

## WHEN TEACHING OPENED MY EYES: A NARRATIVE REFLECTIVE INQUIRY ON EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY IN A RURAL INDONESIAN VILLAGE

Renny Widia Astuti<sup>1</sup>, Rahmi Nasiti Jannati<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup> UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, Indonesia

*Corresponding e-mail: rennywidia28@gmail.com*

### ABSTRACT

This study presents a narrative reflective inquiry into the lived experience of a pre-service English teacher who volunteered in a rural village in Bogor, Indonesia. Through systematic reflection on teaching practice, this research examines educational inequality in remote areas where access to education often ends at the primary level. The narrative draws from reflective journals, photographs, and field observations collected during a two-week teaching program in Desa Cibuyutan. Grounded in reflective practice theory and critical pedagogy, this inquiry reveals how immersive teaching experiences shape pedagogical identity and deepen awareness of systemic educational inequities. The findings demonstrate that reflective narrative inquiry serves as a powerful tool for pre-service teachers to develop critical consciousness about rural-urban educational disparities and transform personal uncertainty into professional purpose. This study contributes to teacher education discourse by highlighting the value of experiential learning in preparing socially conscious educators committed to educational equity.

**Keywords:** Narrative reflection, educational inequality, reflective practice.

### INTRODUCTION

Education is widely regarded as a fundamental human right and a key driver for social mobility and national development. In the Indonesian context, education is enshrined in the 1945 Constitution as a basic right of every citizen. However, in practice, access to quality education remains deeply unequal across regions, with disparities particularly visible between urban and rural communities. While urban centers benefit from developed infrastructure, qualified educators, and technological access, rural and remote villages continue to struggle with chronic educational underdevelopment.

According to the Statistik Pendidikan 2023 by Badan Pusat Statistik, Indonesia has made progress in improving gross enrollment rates at the primary and secondary levels. Still, significant gaps persist in infrastructure, teacher quality, and educational outcomes between urban and rural areas. Rural schools often operate without electricity, internet connectivity, proper sanitation, or adequate classroom facilities. More critically, the distribution of qualified teachers is highly uneven, with remote areas facing a severe shortage of skilled educators. The Ministry of Education and Culture reports that nearly 60 percent of schools in remote regions lack adequate infrastructure, trained teachers, and consistent support (Kemendikbud, 2023). In many such places, education beyond the elementary level is often seen as optional or inaccessible.

The reality is that many Indonesian children in rural areas are still being left behind in the national education system. This is not only a consequence of geographical

isolation but also the result of systemic challenges, including poverty, low parental education levels, and limited government support at the local level. The UNICEF Report on the Situation of Children in Indonesia emphasizes that children in rural areas, particularly in eastern provinces, continue to face unequal opportunities due to disparities in education, health, and infrastructure (UNICEF, 2020).

These issues are more than statistics; they are lived realities that profoundly shape students' educational experiences and outcomes. During my time volunteering as a teacher in Desa Cibuyutan, a secluded village in Bogor, I encountered firsthand the stark contrasts between educational ideals and realities. The school had limited electricity, no internet access, and few textbooks. Many students walked long distances through muddy paths just to attend class, often returning home afterward to help their families with agricultural work. Most came from families with low levels of education and lacked support systems that are more readily available in urban environments.

This educational community service program was carried out by Pendekar Mengajar Indonesia, a non-profit organization dedicated to improving education in remote, underdeveloped, and outermost regions of the country. Founded by a group of young Indonesians committed to educational equity, the organization focuses on empowering volunteer teachers who embody integrity, competence, and social responsibility. Pendekar Mengajar Indonesia promotes three core pillars: enhancing the quality of teaching in schools, empowering local teachers, and strengthening students' character through non-academic activities.

One of the organization's key initiatives took place in Cibuyutan Village, Pamijahan District, Bogor Regency, West Java, from January 9th to January 22nd, 2022. The village was selected based on a needs assessment revealing a shortage of teachers, inadequate learning facilities, and limited access to professional development for educators. During the program, volunteers provided supplementary classroom instruction, conducted capacity-building workshops for teachers, offered counseling for parents, and initiated literacy activities, including the creation of a village reading corner. The program also engaged community leaders and village officials to ensure meaningful and sustainable participation from local residents.

