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EMPOWERING RURAL LITERACY THROUGH COMMUNITY-BASED SOCIAL SCIENCE EDUCATION: THE 'MARAS MACA' CASE IN WEST SUMBAWA

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Abstract

This study explores the role of community-based social science education in enhancing rural literacy, focusing on the "Maras Maca" initiative in Seminar Salit Village, West Sumbawa, Indonesia. "Maras Maca," a grassroots literacy movement, was designed to respond to the limited access to reading materials and educational support among rural youth. Employing a qualitative case study approach, this research investigates how locally rooted educational interventions rooted in social science perspectives can foster critical awareness, civic engagement, and intergenerational learning in underserved areas. Data was collected through interviews with local educators, village leaders, and participants, as well as direct observations of the program's implementation. The findings reveal that integrating contextualized social science themes—such as identity, power relations, and environmental awareness—into literacy activities not only boosts reading comprehension but also strengthens learners' connection to their community and cultural heritage. This study argues that social science education, when situated within the lived realities of rural communities, can become a transformative tool for empowerment and social change. Recommendations are offered for policymakers and educators to replicate similar models in other marginalized regions

Keywords: Community-based education, Rural literacy, Social science education, Empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

Literacy is a fundamental pillar for building an intelligent, independent, and participatory society. In today's era of globalization and digitalization,

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literacy has evolved beyond its traditional definition (Akbar & Wijaya, 2024). It no longer refers solely to the basic ability to read and write but encompasses a broader range of competencies—such as critical thinking, the ability to evaluate and synthesize information, digital literacy, and effective communication across cultural and contextual boundaries (Yonanda & Choiriyah, 2024). These broader skills are essential for individuals to participate meaningfully in the social, economic, and political life of their communities. Despite national efforts to improve educational access and quality, literacy challenges persist, especially in rural regions where educational infrastructure is underdeveloped, and exposure to diverse forms of literacy is limited.

One such region facing these persistent challenges is West Sumbawa Regency in West Nusa Tenggara Province, Indonesia. In remote villages such as Seminar Salit, children and adolescents face an acute shortage of access to books, libraries, and interactive learning spaces. The absence of such resources is not merely a logistical issue but a reflection of deeper structural inequality in educational development. Youth in these areas are often just as curious and eager to learn as their urban peers, but they grow up in environments that do not support or nurture sustained learning habits (Yasriuddin et al., 2025). Consequently, the gap in 21st-century skills between urban and rural youth continues to widen, contributing to cycles of disadvantage and limited social mobility.

This condition underscores the need for alternative educational models that go beyond the conventional, top-down approach of formal schooling. Traditional classroom-based education often fails to account for the social and cultural realities of students in rural areas. Hence, community-based education emerges as a compelling solution. Rooted in the lived experiences of local people, this approach emphasizes participatory, experiential, and contextual learning (Wati et al., 2024). It invites learners to engage with knowledge not as passive recipients but as active co-creators, drawing from their everyday surroundings and local wisdom.

Within this context, social science education plays a pivotal role. At its core, social science is about understanding human behavior, institutions, relationships, and the workings of society. It cultivates a sense of civic consciousness, critical thinking, and social responsibility. When taught through a contextual and community-centered lens, social science transforms

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from abstract content into a powerful tool for empowerment. It equips learners with the skills and awareness needed to become proactive, empathetic, and engaged members of their community—traits that are especially vital in areas where formal civic engagement mechanisms are weak or underutilized (Ilmiyah et al., 2019).

Responding to these needs and challenges, a local initiative named *Maras Maca* was born in Seminar Salit Village. The term *maras* means “gathering” and *maca* means “reading” in the local language, symbolizing a collective act of learning. Initiated by a group of youths chaired by Budiman (25 years old), *Maras Maca* was created in response to the low reading interest among children and the lack of educational facilities. What started as a simple idea to share books and read together quickly transformed into a broader learning movement. *Maras Maca* became a space for informal yet impactful education—where reading activities were interwoven with reflections on local life, cultural stories, and relevant social issues (Yasriuddin et al., 2025).

