

Basic Literacy Difficulties During the School Transition: A Cognitive-Affective Model Based on Educational Psychology

Hamilaturroyya

Universitas Darul Ulum Islamic Center Sudirman Semarang, Indonesia
laturroyya@gmail.com

Mar'atus Sholikhah

Universitas Darul Ulum Islamic Center Sudirman Semarang, Indonesia
marsya.marsya223@gmail.com

Ahmad Syarif Hidayatullah

Universitas Darul Ulum Islamic Center Sudirman Semarang, Indonesia
salmasalma@gmail.com

Zaenal Abidin

Universitas Darul Ulum Islamic Center Sudirman Semarang, Indonesia
zenit.2611@gmail.com

Uswatun Khasanah

Universitas Darul Ulum Islamic Center Sudirman Semarang, Indonesia
uswatunkhasanah6815@gmail.com

Corresponding Author: Hamilaturroyya

Article history: Received: Desember 03, 2025 | Revised: Januari 20, 2026 | Available Online: March 27, 2026

Abstract

Basic literacy attainment among Indonesian junior high school students has remained stagnant despite more than a decade of policy intervention, indicating that prevailing approaches have not addressed the underlying mechanisms. The cognitive and affective dynamics shaping literacy trajectories during the elementary-to-secondary transition specifically remain empirically underexplored. This study examined how adolescents with high digital media exposure experience basic literacy difficulties during this transition, identified the cognitive and affective factors involved, and analyzed how learning conditions sustain or disrupt the resulting cycle. A single qualitative case study was conducted with 18 informants 12 students, 5 teachers, and 1 principal at an urban public junior high school in Central Java. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, five classroom observations, and document analysis, and were analyzed using the interactive model of thematic data analysis. Trustworthiness was established through source and method triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, and audit trails. Findings revealed that the majority of students exhibited persistent reading comprehension failure under independent task conditions, accompanied by pervasive affective barriers including reading anxiety, avoidance behavior, and constrained written expression that systematically curtailed literacy practice. Teacher-centered oral instruction and unstructured digital media consumption were identified as the primary environmental conditions sustaining these patterns. Together, these elements constitute a self-reinforcing cycle in which limited cognitive engagement amplifies negative affect, which in turn suppresses literacy exposure. This study proposes the Cognitive-Affective Coupling Model in Literacy Transition (CACM-LT) and argues that effective

Copyright: © 2026. The authors.

FIKROTUNA; Jurnal Pendidikan dan Manajemen Islam is licensed under a Creative Commons AttributionNonCommercial 4.0 International License

interventions must integrate explicit cognitive instruction, emotionally supportive pedagogical environments, and coherent institutional policy.

Keywords: Basic Literacy Difficulties; Digital Generation Adolescents; Academic Anxiety; Cognitive-Affective Accumulation.

Introduction

Basic reading and writing literacy among junior high school (SMP) students in Indonesia has remained low for over a decade. Limited student engagement with print materials and unstructured use of digital devices contribute to weak literacy competencies at the secondary level.¹ Literacy here encompasses the ability to understand, interpret, and apply written information, as well as the strategic learning behaviors and self-regulation necessary for academic success.² The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) has repeatedly placed Indonesian students below the OECD average in reading literacy, indicating structural challenges in reading comprehension.³ This gap reflects cognitive, affective, and instructional issues that require an evidence-based approach.

From an educational psychology perspective, literacy development is influenced by motivation, self-efficacy, and engagement in learning on higher-order cognitive processes, comprehension, inference, and cognitive load management that must be systematically developed.⁴ Emotional responses to academic challenges also shape literacy trajectories, particularly during educational transitions. Pekrun's Control-Value Theory (CVT)⁵ explains that achievement emotions, anxiety, hopelessness, joy, and pride arise from students' assessments of their control over tasks and the value they assign to the outcomes. Students who feel unable to succeed on tasks that remain important tend to experience anxiety and avoidance; these emotions influence motivation and learning strategies, thereby creating a reciprocal cycle between evaluation, emotions, and

¹ Pablo Delgado et al., "Don't Throw Away Your Printed Books: A Meta-Analysis on the Effects of Reading Media on Reading Comprehension," *Educational Research Review* 25 (2018): 23–38, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2018.09.003>.

² Sharon H deFur and Mary Runnells, "Validation of the Adolescent Literacy and Academic Behavior Self-Efficacy Survey," *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* 40, no. 3 (2014): 255–66, <https://doi.org/10.3233/JVR-140691>.

³ OECD, "What Can Students Do in Mathematics, Reading and Science? BT - PISA 2022 Results (Volume I): The State of Learning and Equity in Education," PISA (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1787/53f23881-en>.

⁴ Julie H J Oh, Armando Bertone, and Gigi Luk, "Reading Comprehension and Its Cognitive Correlates in Multilingual Children and Adolescents," *Translational Issues in Psychological Science* 9, no. 4 (2023): 397–408, <https://doi.org/10.1037/tps0000375>.

⁵ Reinhard Pekrun and Lisa Linnenbrink-Garcia, *International Handbook of Emotions in Education*, ed. Reinhard Pekrun and Lisa Linnenbrink-Garcia (Routledge, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203148211>.

performance. CVT has been validated across cultures, including among high school students in Asia⁶ and adolescents with learning difficulties during the transition period.⁷

Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) explains the cognitive mechanisms behind these difficulties. Working memory capacity is limited.⁸ When basic reading skills are not yet automated, decoding consumes resources that should be available for comprehension and inference. Research integrating CLT with CVT in Indonesia shows that an increase in irrelevant cognitive load exacerbates anxiety and reduces the enjoyment of learning, which ultimately hinders productive cognitive engagement.⁹ These findings confirm that the cognitive and affective dimensions of literacy difficulties operate as mutually influencing processes, rather than as separate pathways.

