school or primary school.

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We have participated for two years from 2022 until now. The application is learning while playing, with media such as fairy tale books, letter cards, and letter songs. Children really enjoy this program. The props also adjust to the surrounding conditions and the school's ability. It is even common for children to invite them to sing and learn letters with these early grade literacy-style learning patterns.

Then, this approach is very popular with students because it is in accordance with local conditions and school capabilities, and EGL is also designed so that learning materials are contextual, touching on students' daily lives. One example is when the rainy atmosphere is used as part of a learning song, as expressed by IS and SH, "this program wants to present a learning process that touches directly on the real conditions faced by children, such as when it is raining, there is a song". Structurally, the program began with a week of intensive training for teachers from 10 schools through an in-house training scheme. As stated by RES as the program facilitator, "the in-house training was conducted at the beginning with 10 schools for about one week... then we assisted and monitored when the teachers were implementing in grades 1 to 3".

After the training, mentoring was provided in the field to ensure teachers were able to implement the nine components of literacy in the classroom. The materials focused on Indonesian lessons were also applied to all other subjects as part of the integration of basic literacy skills. The EGL program also pays special attention to improving reading and writing skills, which are still a big challenge in Papua. YBK, Head of the Local Content Curriculum Development Section for Primary and Secondary Education at the Merauke District Education Office, stated that literacy in Merauke is still relatively low. Many students cannot recognize letters, connect syllables, and read sentences fluently. This condition indicates the need for serious interventions, such as the EGL program, to overcome literacy challenges in the area. In addition, data from the baseline and end-line EGRA tests showed significant progress in some primary schools in the Merauke district, which formed the basis for clustering students' literacy needs.

Successful cooperation between UNICEF and government authorities
The EGL program has been demonstrated to enhance students' competencies and fortify teachers' abilities to present literacy materials in a creative and effective manner. The success of this program can be attributed to the strategic collaboration between UNICEF, the central government, and the local government in Papua. In the context of international cooperation theory, this success underscores the significance of trust, transparency, and the role of mediators in overcoming structural barriers between actors (Saeri, 2012; Schiff & Winters, 2010). In this context, UNICEF's role as a key facilitator is noteworthy, providing essential

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technical and financial resources while also facilitating the exchange of knowledge and expertise among relevant parties. This locally tailored implementation strategy is instrumental in achieving effective and sustainable impact, aligning with the concept of sustainable development that emphasizes quality education. The EGL program also promotes the principles of inclusiveness and sustainability.

This approach involves the active role of the community and parents, as well as the strengthening of the capacity of teachers as agents of change in the learning environment (Khoirunnisa & Firmansyah, 2024). For example, at SD Cenderawasih Spadem, teachers reported that the creative methods applied—utilizing locally appropriate teaching aids—had increased students' enthusiasm for learning. Parental involvement through educational campaigns, such as the classroom reading corner initiative, supports learning at home and strengthens the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) targets in the education sector (Baker, 2016).

The success of the EGL program is not only determined by the quality of implementation at the school level, but also by the effective collaboration between UNICEF and the government, both central and local. The Head of the Curriculum Section at the Merauke Education Office emphasized that this program has a big goal, "UNICEF wants literacy to be completed through formal and non-formal equivalency education ... to achieve ethical, cognitive, and psychomotor improvements so that knowledge can advance". Adapting to the local context is a key strength of this approach, such as the use of local terms, songs, and motor movements as teaching aids. UNICEF also encourages parental and community involvement in children's learning. This was expressed by the Section Head of YBK, "The literacy program is very beneficial, it is even recommended for parents to support by continuing to guide children at home." In the same vein, the head of the program assistant explained that the program includes the community and society, stating that "we also have an 'education campaign'... parents donate tools, help children read at home, even help create a reading corner".

Therefore, the learning process is extended from the classroom to households and local communities. This echoes findings that community-based interventions significantly enhance monitoring and literacy support systems, and is consistent with prior findings that contextualized training rooted in local culture enhances teaching quality and student literacy (Adriany, 2022; Sakhiyya & Mulya, 2023). However, challenges remain, especially in terms of local government support. The literacy facilitator mentioned that "District-level government support is very lacking... when monitoring, they are more busy with other things". She added that despite the strong collaborative approach in the field, the implementation process did not run optimally, "if the local government is half-hearted, the results will also be minimal".

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This initiative can serve as a model for education intervention, with potential for replication in other sectors to address similar challenges. It exemplifies the potential for collaboration between governments and international organizations to create significant impact on improving the quality of education.

