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The PDCA Cycle as a Strategic Framework for Enhancing Elementary Literacy: A Case Study of the Class Literacy Tree Intervention in Indonesia

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Abstract. This qualitative case study examines the implementation and sustainability of the Class Literacy Tree (POLIKEL) strategy within the One Week One Book (SAMI SAKU) program in Indonesian elementary schools, analyzed through the lens of Deming's Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) management cycle. The research employed a descriptive case study design across two public elementary schools in Sumedang Regency, Indonesia. Data were collected via in-depth interviews, observation, and document analysis, and subsequently analyzed using the interactive model. The findings reveal that while the POLIKEL artifact is a powerful pedagogical tool for promoting reading interest and basic writing skills, its success and sustainability are critically contingent upon the fidelity and integration of the supporting PDCA cycle. Schools that executed a proactive planning (Plan) and a formal evaluation (Check) mechanism achieved continuous, measurable improvement, validating the strategic management framework as essential for scalable pedagogical innovation in resource-constrained educational settings.

Keywords: Literacy Strategy, PDCA Cycle, Elementary Education.

1 Introduction

The cultivation of foundational literacy is widely recognized as a cornerstone of global educational policy, serving as the primary conduit for developing critical thinking, creative expression, and effective communication essential for the 21st century [1]. Literacy is not merely the mechanical decoding of text but encompasses the complex abilities to comprehend, critically evaluate, synthesize, and utilize information for lifelong learning and active citizenship. Despite this global consensus and the urgency imposed by rapid digital transformation, international assessments consistently reveal persistent challenges in achieving deep literacy. Results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) frequently highlight a significant literacy gap in many nations, including Indonesia, where a large cohort of students struggles to progress beyond basic information retrieval to higher-order interpretative and evaluative skills [2].

This educational challenge is often compounded in primary school contexts that contend with severe resource disparities. These institutions frequently face a dual

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obstacle: limited access to diverse, high-interest reading materials and inadequate technological infrastructure, such as a lack of computers or reliable internet connectivity, which are often posited as solutions for personalized learning [3]. This environment necessitates the development and validation of innovative, low-cost, and sustainable pedagogical strategies that can function effectively without heavy reliance on sophisticated technology. The challenge is thus operational: how to establish a self-sustaining culture of reading and reflective practice in a low-resource setting.

In response, the Indonesian education system has instituted broad policy frameworks aimed at fostering a robust literacy culture. Initiatives such as the School Literacy Movement (Gerakan Literasi Sekolah or GLS), mandated by the Ministry of Education and Culture (Permendikbud No. 23, 2015), and the flexible Merdeka Curriculum (Emancipated Curriculum) [4], signal a systemic shift. These policies emphasize literacy as a foundational competency underpinning all subjects, explicitly encouraging pedagogical creativity and the development of the Pancasila Student Profile (Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi Republik Indonesia, 2021). The *Merdeka* curriculum, in particular, provides schools with the autonomy to design learning processes that are innovative, flexible, and contextual, prioritizing the development of 21st-century competencies [1].

Within this supportive policy landscape, grassroots pedagogical innovations have emerged. Programs such as One Week One Book (*Satu Minggu Satu Buku* or SAMI SAKU) represent a practical strategy to operationalize these national goals, aiming to instill a consistent, habitual reading culture. This approach is strongly supported by decades of literacy research, which has demonstrated that frequent, deliberate reading practice is arguably the most powerful tool for developing vocabulary, comprehension, and a positive disposition toward reading [5]. However, simply mandating a reading program is often insufficient to cultivate sustained student motivation . The modern student's attention is a finite resource, fiercely competed for by the immediate feedback loops of digital media. The core pedagogical problem, therefore, is how to make the solitary, internal act of reading as engaging, visible, and intrinsically rewarding as its digital counterparts. Scholars on reading motivation emphasize that engagement is a complex interplay of cognitive strategies, conceptual knowledge, and social motivation [6], [7].

This study investigates a specific, low-cost pedagogical innovation designed to address this motivational and social component directly: the Class Literacy Tree (*Pohon Literasi Kelas* or POLIKEL). This strategy, which involves students writing a summary or analysis of a completed book on a paper leaf and physically adding it to a communal wall-mounted tree, transforms reading from a private process into a collective, visible, and celebrated public achievement. A growing body of practitioner-focused research has affirmed the motivational power of such visual interventions [8]–[11]. These artifacts are effective because they create a literacy-rich classroom environment where progress is tangible, peer engagement is high, and the classroom's print environment becomes a dynamic record of student achievement [12]. Furthermore, this approach aligns with constructivist learning theories, where the leaf acts as a scaffold and the entire POLIKEL functions within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), as students can observe and learn from their peers' documented comprehension [13], [14].