This paper emerges from personal yet socially grounded reflections on that teaching experience. Using narrative inquiry as a methodological approach, I examine how immersion in a rural educational setting shaped my personal growth, professional commitment, and critical understanding of systemic inequality. Narrative inquiry allows researchers to analyze broader cultural, political, and social issues through the lens of lived experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). In this case, my narrative serves both as the subject and as a framework for critiquing the structural gaps in Indonesia's education system.

Educational inequality in Indonesia is not a new phenomenon. Studies such as those by Sari and Jasiah (2025) and Berliana et al. (2024) reveal that persistent disparities in 3T (disadvantaged, frontier, and outermost) areas stem from poor infrastructure, limited technological integration, and ineffective educational policies. Despite programs like SM-3T, which deploy graduates to teach in remote areas, teachers often face cultural barriers, professional isolation, and a lack of support. Many must assume multiple roles, even teaching subjects beyond their expertise due to staff shortages.

Yet, these challenges also provide critical learning moments for both teachers and communities. Through narrative reflection, I seek to highlight how teaching in a rural

village not only exposed me to the inequities within the national education landscape but also transformed my perspective and professional identity. This narrative advocates for the integration of lived experience into teacher education and underscores the importance of emotional engagement in shaping a deeper commitment to educational justice.

Overall, this program is expected to serve as an initial step toward positive change in improving the quality of education for children in Cibuyutan Village, while at the same time strengthening the spirit of mutual cooperation and social care among both volunteers and local communities.

In sum, this research contributes to both the academic discourse on rural education in Indonesia and the methodological development of narrative inquiry in educational research. It positions the teacher not only as a pedagogical agent but also as a social witness and narrator of change. By sharing a personal account grounded in field experience, this study seeks to humanize statistics, amplify the voices of marginalized communities, and offer reflective insights for policymakers, teacher educators, and fellow practitioners committed to equity in education.

## METHOD

This research adopts a qualitative autoethnographic approach, which involves systematically analyzing personal experience in relation to broader social, cultural, and political phenomena (Ellis et al., 2011). Autoethnography is particularly appropriate for this study because it allows the researcher to examine educational inequality through the dual lens of insider experience and critical reflection, making visible the often-invisible structural barriers that shape rural education in Indonesia.

The study was conducted during a two-week volunteer teaching program organized by Pendekar Mengajar Indonesia in Desa Cibuyutan, Pamijahan District, Bogor Regency, West Java, from January 9th to January 22nd, 2022. The village was selected based on criteria including remoteness, limited educational infrastructure, and documented teacher shortages. The primary participant in this autoethnographic study is the researcher herself, a fifth-semester undergraduate English education student from a public university in Bandung. Secondary participants include approximately 30 elementary students (ages 7 to 12), three local teachers, and several parents from the village community. All identifying information has been anonymized to protect participant privacy.

Data was collected through multiple sources to ensure richness and depth. Reflective journals were written daily throughout the two-week program, documenting teaching experiences, emotional responses, critical incidents, and emerging insights about educational inequality. Photographs were also systematically collected to capture the physical environment, teaching contexts, and student interactions, serving both as data and as analytical prompts for deeper reflection. In addition, structured and unstructured field observations were recorded in field notes to document classroom dynamics, school infrastructure, community interactions, and daily routines. Finally, informal conversations with students, teachers, and parents during home visits and casual encounters provided valuable contextual understanding of the community's educational challenges and aspirations.

Data analysis followed a recursive and iterative process consistent with narrative inquiry principles. All journal entries, field notes, and photographic data were reviewed

multiple times to build familiarity and identify initial patterns. Thematic coding was then conducted to capture recurring themes related to educational inequality, infrastructural challenges, student experiences, and teacher development, using both deductive (theory-driven) and inductive (data-driven) approaches. These coded themes were subsequently woven into coherent narrative episodes that illustrated key insights about rural education and personal transformation. Each episode was critically examined through the lens of critical pedagogy and reflective practice theory to explore how personal experiences revealed systemic inequalities. To enhance the validity of interpretations, key findings were shared with fellow volunteers and local teachers through member checking, ensuring both accuracy and representativeness of the accounts.