Over time, the program has evolved into a vibrant educational hub that connects generations and revitalizes local knowledge. Children read folktales, listen to oral histories from elders, and discuss topics ranging from environmental conservation to their dreams for the future. These activities foster not only literacy but also a deep sense of cultural identity and belonging. By anchoring learning in the local context, *Maras Maca* naturally integrates the principles of social science education—teaching about social dynamics, shared values, and the importance of collective well-being in ways that feel relevant and engaging to participants. The enthusiasm of the children in the village also supports this program, because this program is voluntary.

Furthermore, what sets *Maras Maca* apart is its inclusive and flexible approach. There are no formal entry requirements, no age restrictions, and no examinations. Everyone is welcome—children, teenagers, parents, and elders—creating a rich intergenerational learning environment. The absence of rigid rules fosters a relaxed atmosphere where people feel safe to express themselves, ask questions, and explore ideas together. This inclusivity breaks down traditional educational barriers and reinforces the idea that learning is a communal process, not limited to formal institutions.

Such an approach challenges the conventional paradigm of education that confines learning within four classroom walls. *Maras Maca* demonstrates that when education reflects everyday life, it becomes more meaningful and

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transformative. Children are not only acquiring reading skills but also developing critical social and emotional capacities—understanding their roots, navigating interpersonal relationships, and recognizing their potential role in shaping their community's future. This fosters a sense of purpose, resilience, and empowerment that is often lacking in conventional schooling models.

From a social science education perspective, Maras Maca represents a real-world application of key concepts such as civic engagement, local identity, social cohesion, and participatory governance. It offers tangible evidence that social learning can take place through grassroots initiatives and that educational outcomes can be achieved outside of formal systems. The program exemplifies how education can be democratized—accessible, relevant, and grounded in the values of the community itself.

However, the Maras Maca program, initiated by a group of youth concerned about education, has entered a hiatus and operated optimally for only about six months. Budiman, the leader of the youth group, explained that the temporary suspension of the program was due to the initiators being preoccupied with continuing their education. In fact, upon closer reflection, the program holds significant potential and would be unfortunate to discontinue, even temporarily. Nevertheless, the Maras Maca program is planned to be continued because there are still many children to adults who show high enthusiasm for learning. This enthusiasm is expected to encourage the implementation of the program more optimally so that it provides a comprehensive positive impact for all villagers.

This paper seeks to explore the processes, challenges, and impacts of the Maras Maca initiative in fostering literacy and social awareness among the residents of Seminar Salit. Using a qualitative methodology, the study draws on the experiences of program organizers, participants, and local stakeholders. Their voices are essential in constructing an authentic narrative of how the program operates and the kinds of transformations it enables—both at the individual and community level.

The primary goal of this research is not simply to highlight a successful program, but to advocate for its potential as a replicable model. As many other villages across Indonesia face similar literacy gaps, the Maras Maca approach could serve as an adaptable framework for building inclusive and sustainable learning environments. By nurturing community engagement and leveraging

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local cultural capital, this model offers a grassroots strategy for promoting equity in literacy and education more broadly.

Lastly, this study underscores that the strength and sustainability of initiatives like Maras Maca lie in the community's social fabric—its trust, collaboration, and shared commitment to education. When learning is rooted in local traditions and supported by social networks, its impact becomes more enduring. Through this lens, Maras Maca is more than just a literacy program—it is a movement of community empowerment, cultural preservation, and educational innovation.

In conclusion, Maras Maca is both a symbol and a substance of community-driven education. It illuminates a path forward for developing social science education that is inclusive, participatory, and grounded in everyday realities. Especially in rural contexts where traditional education systems often fall short, such initiatives demonstrate the transformative power of locally inspired, socially embedded learning.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the processes, challenges, and impacts of the Maras Maca literacy program in Seminar Salit Village, West Sumbawa. This method was chosen because it allows the researcher to capture the real-life experiences and perspectives of the community. The sampling technique used in this study is purposive sampling, in which participants are deliberately selected based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. The participant selection is based on the following criteria: (1) serving as a key implementer or facilitator of the Maras Maca literacy program, (2) having been actively involved in the program for at least one month, (3) being a resident of the village, including children (grades 1–6), teenagers (junior and senior high school), adults, or community figures directly engaged as participants or initiators, and (4) being willing and able to openly share their experiences and perspectives.