Zimmerman's Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) model¹⁰ explains the behavioral dimensions of literacy difficulties. When students lack adequate cognitive tools and negative emotions accumulate, self-regulation tends to break down into avoidance: minimal effort, reduced help-seeking, and even complete withdrawal. The integration of SRL with CVT suggests that affective states form a daily feedback loop that either sustains or erodes student engagement [20]. Students who struggle with reading tend to withdraw, and this withdrawal leads to a lack of practice, which reinforces their difficulties.

In Indonesia, the School Literacy Movement (GLS) has been widely implemented in response to low literacy achievement.¹¹ Post pandemic studies show that the GLS supports reading habits and improves scores on the Computer Based National Assessment (ANBK). Yet persistent barriers remain: students who are not yet fluent readers,

⁶ Jing Zhang, "A Longitudinal Study of Pekrun's Control-Value Theory and the Internal/External Frame of Reference Model in Predicting Academic Anxiety," *Educational Psychology* 42, no. 4 (2022): 479–500, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410.2020.1729345>.

⁷ Petra J Sainio et al., "The Role of Teacher Closeness in Adolescents' Emotions and Achievement with and without Learning Difficulties," *Learning Disability Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (2023): 151–65, <https://doi.org/10.1177/07319487221086006>.

⁸ John Sweller, "Cognitive Load Theory," in *Psychology of Learning and Motivation*, ed. Jose P Mestre and Brian H Ross, vol. 55 (San Diego, CA: Elsevier Academic Press, 2011), 37–76, <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-387691-1.00002-8>.

⁹ Sunawan, Sugiyo, and Yuli Kurniawati Sugiyo Pranoto, "Achievement Goals and Extraneous Load Predict Germane Load: The Mediating Effect of Achievement Emotions," *Malaysian Journal of Learning and Instruction* 18, no. 2 (2021): 215–34, <https://doi.org/10.32890/mjli2021.18.2.8>.

¹⁰ Barry J Zimmerman, "Becoming a Self-Regulated Learner: An Overview," *Theory into Practice* 41, no. 2 (2002): 64–70.

¹¹ Syamsul Ghufuron et al., "Implementation of the School Literacy Movement at SDN Margorejo III Surabaya," *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences* 47, no. 1 (2026): 470105, <https://doi.org/10.34044/j.kjss.2026.47.1.05>.

inconsistent implementation, and limited institutional capacity. A paradox arises when students are formally classified as literate yet lack adequate functional literacy.¹² Meanwhile, the assumption that digital exposure automatically leads to functional literacy has been refuted [9]; engagement with short-form digital content may actually reduce attention to academic texts and hinder deep comprehension.¹³

Literacy studies in Indonesia have largely examined reading interest, teaching strategies, or teachers' conceptualizations of literacy in isolation¹⁴. Structured interventions during the elementary-to-middle school transition show moderate improvements, but few are sustainably effective.¹⁵ The affective dimension has also been under-explored: adolescents with reading difficulties experience greater negative academic emotions and a decline in achievement during the transition, but the psychological mechanisms underlying this pattern remain unexplored.¹⁶ No empirical studies have examined the interaction between cognitive difficulties, affective responses, and the teaching context as a system during the elementary–junior high school transition in an urban setting in Indonesia.

This study addresses this gap by integrating CVT, CLT, and SRL into a conceptual working model: the Cognitive-Affective Coupling Model in Literacy Transition (CACM-LT). This model argues that initial cognitive difficulties, in the form of decoding limitations and working memory load, trigger negative academic emotions through students' perceptions of low control and high task difficulty. These emotions shape behavioral responses such as avoidance, minimal writing output, and reliance on verbal instructions, which limit practice in developing literacy skills. This cycle is self-reinforcing: cognitive and affective barriers exacerbate one another over time. Instructional contexts moderate this cycle: pedagogical practices prioritizing verbal

¹² Dyah Puspitasari Srirahayu, Tiara Kusumaningtyas, and Dessy Harisanty, "The Role of School Librarians in the Implementation of the School Literacy Movement in East Java," *Library Philosophy and Practice*, 2021, 1–15.

¹³ Delgado et al., "Don't Throw Away Your Printed Books: A Meta-Analysis on the Effects of Reading Media on Reading Comprehension."

¹⁴ Caroline Bark and Greg Brooks, "How Can Children with Mild Literacy Difficulties Be Supported at the Transition to Secondary School? A Small-Scale Quasi-Experimental Study," *British Journal of Special Education* 43, no. 4 (2016): 373–93, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8578.12158>.

¹⁵ Dhina Cahya Rohim and Septina Rahmawati, "Peran Literasi Dalam Meningkatkan Minat Baca Siswa Di Sekolah Dasar," *Jurnal Review Pendidikan Dasar* 6, no. 3 (2020): 230–37, <https://doi.org/10.26740/jrpd.v6n3.p230-237>.

¹⁶ Petra Sainio et al., "Adolescents' Academic Emotions and Academic Achievement across the Transition to Lower Secondary School: The Role of Learning Difficulties," *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 65, no. 3 (2021): 385–403, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2019.1705900>.

explanations can reduce student discomfort while maintaining reliance on literacy, whereas administrative grade promotion may formally conceal this cycle from academic records. Unlike previous studies that examined reading interest, GLS implementation, or teaching techniques in isolation, this study examines the interaction between cognitive difficulties and affective responses as the lived experience of *digital native* adolescents transitioning from elementary to junior high school in Indonesia.