Trustworthiness in this study was established through several strategies. Credibility was ensured by prolonged engagement in the field through two weeks of intensive immersion, triangulation of multiple data sources including journals, photographs, and observations, as well as member checking with participants. Transferability was addressed by providing thick descriptions of the context, participants, and experiences, thereby enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other rural educational settings. Dependability was maintained by keeping a detailed audit trail that documented both data collection and analysis procedures. Finally, confirmability was achieved by practicing reflexivity throughout the research process, acknowledging researcher biases, positionality, and the potential influence of personal values on interpretation.

This study adhered to established ethical research principles. Informed consent was obtained verbally from all participants, with parental or guardian approval secured for minors. Anonymization was applied by altering or removing all personal names, specific locations within the village, and other identifying details to protect participant privacy. Care was taken to ensure respectful representation, portraying participants with dignity and avoiding deficit-oriented narratives about rural communities. Data security was maintained by storing all materials under password protection with access restricted to the research team. Finally, the principle of beneficence guided the research, as it was conducted with the intention of highlighting educational inequities to inform policy and practice improvements, thereby contributing to the well-being of similar communities.

As a pre-service teacher from an urban university background, I entered this research with both advantages and limitations. My urban upbringing and access to quality education shaped my initial perceptions of what constitutes "normal" schooling. However, my status as a volunteer rather than an official teacher or government representative facilitated more authentic relationships with community members. Throughout the research process, I maintained awareness of these positionalities and their influence on data interpretation, using reflexive journaling to interrogate my assumptions and biases continuously.

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the key findings through narrative episodes that illuminate different dimensions of educational inequality in Desa Cibuyutan. Each episode is followed by analytical reflection that connects personal experience to broader structural issues.

As a fifth-semester undergraduate student from a public university in Bandung, I was experiencing a personal crisis. The lingering effects of the pandemic, confusion about my academic path, and doubts about becoming a teacher pushed me into a state of uncertainty. I almost gave up, but something inside pushed me to try a different path. I joined a volunteer teaching program and chose the education division. I traveled alone, knowing no one, stepping far outside my comfort zone. Getting to the village itself was already a humbling experience. After a long road trip through winding hills and uneven terrain, we had to continue on foot, crossing a shallow river barefoot, carefully stepping through the shallow water, navigating muddy paths uphill. It was physically demanding, but it made me realize how limited infrastructure can be a major barrier to education in remote places.



*[Figure 1. Narrow bamboo bridge and muddy path used to reach Desa Cibuyutan]*

This initial journey embodied the first barrier to educational equity: physical access. The arduous trek to reach the village underscores how geographic isolation compounds educational disadvantage. While urban students might complain about traffic, rural students navigate treacherous paths daily, often barefoot, in rain or heat. This physical barrier filters students out of the educational system before any pedagogical challenges even emerge. The World Bank research on intergenerational mobility highlights that rural children face compounded disadvantages, starting with the simple act of reaching school (Nazmul et al., 2020).

Arriving in Desa Cibuyutan was like stepping into another reality. Despite limited resources, the children's enthusiasm for school was extraordinary. Some didn't wear uniforms because they couldn't afford them, yet they still walked long distances just to attend class. The school building was a simple structure, built by the community. My fellow volunteers and I slept in an empty classroom on thin mats and sleeping bags. There were mismatched desks, broken chairs, and livestock occasionally wandered through open doors.

I remember one session where I taught the alphabet to a small group on the terrace. Behind me, clothes were drying on a shaky bamboo fence. It was a vivid picture of resilience, learning in between the rhythms of daily village life.