Despite the clear pedagogical validation of the Literacy Tree, a significant and critical gap persists in the academic literature. Existing research focuses almost exclusively

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on the pedagogical and motivational effects, treating it as a static, isolated intervention. There is a conspicuous lack of inquiry into the managerial and strategic processes required to implement such a program effectively and ensure its long-term sustainability. A pedagogical tool, no matter how innovative, will fail if it is not supported by a robust, cyclical process of planning, implementation, evaluation, and continuous improvement. This deficiency is particularly acute in public schools where resources are finite, and teacher time is overburdened [15]

This study explicitly addresses this gap by employing the Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle, a cornerstone of Total Quality Management (TQM) pioneered by W. Edwards Deming (1986), as its primary analytical framework. The PDCA cycle, also known as the Deming Wheel, provides a profound framework for analyzing a pedagogical strategy as a dynamic, self-correcting system rather than a one-time activity [16], [17]. This research posits that the novelty of the Literacy Tree strategy lies not only in the artifact itself but in its potential to be integrated into a strategic management cycle that fosters continuous improvement. This lens allows for an examination of how the program is conceived (*Plan*), how the tree is implemented as a learning tool (*Do*), how its impact on literacy is measured and evaluated (*Check*), and, most critically, how that data is used to refine the strategy (*Act*).

Therefore, this research moves beyond the simple question of Does the Literacy Tree work? to ask, What management strategies make the Literacy Tree work effectively and sustainably? By analyzing the POLIKEL strategy within the SAMI SAKU program through the PDCA lens, this study aims to provide a conceptual and practical model for strengthening a school's literacy culture that is directed, measurable, and sustainable, offering a significant contribution to both pedagogical practice and educational management theory.

2 Method

This research employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive case study design. This methodology was selected for its capacity to provide a deep, holistic, and context-rich understanding of a specific, bounded phenomenon: the implementation of the Class Literacy Tree (POLIKEL) strategy within the One Week One Book (SAMI SAKU) program. The case study approach facilitated an in-depth exploration of the how and why behind the program's strategic processes and emergent dynamics within their specific school contexts [18].

The research was conducted from January to April 2025 at two public elementary schools in Sumedang Regency, West Java, Indonesia: SDN Ciluluk 1 (Tanjungsari District) and SDN Citali (Pamulihan District). These sites were purposively selected as they were both actively implementing the POLIKEL and SAMI SAKU programs, providing a rich context for comparative analysis. Key participants included three fifth-grade teachers, one headmaster from each school, and the fifth-grade students (observed as a group).

Data were collected using a triangulation of three primary techniques: (1) In-depth, semi-structured interviews with teachers and headmasters to explore their planning, implementation, evaluation, and perceived impact; (2) Direct, non-participant observation of classroom literacy activities, focusing on student-teacher and student-tree

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interactions; and (3) Documentation analysis of relevant artifacts, including lesson plans, school strategic plans (RKS/RKAS), student-generated leaves, and teacher evaluation notes.

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña [19]. This process involved concurrent streams of data condensation, data display (organized into matrices structured around the PDCA framework), and conclusion drawing and verification. Trustworthiness was established through persistent observation, prolonged engagement, and member-checking, where key informants reviewed preliminary interpretations.

3 Result

3.1 Strategic Foresight Versus Reactive Routine

The Planning (Plan) phase proved to be the most significant point of divergence, establishing a foundational trajectory that directly determined the subsequent efficacy and sustainability of the literacy program. This phase contrasts a proactive, integrated strategic model (SDN Ciluluk 1) with a reactive, routine-based operational model (SDN Citali).

At SDN Ciluluk 1, the planning phase was characterized by a deep integration of the literacy program into the school's multi-year strategic vision. Documentary analysis of the School Work Plan (RKS) and the School Activity and Budget Plan (RKAS), triangulated with headmaster interviews, revealed that literacy was not merely a standalone add-on but a core component of the school's positive culture initiative. This alignment was the product of a formal needs analysis that actively solicited input from all key stakeholders: teachers, the school committee, and parents. This collaborative process ensured buy-in and aligned the SAMI SAKU program with community needs, a crucial strategic management principle for effective resource allocation and long-term goal alignment (Anwar & Sulaeman, 2025). The Headmaster articulated this approach:

> *Every new academic year, we hold a major planning session. All teachers, coaches, and even parent representatives are involved. Their suggestions are recorded... All activities, such as Tuesday Literacy, are integrated with the school's vision so that the activities are genuinely relevant to the children's needs.* (Headmaster Interview, 2025)

