Critical Literacies

by Zulfa Sakhiyya

2.7

CRITICAL LITERACIES
IN INDONESIA

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Landscape of Indonesia

Indonesia is the world's largest archipelagic country with more than 17,000 islands inhabited by more than 280 million people of 200 ethnicities and 500–700 spoken local languages (Sakhiyya & Martin-Anatias, 2020). The country's education system is immensely complex and ranks the fourth in size after China, India, and the United States accommodating more than 50 million students, 2.6 million teachers in more than 250,000 schools, and more than 3,700 higher education institutions. This rich diversity and large educational infrastructure pose specific challenges regarding access to education. Indonesia's post-authoritarian condition magnifies this problem, where the excess of authoritarianism remains, actively shaping education in general even after the fall of the authoritarian New Order government in 1998 (Heryanto & Hadiz, 2005; Power, 2018). The terrible genius of the New Order administration lay not only in the use of bureaucratic control to undermine knowledge institutions (Guggenheim, 2012) but also the suppression of practices of critical literacies, that is, critical thinking and freedom of expression in educational institutions and public spaces (Heryanto, 2003).

This chapter focuses on the contested notion of "literacy" as defined by the government and as negotiated by grassroots literacy communities. The focus on the locus of literacy practices allows us to distinguish between "formal literacy" and "local literacies". The former assumes an autonomous model of literacy located in formal schooling and organized formally by the government, whereas the latter views literacy as social practices at the grassroots level. In the 1970s, the national literacy program was organized solely to improve literacy rates. "Literacy" as defined by the New Order government is the ability to read and write a particular script, in this case Bahasa Indonesia script. Despite the rise of the literacy rate which has reached up to 92.8% in 2011 (Tobias, Wales, Syamsulhakim, & Suharti, 2014), Indonesia remains the lowest among 61 countries surveyed on reading interests (Miller & McKenna, 2016). UNESCO further recorded that only 0.001% of the total population had reading interests (UNESCO, 2012). This gap means that formal literacy as indicated by the improvement in the literacy rate does not necessarily correspond with the advancement of reading interests and possession of critical thinking.

By reflecting on the case of Indonesia, this chapter offers insights about the importance of critical literacies in post-authoritarian Indonesia. This is done by highlighting the dynamic relationship between the state's formalized definition of literacy or 'formal literacy' and rising local literacies as enacted/practiced by grassroot communities. The questions central to this chapter are: How are

those literacies negotiated vis-à-vis the grassroot literacies in response to formal literacy? How does our academic engagement with those literacies move us toward more just outcomes for marginalized communities?

Historical Trajectories of Literacy in Indonesia

This section traces the historical trajectories of Indonesian educational policies and the impacts they have on the shifting state of literacy in Indonesia. Although the notion of literacy is conceptualized beyond schooling and pedagogy in this chapter, it is important to recognize that literacy practices are embedded within these educational institutions (Street, 1995) and that the notion of "literacy" is contested.

Early literacy practices in Indonesia, which can be categorized as mass literacy education, can be seen as beginning in about the sixteenth century in the form of local Islamic groups of learning called *pesantren* (Nakamura & Nishino, 1995; Pringle, 2010). Delivered in local languages (mostly Javanese), oral and informal in nature, *pesantren* provided basic religious knowledge about Islam and provided practice in reading sacred texts (Qur'an and Hadith), in the study of Islamic jurisprudence (*fikh*), and foreign language studies (Arabic). Although it is less structured as compared to the modern educational model introduced by the Dutch colonial government, *pesantren* is a literacy practice locally rooted in Indonesian soil long before the arrival of colonizers (Bruinessen, 1994).