*[Figure 2. Teaching the alphabet on the terrace with laundry drying on the makeshift fence in the background]*



*[Figure 3. Teaching session inside the classroom with minimal supplies and eager young learners]*

Teaching materials were limited, but thankfully, some time before our visit, the volunteer team and I had managed to prepare a few worksheets. Even so, we often had to rely on our own creativity: drawing vocabulary on paper, using gestures, and storytelling. The children were excited even by the simplest visuals. During our stay, I had the opportunity to visit a few homes of the students with another volunteer. We conducted informal interviews with their families to follow up on the children's learning and check basic health conditions. Many homes lacked proper lighting and sanitation, but families welcomed us warmly and were eager to talk about their children's futures.



*[Figure 4. A candid moment during a house visit and conversation with a student's guardian]*

The lived experiences of students in Cibuyutan revealed the profound ways in which structural limitations intersect with individual aspirations for education. One student whispered to me that he was saving up to buy a flashlight so he could read at night. Electricity wasn't stable in the village; after sunset, darkness dominated. Seeing how eager they were to learn, despite all the limitations, made me realize what Freire (1970) suggested that individuals living under oppressive conditions often retain a strong and enduring aspiration to pursue knowledge, despite the systemic limitations they face.



*[Figure 5. A student reading under dim conditions]*

This episode reveals the material dimension of educational inequality. The absence of basic teaching resources textbooks, writing materials, electricity transforms teaching into an exercise in improvisation. Yet, what struck me most was not what was absent, but what persisted: the students' hunger for learning. This finding aligns with Berliana et al. (2024), who documented that despite infrastructural poverty, intrinsic motivation remains strong among rural students when teachers demonstrate genuine care and creativity.



However, motivation alone cannot substitute for systemic support. The boy saving for a flashlight represents millions of Indonesian children whose educational potential is constrained not by ability but by circumstance. His determination should not romanticize poverty; rather, it should indict the structural failures that force children to choose between basic needs and educational aspirations. During recess, a quiet girl approached me and said, "Next year, I will help my mother. I won't go to school anymore." I stood there speechlessly. What could I say? I couldn't change her fate, but I could be there, present, to remind her she mattered.



*[Figure 6. Young girl during recess, with informal attire and shy expressions]*

She wasn't alone. Several other girls in the upper grades shared similar expectations. Their educational trajectories were predetermined not by academic performance but by economic necessity and gendered social norms. This moment encapsulates the intersection of poverty, gender, and educational exclusion. UNESCO (2023) highlights how rural girls across Southeast Asia face early dropout due to labor demands, marriage, or social expectations. In Cibuyutan, education for girls was viewed as valuable but ultimately expendable when family survival required their labor.

Connell (2009) argues that education systems often reproduce inequality when disconnected from lived realities. The girl's fate seemed predetermined before she even had a chance to choose. Her statement was delivered not with sadness but with resignation, as if dropping out was as natural as the seasons changing. This normalization of educational truncation represents what critical pedagogy calls "internalized oppression," where structural barriers become accepted as personal destiny.

The gender dimension is particularly troubling. While boys from the village also faced educational barriers, girls confronted an additional layer of constraint rooted in patriarchal expectations about women's domestic roles. This finding resonates with Hidayat and Nuruzzaman's (2024) call for inclusive education that specifically addresses the compounded disadvantages faced by rural girls.

The Volunteers didn't stay in homestays, but in the school building itself. With only mats and sleeping bags, we adjusted. The classroom became our home. We heard



goats bleating, saw chickens pecking inside, and laughed at the absurdity. It was uncomfortable but deeply humanizing.



*[Figure 7. Volunteers and students gathered in a circle, with the hilltop view behind them]*

On one afternoon, we gathered in a circle with the students outside the classroom, sharing games and simple conversations. From where we sat, we could see the wide valley below, a breathtaking view that reminded us how high and far this village was from urban access. Despite everything, the joy in their faces made the moment unforgettable.



*[Figure 8. Discussing arrangements of volunteers outside]*

Each night, I reflected on the privileges I took for granted: paved roads, textbooks, electricity, stable internet, reliable transportation. These were not luxuries in my urban life; they were invisible infrastructures that enabled my educational success. Yet here, their absence defines every aspect of learning. Living in the school building transformed me from observer to participant in the daily realities of rural education. Brookfield (2017) describes critical reflection as the act of interrogating one's assumptions. Sleeping on classroom floors, bathing with limited water, and teaching without electricity forced me

to confront my own positionality and privilege. This immersive experience reveals what Dewey (1933) meant by learning through experience. No amount of theoretical reading about rural education could have prepared me for the embodied understanding gained through living these conditions. The discomfort was pedagogical; it disrupted my taken-for-granted assumptions about what constitutes "normal" educational environments.