The data analysis procedure was carried out through a series of stages within the thematic analysis approach. After the data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation, they were transcribed verbatim and read repeatedly to understand the context and content. An open coding process was then conducted to identify initial themes. These codes were grouped into broader and more meaningful categories that reflect

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thematic patterns in the implementation and impact of the program. Once the main themes were established, the researcher interpreted the meaning of the findings within the social and cultural context of Seminar Salit Village, while maintaining data validity through source triangulation, member checking, and peer discussion.

The collected data identified key patterns, such as the role of local values in fostering reading interest, social engagement in learning, and the ways in which social science education is reflected in everyday practices. The researcher positioned themselves as a dialogical partner rather than a passive observer, actively listening and exploring community narratives. This approach allowed the findings to be meaningful and relevant, particularly in understanding a community-based education model that emerges from local needs and strengths.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from this study provide a comprehensive picture of how the *Maras Maca* literacy program has evolved and impacted the local community in Seminar Salit Village. Based on observations and interviews, several key themes emerged regarding the role of community-based social science education in improving literacy and fostering social awareness.

The Role of Local Values in Promoting Literacy

The role of local values is essential and irreplaceable in shaping a meaningful and sustainable literacy process in rural areas like Seminar Salit Village. The *Maras Maca* program has demonstrated that promoting literacy does not merely involve the provision of reading materials, but more importantly, the embedding of cultural identity within the learning experience. In this initiative, reading is not treated as an isolated academic task, but as a culturally rooted activity that strengthens a sense of self and belonging. As explained by R, a youth community leader and one of the program's initiators, "The children learn not just to read words but also the stories that carry the philosophy of our lives as people of Sumbawa. This program makes them feel closer to their cultural roots." His statement underscores how local narratives and values are instrumental in making literacy emotionally resonant and socially relevant for young learners. By embracing these cultural elements, the program transforms reading from a technical skill into a journey of cultural self-discovery and pride.

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One of the program's effective strategies is the deliberate inclusion of local stories and legends as core components of the reading materials provided. Tales of ancestral struggles, wisdom, bravery, and the values of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation), environmental harmony, and respect for elders are adapted into accessible, age-appropriate formats that appeal to children. These narratives, often transmitted orally across generations, are now being preserved in written form, making them both a tool for literacy and a repository of cultural knowledge. The familiar content increases children's enthusiasm, as they see reflections of their own heritage and environment within the books they read. As a result, literacy becomes a personal experience—one that resonates with their everyday lives, community norms, and local worldview. This cultural proximity not only enhances reading motivation but also nurtures a stronger emotional connection to the material, which is critical for long-term engagement.

Moreover, the involvement of the broader community in preserving, narrating, and sharing these local stories strengthens intergenerational learning and reinforces the role of the community as a co-educator. Parents, grandparents, and community elders are not passive observers but become active participants in the learning journey. They often assist children in reading and interpreting these stories, explaining traditional terms, cultural symbols, and the moral values embedded within each narrative. This engagement creates an intimate, dialogical atmosphere where learning occurs through conversation and mutual reflection, rather than through rigid instruction. A parent who frequently accompanies her child to Maras Maca sessions, shared, "Our involvement in accompanying the children in reading makes us feel more connected and more aware of the importance of education for their future." Her words reflect how the program fosters not only literacy but also social cohesion and shared responsibility for education. In essence, reading becomes a collective activity that bridges generations and strengthens the social fabric of the village.

Ultimately, the integration of local values into literacy education serves multiple purposes: it validates local knowledge, enhances the relevance of reading materials, and fosters a learning environment rooted in empathy and respect. In places where formal educational infrastructure is limited, the cultural richness of the community becomes a powerful asset in driving educational innovation. The Maras Maca program shows that when local wisdom is acknowledged and leveraged, literacy can become a tool not only

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for academic growth but also for community empowerment and cultural preservation. This approach offers a replicable model for other rural areas facing similar challenges—demonstrating that the path to meaningful literacy starts from within the community itself.

