

Community Empowerment through the AKSARA Education Program: A Case Study of the 'Pandawa' Youth Organization

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Abstract: Illiteracy among the elderly remains a challenge in various regions in Indonesia, including Banyuwangi Regency, limiting their social and economic participation. This article examines the implementation of the AKSARA program, an independent effort to address this issue, run by the youth organization PANDAWA (Persatuan Pemuda Wangkal) in the Wangkal neighborhood of Kalipuro District. The purpose of this study was to examine the program's implementation and analyze its impact on improving literacy and reducing illiteracy among elderly participants. The study used a qualitative approach with a case study method. Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation studies, then analyzed thematically. The results showed that the program was implemented using a teacher-centered learning approach, three times a week for fifteen meetings, held in residents' homes. The material focused on basic reading and writing with patient tutoring. Despite facing challenges such as time constraints and participant characteristics, PANDAWA was able to overcome these challenges with solutions based on local wisdom and strong social ties. The novelty of this study lies in the documentation of a community-based empowerment model driven entirely by local youth initiatives. The findings suggest that youth can be effective agents of change in non-formal education and sustainable community development.

Keywords: AKSARA, Community Empowerment, Parental Literacy

Abstrak: Masalah buta aksara pada kelompok lanjut usia masih menjadi tantangan di berbagai daerah di Indonesia, termasuk di Kabupaten Banyuwangi, yang membatasi partisipasi sosial dan ekonomi mereka. Artikel ini membahas implementasi program AKSARA sebagai upaya mengatasi masalah tersebut, yang dijalankan secara mandiri oleh organisasi pemuda PANDAWA (Persatuan Pemuda Wangkal) di Lingkungan Wangkal, Kecamatan Kalipuro. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk mengkaji implementasi program dan menganalisis dampaknya terhadap

peningkatan literasi serta pengurangan buta aksara pada peserta lansia. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode studi kasus. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi, wawancara mendalam, dan studi dokumentasi, kemudian dianalisis secara tematik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa program dilaksanakan dengan pendekatan pembelajaran yang berpusat pada guru, tiga kali seminggu selama lima belas pertemuan, bertempat di rumah warga. Materi berfokus pada membaca dan menulis dasar dengan pendampingan tutor yang sabar. Meski menghadapi tantangan seperti keterbatasan waktu dan karakteristik peserta, PANDAWA mampu mengatasinya dengan solusi berbasis kearifan lokal dan ikatan sosial yang kuat. Kebaruan penelitian ini terletak pada dokumentasi model pemberdayaan berbasis masyarakat yang digerakkan sepenuhnya oleh inisiatif pemuda lokal. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa pemuda dapat menjadi agen perubahan efektif dalam pendidikan nonformal dan pembangunan masyarakat berkelanjutan.

Kata Kunci: AKSARA, Pemberdayaan Masyarakat, Literasi Orang Tua

Introduction

Education is an alternative way to achieve a goal by learning something, enriching oneself from the unknown to the knowledgeable, and strengthening one's mental and moral abilities to avoid mistakes, whether in customs, religion, or applicable laws (Alia, Resma, Nurali, & Hamara, 2020). Through the educational process, individuals are shaped into human resources who play a significant role in the nation's and state's development (Dhani & Disemadi, 2023).

However, social realities in several regions in Indonesia still show that access to and outcomes of education are unequal, particularly among adults who have not received adequate formal education. One fundamental problem is the persistence of illiteracy in the population, both functional and total. Education for all, based on the philosophy of lifelong learning, will lose its profound meaning if educational services fail to meet the needs of the elderly. Education, which supposedly lasts from cradle to grave, will be futile if it focuses solely on human growth and development. Education must also address human decline (Irmawita, 2018). This situation presents a significant challenge to efforts aimed at enhancing the quality of life and achieving human development indicators.

Amidst these conditions, various community-based initiatives have emerged as a form of social responsibility towards education. One such program is the AKSARA (Community School Acceleration) program, initiated by the Banyuwangi Regency Government as a form of equivalency education service for adults. The target audience for adult learning is adults or the general public who want to develop their knowledge, skills, behaviors, and other abilities (Dhani & Disemadi, 2023).

