

“Paving The Road Towards Better Literacy Education in Indonesia through Children’s Literature”

“Books can be the best thing that happens in children’s lives.” That is the best phrase to illustrate my childhood experience, which was full of precious memories with books and inspired me to spread the same enjoyment to Indonesian children. My name is Ahliana Affiati Sani (Afi). Thanks to my parents, I was born and raised in Bandung as an avid reader of children’s books, newspapers, and the famous “Bobo” magazine. They always supported my interest in books, so I could always find happiness whenever I read. This experience has nurtured the love of reading that made me win several “Synopsis Competitions”, which involved reading, writing, and storytelling skills from the regional to national level during elementary grade. All praise to Allah, I continued to perform well in school until I graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Biology from Institut Teknologi Bandung with a GPA of 3.52 and was awarded Cum Laude in 2011.

Four years later, my interest in children’s literature and literacies rose significantly after I got a chance to live in London for a year due to my husband’s postgraduate studies. Before moving to London, I struggled to find engaging and appropriate children’s books for my son in Indonesia, especially books with Islamic themes. Surprisingly, I could easily find many excellent and affordable children’s books for general and Islamic themes in the UK. I was also impressed by how children’s libraries are available throughout the country and always full of children engaged in enjoyable literacy activities. These experiences inspired me to create a similar environment in Indonesia, particularly for Muslim communities. Hence, I founded Little Tree Library (LTL) in June 2016, an online book store specializing in curating Islamic books for young readers and fostering early literacy skills through campaigns, webinars, book reviews, and several “Author’s Talks” with world-renowned Muslim authors. My long-term goal for LTL is to be an organisation that contributes to the rise of Islamic children’s books quality in Indonesia.

After the birth of my second son, I participated in the “Training of Trainer Read Aloud” in October 2019, which made me love children’s literature and literacies even more. Months later, I co-founded the Tangerang Read Aloud (TRA) community to empower parents and educators in the Tangerang Raya in nurturing the love of reading in young people. Since then, I have been involved in several voluntary works, such as reviewing children’s books published by Indonesia’s Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC), conducting field tests to observe children’s responses to newly published children’s books by Grow The Seed (publishing company), and volunteering at a literacy campaign through “The 3rd Indonesia World Read Aloud Day 2022” held by Indonesia Read Aloud Community. When I indulged myself in these activities, I learned that there are similarities among the creators of outstanding and engaging children’s literature: they positioned children as the main subject of their stories and paid much attention to the details of literary elements (character, plot, setting, conflict, and theme). So, their books could provide proper representations of the characters’ diversity, show childhood experiences related to the reader, and boost children’s

imagination by opening the door toward new horizons. As a result, through my experiences as a storyteller and guest teacher, these books successfully encouraged young readers to enjoy reading and promoted their language and literacy skills.

However, in Indonesia, there is still a lack of children's books that fulfill the above mentioned criteria and can promote higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) and attract children to read for pleasure, which are crucial factors in shaping Indonesian children as lifelong readers. The ability to perform HOTS is intensely related to reading comprehension, which has become the central issue in literacy acquisition in Indonesia (INOVASI, 2020). It was worsened by the learning loss caused by the COVID-19 pandemic among Indonesian students. The recent findings indicated that most Indonesian students are not achieving basic literacy skills (reading and writing) by Grade 3 (INOVASI, 2021), which resulted in an emergency curriculum as the government's immediate response. However, to solve these issues in the long term, there should be continuous reinforcement of reading interest in young readers as their interest in reading strongly correlates with the learning assessment scores on the basic literacy test (INOVASI, 2020). Numerous studies have proven that reading interest can be ignited by providing engaging children's literature.

Unfortunately, the children's books circulated in Indonesia, especially fiction, are still dominated by didactic literature full of explicit educational content with less humor. Their messages are mainly conveyed through preachy narration, with poorly developed literary elements. Meanwhile, the latter plays a vital role in improving reading comprehension (Budiono, 2010). Children's literature should put children's point of view at the center of the story, make them see themselves represented, and show active involvement of the children's characters in solving the problem within the story (Nurgiyantoro, 2019), which is called child-centered literature. However, most adult characters in these didactic books are usually portrayed as superior characters who dictate what children should do or what adults expect them to be rather than respecting them as human beings with their own thoughts, backgrounds, uniqueness, competence, and curiosity. Of course, there is nothing wrong with moral lessons in children's books. Nevertheless, not all children look for moral lessons when they read. Sometimes they read to entertain themselves by enjoying the story and its literary elements. As Lukens stated in Nurgiyantoro (2019), whatever aspects of the content are offered in literary works, the purpose of providing comfort and entertainment for the reader must not be diminished.

Furthermore, due to the habit of reading many didactic books, most adults only focus on delivering moral lessons without respecting children's responses to texts. This is unfortunate because children's thoughts and responses to literary works show how they construct meaning, boosting their learning abilities. A Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018 survey shows that Indonesian students whose teachers applied various strategies to promote reading comprehension after reading books or language learning gain higher assessment scores for math and science (MoECRT, 2017). These findings showed that how adults guide children in perceiving children's literature is as important as the quality

of the literature itself and helps them build critical thinking skills that are beneficial for the learning process.

To solve these problems, we need more child-centered children's literature to create a balance against the abundance of didactic ones in Indonesia, so our children are exposed to various high-quality texts and have a greater chance of finding texts that match their interests. Moreover, we must consistently develop children's literature on extensive topics with accurate representations of the childhood lives and the beauty of diverse characters of Indonesian children. Improving pedagogical strategies to help children comprehend literature is also significant so that children will be more enthusiastic about reading. Hence, Indonesia needs more experts and scholars in this field who will collaborate with other stakeholders. I believe that all my experiences and the vast networking I have built for more than two years in this field are valuable assets to contribute to Indonesia. However, there is a huge disparity between my current interest and my latest academic qualification, so I want to study at Children's Literature & Literacies MEd, University of Glasgow, UK, to be part of the solution. Throughout its courses, this study program provides the opportunity to learn about the texts for children, their production, and how children's literature can be used to foster literacy development. I am interested in learning how to examine and solve issues on representation and inclusion in Indonesian fictional children's literature and how to build strategies in providing evidence-based recommendations to the authors and publishers, which are the expertise of Dr. Melanie All the precious memories with books during my childhood made me dream of seeing Indonesian children surrounded by high-quality literature that cherishes their culture and strengthens their identity, which will empower them to become lifelong learners through the love of reading. Reading and writing skills are the basic literacy skills that should be mastered first before acquiring the others in the multiliteracies perspective (MoEC, 2017). That is why fostering basic literacy skills among Indonesia's future leaders is critical towards the vision of Indonesia Emas 2045.

To achieve this dream, I aspire to be a researcher, professional, and educator in children's literature and literacies. Upon returning to Indonesia for the first year, I will continue my role in the TRA Community by writing books or practical guidance and educating teachers, librarians, and parents about practical and pedagogical strategies for helping children read, enjoy, and understand children's literature. For the next five years, I want to be involved in literacy projects managed by institutions or NGOs to improve children's book quality and literacy activities in schools and libraries, such as Litara Foundation, Provisi Education, or Indonesia's MoECRT.