Social Engagement and Active Participation

Social engagement plays a central role in the success and sustainability of the Maras Maca initiative. The program does not operate on the basis of one-directional teaching, but thrives on the reciprocal involvement of all stakeholders—children, parents, youth, and the broader community. Rather than positioning learning as the sole domain of schools or teachers, Maras Maca repositions education as a communal effort that unfolds naturally within the village. This inclusivity enables learning to happen beyond institutional walls and empowers community members to be directly involved in the educational journey of their children. As shared by A, a mother who regularly supports the program, “We feel valued as part of the children's education process. We are not just observers, but partners in learning.” Her words highlight a crucial transformation in mindset: from passive recipients of education to active contributors. This participatory atmosphere strengthens the social dimension of literacy, bridging the gap between home and community-based learning spaces.

In addition, Maras Maca provides a platform for children to engage in meaningful discussions on a variety of social topics that are relevant to their everyday lives. These range from mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*), care for the environment, to respectful communication and collective responsibility. Through facilitated dialogues and group discussions, children are encouraged to speak confidently in front of others, articulate their thoughts, and listen attentively to differing perspectives. These activities foster a democratic spirit and enhance children's social and emotional development. They also become more aware of their roles and responsibilities within the community—not just as students, but as young citizens with a voice. This process of social interaction and critical thinking enriches the meaning of literacy, turning it into a tool for empowerment, not just a technical skill. The sessions become more than just “reading time”—they evolve into spaces for reflection, collaboration, and the nurturing of civic values.

Furthermore, the sense of ownership felt by the community is evident in the collective support and shared responsibilities involved in running the

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Maras Maca program. Each activity becomes a reflection of community solidarity, where different generations contribute according to their capacities. Youth help with organizing events and motivating participants, while elders provide guidance and share stories filled with wisdom. Parents take part in managing the reading space or bringing snacks, while others may contribute books or assist during group activities. This kind of cooperation is what gives Maras Maca its character as a grassroots movement—not dependent on formal funding, but powered by collective spirit. As described by L, a respected community figure, “This activity gives everyone the opportunity to collaborate. From here, we learn that education is not just for children, but for the entire community.” His statement emphasizes the redefinition of education as a shared journey, not an exclusive service. It also affirms the belief that when a community is empowered to take charge of its own educational path, the results are more organic, resilient, and impactful.

In conclusion, Maras Maca exemplifies how active participation can transform a small literacy program into a broader social movement. It nurtures mutual trust, fosters a sense of togetherness, and promotes a community-based learning culture that extends far beyond the act of reading. The involvement of every layer of society—from children to elders—demonstrates that education can become a powerful unifier, creating not just better readers, but stronger, more connected communities. Through its participatory design, Maras Maca doesn’t just build literacy; it builds relationships, collective memory, and a shared vision for the future.

Integrating Social Science Education into Practice

One of the most compelling aspects of the Maras Maca program is its seamless integration of social science education into everyday literacy activities. Unlike conventional literacy programs that focus solely on technical reading and writing skills, Maras Maca takes a broader and more holistic approach by embedding social values and civic knowledge into its content and practices (Fu’adah et al., 2023). Children who attend Maras Maca are not only encouraged to read stories but to critically reflect on the social messages and moral lessons within those stories. For instance, tales highlighting the spirit of mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*), empathy for others, and awareness of one’s role in the community become entry points for discussions about real-life issues. As L, one of the community leaders, explained, “The children don’t just learn to read; they also understand how they can contribute to society.”

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This statement underscores the essence of Maras Maca—not as a reading club, but as a grassroots classroom for civic education, where literacy becomes a means to nurture socially conscious individuals.

Moreover, the program introduces participants to the structure of village governance and the importance of public participation. Although the learners are mostly children and teenagers, they are given opportunities to understand how decisions are made in their community, how leaders are chosen, and how collective action shapes the well-being of all residents. Simple activities like mock village meetings, role-playing as community leaders, or attending actual village discussions with their parents help the young learners connect abstract civic concepts to their everyday experiences. As R, a youth facilitator, expressed, “We want the children to understand how the community works and that everyone, regardless of age, can contribute.” By teaching the basics of democracy and civic engagement in this way, Maras Maca plants seeds of responsibility and participation from an early age—empowering children to see themselves not as passive observers, but as future contributors and changemakers in their village.

