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Preface

Preface

Editor

 i-xix

 PDF

Articles

The Effect of Think Talk Write Learning Model on Improving Mathematical Communication Skills and Matemathical Problem Solving in Grade V Elementary School

Untung Ardi Yulianto, Ristiana Dyah Purwandari

 1-10

 PDF

The Influence of Learning Videos on Interest and Learning Outcomes Class VI Students in Mathematics SD Negeri 2 Merden Banjarnegara

Rudiarso Rudiarso, Ristiana Dyah Purwandari

 11-20

 PDF

E-Book Development Guidelines for Creating Canva-Based Learning Media to Improve the Professional Competence of Elementary School Teachers

Tenggar Amrullah, Ristiana Dyah Purwandari

 21-28

 PDF

Impact Leadership Head School and Professionalism Teachers on the Performance of Primary School Teachers in the Pattimura Group Rakit District Banjarnegara

Toni Wahyudi

 29-40

 PDF

The Effect of the Application of Tpack-Based Learning on the Motivation and Learning Achievement of Students of Public Elementary School 1 Sokanandi on PJOK Lessons

Imam Santosa

 41-46

 PDF

The Influence of the Problem Based Learning Model Assisted by Learning Video Media on Problem Solving Ability and Mathematical Reasoning of Third Grade Students at SD Negeri 1 Prendengan

Asih Wahyuning, Ristiana Dyah Purwandari

 47-50

 PDF

The Effect of Applying the Learning Model Problem Based Learning Assisted Method Polya on Reasoning Ability and Solving Mathematics Story Problems in Students Grade IV Kasmaran Primary School

Stephanie Prisca Dewi, Ristiana Dyah Purwandari

 51-61

 PDF

The Role of Scaffolding Strategy as an Alternative to Improve Students' Matematical Thinking Skills at SD Negeri 3 Kalipelus

Listiani Dwi Noviyanti, Ristiana Dyah Purwandari

 62-66

 PDF

The Effectiveness of Interactive Multimedia on Collaboration Skills and Science Learning Outcomes of Fifth-Grade Students at SDN 1 Kalibombong

Merry Metrika, Ristiana Dyah Purwandari

 67-73

 PDF

Analysis of Grade VI Students' Mathematical Creative Thinking Skills in Solving Problems on the Topic of Circles

Oktorina Ponco Rahayu, Ristiana Dyah Purwandari

 74-79

 PDF

The Effect of Problem-Project Based Learning on Critical and Collaborative Thinking Skills of Students of SD Negeri 2 Darmayasa

Ika Wulandari, Ristiana Dyah Purwandari

 80-83

 PDF

The Effect of Predict Observe Explaint (POE) Learning Model on Competency Process Standards

Dian Eka Nugraheni, Subuh Anggoro

 84-89

 PDF

Implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) Model in Science Subject for Grade V at SDN 2 Sered on Ecosystem Material

Yuniati Yuniati, Ristiana Dyah Purwandari

 90-92

 PDF

Analyzing Effective Learning Models for Developing Problem-Solving Skills in Primary School Students

Rosul Juned

 93-100

 PDF

The Effectiveness of Using Difa Tara Interactive Learning Media in Increasing Critical Reasoning Abilities and Independence in Science Subjects in Elementary Schools

Sumarsi Sumarsi, Ristiana Dyah Purwandari

 101-108

 PDF

Implementation of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) Approach in Improving Critical Reasoning Ability and Collaboration of Grade IV Elementary School in Science Subject in Pagedongan District

Nurul Farida Istiqomah, Subuh Anggoro

 109-119

 PDF

Implementation of Sport Education Model (SEM) to Increase Learning Interest and Critical Reasoning Ability of Grade VI Elementary School Students in PJOK Subject in Pagedongan Sub-District

Sulistiono Sulistiono, Ristiana Dyah Purwandari

 120-128

 PDF

Analysis of Junior High School Students' Mathematical Problem Solving Ability on SPLDV Material

Haryanto Pamungkas, Gunawan Gunawan

 138-142

 PDF

Patterns and Trends of SSCS Model Implementation in Science Literacy Development: Systematic Literature Review 2015-2024

Laksmi Fidya Arini, Ristiana Dyah Purwandari

 152-167

 PDF

The Role of Wordwall in Improving Interactive Learning Quality: An Analysis of Empirical Studies through Systematic Literature Review