The objectives of this study are: (1) to analyze how digital native adolescents experience basic literacy difficulties during the transition to junior high school in an urban context in Indonesia; (2) to identify the cognitive and affective factors that shape these difficulties from an educational psychology perspective; and (3) to investigate how instructional and institutional conditions maintain or disrupt the cognitive-affective reinforcement cycle proposed by the CACM-LT.

Research Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with a single-case study design to explore the basic literacy difficulties of junior high school students who advance to the next grade without adequate literacy proficiency. The case study design is suitable for investigating contemporary phenomena in real-life contexts, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly defined. This study follows Stake's instrumental case study approach, using a bounded case to understand the cognitive-affective dynamics outlined in the CACM-LT framework.

The research was conducted from October 1 to December 31, 2025, at a public junior high school in an urban area of Central Java, Indonesia. The location was purposively selected based on preliminary observations indicating that many seventh- and eighth-grade students had not yet achieved basic literacy competencies, including reading comprehension, written expression, and basic numeracy.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling using predefined inclusion criteria. Student participants were identified through consultation with subject and guidance teachers as students who demonstrated difficulty reading short texts, understanding written instructions, or producing coherent written sentences. Teacher participants were selected for their direct involvement in teaching and experience supporting students with literacy difficulties. A total of 18 participants from three categories were involved in this study, as detailed in Table 1

Table 1.
Participant Profile

Category	Code	n	Description
Male students	L-1 to L-6	6	Grade 7 and 8 students with identified literacy difficulties
Female students	P-1 to P-6	6	Grade 7 and 8 students with identified literacy difficulties
Male teachers	GL-1 to GL-2	2	Subject teachers (Indonesian Language; Social Studies)
Female teachers	GP-1 to GP-3	3	Subject teachers (Mathematics; Natural Sciences) and Guidance & Counseling teacher
School principal	KS	1	Institutional perspective on literacy challenges
Total		18	

The participants' ages ranged from 13 to 14 years ($M = 13.5$), consisting of six 7th-grade students (3 boys, 3 girls) and six 8th-grade students (3 boys, 3 girls). This age range places them on the cusp between late Generation Z and early Generation Alpha; this study refers to them as *digital native* adolescents to highlight their lifelong exposure to digital media without being tied to a specific generational label.

Data were collected through three methods: in-depth semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted individually with all 18 participants in Indonesian, lasting 35–60 minutes ($M = 45$ minutes for students; 55 minutes for teachers and the principal). The interviews explored students' learning experiences, psychological responses to literacy tasks (motivation, anxiety, self-confidence), and teachers' perspectives on literacy challenges in the classroom. All interviews were audio-recorded with written consent and transcribed verbatim. Selected excerpts were translated into English by the research team; translation accuracy was verified through back-translation by an independent bilingual colleague.

Classroom observations consisted of five sessions covering 7th- and 8th-grade classes across three subjects (Indonesian Language, Mathematics, and Social Studies). Each session lasted approximately 80 minutes (two standard periods) and was documented using a structured checklist and field notes. The checklists were designed based on four constructs from the theoretical framework: student engagement with written materials, indicators of academic anxiety, teaching responses to literacy difficulties, and self-regulatory behaviors during literacy tasks.

Document analysis included a review of students' written assignments and assessment records (n = 47 documents) as well as institutional documents related to the school's literacy program, including the GLS implementation plan and records of pre-lesson reading activities. These documents provided contextual data and supporting evidence for the patterns identified through interviews and observations. All research instruments, namely the interview protocol, observation checklist, and document analysis framework, were developed based on the constructs of CVT (value-controlled assessment; emotions, activities, and outcomes), CLT (intrinsic and extrinsic cognitive load), and SRL (planning, execution, and self-reflection phases). The instruments were pilot-tested on 2 students and 1 teacher (not included in the main study) and refined before data collection. Pilot data were not analyzed. The instruments are available from the corresponding author upon request.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, consisting of data condensation, data presentation, and drawing conclusions and verification.¹⁷ Analysis was conducted manually using a structured coding system supported by a spreadsheet-based matrix. Coding took place in three cycles: (1) inductive open coding to identify patterns emerging from the data; (2) axial coding to group codes into categories aligned with the theoretical framework (cognitive, affective, behavioral, instructional, and institutional dimensions); and (3) selective coding to identify central concepts within the cognitive-affective integration cycle that form the basis of the CACM-LT model.

Two members of the research team coded portions of the data independently to verify analytical convergence; disagreements were resolved through discussion to reach consensus. Formal inter-coder reliability statistics were not calculated, consistent with the interpretive orientation of this study; however, procedural rigor was maintained through documented coding decisions and reflective memos.

The validity of the findings was ensured through several strategies.¹⁸ Triangulation was achieved by integrating data from three sources (students, teachers, institutional documents) and three methods (interviews, observation, document analysis);

¹⁷ Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldaña, *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook* (Washington: SAGE Publications, 2014).