Crucially, this integration led to the formulation of specific, measurable, and resourced goals. The literacy program (dubbed SERASI - Selasa Literasi) and the POLIKEL tool were linked to clear Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), such as participation and achievement in district-level arts and literacy competitions (FLS2N). This transformed the program from a mere habituation activity into a goal-oriented strategy. The teacher affirmed this:

> *Habituation activities are always included in the annual program, with the target of performing at the arts festival. We have a clear training schedule and support from parents. So, it's not just routine practice; it's directed toward a specific achievement.* (Teacher Interview, 2025)

This proactive, data-driven, and goal-oriented planning exemplifies the *Plan* stage as Deming intended: a deep analysis of the system, its goals, and its resources, designed

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to predict and prevent problems before they occur. This strategic approach provided a strong foundation for the subsequent implementation phases, establishing a virtuous cycle of planning and results [20]

In stark contrast, SDN Citali demonstrated a reactive and routine-based planning model. Interviews with the fifth-grade teacher and analysis of programmatic documents indicated that planning was largely an administrative formality focused on fulfilling reporting requirements rather than strategic design. The literacy program was continued primarily because it was done last year, without a reaffirmed needs analysis. The teacher noted the strategy of varying activities:

> *For now, the literacy habituation is not limited to just reading storybooks, but also religious, artistic, and language literacy in rotation so the children don't get bored... but because of limited learning time, sometimes it isn't documented or we don't add new programs.* (Teacher Interview, 2025)

This superficial planning phase resulted in a critical, unaddressed systemic failure: a severe shortage of reading materials. While the POLIKEL strategy was planned, the prerequisite resource (books for SAMI SAKU) was neglected. The school library was described as *kurang variatif* (lacking variety), and the plan to mitigate this—instructing students to bring books from home—was an abdication of systemic responsibility, guaranteeing inequitable access. This failure to identify and resolve a predictable bottleneck in the *Plan* phase rendered the subsequent *Do* phase critically vulnerable. The comparison clearly demonstrates that, while SDN Ciluluk 1's planning was an act of design, SDN Citali's was an act of repetition, leading to predictable path-dependent failures [21].

3.2. Fidelity, Motivation, and Systemic Friction

The Implementation (Do) phase, where the plan is executed and the POLIKEL artifact is brought to life, revealed how the foundational strengths and weaknesses of the *Plan* phase translated into lived pedagogical reality.

The core pedagogical process observed in both schools was consistently constructivist and remarkably effective when implemented with high fidelity. It transformed the passive act of reading into an active, multi-step process: (a) students read a book, (b) they analyzed it by writing down its intrinsic elements (e.g., characters, plot, setting), (c) they articulated the moral message, (d) they transcribed this analysis onto a paper leaf, (e) they physically attached their leaf to the communal tree, and (f) the teacher facilitated discussion. This sequence aligns perfectly with constructivist learning theories. The POLIKEL artifact functioned as a physical scaffold that externalized the invisible cognitive process of reading comprehension and a ZPD where students learned from their peers' posted work.

At SDN Ciluluk 1, implementation was executed with high fidelity, consistency, and enthusiasm. Observation data showed student participation rates consistently above 80%. This success was a direct result of the strong *Plan*: the literacy program (SERASI) was given a dedicated, protected time slot in the school schedule every Tuesday. Because it was an official, school-wide event, it was prioritized by both teachers and students. The teacher actively facilitated the interaction, dedicating time for students to complete their leaves and present them, creating a powerful gamified feedback loop.

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> *The tree became a 'living document,' a visual record of collective achievement. Students were observed checking the tree, comparing their number of leaves with peers, and expressing a desire to 'make the tree rimbun (lush).'* (Observation Notes, 2025)

This fostered positive peer pressure and tapped directly into intrinsic motivators of mastery, autonomy, and social relatedness. The teacher's role shifted from that of an enforcer to a facilitator and motivator, celebrating each new leaf, thereby creating a vibrant, literacy-rich environment [22].

Conversely, implementation at SDN Citali was characterized by inconsistency and systemic friction. The failures of the *Plan* phase manifested immediately in the *Do* phase. The fifth-grade teacher's lament revealed a cascade of failures: poor planning meant the program was scheduled when students were fatigued, and resource failure meant motivated students could not participate, leading to disengagement.