The Head of the Banyuwangi Education Office consistently targets 10,000 to 11,000 new students annually to access the Aksara program (Sodiqin, 2025). This program is not only run by the government and non-formal educational institutions, such as PKBM. Still, it is also being implemented by youth organizations with a more participatory and locally based approach. Pandawa, based in the Wangkal neighborhood, Kalipuro District, Banyuwangi Regency, serves as a concrete example of how civil society can actively support literacy education. The Wangkal community itself faces literacy challenges, particularly among older people who struggle with reading and writing. To address this challenge, Pandawa organizes a literacy education program for residents aged 40 and above, aiming to eradicate illiteracy and promote social empowerment by improving basic literacy skills.

This activity is held regularly, three times a week, for fifteen meetings per class. Participants are provided with basic reading and writing materials using a teacher-centered learning approach, with tutors playing a central role in the teaching process. Although the number of participants is still limited to ten, significant progress has been made—from initially being unable to read to beginning to recognize letters, and from previously being fluent to becoming more confident in reading. The program is implemented in the homes of organization members and is supported by adequate facilities, such as complete stationery, uniforms, and food.

The AKSARA program has become one of the Banyuwangi Regency Government's strategies to improve the quality of human resources, particularly through equivalency education services for adults. Previous research has examined the program's implementation from various perspectives. For example, Muftiyah, Saputra, & Fazalan (2022) emphasized the involvement of formal institutions such as Community Learning Centers (PKBM) and the education office in implementing literacy programs, focusing on improving the Human Development Index (HDI) and community economic well-being through skills and literacy training. This research demonstrates that the AKSARA program can contribute to the economic development of rural communities. Another study by Wulandari (2017) reviewed functional literacy programs in urban communities in Surakarta using an evaluative approach. The focus was on the program's success and its impact on improving participants' literacy skills, including factors that hindered and supported the program. Meanwhile, Ansori (2020) focused more on efforts to empower older people through the Reading Village program, highlighting improvements in basic literacy skills among older people and internal challenges such as memory and learning motivation. Meanwhile, Mahmudah & Musthofa (2024) examined efforts to improve literacy among older adults in Wonosari Village, Bondowoso Regency, through an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach. This activity successfully improved literacy skills, built self-confidence, and enhanced social participation among older people. Although community-based, this study focused on the structured training process designed by the community service team, not solely on local initiatives.

Unlike the four previously mentioned studies, this study offers several novelties. First, it highlights the implementation of the AKSARA Program, driven by a non-formal youth organization,

the Wangkal Youth Association (PANDAWA), which is not part of a formal educational institution or the government. This grassroots initiative grew out of the youth's social concern about the problem of illiteracy in their community. Second, the learning approach used is teacher-centered and home-based, making the domestic space the learning environment. This demonstrates the program's flexibility and adaptability in response to local social conditions, particularly for elderly participants with limited mobility and time constraints. Third, this study presents a model of community empowerment through the active role of the younger generation, which facilitates non-formal education in a contextual, communicative, and inclusive manner.

In this context, PANDAWA plays more than just a technical implementer; it is also an agent of social change at the community level. Thus, this study fills the gap in the literature on the implementation of community-based literacy programs by illustrating how youth organizations can be driving forces in addressing educational challenges, particularly in areas where illiteracy persists. This approach also broadens the understanding that empowerment through education does not always have to begin with formal institutions, but can grow from local initiatives that foster a spirit of cooperation and social responsibility.

Based on the identification of problems and research gaps above, this study aims to generally examine the implementation of the community-based AKSARA Program, run by the Pandawa youth organization, as an alternative empowerment strategy. Specifically, this study aims to analyze the program's implementation practices and describe its impact on improving literacy skills and reducing illiteracy rates among elderly participants in the Wangkal neighborhood. By focusing on the tangible contributions of this local initiative, this study aims to document the empowerment model that emerges from youth social concerns and its effectiveness in addressing basic education challenges at the community level.

Methods

Research Design

This research employs a qualitative approach, utilizing a case study method. This design was chosen to gain an in-depth and contextual understanding of the implementation of the AKSARA program by the Pandawa organization in the Wangkal neighborhood, Kalipuro District, Banyuwangi Regency. This qualitative research aims to gain a deeper understanding of humanitarian and social issues (Fadli, 2021), focusing on processes, practices, and meanings from the perspective of those directly involved in the field.