Therefore, the EGL program serves as a robust empirical case that illustrates the critical interplay between international cooperation and quality education within the context of international relations. By integrating global expertise from organizations like UNICEF with localized educational initiatives, the program embodies a strategic exercise of soft power whereby normative and technical guidance helps to shape and refine national education policies. The collaboration between international actors, state agencies, and community stakeholders not only bolsters the quality of education through innovative pedagogical practices and curriculum adaptations but also reinforces the sustainable pursuit of the SDGs. In this light, the EGL program's successful deployment in Papua underlines the theoretical premise that practical international development cooperation—grounded in established theories of global governance—can substantively enhance educational outcomes and ultimately contribute to broader societal improvements.

Effectiveness Factors of UNICEF's Early Grade Literacy Program in Papua

The Early Grade Literacy Program in Papua, implemented by UNICEF, has demonstrated a substantial impact on enhancing the quality of education at the early primary school level. Indeed, the program has not only introduced an alternative teaching methodology but also sought to foster an interactive and enjoyable learning environment that is pertinent to the local Papuan context. A notable factor contributing to the program's effectiveness is the strong support of local government policy. Local governments in Papua have exhibited commitment through budgetary allocations that support the integration of literacy programs into the national curriculum. The alignment of these literacy programs with local education strategic plans facilitates more optimal resource distribution and sustainable program implementation (Zaw et al., 2021). Interviews with local education officials indicate that collaboration between government policies and program implementation is pivotal to success, as they provide access to training and contextual learning materials.

The teaching methods in the EGL program are supported by the UNICEF children's agency, which focuses on child welfare, so the programs tend to want to be "close" and "friendly" to children, especially in the area of improving the quality of education that every child should receive. The EGL materials provided to teachers point to how each teacher can provide an approach that not only requires children to achieve classical assessment targets but can be more "heart-to-heart" with each student to help each child with different literacy needs. Through intensive training and mentoring programs organized by UNICEF, teachers in Papua have been able to adopt more innovative teaching methods that are responsive to

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students' needs. RES, an early literacy facilitator, said, "this training has opened our horizons in applying more creative and contextualized teaching methods so that students can more easily understand the material." Findings from a study by Romrome and Ena (2022) also showed that the integration of local cultural elements in teacher training significantly improved teaching effectiveness as well as students' literacy comprehension (Romrome & Ena, 2022).

In fact, this program is often compared to others, such as the Rural and Remote Education Initiative for Papuan Provinces, an initiative to improve the quality of education implemented through international cooperation between Indonesia and Australia, which aims to integrate technical, financial, and experience exchange support in order to overcome the education gap in remote areas in Papua. The Early Grade Literacy (EGL) program implemented by UNICEF in Merauke Papua specifically focuses on improving literacy competencies through intensive teacher training, the use of teaching materials adapted to the local context, and the active involvement of communities and parents. The EGRA-based evaluation showed significant improvements in students' reading skills, as indicated by a reduction in the rate of non-readers and an increase in their ability to read with comprehension. The success of the EGL program confirms that a collaborative approach involving international mediators not only supports the achievement of national education targets but also strengthens the accuracy of interventions in the field through the adaptation of creative and culturally relevant teaching methods (Comings, 2015; Indriani, 2024; Romrome & Ena, 2022).

Thus, while the Rural and Remote Education Initiative for Papuan Provinces program has been able to provide significant technical and financial support, it shows some shortcomings when compared to UNICEF's EGL program. Firstly, the program tends to be more macro in nature with a broad approach and less focus on tailoring to the local context and specific needs of teachers and students, which is central to the success of the EGL approach. In addition, the training and guidance for teachers in these programs are often limited to technical and infrastructural aspects, whereas EGL offers a more comprehensive intensive training strategy, including the integration of local cultural elements in the teaching methodology, which has been shown to improve students' literacy comprehension (Sheehy et al., 2024; Zaw et al., 2021). The data-driven approach adopted by EGL, through EGRA-based evaluations, also allows for more targeted identification and intervention, in contrast to more general international programs that tend to rely on macro performance indicators. As a result, while international support for Indonesia's program has had an overall positive impact, its shortcomings in terms of local adaptation, depth of teacher training, and systematic use of data for decision-making make it less effective than the EGL program managed by UNICEF (Adhanofa et al., 2024; Sari et al., 2024).

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Therefore, the EGL program has a significant influence on existing teaching methodologies. The program is specifically for teachers to solve the problem of low literacy in Papua. The national curriculum implemented in Indonesia is constantly changing, which requires teachers to be dynamic in keeping up with the development of the material provided. Until now, it is still common to find teachers with ineffective teaching methods. As YBK said:

> The learning system in schools often seems to force children to obey the teacher's will. Like pointing to the letter A, yes A, but not with the capacity and ability to guide so that what the teacher knows can enter the child's brain. The letters of the alphabet need to be taught with shapes, symbols, and concrete objects. So you can learn the letter A with examples such as *Ayam* (chicken), U with *Ular* (snakes), I with *Itik* (ducks) so that it is easier and more interesting for students.