¹⁸ John W. Creswell, *Penelitian Kualitatif Dan Desain Riset*, 2018, https://smartcampus.seskoal.ac.id/elibrary/index.php?p=show_detail&id=1343.

convergences strengthened the findings, while differences were examined and reported. Participant verification was conducted in two stages: eight participants reviewed their transcripts, and five participants reviewed the initial thematic findings. All confirmed the themes' accuracy, with two minor clarifications incorporated into the final analysis. Debriefing was conducted with an external academic colleague specializing in educational psychology, who reviewed the analytical procedures, coded data samples, and themes that emerged at three stages during the analysis. A complete audit trail documenting fieldwork decisions, coding evolution, and analytical notes was maintained throughout the study and is available upon request.

Data sufficiency was evaluated through ongoing review during the data collection process.¹⁹ For student participants, code saturation, where no significant new codes emerged, occurred near the sixth interview, with initial thematic stabilization evident as early as the third interview. For teacher participants, saturation was reached after the first two interviews, consistent with more convergent professional perspectives. Saturation in qualitative research is understood as the sufficiency of information relative to the research questions, not absolute completeness; the limited sample size is acknowledged as a limitation.

Results

The analysis yielded five thematic clusters describing the cognitive-affective reinforcement cycle: (1) patterns of reading difficulties; (2) difficulties with writing and expressing ideas; (3) affective responses to literacy tasks; (4) teachers' perspectives on literacy gaps; and (5) institutional perspectives. Diverse and unexpected findings, along with a cross-source summary table, are presented in the concluding section.

Patterns of Reading Difficulties in the Context of Academic Learning

Data from interviews, observations, and documents reveal a consistent pattern of reading difficulties. During five observation sessions, 9 out of 12 students reread short paragraphs 2 to 3 times before answering questions, yet many still failed to identify the main idea. On tasks involving narrative or explanatory texts, students produced

¹⁹ Greg Guest, Emily Namey, and Mario Chen, "A Simple Method to Assess and Report Thematic Saturation in Qualitative Research," *PLOS ONE* 15, no. 5 (2020): e0232076, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0232076>.

incomplete or incorrect interpretations, particularly when asked to summarize the meaning independently.

Observations also showed that 7 out of 12 students delayed literacy tasks until the teacher explained the instructions verbally. Following the verbal explanation, student performance improved, indicating that the primary obstacle lies in processing written language rather than in conceptual understanding. This pattern is consistent with CLT predictions: decoding demands consume working memory capacity, thereby reducing resources available for comprehension.

Interview data reinforces this pattern. Student L-3 (male, 8th grade):

“When I’m asked to read on my own, it takes me a long time to understand it. I often have to reread the text several times, especially if it’s long.” Student P-2 (female, 7th grade): “I understand better when the teacher explains it directly. Reading on my own makes me tired and confused.”

These difficulties are particularly evident in the context of assessment. Students L-5, P-1, and P-4 reported an inability to interpret narrative exam questions despite having read them repeatedly. Some participants traced their difficulties to limited exposure to independent reading during elementary school, suggesting that reading difficulties in junior high school reflect a cumulative gap from previous education.

Difficulties with Writing and Limited Expression of Ideas

Findings indicate substantial difficulties in written expression. Although some students demonstrated conceptual understanding when answering orally, this understanding was not reflected in their written work.

Document analysis revealed that 8 out of 12 student-written responses consisted of short phrases or one-sentence answers, even on tasks requiring elaboration. Paragraph-level writing was rarely observed, and students tended to avoid lengthy writing tasks when given a choice. Student P-5 (female, 8th grade) explained:

“I understand the answer, but when I have to write it down, I don’t know where to start.” Student L-2 (male, 7th grade): “Writing takes a long time, and I often run out of ideas, so I just write short answers.”

Fear of making mistakes emerged as a significant barrier. Students L-1, L-4, P-3, and P-6 opted for minimal responses to avoid making mistakes, a strategy that limits the depth of written expression. Previous learning records indicate a dominance of short-answer formats, reflecting a pattern of limited writing practice that persists into junior high school.

Affective Responses Related to Literacy Tasks

Interview and observation data indicate that literacy tasks often trigger negative emotions, such as anxiety, fear of making mistakes, embarrassment, and diminished self-confidence. Ten out of 12 students reported anxiety when asked to read aloud or write answers in class. These emotional responses often stem from previous negative experiences. Student L-6 (male, 8th grade):

“I feel scared when asked to read aloud because I might make a mistake and be laughed at.”

Observations confirmed avoidance behaviors: students L-1, L-3, P-2, and P-5 avoided eye contact, looked down, or remained silent to reduce the likelihood of being called on. Social comparison emerged as a recurring theme among students P-1, P-3, L-2, and L-5, who compared themselves to more proficient peers, a tendency linked to feelings of inferiority and reduced participation.

Through the CVT lens, this pattern aligns with a low-control configuration (students feel they cannot succeed) and a high-value configuration (students recognize that the task is important and that failure carries social consequences), a combination that the theory predicts will lead to anxiety, hopelessness, and avoidance.

Teachers' Perspectives on the Literacy Gap

Teachers reported significant disparities in students' literacy skills within the same classroom. Teacher GL-1 explained:

“Many students answer incorrectly, not because they don't understand the material, but because they don't understand the question.”

The wide range of abilities requires continuous adaptation. Teacher GP-2:

“We often have to repeat the same instructions in different ways, both verbally and through examples, sometimes individually, just to ensure everyone understands what they need to do.”

Teachers GL-1, GL-2, GP-1, and GP-2 reported a routine reliance on repeated verbal explanations. While this practice addresses immediate classroom challenges, the teachers acknowledged that it reduces teaching efficiency and limits higher-order learning. A GP-3 teacher (guidance and counseling) added that students with literacy difficulties often exhibit anxiety and reluctance to participate, which they address through counseling sessions. However, this falls outside the scope of standard teaching.

