The Space to Read

There is a photograph from Projek BacaBaca that has stayed with me for years. It shows a young boy lying on the floor of his family's cramped kitchen, a fan beside him, an open book in front of him and a mobile phone connecting him to a university volunteer. The accompanying image is an AI-generated reconstruction of that moment to protect the child's identity.

Projek BacaBaca is a community literacy initiative in Malaysia that pairs children with trained university volunteers for weekly, one-to-one reading sessions. The photograph highlights something often overlooked in discussions about educational access: the conditions in which children are expected to learn. Children's learning takes place across diverse home environments, often shaped by unequal access to space and resources. Here, the kitchen floor becomes the setting for a reading lesson.

Learning to read requires time, repetition and encouragement. Progress is rarely straightforward. Words mastered in one session may need revisiting in the next. Sustaining this process requires patience, consistency and a willingness to adapt teaching to children's experiences, needs and learning environments.

For higher education, such encounters raise questions about institutional responsibility. University volunteers gain opportunities to engage with educational realities beyond their classrooms, while universities must consider how to sustain meaningful community engagement beyond individual projects. Hope, in this context, reflects a commitment to continue creating learning opportunities, even when progress is uncertain.

The image also reminds us of the inequalities that shape children's educational experiences. Supporting one child's journey towards literacy matters, as does addressing the wider educational inequalities that limit access to literacy opportunities.