Population and Sample

The population in this study consisted of all stakeholders involved in the Pandawa literacy program in Wangkal Village. Sampling was conducted purposively, with the following criteria: (1) Core administrators of the Pandawa organization who are directly involved in the planning and execution of the program; (2) Tutors or facilitators who teach regularly; and (3) Elderly students

(aged 40 years and above) who actively attend at least 10 meetings. A total of 10 informants were interviewed, comprising the following sample composition: 3 organizational administrators, two tutors, and 5 participants. The informants' identities are guaranteed confidentiality, and the data is only used for academic purposes.

The primary instrument in this study was the researcher herself (human instrument), who acted as planner, data collector, analyst, and reporter of research results. To obtain comprehensive data, supporting instruments in the form of research guidelines were developed and used. Semi-structured interview guidelines were created to gather in-depth information from administrators, tutors, and participants. Participatory observation guidelines were used to document learning activities and interaction dynamics at the program location. In addition, the researcher also used document checklists to collect and analyze supporting archives such as attendance lists, teaching modules, and photo documentation of activities. All of these instruments were designed to complement each other in the data triangulation process.

Data Collection

Data for this study were obtained through direct observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observations were conducted throughout the learning process, noting interactions between tutors and participants, the classroom atmosphere, and the approaches used. Interviews were conducted with various parties, including PANDAWA organization administrators, tutors, and program participants, most of whom were elderly. Additionally, researchers collected supporting documents, including activity schedules, participant attendance lists, photographic documentation, and learning materials used during the learning process.

Data Analysis

All collected data were analyzed qualitatively using an interactive model, namely through the process of data reduction, data presentation, and concluding, in accordance with the qualitative analysis flow model of Miles and Huberman (Yusuf, 2017). Researchers sorted relevant information, organized the data into main themes according to the research focus, and concluded from various findings in the field. To ensure data validity, triangulation was employed in both terms of sources and data collection techniques, thereby ensuring the reliability and accountability of the results obtained.

Results and Discussion

Social Context and Urgency of the AKSARA Program

Literacy is a key indicator for measuring the quality of human resources and the success of a region's development. Basic literacy, such as the ability to read and write, is not only a prerequisite for accessing information but also the foundation for citizen participation in social, economic, and democratic life. Literacy development is crucial because it is a fundamental skill that every

individual must possess to navigate life in the future (Fitriani & Aziz, 2019). Unfortunately, although Indonesia has made significant progress in education, the reality on the ground indicates that there are still pockets of society, particularly in rural and remote areas, that have not yet been fully reached by basic education services, especially for adults. Yet, literacy is a crucial skill for an information civilization that now lives in the technological era (Purwaningtyas, 2018).

In Banyuwangi Regency itself, in 2020, there was a percentage of illiterate age groups as shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Percentage of Illiteracy Rate in Banyuwangi Regency

Literacy Age Group	Illiteracy Rate by Age Group and Gender (Percent)		
	Man	Woman	Male + Female
	2020	2020	2020
Age 15-44 years	1,08	1,78	1,42
Age 45+ years	7,70	23,54	15,87
Age 15+	4,12	12,14	8,18

Source: National Socio-Economic Survey (Susenas) March, (Central Statistics Agency of Banyuwangi Regency, 2023)

One area still facing literacy challenges is the Wangkal neighborhood in Kalipuro District, Banyuwangi Regency. In this area, several residents aged 40 and over still lack adequate literacy skills. Some are even completely illiterate. This condition not only limits individuals' ability to live independently in their daily lives but also narrows opportunities to improve their standard of living, both economically and socially. In this context, literacy education programs are highly relevant and urgent to implement as part of community empowerment efforts.

Illiteracy in adulthood is usually closely related to limited access to formal education in the past, low awareness of the importance of education, and family economic conditions that force children to work from an early age. Meanwhile, according to Listiawati et al. in Wardani (2018) illiteracy is caused by several factors, including never having received any education at all, having received education but dropping out, not possessing reading, writing, and arithmetic skills, and having been literate but regressing to illiteracy. Illiteracy can be defined as a person's inability to use language and use it to understand reading, listen to conversations, express themselves in writing, and orally (Azizah & Khairunnisa, 2023). Furthermore, in some communities, cultural and social environmental factors also contribute to low interest and opportunities for learning. Therefore, the approach used in implementing literacy programs needs to be participatory, contextual, and address the real needs of the local community.