> *Literacy is implemented after the habituation period outside... many children are already tired. From 30 students, sometimes only 15 bring a reading book from home. As a result, the time to interact with the class literacy tree is not optimal.* (Teacher Interview, 2025)

The teacher's role consequently devolved from facilitator to crisis manager, managing boredom rather than comprehension. This finding is critical: it demonstrates that the pedagogical tool (POLIKEL) is powerless when the systemic support required by the *Plan* phase is flawed. The *Do* phase at SDN Ciluluk 1 was a virtuous cycle; at SDN Citali, it was a vicious cycle of scarcity and disengagement.

3.3. Data-Driven Reflection Versus Administrative Compliance

The Evaluation (Check) phase is the brain of the operation, where the organization systematically asks, Is our plan working, and how do we know? This phase revealed a profound difference in managerial maturity regarding the use of data for continuous improvement.

SDN Ciluluk 1 demonstrated a robust, multi-layered evaluation system. At the macro (administrative) level, the *Plan* phase had already established a formal *Check* mechanism. The headmaster confirmed that formal, bi-annual reviews were used to evaluate the program against its stated goals (e.g., FLS2N success), with data fed directly back into the next planning cycle.

More importantly, the POLIKEL strategy itself functioned as a powerful, real-time micro-level evaluation tool. The tree, with its collection of leaves, served as a dynamic, visual, formative assessment dashboard. With a single glance, the teacher could check critical literacy data:Quantity and Participation: Who is reading? How many books has each student completed? Quality and Comprehension: What is the quality of the analysis on the leaves? Are students able to identify intrinsic elements and articulate the moral message?

The teacher at SDN Ciluluk 1 was observed using this data formatively—praising prolific students and quietly providing remedial support to absent students. The tree, therefore, was not just a motivational tool; it was a data-gathering tool that made student learning visible and trackable. SDN Citali demonstrated an almost complete absence of a formal *Check* phase. Evaluation was conflated with mere administrative reporting. The teacher admitted:

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We usually just make a report on the number of activities. If there are shortcomings, we talk about them briefly. There is no special forum to discuss evaluations in detail. So, the problem often repeats from year to year. (Teacher Interview, 2025)

This is a critical distinction: SDN Ciluluk 1 evaluated performance, while SDN Citali reported compliance. The repetition of problems (book shortage, poor scheduling) was the inevitable outcome of a broken management cycle—because systemic failures were never formally *Checked*, they could not be systematically addressed in the next *Plan* phase. Even though the POLIKEL artifact existed, the teacher was too consumed by the failures of the *Do* phase to engage in the reflective, data-driven *Check* phase. This confirms that without a dedicated, formal evaluation loop, any pedagogical innovation will stagnate and fail to produce sustainable results [8], [23].

3.4. Improvement (Act): Closing the Loop for Iterative Growth

The Improvement (Act or Adjust) phase is the final and most critical component, representing the organization's ability to use the data gathered in the *Check* phase to refine the next *Plan* phase. This is what transforms a static project into a dynamic, self-improving process.

At SDN Ciluluk 1, the *Act* phase was visible at both the macro and micro levels, successfully closing the loop. At the macro (school leadership) level, data from the formal, bi-annual *Check* phase was directly fed back into the next planning cycle. The headmaster's example of changing a coaching method based on evaluation demonstrated an adaptive organization that uses data to make informed strategic changes, aligning with core TQM principles.

At the micro (classroom) level, the teacher was free to *Act* on pedagogical problems (e.g., student comprehension, motivation) because the systemic problems (resources, scheduling) had already been solved by the macro-level PDCA cycle. The teachers described their successful follow-up strategies, including remedial support, differentiation, and creativity exploration, confirming the POLIKEL's utility as a formative assessment tool that triggers pedagogical action (Irwan et al., 2025).

SDN Citali's teacher also reported *Acting* on observations: providing remedial support and varying methods. This shows the teacher's commitment as a reflective practitioner. However, the crucial difference lies in the type of problem being acted upon. At SDN Ciluluk 1, the teacher acted on pedagogical issues. At SDN Citali, the teacher was *Act*ing on systemic failures—attempting to remedy students who were bored because they didn't have books, a problem no pedagogical strategy can fix.

This final finding synthesizes the entire study: the *Act* phase at SDN Ciluluk 1 was a system-wide process of continuous improvement (sustainable and scalable). The *Act* phase at SDN Citali was an individual teacher's heroic but unsustainable effort to compensate for a broken system. The data clearly demonstrates that the POLIKEL strategy is a powerful pedagogical tool, but its true potential is only unlocked when it is embedded within a complete, high-fidelity Plan-Do-Check-Act management cycle driven by reflective, data-driven, and supportive school leadership [24].