This form of applied social education not only benefits individual learners but also strengthens collective awareness. Through regular reading and dialogue sessions, children and adolescents are encouraged to think beyond their own needs and consider the broader implications of their actions on others. Books that tell stories about kindness, justice, conflict resolution, and environmental care become tools to foster moral reasoning and group empathy. K, one of the youngest participants, shared her insight: “Through the books we read, we learn how to maintain unity and help each other among the residents. This is a very important lesson for us.” Her reflection reflects the deeper impact of the program—where literacy activities become exercises in building character and community consciousness. It also shows that children, when given the right guidance and space, can internalize and practice complex social concepts in relatable and meaningful ways.

In the long term, the practice of integrating social science education into Maras Maca’s daily activities contributes to a more informed, empathetic, and proactive community (Wati et al., 2024). By teaching children how their community functions and how they can be part of positive change, the program helps bridge the gap between education and social reality. It instills not only knowledge, but also a sense of ownership, belonging, and responsibility. This

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approach offers valuable insight into how grassroots initiatives can contribute to long-term community development—not through formal instruction alone, but through experiential learning rooted in the values and realities of local life.

Access and Resource Challenges

One of the most persistent and pressing challenges encountered by the Maras Maca program is the limited availability of resources—particularly books and appropriate educational materials. While the program has succeeded in creating a vibrant learning atmosphere, the scarcity of reading materials remains a significant barrier to its long-term effectiveness. Most of the books available are donations or personal collections from volunteers, many of which are outdated or not age-appropriate. K, one of the volunteer organizers, explained, “We often struggle to find books that are appropriate for the children’s age and needs. The books we have are limited, so sometimes we have to borrow from neighboring villages.” This scarcity not only limits the diversity of learning content but also restricts the ability to sustain children’s interest with new and engaging materials. Despite these challenges, the spirit and determination of the community to keep the program alive remain strong.

To address the limitations in printed materials, the community has adopted various creative strategies, particularly leveraging the potential of digital resources (Yonanda & Choiriyah, 2024). While internet access in Seminar Salit Village is still inconsistent, some families use smartphones to access reading apps or search for digital storybooks that align with the children’s interests. In some cases, downloaded materials are shared via Bluetooth or offline drives to ensure they can be accessed without a constant internet connection. L, a facilitator in the program, shared, “We know it’s not easy, but we keep trying. We even use technology when we can to get the information we need.” These small but consistent efforts highlight the community’s adaptability and innovation, showing that even in resource-poor settings, technology can serve as a bridge to knowledge when used strategically.

Nevertheless, digital access is not a permanent substitute for a well-equipped literacy space with adequate physical materials. Children, especially in early literacy stages, still need tactile interaction with printed books to support comprehension and engagement. The absence of colorful picture books, activity books, and age-specific reading levels is a major gap that affects both the learning experience and outcomes. Moreover, reliance on

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smartphones can also raise concerns about screen time and content control, which requires guidance from parents or facilitators. For Maras Maca to thrive and evolve as a sustainable educational initiative, it needs stronger support in the form of donations, partnerships with libraries, NGOs, or educational foundations that can provide relevant and culturally appropriate materials.

Looking ahead, one potential solution is the establishment of a mobile library service or a rotating book-sharing network between nearby villages. Such initiatives would not only enhance the variety and accessibility of reading materials but also build a collaborative spirit among rural communities facing similar challenges (Akbar & Wijaya, 2024). In addition, involving local authors and illustrators to create books based on local stories and traditions could further enrich the program while reinforcing cultural identity. Ultimately, the ability of Maras Maca to grow and serve as a model for other villages will depend on how well it can continue to adapt, collaborate, and secure the resources necessary to support its mission of empowering rural literacy through community-based education.