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Indonesia was colonized by some European countries (Portugal, Spain, France, England, and the Netherlands) and Japan. The modern secular education system was introduced by the Dutch colonial government as a consequence of the Ethical Policy in 1920s. However, it did not contribute to the literacy of the populace. Formal literacy, as conceptualized and taught by the Dutch colonial government as the ability to read and write, was designed only for the Eurasian and Indonesian urban elite (Lowenberg, 2000). It was aimed to produce *ambtenaars*, Indonesian elite whose jobs were to assist the colonial government in low-level administration and bureaucracy (Kell & Kell, 2014). Up to 1930, there were only 106 indigenous students enrolled in Dutch colonial schools (Yulaelawati, 2009). This formal literacy schooling was exclusive as compared to local literacies practiced by 1127 *pesantren* located in Java, Madura, and Sumatra (Penders, 1977). By the end of Dutch colonialism, most Indonesians remained illiterate (Lowenberg, 2000) as measured by their ability to read and write in any scripts or languages (only 6.4%).

In reconstructing the nation after independence in 1945, under Sukarno's leadership (1945–1965), Indonesia faced enormous problems related to illiteracy rates, the national language, textbooks, large population, financial resources, infrastructure, teachers, and educational administrators (Kell & Kell, 2014). Literacy in Indonesia gradually progressed from 9% in 1951 to 39% in 1961 (UNESCO, 1974).

During Soeharto's so-called New Order administration (1966–1998), literacy was synonymous with academic performance. The meaning of literacy was reduced to the ability to read and write as expected in formal education. During the New Order administration, the literacy rate improved from 56.6% in 1971, to 69.3% in 1980, and to 83.7% in 1990 (UNESCO, 1974, 1977, 1999). This achievement in literacy was mainly indicated by the rising enrollment rate in elementary schools. Nevertheless, enrollment rates were not in line with completion rates. Only 50% of pupils could attend first grade up to fourth grade, and only 35% completed six years of elementary school.

Despite improvements in the literacy rate as measured by standardized assessments, critical thinking and freedom of expression was suppressed by the authoritarian government. Leigh (1999) observes that schooling in Indonesia does not always mean learning, and in the same vein, reading does not mean understanding or thinking. The role of literacy in cultivating critical thinking to enable active participation in a democratic society was undermined. Education as an ideological

state apparatus aimed to curb critical thinking. Texts and books deemed left wing were banned and burned (Anderson, 2006). Critical engagement with these texts as a form of critical literacy practices was forbidden and disbanded (Wiratraman, 2018). The authoritarian regime feared the continuation of such practices could destabilize their political power (Guggenheim, 2012; Hadiz & Dhakidae, 2005), as these activities could potentially identify social and political problems embedded in the government policies (Guggenheim, 2012; Street & Lefstein, 2007). Critical scholars and journalists had to face intimidation, death threats, (political) imprisonment, and even murder when challenging the authoritarian government (Budiarjo, 1974; Heryanto, 2003). The aftereffects of such suppression remain visible today.

Although the regime was overthrown in 1998, the narrow approach on education and bureau-cratic structure developed by the New Order administration continues to impinge on the quality of Indonesian education system, generally and literacy, specifically. Indonesia's formal literacy perfor-mance, as recorded by the OECD's Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) remains staggeringly low as compared to the OECD-average countries. Indonesia was ranked amongst the lowest participating countries. This is despite efforts to improve the quality of education in general and literacy in particular by allocating education 20% of the national budget. The poor results in international literacy assessments such as the OECD's PISA have highlighted the importance of lit-eracy as well as the inadequacy of the formal literacy approach. This has become a national concern and made the word "literacy" one of the most important in national education discourses in this decade (Dewayani & Retnaningdyah, 2017). The poor performance of Indonesia's youth on literacy assessments revealed that it is inadequate to associate literacy merely with formal schooling if we are to understand the more diverse and substantial meanings of literacy practices in contemporary soci-ety in Indonesia and beyond. This inadequacy highlights the urgency of using critical literacies as not only theoretical framework but also as "praxis" in reflecting and acting upon the field of education and literacy (Stromquist, 2014).