Institutional Perspectives on Literacy Challenges

The principal (KS) characterized literacy difficulties as a systemic problem:

“We recognize that some students enter junior high school with inadequate reading skills. This phenomenon does not occur suddenly, but is rather an accumulation of the educational process at the previous level.” (Interview with the Principal, December 21, 2025)

The school has implemented the GLS literacy program, including a 15-minute pre-class reading activity. However, the school principal noted challenges such as significant variation in students' abilities, limited time and teaching staff, and minimal parental involvement in fostering reading habits at home. This perspective indicates that literacy difficulties are acknowledged at the school level but remain difficult to address through existing programs alone, consistent with empirical findings on the broader implementation of GLS.²⁰

Unexpected and Unusual Findings

Two students (L-5 and P-4) exhibited unusual profiles. Although identified as having literacy difficulties, both were actively engaged in oral discussions and motivated in non-literacy tasks (e.g., hands-on science activities). Their difficulties appeared to be limited to written texts, suggesting that the cognitive-affective reinforcement cycle may be domain- and task-specific and thus not universally applicable across all academic activities.

Teacher GP-3 offered a different interpretation: for some students, reluctance to engage in literacy tasks does not reflect anxiety, but rather a learned strategy to wait for adult assistance. She linked this behavioral pattern to the home environment, where independence in tasks is rarely expected. This interpretation does not contradict the CACM-LT but adds an alternative pathway for maintaining avoidance behavior.

Data source convergence is strong but not absolute. Teacher and student reports align regarding the centrality of anxiety and avoidance. Yet, document analysis reveals that the academic performance gap between literacy-dependent and non-literacy-dependent subjects is narrower than reported. Literacy difficulties may be more emotionally prominent for students and teachers than their formal academic consequences, a finding consistent with the CACM-LT's emphasis on the affective dimension.

²⁰ Ghufron et al., “Implementation of the School Literacy Movement at SDN Margorejo III Surabaya.”

Table 2.
Summary of Research Findings

No	Focus of Findings	Key Description	Primary Data Sources
1	Reading difficulties	9 out of 12 students reread texts multiple times; 7 out of 12 relied on oral explanations for written instructions	Interviews, observations
2	Writing difficulties	8 of 12 students produced only short or incomplete written responses; 4 students reported fear of making mistakes	Interviews, documents
3	Emotional responses	10 of 12 students reported anxiety; avoidance behaviors were observed in 4 students across sessions	Interviews, observations
4	Classroom dynamics	Teacher-centered instruction is dominant due to students' limited ability to process written text	Observations, interviews
5	Teachers' perspectives	A wide literacy gap within classes requires continuous instructional adaptation	Interviews (GL-1, GL-2, GP-1, GP-2, GP-3)
6	Institutional perspective	Low literacy is framed as systemic; programs are constrained by time, resources, and family support	Interview (KS), documents
7	Divergent findings	Atypical profiles in 2 students; alternative interpretation by guidance counselor; discrepancy between records and experience	Interviews, observations, documents

Table 2 summarizes basic literacy difficulties during the elementary–middle school transition, covering four interrelated dimensions: cognitive limitations, affective responses, behavioral adaptation, and instructional and institutional conditions. These patterns are consistent with a self-reinforcing cycle: initial cognitive difficulties trigger negative affective responses, which in turn drive avoidance and limit the practices necessary to build skills. However, this pattern does not apply uniformly. Variations among students suggest that domain-specific contexts, family environments, and individual student characteristics moderate the cycle.

Discussion

This study examines the basic literacy difficulties of digital-generation adolescents during their transition to junior high school at an urban school in Indonesia. The analysis is based on data from 18 participants and organized into four themes: cognitive barriers, affective responses, instructional and digital influences, and systemic

implications. These interpretations apply to this limited case and are not intended as generalizations.

Cognitive Barriers to Literacy Development

The main issue identified is the gap between students' academic progress and their literacy proficiency. Students who have advanced to junior high school often still struggle with basic reading comprehension and written expression, indicating that grade progression does not always reflect literacy readiness. This pattern aligns with 2022 PISA data, which places Indonesian students far below the OECD average in reading literacy.²¹

Reading literacy serves as the foundation for cross-curricular learning. When students cannot read fluently, they struggle to interpret written instructions, solve text-based problems, and understand conceptual material. These difficulties are linked to decoding accuracy, semantic integration, and working memory capacity, which together form the ability to construct meaning from lengthy texts.²² When decoding is not yet automatic, cognitive load increases, leaving few resources for comprehension.²³ The finding that 9 out of 12 students reread a paragraph several times before answering reflects this CLT prediction: cognitive resources are absorbed by basic decoding.

However, a cognitive explanation alone is insufficient. Literacy development is also influenced by curriculum design, the availability of reading materials, and classroom pedagogy. Research in Indonesia integrating cognitive load with achievement emotions shows that as irrelevant cognitive load increases, students' negative emotions also rise, which in turn reduces cognitive availability for productive learning.²⁴ The cognitive and affective dimensions of literacy difficulties influence one another, rather than running in parallel.

Affective Responses as Exacerbating Barriers

Affective responses play a central role in shaping students' engagement in literacy tasks. Ten out of 12 students reported experiencing anxiety when asked to read aloud or

²¹ OECD, *PISA 2022 Results (Volume I): The State of Learning and Equity in Education* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1787/53f23881-en>.