Previous learning models such as counting with sticks are at risk of injury, so special teachers who understand student psychology are needed, especially now with the *Merdeka* Curriculum. In the past, teachers were forced to follow the child's desire to learn, so the teacher is a facilitator, so it is necessary to improve the quality of teachers with this Literacy Program.

RES, Early Grade Literacy Facilitator in Merauke District, explained the program's approach to providing EGL materials. The program commences with an in-house training that spans approximately one week and incorporates material on nine components: print awareness, phonology, alphabet knowledge, phonics, comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, writing, and speaking. The teachers were instructed not only in theory but also in practice. Subsequent to the training, the teachers return to their respective schools to implement the literacy components. Moreover, ongoing monitoring and assistance are provided to ensure the program's smooth execution. Community involvement and active support from parents have also been identified as significant factors contributing to the success of the program. The Papuan community is encouraged to be directly involved, for example through the establishment of reading rooms in schools and learning assistance at home. SH, a participating teacher, attested to the efficacy of parental involvement, stating, "The involvement of parents in this program is tremendously beneficial, as they ensure that children receive learning stimulation in the domestic environment." The study by Bodrogini et al. (2021) corroborates this quote in a way that active community participation not only enhances students' learning motivation but also fortifies the overall monitoring and evaluation of program implementation (Bodrogini et al., 2021).

The implementation of this program with creative teaching methods was welcomed by teachers and students, as stated by IS and SH:

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The children are happy with this program.. the teaching aids are also adapted to the surrounding conditions and the school's capabilities, and this program wants to present a learning process that touches directly on the real conditions faced by children such as now it is raining, there is a song.

EGL learning, unfortunately, cannot be implemented throughout the semester, and can only be done more in the first one to three months of learning because there are still materials from the national curriculum that must be applied. So it can be seen that the EGL program is one of the assisted programs that also certainly wants to support the achievement of the current national curriculum targets by assisting early-grade teachers. In this way, their knowledge and skills can be more developed and varied with the EGL target that teachers can create practical learning that is relevant to the needs and abilities of their students.

Therefore, effectiveness of UNICEF's Early Grade Literacy Program in Papua is influenced by the collaboration synergy between local government policies, improved teacher competencies, and community involvement. A holistic approach that integrates policy, education, and community participation is key to improving early literacy, which in turn contributes to enhancing the overall quality of education in Papua.

CONCLUSION

The Early Grade Literacy (EGL) program, implemented in Papua, particularly in the Merauke regency, has had a positive impact on the enhancement of the quality of basic education, particularly in the domain of students' literacy skills. The implementation of this program includes intensive training for teachers, the provision of contextual teaching materials appropriate to local culture, and the evaluation of students through the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA). The results of the EGRA demonstrated a substantial enhancement, with the proportion of students who lacked reading proficiency declining from 50% to 22%, while the proportion of students who could read fluently and comprehend the reading material increased from 24% to 47%. The incorporation of creative learning elements, such as songs, dances, and props rooted in local culture, proved effective in fostering an enjoyable learning environment and cultivating students' enthusiasm for academic pursuits within the classroom setting. The effectiveness of the program is further enhanced by the support of parents and the community, as evidenced by the establishment of reading corners and the implementation of educational campaigns.

The success of EGL is also a substantial contributor to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in the area of inclusive and quality education. This initiative exemplifies strategic international cooperation, integrating

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UNICEF's role as a global actor with national and local governments within a synergistic collaborative framework. UNICEF provides a multifaceted role in global education policy. The organization offers technical and financial assistance, as well as normative and technical mediation, thereby connecting global education policy with contextualized local implementation. EGL's strategy of leveraging data-driven, pro-child approaches in remote regions exemplifies the transformative potential of international cooperation in enhancing local education capacity.

However, the sustainability and expansion of this program are contingent upon the commitment of local governments and the active involvement of local communities. To ensure the continuity and expansion of the ongoing transformation, enhanced interdisciplinary collaboration and sufficient budgetary assistance are imperative. The success of EGL in achieving this ambitious target of ensuring that all Papuan children are literate by the third grade serves as a model that merits replication. Consequently, it is advised that analogous collaborative efforts be sustained and potentially expanded through cooperative endeavors with additional international institutions or partner nations. This approach should be guided by the principles that have demonstrated efficacy in the implementation of the EGL Program. Conversely, the methodological limitations of this study underscore the necessity of employing mixed methods (quantitative and qualitative) in subsequent research to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of education interventions in remote regions.

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