In the past four years (2016–2020), the Indonesian government has increasingly recognized the importance of community literacies to support formal literacy at schools. National movements on literacy since then have taken a more holistic approach into community movements (Agustino, 2019). As advocated by grassroots literacy communities, the government collaborated with pro-vincial, municipal, and district administrators as well as the private sector, women's organizations, youth organizations, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and community organizations to promote more diverse local literacies in communities (UNESCO, 2015). Although scattered, NGOs and other local organizations and communities now have the space to establish their own literacy movements to support national goals of literacy. The forms of these new literacy communities are, to name a few, literacy through folk tales, local culture literacy, reading culture community, literacy for entrepreneurship, smart houses, and community learning hubs (Kusumadewi, 2017). According to Directorate of Community Education and Special Education, there are at least 4,348 community libraries (*Taman Baca Masyarakat*) across the archipelago and 83 literacy-base communities or selected communities which organize literacy programs to create and sustain literate communities (Direc-torate of Community Education and Special Education , 2021). The emergence of these diverse literacies in addition to basic literacy (reading and writing) has highlighted the need in Indonesia for literacies that are more aware of social and cultural practices in society.

As the historical recount has demonstrated, power and ideology influence the design of certain literacy programs and consequently influence social life. Critical literacies may reveal how literacy teaching and programs are not neutral, mechanistic processes of "civilizing" future generations. Instead, they are a battleground in which competing visions, ideologies, discourses, and political interests struggle for dominance in a given society. Literacy as a social practice accommodates values, cultural experiences, and ideologies that influence individual interactions with texts. This critical perspective enables us to embrace overlooked, devalued, and subjugated literacy practices, that is,

Indonesian local literacies, and to offer an alternative public discourse which highlights the role of literacy as "a communal resource contributing to the quality of local life" (Barton & Hamilton, 2012, p. xiv). Critical literacies pinpointed the universal movement in supporting vulnerable young adults and disadvantaged groups as well as empowering gender equality, and so does in Indonesia. The emergence of this new orientation of literacy in Indonesia is under-researched, and it is the impetus of this chapter to capture this shift. The next section analyzes critical literacies work in Indonesia.

Critical Literacy Praxis in Indonesia

In surveying critical literacies in Indonesia, we adopt Paolo Freire's concept of praxis as "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, 2000, p. 33). In undertaking this study, we reviewed not only the works of critical literacy researchers but also literacy activists (practitioners) at the community level. We also attempted to capture local literacies that have been working at the community level but are under-researched and overlooked. The interrelationship between the work of researchers and practitioners illuminates Freire's proposition that praxis does not actually operate outside theory; rather, praxis "requires theory to illuminate it" (Freire, 2000). Following this conceptual framework, we structure our analysis into action and reflection undertaken by critical literacies activists, practitioners, and researchers and categorize them into two groups: school settings and beyond formal schooling (local literacies).

School Settings

Although still relatively rare, critical literacy research and practices are being developed across a range of curriculum areas in Indonesia. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is one area that started the inclusion of critical literacy pedagogy. In critical literacy perspectives, a language learner should be able to discover complex relationships between language and power (Janks, 2010), create their own critical standpoints, question the taken-for-granted facts (Luke & Dooley, 2011), and have the awareness to empower marginalized groups (Freire, 2000) (see also Chapters 1.4, 3.9, and 3.11 in this book). According to Gustine (2013), Indonesia's EFL curriculum generally has a limited space for critical literacy as it is dominated by rote learning and memorization. Gustine (2013) brought critical literacy into the classroom by adopting four dimensions of critical literacy proposed by Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2015). She provided four different popular topics for students to oppose taken-for-granted perspectives and develop their own critical viewpoints. Through critical literacy, Gustine succeeded in directing the students from having a passive perspective into developing critical viewpoints. White underarm skin on deodorant TV commercial adverts, homophobia, and catastrophes in some regions in Indonesia were among the popular topics introduced. Initially, students took the underlying assumptions of those ads for granted and did not question how social and cultural systems work. By helping students to question everyday issues from critical perspectives, consider different points of view, and relate their thoughts to sociopolitical systems, the teacher was able to direct the students to the heart of critical literacy. She managed to shift from using language as the practical use of skills into critical practices.

Such concerns led Gustine (2017) to undertake further study, especially on how teachers understand the notion of critical literacy and its practices. It seemed that four years of studying at preservice teacher education (a bachelor's degree) were not enough to lay the basic foundations for critical literacy. Although it was revealed that some EFL teachers who were also her graduate students had a little knowledge of critical literacy in the beginning of her study, there is a possibility that the other participants developed awareness of what a critical literacy classroom could be.