²² Oh, Bertone, and Luk, "Reading Comprehension and Its Cognitive Correlates in Multilingual Children and Adolescents."

²³ Sweller, "Cognitive Load Theory."

²⁴ Sunawan, Sugiyo, and Pranoto, "Achievement Goals and Extraneous Load Predict Germane Load: The Mediating Effect of Achievement Emotions."

write in class. Anxiety reduces the willingness to participate and, in some cases, triggers active avoidance: silence, downcast eyes, and minimal written output. This pattern aligns with findings that adolescents with reading difficulties experience greater negative academic emotions during school transitions, with these emotional patterns following a decline in achievement.²⁵

Within the CVT framework proposed by Pekrun, this pattern aligns with a configuration of low control and high task value conditions predicted to elicit anxiety, hopelessness, and avoidance.²⁶ Students perceive literacy tasks as both important and beyond their reach; this assessment triggers an affective response. Longitudinal research on high school students supports this interpretation and demonstrates that academic anxiety arises from the reciprocal interaction between perceived control and task value.²⁷ Anxiety and low self-confidence in this study do not merely accompany literacy difficulties; both also function as secondary barriers that exacerbate cognitive challenges. Students who are anxious about reading tend to avoid it, which deprives them of the practice needed for improvement. This is the self-reinforcing cycle proposed by CACM-LT: emotional withdrawal perpetuates cognitive deficits that trigger anxiety.

Classroom social dynamics also play a role. Students associate their anxiety with fear of public correction and comparison to more proficient peers. When struggling readers are asked to perform without adequate guidance, practices intended to build skills can instead deepen affective barriers. Recent evidence suggests that close, supportive teacher-student relationships during the first year of middle school are associated with increased positive emotions and literacy achievement.²⁸ The affective dimension of literacy difficulties, therefore, is not merely an internal issue for the student, but a relational and pedagogical one.

²⁵ Sainio et al., “The Role of Teacher Closeness in Adolescents’ Emotions and Achievement with and without Learning Difficulties.”

²⁶ Pekrun et al., “Academic Emotions in Students’ Self-Regulated Learning and Achievement: A Program of Qualitative and Quantitative Research.”

²⁷ C Huck et al., “Development of an Instrument to Assess Teacher Perceptions of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in PK–12 Schools,” n.d.

²⁸ Sainio et al., “Adolescents’ Academic Emotions and Academic Achievement across the Transition to Lower Secondary School: The Role of Learning Difficulties.”

Teaching Practices and the Digital Context

Teachers rely heavily on repeated oral explanations to compensate for students who cannot process written text independently. As an immediate response, this is understandable. However, over time, this practice reduces students' exposure to written language and narrows opportunities to develop independent reading and writing skills. Classrooms adapt in the short term while maintaining a reliance on literacy in the long term, in line with the moderating role proposed by CACM-LT in the teaching context.

SRL helps explain why this pattern persists. When students lack the cognitive tools to engage with a text and are simultaneously experiencing anxiety, the cycle of self-regulation planning, execution, and reflection is disrupted. Students begin to avoid tasks, rather than simply attempting them with weaker tools.²⁹ The study adds that this disruption is perhaps unconsciously supported by classroom practices that shield students from difficulty rather than guiding them through it.

The digital environment also plays a role. Exposure to short-form digital content can erode sustained attention toward longer academic texts and slow the development of deeper comprehension.³⁰ The assumption that the “digital generation” automatically acquires functional literacy through digital exposure is not empirically supported.³¹ Students in this study were comfortable with digital devices, but had not yet transferred that comfort into academic reading and writing skills. Verbal instruction in school and unstructured digital consumption outside of school may reinforce each other, leaving little room for sustained reading and writing practice. Promoting reading interest or expanding digital access alone is not enough; what is needed is structured cognitive engagement with written texts, supported by pedagogical strategies that systematically build comprehension and expression skills.

²⁹ Belinda Berweger et al., “Daily Affective-Motivational Experiences during Exam Preparation: Feedback Cycles, Stability, and Change over Time,” *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000990>.

³⁰ Delgado et al., “Don't Throw Away Your Printed Books: A Meta-Analysis on the Effects of Reading Media on Reading Comprehension.”

³¹ Metka Kordigel Aberšek, “Misconceptions about Functional Literacy Mastery in an Electronic Environment and New Didactic Tasks of Slovenian Language,” *Slavia Centralis* 13, no. 2 (2020): 187–202.

Alternative Interpretations and Limiting Conditions

The findings above are consistent with the CACM-LT, but alternative interpretations also warrant consideration. *First*, the relationship between literacy difficulties and anxiety may reflect characteristics of students who already have generalized anxiety, a limited family literacy environment, or undiagnosed learning difficulties, such that both emerge as co-occurring outcomes. The case study design cannot determine the direction of causality; longitudinal research or mixed-methods approaches are needed.

Second, reliance on verbal instruction may be interpreted not as a contributor to literacy delays, but as an adaptive cultural feature in classroom pedagogy in Indonesia. If so, the solution is not to reduce verbal instruction but to integrate structured written engagement alongside it. Findings from GP-3, which link student hesitation to learned dependence on adult assistance, point in a similar direction: avoidance behaviors may have diverse sources.

Third, the profiles of L-5 and P-4 students showing strong oral engagement and motivation in non-literacy tasks suggest that the cognitive-affective reinforcement cycle may be specific to strong domains in literacy-rich tasks but stalls in areas where students experience greater control. This highlights the importance of using students' strengths as entry points for literacy interventions.