The Banyuwangi Regency Government responded to this challenge by launching the AKSARA (Community School Acceleration) program, a non-formal education program specifically designed

to provide equivalency education services for adults who have not completed primary or secondary education. This program was launched to facilitate adults in pursuing equivalency education, specifically junior high school (Package B) and senior high school (Package C) (Fanani, 2021). The Head of the Banyuwangi Education Office stated that the AKSARA program will impact the average length of schooling. Thus, it is hoped that the ultimate goal of increasing the Human Development Index in Banyuwangi will continue to increase (Yaqin, 2022). This program is part of a strategy to increase the Human Development Index (HDI) in Banyuwangi and is implemented in partnership with the Community Learning Activity Center (PKBM). It involves various community elements, including non-governmental organizations, local communities, and youth organizations. In general, Banyuwangi Regency's efforts to increase the HDI are hampered by low public awareness of education. People who are predominantly farmers and live in rural areas with low economic conditions often neglect education (Muftiyah et al., 2022). Low levels of education result in experiences and mental environments that are less conducive to intellectual stimulation, which can lead to poor cognitive development (Riskiana & Mandagi, 2021).

To date, the Banyuwangi Regency Government has made significant efforts to improve the Regency's Human Development Index (HDI), as evidenced by the consistently high rate of acceleration in the HDI from year to year. The latest data shows the Banyuwangi Regency HDI data in Table 2:

Table 2. Human Development Index of Banyuwangi Regency Based on New Method Components

Components	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Age Life Hope	70,03	70,11	70,19	70,34	70,54	70,65	70,72	71,06
Hope Long School	12,20	12,55	12,68	12,69	12,78	12,8	13,10	13,11
Average Long School	6,88	6,93	7,11	7,12	7,13	7,16	7,42	7,66
Expenses Per Capita Per Year Adjusted	10.692,00	11.171,00	11.438,00	11.828,00	12.264,00	12.140,00	12.217,00	12.320,00
Indices Human Development (IPM)	68,08	69,00	69,64	70,06	70,60	70,62	71,38	71,94

Source: PBS East Java Province, (Central Statistics Agency of Banyuwangi Regency, 2023)

One innovative implementation of the AKSARA Program is the implementation of literacy education activities driven by a local youth organization, PANDAWA (Wangkal Youth Association). PANDAWA is a gathering place for youth in the Wangkal area, established in 2023 in response to the local community's needs for social, cultural, and economic development. This organization was born out of the collective awareness of the importance of young people's active and sustainable involvement in building national character and regional progress. Youth organizations are a series of organizational activities that involve the important role of youth in carrying out activities in the community (Julianto, 2019). The role and position of youth organizations are crucial, and therefore their existence must be continuously monitored so that they can always be inventoried, and even their performance can be known in their routine activities (Kustiyono, 2021).

Community-based education aims to empower communities through educational programs designed, organized, and managed by the community itself. This education aims to address community needs by utilizing local potential and technology. Community-based education is flexible and tailored to the challenges and opportunities that exist in the community (Islami, Ilmin, Afny, Supriyanto, & Habibi, 2024). Through literacy activities organized by PANDAWA, the AKSARA program not only serves as a means of improving basic literacy skills for adults but also serves as a concrete manifestation of community-based empowerment. By transforming members' homes into learning spaces and involving youth as tutors and facilitators, this program demonstrates that education can be effectively implemented through a collaborative approach and social awareness, without relying on complete formal infrastructure.

The urgency of the AKSARA program is increasingly evident in the enthusiasm of participants who, previously unable to read and write, have quickly begun to show significant progress. For older adults who feel marginalized by advances in technology and information, basic literacy skills provide a starting point for regaining self-confidence and opening up new opportunities in life. More than just literacy skills, these activities restore dignity and strengthen citizens' capacity to become productive members of society. Education for older adults is crucial. As in previous stages of life, education helps provide perspective in older adults' lives (Noor & Inayati, 2021).