Dhesi Purnamasari, Ristiana Dyah Purwandari

 168-174

 PDF

Analysis of Students' Learning Motivation Using Flipbook Media in Elementary School

Isti Windi Astuti, Ana Andriani

 175-177

 PDF

Strategy for Strengthening Character Education in Elementary School Children: Building a Generation with Noble Morals Qualitative Study at SD Negeri Planjan 01 Kesugihan

Eli Purwati, Wanda Nugroho Yanuarto

 178-182

 PDF

Strengthening Students' Self-Efficacy through Scouting Extracurriculars in Primary Schools

Sriyanti Sriyanti, Ana Andriani

 183-189

 PDF

Student Involvement in Science Learning through Direct Instruction Model

Cefi Kurniasih, Ana Andriani

 190-192

**Analysis of the Impact of YouTube Social Media on the Morals of Elementary School Students**

Febriyanti Febriyanti, Ana Andriani, Isti Windi Astuti

193-196

**Effectiveness of RADEC Learning Model in Developing Critical Thinking Skills of Elementary School Students: A Systematic Literature Review**

Aji Purwanto, Wanda Nugraha Yanuarto

197-205

**The Influence of Critical and Creative Thinking of Elementary School Students of Kuripan Kidul 03 on the Material of Energy Changes: Analysis of the Role of Gender and Age**

Aprilia Ariestiani Wijayanti, Subuh Anggoro

206-209

**Analysis of Deviant Behavior in Elementary School Children at SD Negeri Doplang 04 Adipala**

Dhimas Pinasthika, Sriyanto Sriyanto

210-214

**Applying the Restitution Triangle Strategy to Address Student Discipline Issues in Elementary Schools**

Alif Maulana Permadi, Sriyanto Sriyanto

215-218

**Cognitive Assessment Using the Anates Application on Solar System Material for Grade 6 Students of Karangkandri 04 Elementary School**

Bety Andriyani, Subuh Anggoro

219-222

 PDF

Analysis of Final Summative Assessment Test Items for Grade 6 Elementary School in Physical Education Using Anates

Deppy Widiyanto, Wanda Nugroho Yanuarto, Subuh Anggoro

 223-228

 PDF

Implementation of Mesi Quper (Media Edukasi Quizizz Kombinasi Peardeck) for Optimizing Differentiated Learning in Class V of SDN 1 Kalitapen


Neysa Dika Putri, Wakhudin Wakhudin

 229-233

 PDF

Analysis of RADEC Learning Model in Improving Students Learning Outcomes at SD Negeri Karangjengkol 01, Kesugihan, Cilacap

Puput Lestari, Kuntoro Kuntoro

 234-241

 PDF

Analysis of Jerold E. Kemp Learning Model on Students Learning Outcomes at SD Negeri Kuripan 04, Kesugihan, Cilacap

Ima Yuni Pasaningsih, Kuntoro Kuntoro

 242-248

 PDF

Students' Points of View on the Execution of Visual Media in Indonesian Dialect Instruction for Review 6 at SDN Cibalung 04, Cimanggu

Muhammad Rizqi Siregar, Sriyanto Sriyanto

 249-253

 PDF

Sistematika Review: Differentiated Learning Models for Diverse Students in Primary Schools

Arif Hidayat, Ristiyana Dyah Purwandari

 254-260

 PDF

Implementation of Cooperative Learning Model to Improve Critical Thinking and Student Learning Outcomes at SDN Mertasinga 07 Cilacap Utara


Dwi Setyaningsih, Sriyanto Sriyanto

 261-265

 PDF

Analysis of Learning Strategies for Slow Learner Students in Primary Schools

Shania Ulfach, Wakhudin Wakhudin

 266-270

 PDF

Implementation of the Problem-Based Learning Model to Build Adiwiyata Schools through Strengthening Environmental Care Character in Elementary Schools


Sri Sunarni, Wakhudin Wakhudin

 271-276

 PDF

Increasing Students' Reading Interest Through the Sami Sabu Program at SD Negeri 1 Samudra Kulon

Eni Suprati, Wakhudin Wakhudin

 277-282

 PDF

The Effectiveness of E-Learning with the Assistance of Linktree and Whatwall on Science Learning Outcomes for Fifth Grade Students at Karangreja 01 Elementary School in Cimanggu

Sumiyati Sumiyati, Wanda Nugroho Yanuarto

 283-285

 PDF

The Application of the RADEC Learning Model to Improve the Creative Thinking Skills of Elementary School Students