Systemic Implications for Policy and Practice

These findings raise questions about the implementation of competency-based progressive policies. When students reach middle school without mastering basic literacy, the gap is cumulative, having formed over the years and only becoming apparent at the transition point. The principal's framework, which states that this issue is "not an isolated incident but part of a broader pattern," illustrates this: the problem is institutionally recognized, but existing programs lack the scale or intensity necessary to address it. Pre-lesson reading activities in GLS help, but are hindered by time constraints, uneven student readiness, and resource limitations.³²

For teachers, these findings highlight the need to move beyond verbal compensation toward explicit literacy instruction within subject areas: guided reading strategies,

³² Ghufron et al., "Implementation of the School Literacy Movement at SDN Margorejo III Surabaya."

structured writing frameworks, and gradual opportunities for students to engage with texts independently. For school leaders, literacy support requires dedicated time, tailored resources, and coordination between subject teachers and guidance counselors. GP-3 data indicate that the affective dimension of literacy difficulties frequently emerges in counseling settings; integrating counseling support with literacy instruction can strengthen the impact of interventions.

At the policy level, the data suggest that administrative promotion decisions could be combined with targeted literacy screening and intervention protocols to promptly identify and support students who are advancing to junior high school.³³ Within the broader landscape of Indonesian education, this argument also intersects with the philosophy of Islamic education. The command “*iqra*” (read) in Surah Al-‘Alaq positions reading and the pursuit of knowledge as a core religious obligation, not an optional skill, and Qur’anic educational philosophy emphasizes the development of independent reasoning alongside character formation.³⁴ Structured literacy initiatives in Indonesian Islamic school settings have yielded measurable improvements in literacy outcomes.³⁵ The convergence of cognitive development science and Islamic educational thought suggests that literacy interventions in Indonesian junior high schools can be strengthened by drawing on shared values that place reading, reasoning, and character at the core of student development.

Limitations

The study was conducted at a single urban school in Central Java over one month, thus limiting the generalizability of the findings to rural or suburban schools or to schools with different profiles. The qualitative design provides depth but not breadth; the saturation achieved, particularly for the small group of teachers, represents sufficient information relative to the research questions, not comprehensive saturation. CACM-LT is proposed as a theoretical model for a single case; broader empirical testing is needed

³³ Srirahayu, Kusumaningtyas, and Harisanty, “The Role of School Librarians in the Implementation of the School Literacy Movement in East Java.”

³⁴ Purbatua Manurung, Abdul Hasan Saragih, and Pagar Hasibuan, “A Study of the Philosophy of Education and Analysis of the Principles of Implementing Education According to the Al-Qur’an,” *Pharos Journal of Theology* 105, no. 2 (2024): 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.105.28>.

³⁵ Zalik Nuryana et al., “Literacy Movement for Superior Schools: Best Practices and Leadership Strengths,” *International Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education* 9, no. 1 (2020): 227–33, <https://doi.org/10.11591/ijere.v9i1.20279>.

to assess its generalizability. Ongoing efforts at reflexivity cannot eliminate interpretive bias. Future research with mixed-methods or longitudinal designs across various locations, including rural, suburban, and Islamic school settings, as well as cross-cultural comparisons, will provide a more complete picture and test the boundary conditions of CACM-LT.

Conclusion

Based on case study data from 18 participants and the integrative framework of CVT, CLT, and SRL, three main conclusions emerge. First, basic literacy difficulties during the elementary-to-middle school transition cannot be understood through a cognitive, affective, or instructional lens in isolation; these difficulties arise from the dynamic interaction between limited cognitive processing, affective responses such as anxiety and low self-confidence, teaching practices that compensate rather than build skills, and cumulative systemic factors from prior education. Second, the affective dimension functions as an additional barrier: anxiety reduces engagement in literacy tasks, limits the practice needed to overcome cognitive difficulties, and generates an intensive self-reinforcing cycle over time. Third, students' digital proficiency and their persistent literacy gaps challenge the assumption that digital exposure automatically leads to functional literacy.

The theoretical contribution of this research is the CACM-LT, which conceptualizes literacy difficulties during the junior high school transition as a coherent, mutually reinforcing cycle, rather than merely a collection of separate deficits. This model also aligns with principles of Islamic educational philosophy that prioritize reading and reasoning as central educational priorities in Indonesia's educational landscape. Practically, effective literacy interventions in junior high school require an integrated approach: the development of cognitive skills, emotional safety in the classroom, structured engagement with written texts, and institutional alignment between primary and secondary education. Improving literacy outcomes is not merely a matter of expanding GLS or digital access. Still, it requires pedagogical designs that combine explicit instruction, psychologically supportive learning environments, and policy frameworks that recognize literacy as a fundamental educational right.