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4 Discussion

The findings of this research offer significant theoretical and practical implications, bridging the practitioner-focused literature on literacy artifacts with high-level principles of educational management. By analyzing the Class Literacy Tree (POLIKEL) strategy through the Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) framework, this study moves beyond a simple evaluation of an intervention and instead provides a model for understanding the systemic conditions required for sustainable pedagogical success. The dramatic contrast between the two case study schools—one a model of strategic, iterative improvement, the other a case of well-intentioned stagnation—validates the central thesis: pedagogical innovation, without a supporting managerial framework, is insufficient and ultimately unsustainable.

Theoretically, this study provides a critical bridge between the literature on literacy interventions [8], [9] and the foundational principles of Total Quality Management (TQM) pioneered by Deming [23]. While existing research celebrates the motivational effects of the Literacy Tree, this study grounds its success not in its visual appeal but in its integration into a cyclical process. The POLIKEL, when used effectively (as at SDN Ciluluk 1), is fundamentally a data-gathering artifact. It serves as the physical manifestation of the *Check* phase, transforming the invisible, cognitive work of reading into a visible, public, and trackable dataset [5]. This dataset (the quantity and quality of leaves) allows a reflective practitioner to monitor engagement and comprehension in real-time and subsequently *Act* upon that data through targeted pedagogical differentiation—a classic application of the TQM philosophy in education.

Furthermore, this research extends constructivist learning theory Piaget and Vygotsky into the realm of classroom management. The observed pedagogical sequence (read, analyze, write leaf, post) is a powerful constructivist cycle. The leaf acts as an externalized scaffold of comprehension, and the entire tree becomes a communal Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) where peer modeling and motivation are maximized [25]. Crucially, the study demonstrates that this constructivist engine only runs if the *Plan* and *Do* phases of the management system provide the necessary fuel (books) and protected time (schedule). The failure at SDN Citali was not a failure of pedagogy (constructivism), but a failure of the management system that must support it.

The study offers a scalable, low-cost model for public schools facing resource and technology deficits. The POLIKEL strategy's elegance lies in its simplicity and its analog nature, making it an effective platform for gamification, social motivation, and formative assessment in environments lacking digital infrastructure [3].

The findings align perfectly with the philosophy of the Merdeka Curriculum (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Republik Indonesia, 2020) and the goals of the Pancasila Student Profile [26]. By fostering critical reasoning (analyzing the text), creativity (designing the leaf), and collaboration (*gotong-royong* in building the tree), the strategy addresses foundational competencies.

The most critical implication, however, is for school leadership and the implementation of strategic management. The Headmaster at SDN Ciluluk 1 demonstrated strategic leadership: facilitating a participatory *Plan*, protecting the *Do* phase through resource and schedule allocation, institutionalizing the *Check* phase with formal reviews, and leading the *Act* phase by using data to improve the next plan. Conversely, the leadership at SDN Citali operated in a mode of administrative management, focusing on

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compliance rather than systemic improvement. This research provides clear empirical evidence that for a grassroots pedagogical innovation (like POLIKEL) to become a sustainable, impactful program, it requires top-down strategic support that mandates and monitors the fidelity of the PDCA cycle [1], [27]. Schools seeking to replicate the program's success must replicate its management cycle, not just its visual artifact.

In essence, this study transforms the POLIKEL from a decorative classroom tool into a robust, analytically grounded management strategy for achieving sustainable literacy improvement in low-resource contexts.

5 Conclusion

This research successfully analyzed the implementation of the Class Literacy Tree (POLIKEL) within the One Week One Book (SAMI SAKU) program using the Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) management framework. The primary conclusion is that the effectiveness and sustainability of this pedagogical intervention are contingent upon the fidelity and integration of the underlying PDCA management cycle. The novelty of this study lies in shifting the focus from the pedagogical tool itself to the strategic management process required for its institutionalization.

Key findings show that schools that implemented a proactive and participatory *Plan* and established a formal, data-driven *Check* mechanism (SDN Ciluluk 1) achieved measurable, continuous improvement. Conversely, schools that relied on routine planning and failed to resolve systemic issues (SDN Citali) experienced stagnation and teacher burnout. The POLIKEL is affirmed as a powerful constructivist tool that also functions as a real-time, visual formative assessment dashboard for the teacher, thereby integrating the *Check* and *Act* phases at the classroom level.

It is recommended that elementary schools seeking to implement such literacy initiatives develop systematic needs analysis mechanisms, secure protected scheduling and resource allocation, and establish formal, bi-annual reviews to ensure the PDCA loop is fully closed. This guarantees that the strategy not only promotes reading motivation but also becomes a self-improving, sustainable model aligned with the goals of the *Merdeka* Curriculum.

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