This type of literacy movement continues to be popularized and socialized in society. Literacy is essentially the right of every individual to lifelong learning. Ideally, if literacy skills improve, the community's quality of life will also improve (Andrianti, 2018). Therefore, the social context that still harbors illiteracy issues and the collective spirit of local youth are two crucial factors underlying the urgency of implementing the AKSARA Program. This effort not only addresses the need for basic education but also creates space for active community participation in inclusive and sustainable development.

Implementation of the AKSARA Program by the Pandawa Organization

The AKSARA program, implemented by the youth organization PANDAWA (Persatuan Pemuda Wangkal), is a concrete example of community-based literacy education. Community-based education is an approach that is increasingly gaining attention in efforts to improve

community welfare, especially in developing countries (Wahib & Susanto, 2024). Unlike formal approaches that are generally implemented through non-formal educational institutions such as PKBM, this activity is carried out by a group of young people who care about the social conditions in their neighborhood. This demonstrates that the role of youth in development extends beyond the economic and cultural fields, also encompassing fundamental aspects such as community education. The role of youth is often recognized in various educational fields, including religious education, organizational education, arts education, and sports education. All of this is inseparable from the role of the younger generation (In'am, 2023) in which young people play a role in basic community education.

PANDAWA was founded in 2023 as a gathering place for young people in the Wangkal neighborhood, Kalipuro District, Banyuwangi, with the goal of actively and sustainably contributing to the community's social, cultural, and economic development. The organization's founding was driven by the young generation's passion for building national character and driving regional progress through concrete actions. One of its flagship programs is literacy education for illiterate senior citizens.



Picture 1. Implementation of the AKSARA Program Followed by the Community

Learning activities are held routinely three times a week, with a total of fifteen meetings per batch. This program targets participants with an average age of 40 years and above, consisting of residents of the Wangkal neighborhood who are unable to read and write or still struggle with spelling words. Homemakers also attended this activity because they have the right to equality, and as an effort to eliminate the domestic stigma that women's place is only in the kitchen (Yasin, 2025). So that educational development and democratization continue to exhibit a mutually reinforcing relationship (Shaturaev, 2021).

During implementation, PANDAWA provides two tutors to assist participants throughout the learning process. The material taught focuses on basic reading and writing skills as the main foundation of literacy. Literacy is a fundamental skill that enables individuals to process and search for information (Indriani, Hermadianti, Oktobriani, & Lestari, 2022). In its learning practices, Pandawa applies a teacher-centered model (Rozali, Irianto, & Yuniarti, 2022). This approach has

proven suitable for the context of beginner elderly participants. The literature suggests that direct and structured instructional methods are often more effective for early adult learning, particularly in basic literacy, as they provide clarity, routine, and support that help reduce learning anxiety. Tutors actively guide letter recognition and word formation, creating a safe and supportive learning environment for participants with no prior literacy experience. This reinforces the finding that pedagogical approaches need to be tailored to the characteristics and psychological needs of adult learners.

Furthermore, the implemented empowerment model exhibits a transformative and participatory character. This program is not merely instructional (giving fish), but also seeks to build participants' independence and self-confidence (teaching how to fish). Utilizing members' homes as learning spaces creates emotional bonds and intimacy (Ramadhan, Purnamasari, & Sasongko, 2020), transforming domestic spaces into empowering public spaces. Providing complete facilities also provides concrete support to motivate and maintain learning continuity (Yugiswara, Sukidin, & Kartini, 2019). The observed increase in participants' self-confidence and enthusiasm is an early indicator of transformative empowerment, characterized by a shift from a passive state to greater agency in social life.

Throughout the implementation process, PANDAWA also regularly monitored the participants' progress. Some participants who previously couldn't recognize letters can now read fluently. These changes impact not only cognitive aspects but also psychological ones, such as increased self-confidence and enthusiasm for continued learning. In general, PANDAWA's implementation of the AKSARA Program reflects educational practices grounded in the values of cooperation, independence, and empowerment. The role of youth as facilitators and drivers of this program is key to its success. In addition to providing concrete solutions to the problem of illiteracy in their communities, this initiative also fosters collective awareness that education is a shared responsibility and can begin at the most basic level of society.