Sustainability and Future Prospects

The sustainability and future development of the Maras Maca program have become a central aspiration for many stakeholders involved, ranging from youth volunteers and parents to local community leaders. The sense of ownership and pride toward the initiative has grown significantly over time, with many expressing the hope that its positive impact could be extended to other rural areas (Marwan et al., 2024). This is not merely a passive expectation, but an active ambition voiced by young people who have benefited from the program. As F, a high school student and regular participant, stated passionately, "We want this program to not only stop in our village. Many other villages need activities like this. We want to bring more books and facilitate literacy access for everyone." The enthusiasm shown by youth like F reflects a growing awareness of the importance of education and a genuine desire to share its benefits with wider communities.

Nonetheless, transforming this vision into a reality requires a more structured and long-term support system. At its current stage, Maras Maca operates primarily on volunteer efforts and small-scale donations, which limits its capacity for expansion. To ensure continuity, the program needs stronger institutional backing—both from within the community and from external collaborators. This includes partnerships with educational

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institutions, local governments, NGOs, and donors who are aligned with the mission of improving rural literacy. Furthermore, consistent funding is necessary not only for acquiring books and materials but also for developing training programs for local facilitators who can maintain the educational quality of the program. In this sense, sustainability is not only about physical resources but also about human capital and long-term community commitment (Sahidi et al., 2025).

Another key aspect of ensuring Maras Maca's sustainability lies in innovation and adaptability. As learning needs evolve, so must the methods used. The introduction of digital literacy resources—such as e-books, interactive storytelling apps, and audio-visual materials—can complement traditional reading practices, especially in engaging younger audiences. Moreover, by integrating technology into literacy activities, the program can reach children in more remote areas where traditional books might not easily be available. Digital platforms can also facilitate the exchange of learning materials between villages, creating a network of rural literacy communities. However, this must be accompanied by digital literacy training to ensure that both children and parents are equipped to use these tools effectively and safely.

Looking forward, Maras Maca has the potential to evolve into a replicable model of grassroots, community-driven education. If nurtured with continued collaboration, innovation, and support, it could serve as a beacon for other villages struggling with similar educational limitations. The impact of such a program goes beyond reading skills—it fosters civic awareness, cultural pride, and social responsibility among young people. With the right infrastructure and partnerships in place, Maras Maca could lead a literacy movement that not only empowers individual learners but also strengthens the social fabric of rural Indonesia as a whole.

CONCLUSION

The Maras Maca initiative stands as a compelling example of how grassroots movements can significantly contribute to literacy improvement and social education in rural communities. Through its integration of local values, community participation, and social science principles, Maras Maca has demonstrated that education does not always require formal infrastructure—it can grow from the everyday lives, culture, and relationships within a village.

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The program has not only increased access to reading materials but also rekindled a love for learning, cultural pride, and civic awareness among its participants.

One of the most significant findings of this study is the role of local cultural values in making literacy meaningful and relevant to the community. By embedding traditional stories and local wisdom into reading practices, Maras Maca helps children and youth connect with their identity while developing their literacy skills. Furthermore, the program's emphasis on social engagement and inclusive participation has created a shared sense of ownership, strengthening social ties and intergenerational cooperation.

The integration of social science education through practical, everyday activities has also proven effective in fostering critical thinking, empathy, and a sense of social responsibility. Despite facing major challenges in terms of access to books and learning materials, the community's resilience and creativity have ensured the program's continuity and relevance. Efforts such as borrowing books from neighboring villages and exploring digital alternatives reflect a strong commitment to sustaining the initiative.

Looking forward, the future of Maras Maca depends on continued collaboration, resource mobilization, and innovative approaches. The desire to expand to other villages reflects its success and transformative potential. With the right support from educational institutions, NGOs, and policymakers, Maras Maca could become a replicable model for community-based literacy development across Indonesia.

The practical implication for education policymakers at both local and national levels is the importance of designing literacy empowerment policies that are contextual and grounded in the socio-cultural strengths of the local community. The Maras Maca program in Seminar Salit Village demonstrates that an educational approach integrating social science with local values can foster a strong learning spirit across age groups and cultivate collective awareness of the importance of literacy as an integral part of daily life.

Ultimately, this program reminds us that education is most powerful when it is rooted in local realities, driven by collective spirit, and oriented toward long-term social change. Maras Maca is not just a reading initiative—it is a living example of how education, culture, and community can come together to shape a more literate, aware, and empowered generation.

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