Mambu (2011) incorporated critical pedagogy into EFL practices by applying Freire's (2000) thematic investigation. He presented pictures of McDonald's burgers, a beauty pageant, a crowded

city, and a beggar in front of a shrine to explore the concept of domination by discussing poverty and social class. He also proposed that writing an op-ed article could be a way to criticize the government. To demonstrate this concern to his students, he wrote an opinion piece in the *Jakarta Post* to criticize the ruling president as being too biased in selecting ministers based on political deals and calculations. In line with Janks's (2010) point of view, developing learners' understanding of the presence and importance of op-ed articles means providing them a gate to meaning-making processes that oppose the domination of political leaders. Mambu (2011) promoted English for advocacy purposes. It was done by encouraging ELT teachers to advocate and empower the marginalized, fight against oppression through English, and persistently question bias toward the notion of "the oppressed" to perceive diverse viewpoints that domination is not always about numbers. The use of English itself could potentially bring Indonesian local narratives to light and advocate for the rights of minoritized communities in Indonesia to wider international audiences.

Local Literacies

Critical literacy research has also started to move to areas beyond formal schooling, with a few notable researchers starting to document the local literacies of several communities. This shift in research focus has marked the global movement of critical literacies in Indonesia, showing that it does not focus only on literacy in formal schooling.

Dewayani (2013) investigated the identity construction of street children through their writing. The study depicted urban poverty and how it reproduced schooling discourses and marginalized those who did not have access to formal schooling. It unraveled the complex relationship between children, parents, society, and government through the discourse of formal schooling and argued that formal schooling as an important means of vertical mobility in society is not the only solution to eradicate poverty (Dewayani, 2013; Dewayani & Retnaningdyah, 2017). The stigma attached to street children as uneducated, working and living on the street, and prone to social deviance has created a vicious cycle of alienation contributing to children's construction of self. By exploring the critical literacy practices organized by local communities in cooperation with an NGO, they pursued equal literacy for street children in Bandung. They provided early childhood education programs for street children, such as play-based learning, reading, and writing to embed a learning mindset and motivate the youth to pursue further education. This project not only monitored children's learning progress, but it also introduced the notion of a "dream" to them—how they projected themselves as agents, positioned themselves in connection with others, and imagined future identities different from the ones constructed by mainstream Indonesian society.

Retnaningdyah (2013, 2015) studied one subordinate group of women in the global division of labor: Indonesian foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong. Arguing against the stigma of domestic workers as unintelligent, passive, and submissive, Retnaningdyah showed how the women were actively engaged in activities to negotiate the prevailing structures of power in transnational labor market, and that literacy practices were central to their activism. They reconstructed their identities and empowered their communities through blogging in which their identities underwent significant changes through meaning-making processes. Overtime working hours and never-ending house chores did not seem to make them give up on writing and digital activities. In challenging the dominant discourse, they used the term *Babu* (maid) to fight for the value of domestic workers. The juxtaposition of the notion of blogging and *Babu* gave an alternative interpretation as *Babu* had always been associated with passiveness, submissiveness, and low skills, whereas blogging was something smart and tech-savvy. This discursive reversal was intended to shift negative social constructions of domestic workers as unintelligent and passive to seeing them as smart, creative, strong-willed, and critical people. These literacy practices also empowered the community to speak their unspoken and unheard voices (Retnaningdyah, 2015). For example, Erwiana experienced domestic violence from

her boss and was fired after eight months of working without receiving any salary. The social practice of literacy was proven to be able to move fellow international domestic workers to fight for legal justice for Erwiana. The literacy practices of these domestic workers have not only reconstructed their identities but also empowered their communities.

Agustino (2019) conducted a case study of one community library and argued that there was a relationship between local literacy movement and community empowerment. Community or local libraries in Indonesia are different from local libraries in the more developed countries that are government sponsored but locally run. In Indonesia, local libraries and their literacy movements are entirely voluntary and independent in nature. But according to Agustino's study, these libraries have been able to contribute to the socioeconomic life of their participants. The social literacy practices are visible in the form of a series of soft skill thematic activities to promote socioeconomic independence, along with providing books for reading.