Moreover, this experience cultivated what Hikmat et al. (2023) call "reflective practice" in teaching. Each evening, I documented not just what I taught but how context shaped pedagogy, how students lived realities influenced their learning, and how my own emotional responses revealed deeper truths about educational injustice. These reflections became the foundation for developing critical consciousness about systemic inequality. The hilltop view served as a powerful metaphor: the village was geographically elevated but socially marginalized, physically beautiful but structurally neglected. This paradox encapsulates the core tension in rural Indonesian education, where natural landscapes mask systemic abandonment.

That experience didn't give me all the answers, but it gave me directions. I realized I enjoyed teaching, not because it was easy, but because it was meaningful. I had once doubted my place in this profession. Now, I am certain that my purpose lies in empowering others through education. The two weeks in Cibuyutan fundamentally reshaped my understanding of what it means to be a teacher. Before volunteering, teaching felt abstract, a career path chosen more by circumstance than conviction. The pandemic had left me adrift, questioning whether education mattered in a world that seemed increasingly unstable. But witnessing students who walked hours through mud just to learn the alphabet, who saved money to buy flashlights for studying, who maintained hope despite systematic disadvantage, I found my answer.

This transformation illustrates the power of experiential learning in teacher education. As Zeichner and Liston (2014) argue, reflective teaching emerges not from textbooks but from confronting the complex realities of educational practice. My experience aligns with findings from Saiful and Triyono (2018), who demonstrated that rural teaching experiences cultivate critical awareness that transforms pedagogical identity. The journey from uncertainty to purpose reflects what Fadilah et al. (2023) describes as the developmental trajectory of reflective teachers. Doubt and discomfort are not obstacles to professional growth; they are catalysts for deeper engagement with the ethical and political dimensions of education. My initial crisis was not resolved through certainty but through finding meaning in solidarity with marginalized communities.

This narrative also speaks of the importance of what Burhan et al. (2024) call "context-responsive pedagogy." The teaching profession is not perfect; curriculum changes are frequent, teachers carry administrative burdens, and respect is often lacking. Still, I carry the words of the Prophet: "The best of people are those most beneficial to others." Even though what I'm doing may seem small, I choose each step with care and purpose. The experience in Cibuyutan taught me that being a teacher means more than delivering content; it means bearing witness to injustice, advocating for equity, and maintaining hope even when systems fail students. This understanding transformed teaching from a job into a vocation, from technical skill into moral commitment.

The narrative episodes presented above illustrate how personal experience can unveil structural inequalities that formal training often fails to capture. Dewey (1933) emphasized that meaningful learning arises through experience. In this context, teaching in a remote village provided more than pedagogical exposure; it served as a mirror into

Indonesia's educational divides. Geographic and Infrastructural Barriers: The physical journey to Cibuyutan, the lack of electricity, the absence of teaching materials, and the unstable infrastructure all represent tangible manifestations of what Leasa et al. (2024) identify as chronic structural deficiencies. These material conditions are not incidental to educational inequality; they are constitutive of it. When a student must cross rivers and climb muddy hills to reach school, when classrooms lack walls and livestock wander through lessons, education becomes an act of extraordinary perseverance rather than a guaranteed right.

The girl who announced her impending dropout reveals how poverty and patriarchal norms intersect to truncate educational opportunity. As UNESCO (2023) documents, rural girls face compounded disadvantages that make educational persistence nearly impossible without systemic intervention. This finding underscores Liyana's (2023) argument that educational inequality reproduces economic inequality in feedback loops that perpetuate marginalization across generations.