Bibliography

- Aberšek, Metka Kordigel. "Misconceptions about Functional Literacy Mastery in an Electronic Environment and New Didactic Tasks of the Slovenian Language." *Slavia Centralis* 13, no. 2 (2020): 187–202.
- Bark, Caroline, and Greg Brooks. "How Can Children with Mild Literacy Difficulties Be Supported at the Transition to Secondary School? A Small-Scale Quasi-Experimental Study." *British Journal of Special Education* 43, no. 4 (2016): 373–93. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8578.12158>.
- Berweger, Belinda, Jasmin Breitwieser, Bärbel Kracke, Garvin Brod und Julia Dietrich. "Daily Affective-Motivational Experiences during Exam Preparation: Feedback Cycles, Stability, and Change over Time." *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 2026. <https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000990>.
- Creswell, John W. *Penelitian Kualitatif Dan Desain Riset*, 2018. https://smartcampus.seskoal.ac.id/elibrary/index.php?p=show_detail&id=1343.
- deFur, Sharon H, and Mary Runnells. "Validation of the Adolescent Literacy and Academic Behavior Self-Efficacy Survey." *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* 40, no. 3 (2014): 255–66. <https://doi.org/10.3233/JVR-140691>.
- Delgado, Pablo, Cristina Vargas, Rakefet Ackerman y Ladislao Salmerón. "Don't Throw Away Your Printed Books: A Meta-Analysis on the Effects of Reading Media on Reading Comprehension." *Educational Research Review* 25 (2018): 23–38. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2018.09.003>.
- Ghufro, Syamsul, Nafiah, Fifi Khoiril Fitriyah, Mustofa, and Kaswadi. "Implementation of the School Literacy Movement at SDN Margorejo III Surabaya." *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences* 47, no. 1 (2026): 470105. <https://doi.org/10.34044/j.kjss.2026.47.1.05>.
- Guests: Greg, Emily Namey, and Mario Chen. "A Simple Method to Assess and Report Thematic Saturation in Qualitative Research." *PLOS ONE* 15, no. 5 (2020): e0232076. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0232076>.
- Huck, C, Zhang, L., Garby, and X Li. "Development of an Instrument to Assess Teacher Perceptions of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in PK–12 Schools," n.d.
- Manurung, Purbatua, Abdul Hasan Saragih, and Pagar Hasibuan. "A Study of the Philosophy of Education and Analysis of the Principles of Implementing Education According to the Al-Qur'an." *Pharos Journal of Theology* 105, no. 2 (2024): 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.105.28>.
- Miles, Matthew B., A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldana. *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*. Washington: SAGE Publications, 2014.
- Nuryana, Zalik, Agus Suroyo, Indah Nurcahyati, Farid Setiawan, and Arif Rahman. "Literacy Movement for Superior Schools: Best Practices and Leadership Strengths." *International Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education* 9, no. 1 (2020): 227–33. <https://doi.org/10.11591/ijere.v9i1.20279>.

- OECD. *PISA 2022 Results (Volume I): The State of Learning and Equity in Education*. Paris: OECD Publishing, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1787/53f23881-en>.
- . “What Can Students Do in Mathematics, Reading and Science? BT - PISA 2022 Results (Volume I): The State of Learning and Equity in Education.” PISA. Paris: OECD Publishing, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1787/53f23881-en>.
- Oh, Julie H J, Armando Bertone, and Gigi Luk. “Reading Comprehension and Its Cognitive Correlates in Multilingual Children and Adolescents.” *Translational Issues in Psychological Science* 9, no. 4 (2023): 397–408. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tps0000375>.
- Pekrun, Reinhard, Thomas Goetz, Wolfram Titz, and Raymond P Perry. “Academic Emotions in Students’ Self-Regulated Learning and Achievement: A Program of Qualitative and Quantitative Research.” *Educational Psychologist* 37, no. 2 (2002): 91–105. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15326985EP3702_4.
- Pekrun, Reinhard, and Lisa Linnenbrink-Garcia. *International Handbook of Emotions in Education*. Edited by Reinhard Pekrun and Lisa Linnenbrink-Garcia. Routledge, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203148211>.
- Rohim, Dhina Cahya, and Septina Rahmawati. “Peran Literasi Dalam Meningkatkan Minat Baca Siswa Di Sekolah Dasar.” *Jurnal Review Pendidikan Dasar* 6, no. 3 (2020): 230–37. <https://doi.org/10.26740/jrpd.v6n3.p230-237>.
- Sainio, Petra, Kenneth Eklund, Riikka Hirvonen, Timo Ahonen, and Noona Kiuru. “Adolescents’ Academic Emotions and Academic Achievement across the Transition to Lower Secondary School: The Role of Learning Difficulties.” *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 65, no. 3 (2021): 385–403. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2019.1705900>.
- Sainio, Petra J, Kenneth M Eklund, Eija K Pakarinen, and Noona H Kiuru. “The Role of Teacher Closeness in Adolescents’ Emotions and Achievement with and without Learning Difficulties.” *Learning Disability Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (2023): 151–65. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07319487221086006>.
- Sriharyu, Dyah Puspitasari, Tiara Kusumaningtiyas, and Dessy Harisanty. “The Role of School Librarians in the Implementation of the School Literacy Movement in East Java.” *Library Philosophy and Practice*, 2021, 1–15.
- Sunawan, Sugiyo, and Yuli Kurniawati Sugiyo Pranoto. “Achievement Goals and Extraneous Load Predict Germane Load: The Mediating Effect of Achievement Emotions.” *Malaysian Journal of Learning and Instruction* 18, no. 2 (2021): 215–34. <https://doi.org/10.32890/mjli2021.18.2.8>.
- Sweller, John. “Cognitive Load Theory.” In *Psychology of Learning and Motivation*, edited by Jose P Mestre and Brian H Ross, 55:37–76. San Diego, CA: Elsevier Academic Press, 2011. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-387691-1.00002-8>.
- Zhang, Jing. “A Longitudinal Study of Pekrun’s Control-Value Theory and the Internal/External Frame of Reference Model in Predicting Academic Anxiety.” *Educational Psychology* 42, no. 4 (2022): 479–500. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410.2020.1729345>.

Zimmerman, Barry J. "Becoming a Self-Regulated Learner: An Overview." *Theory into Practice* 41, no. 2 (2002): 64–70.