In addition to this literature on grassroots literacies, we present two communities we have studied empirically, "Rumah Buku Cilegon" and "Adam and Sun" to paint more varieties of local literacies. The former community concerns one reading club, while the latter is a science club.

"*Rumah Buku Cilegon*" or Cilegon Book House was established in 2011 from a deep concern over the low reading interest and poor condition of city libraries in Cilegon, an industrial city in West Java, with rising economic inequality of its people. With the desire to bring together friends with shared passion about books, the community initially organized book picnics around Cilegon and surrounding cities to promote the culture of book reading through book picnics and an engaging mobile library. *Rumah Buku Cilegon* commutes from one place to another around Cilegon, familiarizing the locals with high-quality books to lay the foundation of literacy in the local community. They believe that critical literacy is important to fight against fake news and hoaxes (in-depth interview, February 2020). The book picnic was later dedicated to children since they were their most loyal participants. In addition, this community organized another program, "*Mencuri Ilmu dari Buku*" (Stealing Knowledge from Books). Unlike formal schooling in Indonesia, which is passive and makes children subservient to the learning process, this community encouraged freedom of speech and critical thinking. Everyone has the same opportunity to speak their mind. This approach resisted formal literacy as shaped and structured by the authoritarian government.

"Adam and the Sun" was also a community library initiated by the grassroots community in Banten in 2009 but then moved to Bandung in 2018. It focused on science and literacy, campaigning about the non-dichotomy of science and religion and using logic and critical thinking to deepen faith. When we interviewed the founder, he cited a verse in Al-Quran, especially *surah Al-Baqarah*, that the angel asked a question about why God created humans if they would do damage on earth. He explained, if "Angel, who is a submissive and passive creature, asked a question, why are people afraid to ask?" The social construction that those who question faith are labeled as nonbelievers discourages the questioning culture. Through science, one is able to contemplate why and how the universe was created. Thus, there is no dichotomy between religion and science. Adam and the Sun's literacy programs are, to name a few, Galileo Junior (visualizing astronomy through video), Dream Trigger (motivating children to dream high), Verse of Universe (doodle and rap music), local music (collaborating with local musicians to create minor notes of outer space sounds using Sundanese instruments), and Space for Space (urging Banten local government to build a planetarium). Adam and Sun also initiated Banten Science Day to promote science and astronomy to elementary school students.

The works of these literacy activists and practitioners at the community level embody local literacies (Barton & Hamilton, 2012) and show that vernacular literacies, although often subjugated by the discourse of formal literacy, play important roles in making sense of the world through words (Freire, 2000).

Concluding Thoughts

Indonesia's case, as demonstrated in this chapter, offers insights of how critical literacies could potentially liberate a range of important subjugated knowledge in any post-authoritarian context, irrespective of geographical location and local cultures. The historical trajectories of literacies in post-authoritarian Indonesia and the work of researchers and practitioners have highlighted the importance of linking literacy with social practices: literacy is ideologically and socially situated and it is mediated by texts and social networks. To make formal literacy more meaningful, it cannot be divorced from vernacular grassroot literacies (Barton & Hamilton, 2012). Unlike the more cognitive formal literacy imposed by the authoritarian administration, grassroots literacies have provided spaces in which people can truly engage in literacy acts as meaningful social practices and can potentially liberate Indonesia from its authoritarian shadow. As we have learned from the street children in Bandung, Indonesian foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong and local community libraries in Indonesia, critical literacy practices have the power not only to make the unheard voices heard but also to reconstruct one's identity and empower their respective community.

The current literacy praxis has demonstrated encouraging signs at community and grassroots levels. Future critical literacy praxis in Indonesia can expand existing work by exploring more in the areas of the impact of authoritarianism in ways of thinking and ways of doing literacy, the global pandemic, environmental issues (global warming), local languages, and gender equity. These four areas, while deserving top priority, are under-researched in the context of Indonesia. The global phenomena need to be contextualized locally in order to better address the problems through literacies. Critical literacies offer powerful ways to help navigate our post-authoritarian condition, while engaging with opportunities and inequalities accelerated by globalization.

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