Despite overwhelming constraints, teaching and learning persisted in Cibuyutan. Students demonstrated remarkable intrinsic motivation, and teachers (including volunteers) developed creative pedagogical adaptations. This resilience, however, should not romanticize poverty. As Freire (1970) argued, oppressed communities often maintain strong aspirations for knowledge precisely because they recognize education as a potential path to liberation. The challenge is ensuring that this intrinsic motivation meets systemic support rather than structural abandonment.

This study demonstrates how narrative inquiry functions not merely as a research method but as a form of critical pedagogy. Holman Jones et al. (2013) argue that autoethnography bridges self and society, turning personal stories into tools of awareness and advocacy. By documenting lived experiences of educational inequality, this narrative makes visible the human consequences of policy failures and systemic neglect. The three commonplaces of narrative inquiry (temporality, sociality, place) as articulated by Connelly and Clandinin (2006) proved essential for understanding how educational inequality operates across multiple dimensions:

The two-week duration allowed observation of how daily routines, seasonal agricultural cycles, and long-term educational trajectories intersect to shape student experiences. The girl's announcement that she would not continue school "next year" reflects how time operates differently in contexts of poverty, where futures are foreclosed before they begin. The interplay between personal conditions (students' motivations, families' aspirations) and social conditions (poverty, gender norms, policy neglect) revealed how individual agency is constrained by structural forces. My own transformation from uncertain student to committed educator illustrates how immersion in marginalized communities can reshape professional identity. The physical setting of Cibuyutan, perched on hills with breathtaking views yet isolated from urban infrastructure, embodied the paradox of rural education in Indonesia: geographically elevated but socially marginalized, naturally beautiful but systematically neglected.

This study contributes to understanding how experiential learning shapes teacher identity. My transformation from a confused undergraduate to a purposeful educator illustrates what Hikmat et al. (2023) describes as the developmental trajectory of reflective practice. Reflection was not merely retrospective analysis; it was a process of ongoing meaning-making that transformed discomfort into critical consciousness. The findings support Zeichner and Liston's (2014) argument for embedding experiential,



reflective components in teacher education programs. Pre-service teachers who encounter educational inequality firsthand develop deeper commitments to equity than those whose training remains purely theoretical. As Brookfield (2017) notes, critical reflection requires interrogating assumptions, a process accelerated by confronting realities that contradict taken-for-granted beliefs about education.

However, this study also reveals potential pitfalls of volunteer teaching programs. Short-term interventions risk perpetuating "savior" narratives that center the growth of privileged volunteers while marginalizing community voices. To counter this tendency, reflection must be coupled with structural analysis that recognizes how individual transformation alone cannot substitute for systemic reform. My personal growth matters less than what it enables: a lifelong commitment to advocating for educational equity and amplifying marginalized voices.

**Infrastructure Investment:** Material deprivation is not inevitable; it reflects policy choices about resource allocation. Governments must prioritize rural infrastructure not as charity but as fulfillment of constitutional guarantees of education as a basic right (Hidayat & Nuruzzaman, 2024). Teacher education programs should incorporate experiential learning in rural contexts, coupled with structured reflection on systemic inequality. This approach cultivates not just pedagogical skills but ethical commitments to equity (Hikmat et al., 2023).

Policies must specifically address barriers facing rural girls through targeted scholarships, community engagement to challenge patriarchal norms, and infrastructure that ensures safe school access (UNESCO, 2023). **Community-Based Solutions:** Sustainable improvement requires engaging local communities as partners rather than recipients of intervention. The school built by community members in Cibuyutan demonstrates local capacity that policy should support rather than replace. **Long-Term Commitment:** Short-term volunteer programs like *Pendekar Mengajar Indonesia* provide valuable exposure but cannot substitute for sustained teacher placement, infrastructure development, and community empowerment initiatives.

This autoethnographic study offers deep insights into one volunteer's experience but cannot claim representativeness across diverse rural contexts. The two-week duration, while intensive, limits understanding of long-term educational dynamics. Future research should employ longitudinal designs that track students, teachers, and communities over extended periods. Additionally, this study centers the volunteer's perspective. Future research should prioritize voices of rural students, parents, and local teachers through participatory action research designs that position community members as co-researchers rather than subjects. Finally, while narrative inquiry illuminates lived experiences, it should be complemented by quantitative analyses that map the scope and scale of educational inequality across Indonesia's diverse regions.

