

Children's literacy in Indonesia: solving the book supply problem

by Mark Heyward and Paul Collett

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Photo Credit: Mark Heyward

In 1992, while one of us (Collett) was at school in Jakarta, the other arrived to take up a position as school principal in Kalimantan. A young parent and fresh from a career teaching early childhood in Australia, one of the first priorities was to buy some local children's books – for the classroom and for home. This was a disappointment. Outside Jakarta and the big cities there were few bookstores. Books for children were limited to school textbooks or folk tales with dense text and sparse black and white illustrations.

Over the last ten years the situation has begun to change. Bookstores in regional centres now stock Indonesian children's books and young adult fiction, but much of it is translated from English and there is still a dearth of content for beginning readers. The cost of quality children's books is prohibitive for all but the upper middle classes, and the few books that do make it into the hands of children in schools and homes are typically dry texts or religious instruction. Why spend limited funds on entertainment for children? The priority is academic and moral instruction. Until recently, this attitude was reflected in government policy. Illustrated storybooks were approved for purchase in early childhood centres, but not for primary schools.

Meanwhile, children's literacy levels in the general population are alarmingly low. The Innovation for Indonesia's School Children (**INOVASI**) program has been working with the Indonesian government and non-government partners to address this issue since 2016. INOVASI is funded by the Australian government and implemented by **Palladium**. The program is due to end in December 2023.

In 2016, a **ministry survey** found that 47% of grade 4 students were unable to read. **INOVASI's 2017-18 baseline study** found that 43% of grade 2 students failed a basic letter and word recognition test, while **INOVASI's book study** found that 68% of available books were textbooks – dry, boring, and too difficult for beginning readers. Children **cannot learn to read without reading material**, and the most effective reading material is levelled and engaging children's books.

Throughout the Jokowi period, commencing 2014, government efforts to build a reading culture have aligned with grassroots efforts. International and local NGOs have been developing books; community reading centres, known as *taman baca masyarakat*, have sprung up in villages across the country; and in 2015 a 15-minute silent reading period was introduced in schools. But the problem persists. Books are either unavailable or inappropriate for most children – especially in the outer islands.

In a [previous blog](#), we described how a small pilot in North Kalimantan led to changes in the national policy for book approvals in Jakarta. In 2019, the Ministry of Education issued a decree consisting of a list of books approved for young children in grades 1-3. Previously the titles were only approved for preschools. Following two more years of collaboration with INOVASI, in 2022 the ministry updated requirements for nominating books for approval. The ministry issued a new decree, making it easier for individual writers and not-for-profit organisations to submit books for review and approval. The ministry also issued a decree on book levelling, adding in additional levels for beginning readers.

One might think the problem has been solved. Not yet. While the changes in Indonesia's national book approval process have made a big difference, most children still do not have access to appropriate, engaging books.

Over an 18-month period in 2021-22, INOVASI brought together stakeholders from government, non-government partners, and the industry to explore the problem and brainstorm solutions. The challenge lay in assembling a diverse set of actors with different perspectives on a complex set of problems. We spoke with everyone: from the owners of regional publishing giants, dismayed as to why such a massive market was not buying more children's books, to teachers on remote islands struggling to purchase books for their students, given a limited school budget that barely covers the basics of pencils, paper, maintenance and teacher compensation.

In a series of workshops, the group teased out the issues, identifying six key challenges on the supply side and six on the demand side, and a range of potential solutions.

On the demand side, challenges included low levels of awareness of the need for children's books, limited school budgets, the high price of books, limited teacher understanding of how to use books for literacy, limited access to the market for suppliers, and a tendency to purchase inappropriate books. Solutions included awareness-raising campaigns, national budget support for schools in remote areas, online digital libraries, government industry subsidies, improvements to the national book approval process, and a new ministry database on good books.

On the supply side, the following challenges were identified: the constraining book approval process; high production costs; high distribution costs; the currently small market; the maximum retail price policy making it unaffordable to produce quality books; and weak governance around intellectual property. The group proposed solutions including: relaxing the rules and streamlining the process for book approvals; a national government program to provide books for remote areas; bulk purchase of basic materials such as paper (through a public-private partnership); regular government engagement with the publishing and book retail industry; province-level printing, storage and distribution; publication of local books; changes to the calculation of maximum retail prices to incentivise writers and publishers; and enforcement of penalties for piracy.

Some of the solutions proposed, such as changes to the book approval process and development of teacher training (online and offline), were adopted during the problem exploration period. Some, such as the government's book provision program, were implemented subsequently. INOVASI worked with the government to revise their instruments for reviewing and writing textbooks and non-textbooks. The new instrument, which includes a gender and inclusion lens, will be used to review all books from now on. In 2022, in a new program, the government provided over 12 million books for 7,609 disadvantaged primary schools in 81 remote districts. Meanwhile, INOVASI is collaborating with the ministry to bring writers and illustrators of children's books from Australia to work with Indonesian creatives and industry stakeholders.

Following the 18-month problem exploration, INOVASI facilitated a national dialogue event with government and NGOs to discuss the topic "Improving the quality and quantity of children's books". Minister Nadiem Makarim took part, and the discussions resulted in recommendations for book supply, school libraries and reading corners. The minister held a follow-up meeting with INOVASI, ministry officials and NGO partners to discuss the solutions and, as a result, parliament approved a government proposal to earmark a proportion of education funding for children's books. The initial allocation for 2023 is approximately AUD5 million. This is expected to expand over coming years. In February 2023, the minister launched the new policies and programs for children's books in a live-streamed event "[Quality reading books for Indonesian literacy](#)".

An ongoing dialogue has been brokered between the ministry and publishers to address how current government pricing, procurement, and distribution mechanisms disincentivise the provision of high-quality books through official channels. The government is exploring ways to adapt procurement guidelines and appropriately value creative intellectual property.

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The next step for INOVASI and partners is to find out how well these new systems and policies work. Are teachers, parents and children using the books? Are literacy levels improving? What needs adjusting? What more can be done? Monitoring, evaluation and research have been underway to answer these questions since 2019. Initial results are promising, but there is a long way to go to ensure that all Indonesian children have access to good books, and that all teachers know how to use them to support literacy. For now we can be satisfied that, through genuine partnership and a problem-driven approach, many more Indonesian children have access to quality reading books.

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