Challenges and Solutions for Program Implementation

One of the main challenges in implementing the AKSARA Program by the PANDAWA youth organization in the Wangkal area is communication between tutors and participants. The majority of program participants are over 40 years old, who have different mindsets, learning experiences, and educational perceptions than the younger generation. To overcome this, tutors must use simple, clear, and easy-to-understand language. In this case, face-to-face communication allows parents and tutors to communicate openly because it allows for the use of simple or everyday language, thus creating a more comfortable and familiar environment for both parties (Ashary & Fatimah, 2015). The delivery of material must be tailored to the background of the participants, including the use of examples relevant to their daily lives. Tutors also need to create a friendly atmosphere so that participants do not feel awkward or stressed.

Another challenge is patience during the learning process. Teaching adult students who are unfamiliar with the teaching and learning process requires extra patience and understanding.

Tutors must be able to maintain a pace that is neither too fast nor too slow and provide repetitive explanations in a friendly manner. The pace of explanation must be controlled to ensure students do not lose understanding. In this context, tutors are required not only to possess pedagogical skills but also affective skills to create a supportive learning environment.

Additionally, there are technical challenges, such as writing material on a whiteboard. Due to limited vision, which is common among older students, tutors need to write in larger, clearer fonts for easy reading. Using a whiteboard when explaining course material has important benefits, allowing instructors to present lessons clearly, step-by-step, and systematically (Wartini, 2017). This may seem simple, but it is crucial in supporting the learning process. The layout and format of visual materials also need to be considered to avoid confusion for students.

In terms of time management, the program also faced challenges in scheduling meetings. Participants had various domestic activities and family responsibilities that could not be neglected, making meetings impossible to hold on a fixed schedule. To address this, PANDAWA sought flexible time agreements by finding a time when all participants could attend together. This approach demonstrated the importance of compromise and good coordination between organizers and participants to ensure the program's consistent operation.

When it comes to learning methods, a single approach is insufficient to meet the needs of all participants. Therefore, blended learning methods are needed, which combine visuals, hands-on practice, Q&A sessions, and review of material in a fun way. For example, game-based methods can increase students' motivation and help them retain the material better (Tarwita & Yasin, 2025). Tutors involved in these activities must be diligent, patient, and able to lighten the mood to prevent the learning process from feeling stiff or stressful. The ability to build personal relationships with participants is a key factor in the program's success.

In response to these challenges, PANDAWA has implemented several strategic solutions. These include selecting empathetic tutors, using simple visual media, and scheduling flexibility. Furthermore, the learning approach is contextual and communicative, prioritizing participant comfort and engagement. A supportive learning environment, adequate supporting facilities, and a strong spirit of cooperation are crucial social assets for maintaining the program's sustainability. With numerous challenges creatively and successfully overcome, PANDAWA's implementation of the AKSARA Program serves as a best-practice example of providing literacy education at the community level. This demonstrates that program success is determined not only by the learning methods or facilities available, but also by adaptive skills, social empathy, and a willingness to continue learning alongside the community.

Conclusion

Based on research findings, the AKSARA Program, initiated and implemented by the Pandawa youth organization in the Wangkal neighborhood, successfully demonstrated the effectiveness of a community-based literacy education model. This program, which focuses on elderly participants,

not only succeeded in improving basic reading and writing skills but also significantly encouraged increased self-confidence and social participation of participants.

This success was supported by several key factors: (1) a teacher-centered learning approach tailored to the characteristics and learning pace of older people; (2) the use of domestic spaces (members' homes) that created a friendly and non-intimidating learning environment; and (3) the provision of adequate facilities and mentoring support, reflecting the principles of caring and mutual cooperation. This research contribution lies in documenting an alternative empowerment model that emphasizes the critical role of youth as social catalysts in adapting government programs into participatory local initiatives. Based on these findings, this study recommends that local governments establish systematic partnerships with community organizations through institutional mentoring schemes, specialized tutor training for adult-elderly learning pedagogy, and the provision of flexible teaching modules. For sustainability, this model needs to be adapted to other areas, incorporating contextual principles and incorporating post-literacy programs. Future research could involve developing longitudinal studies to measure the program's long-term impact on participant well-being, as well as conducting comparative research to identify both universal and context-specific factors that contribute to success.

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