## CONCLUSION

Volunteering in Cibuyutan changed my perspective on education fundamentally. It revealed how dreams are shaped or limited by geography, infrastructure, and opportunity. Through this narrative inquiry, I offer a reflection not only of one village but of many others like it across rural Indonesia. The experience taught me that educational inequality is not abstract statistics; it is lived reality for millions of children whose potential is constrained by circumstances beyond their control. It is the girl who drops out

to help her mother, the boy saving for a flashlight to study at night, the students walking hours through mud to reach classrooms without walls or textbooks.

Yet, this experience also revealed extraordinary resilience: communities building schools with their own resources, students maintaining hope despite overwhelming barriers, families welcoming volunteers with warmth despite having little to share. This resilience should inspire but not excuse systemic neglect. As Freire (1970) reminds us, oppressed communities' aspirations for knowledge reveal education's liberatory potential, but realizing that potential requires structural change, not just individual determination.

For me personally, this experience transformed uncertainty into purpose. I entered Cibuyutan doubting my place in education; I left committed to a lifetime of working toward educational equity. The journey was uncomfortable, humble, and ultimately transformative. It taught me that being a teacher means more than delivering content; it means bearing witness to injustice, advocating for marginalized students, and maintaining hope even when systems fail. Real educational change begins when teachers, policymakers, and citizens are willing to see, feel, and act beyond comfortable assumptions. It requires moving from statistics to stories, from policy documents to lived experiences, from urban centers to remote villages. Only by confronting the full reality of educational inequality can we build the political will and ethical commitment necessary for meaningful reform.

This narrative inquiry contributes to broader conversations about rural education in Indonesia by humanizing data, centering marginalized voices, and demonstrating how personal transformation can catalyze professional commitment to equity. It positions narrative reflection as both a research method and a pedagogical tool for developing socially conscious educators.

As Indonesia continues pursuing educational equity through programs like Kurikulum Merdeka and infrastructure initiatives, we must remember that behind every statistic is a child whose future hangs in the balance. Their dreams should not be limited by geography, gender, or economic circumstance. Fulfilling the constitutional promise of education as a basic right requires sustained commitment, adequate resources, and genuine solidarity with rural communities. I carry with me the words of the Prophet: "The best of people are those most beneficial to others." Even though individual actions may seem small, choosing each step with care and purpose matters. My experience in Cibuyutan taught me that teaching is not just a profession but a moral commitment to building a more just and equitable society, one student, one classroom, one community at a time.

## REFERENCES

- Berliana, N., Indah, N., Hamidah, F., Jasmi, R. A., Islam, B. K., Dakwah, F., Sultan, U., Hasanuddin Banten, M., Al-Qur'an Dan Tafsir, I., Ushuludin, F., Abad, D., & Banten, H. (2024). Educational inequality in remote areas: A case study in Cisampang Village. *Journal of Islamic Education*, 4(2), 112-128.
- Brookfield, S. D. (2017). *Becoming a critically reflective teacher* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Burhan, Mirayanti, Marzuki, Saugadi, & Rusdin, D. (2024). Redefining rural education: Exploring EFL teachers' perceptions and recommendations for enhanced human resource management practices. *Cogent Education*, 11(1), Article 2317503.

- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. Jossey-Bass.
- Connell, R. (2009). Good teachers on dangerous ground: Towards a new view of teacher quality and professionalism. *Critical Studies in Education*, 50(3), 213-229.
- Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (1990). Stories of experience and narrative inquiry. *Educational Researcher*, 19(5), 2-14.
- Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (2006). Narrative inquiry. In J. L. Green, G. Camilli, & P. Elmore (Eds.), *Handbook of complementary methods in education research* (pp. 477-487). Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Dewey, J. (1933). *How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process*. D.C. Heath.
- Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 12(1), Article 10.
- Fadilah, R., Ayudhia, H. Y., Pratama, V. M., & Harmawan, V. (2023). Teachers' teaching reflection: English teachers' challenges in rural areas of Indonesia. *LET: Linguistics, Literature and English Teaching Journal*, 13(1), 45-62.
- Febriana, M., Joko, Dewi, N., & Muhtia, R. A. (2018). Teaching in rural Indonesian schools: Teachers' challenges. *International Journal of Multicultural and Multireligious Understanding*, 5(5), 11-20.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.
- Ghanbar, H., Cinaglia, C., Randez, R. A., & De Costa, P. I. (2024). A methodological synthesis of narrative inquiry research in applied linguistics: What's the story? *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 34(4), 1629-1655.
- Harahap, E. S., Maipita, I., & Rahmadana, M. F. (2020). Determinant analysis of education inequalities in Indonesia. *Budapest International Research and Critics Institute (BIRCI-Journal): Humanities and Social Sciences*, 3(2), 1067-1082.
- Hidayat, S. A., & Nuruzzaman, M. A. (2024). Bridging the gap: Efforts to minimize education gaps through inclusive education in rural areas. *IJNET (International Journal of Indonesian Education and Teaching)*, 8(2), 355-364.
- Hikmat, M. H., Santos, R. F., Suharyanto, S., Maudy, A. G., & Phommavongsa, K. (2023). Toward continuous innovation in teaching: Reflective practice on English teaching of Indonesian and the Philippine teachers. *Indonesian Journal on Learning and Advanced Education (IJOLAE)*, 5(1), 45-60.
- Holman Jones, S., Adams, T. E., & Ellis, C. (2013). *Handbook of autoethnography*. Left Coast Press.
- Kemendikbud. (2023). *Statistik pendidikan Indonesia 2023*. Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi.
- Leasa, M., Batlolona, J. R., Titaley, E., & Batlolona, T. (2024). The social landscape of education in rural areas: Evening study programs, study irregularities and academic achievement. *Jurnal Penelitian Dan Pengembangan Pendidikan*, 8(3), 481-492.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.
- Listrianti, F., Santosa, T. A., Yustitia, V., Nasution, B., Nugraha, A. R., & Sjoraida, D. F. (2024). Improving the quality of education in rural areas through community service. *Journal of Community Development*, 4(1), 78-92.
- Liyana, N. F. (2023). The effect of educational inequality on economic growth in Indonesia. *Jurnal Pajak dan Keuangan Negara*, 5(1), 145-162.



- Nazmul, M., Emran, M. S., & Shilpi, E. F. (2020). The rural-urban divide and intergenerational educational mobility in a developing country: Theory and evidence from Indonesia (Policy Research Working Paper No. 9297). World Bank.
- Nugraha, D., Husni, F. A. N., Ruhendi, A., & Suhartini, A. (2025). *Evaluation The Development Of Diversity Students Elementary School*. 1(1).
- Pervin, N., & Mokhtar, M. (2023). Reflections on doing narrative inquiry research: From the lens of interpretive paradigm. *Malaysian Journal of Qualitative Research*, 9(1), 49-61.
- Pino Gavidia, L. A., & Adu, J. (2022). Critical narrative inquiry: An examination of a methodological approach. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 21, 1-13.
- Safitri, A. (2022). Analysis of village and city in the concept of modern education. *Indonesian Journal of Education (INJOE)*, 2(3), 234-248.
- Saiful, J. A., & Triyono, S. (2018). EFL teachers' reflection in teaching English to EFL students of rural areas. *International Journal of Language Education*, 2(2), 1-13.
- Sari, N., & Jasiah, M. (2025). Educational challenges in Indonesia's 3T regions: A systematic review. *Journal of Educational Research Indonesia*, 7(1), 23-41.
- UNESCO. (2023). Gender and education in Southeast Asia: Progress and persistent challenges. UNESCO Bangkok.
- UNICEF. (2020). Situasi anak di Indonesia: Tren, peluang, dan tantangan dalam memenuhi hak-hak anak. UNICEF Indonesia.
- Wei, L. (2023). Narrative inquiry: A research method in the education field. *World Journal of Education*, 13(6), 35-47.
- Zeichner, K. M., & Liston, D. P. (2014). *Reflective teaching: An introduction* (2nd ed.). Routledge.