Eni Safitri, Wanda Nugroho Yanuarto

 286-292

 PDF

Implementation of Games Educational to Build Disciplined Character in Primary School Grade IV at SDN 2 Cikembulan

Sofiana Ratnasari, Wakhudin Wakhudin

 293-296

 PDF

Teacher Strategies in Overcoming Early Reading Difficulties Among First Grade Students at Ki Bagus Hadikusumo Class, SD UMP

Diyah Mardiyanti, Ristiana Dyah Purwandari

 297-301

 PDF

The Impact of Gadget Use on Students' Character at SDN 1 Danakerta


Evana Rizqoh, Sriyanto Sriyanto

 302-306

 PDF

Identify Student Misconceptions Using Three Tier Diagnostic Instruments on Physical Fitness Materials SD Negeri Danasri Kidul 02


Supriyanto Supriyanto, Wanda Nugroho Yanuarto, Subuh Anggoro

 307-313

 PDF

The Use of Lingsan Media (ASEAN Tour) in Science Learning for Grade VI of Curug State Elementary School to Improve 21st Century Skills


Bekti Kuat Pamungkas, Wakhudin Wakhudin

 314-318

 PDF

Inclusive Practices for Deaf Children in Elementary Education: Insights from a Literature Review


Anfal Zaeni Noor, Sriyanto Sriyanto

 319-323

 PDF

The Relevance of Pragmatism-Based Teaching Methods in Optimizing Information Processing in Primary School Students

Anggraeni Anggraeni, Ana Andriani

 324-326

 PDF

Cultivating Differentiated Learning through SSC (Self Service Creativity) to Realize Independent Learning

Martina Rini Budiarti, Wakhudin Wakhudin

 327-333

 PDF

Analysis of the Direct Instruction Model in Mathematics Learning on Number Factors Material in Grade 4A at SDN Mertasinga 06 Cilacap for the 2024/2025 Academic Year


Susy Abidin, Kuntoro Kuntoro

 334-339

 PDF

Problem-Based Learning Using Media Quizizz to Enhance Critical Thinking SD N 1 Kembaran Kulon Academic Year 2024/2025

Parwati Parwati, Wanda Nugroho Yanuarto

 340-345

 PDF

The Urgency of Learning Coding for Elementary School Students in Indonesia

Ilzam Afdila Putra, Agung Wahyu Nugroho, Wakhudin Wakhudin

 346-351

 PDF

The Effect of Cooperative Learning Teams-Games-Tournaments (TGT) Type on Collaboration Skills and Learning Achievement Class V Students in Science Subjects at SDN Penarang 01 and SDN Penyaran 04 Sidareja District, Cilacap District

Praise Astuti, Ristiana Dyah Purwandari

 352-356 PDF

Improving Students' Cognitive Learning Achievement in History Learning Through the Cooperative Script Model and Infographic Media in Class X IPS 1 MA Negeri 2 Surakarta

Siti Nurjanah, Sriyanto Sriyanto

 357-360 PDF

Critical Analysis of Teachers' Efforts in Developing National Character Through Social Science Learning in Hasanudin Sub-District, Cipari Cluster, Cilacap

Uzlifatul Wijayati

 361-365 PDF

The Influence of Social-Emotional Learning (PSE) on Critical Thinking and Learning Achievement in Grade 5 Mathematics Subjects at SD Negeri Sidareja 01 Sidareja District

Tri Prayitno, Ristiana Dyah Purwandari

 366-370 PDF

Utilization of Information Technology Media at Pertiwi Ajibarang Wetan Kindergarten

Sugiarti Sugiarti, Ine Kusuma Aryani

 371-373 PDF


The Effect of 5-E Inquiry-Based IPAS Learning on Critical Thinking Skills and Process Skills of Students of SDN 3 Kalibombong

Widian Mustakim, Subuh Anggoro

 374-378 PDF

The Implementation of Canva-Based Barcode Learning Media to Improve Learning Outcomes on Local Wisdom Material Using the PJBL Model at SMA Negeri 1 Mojotengah, Wonosobo

Erfi Yana Eka Susanti, Beny Wijanarko, Sriyanto Sriyanto

 379-384 PDF

Implementation of Principal Management Strategies in Improving Teacher Performance at SD Negeri Titih Lor 03

Wiwit Viana Wulandari, Ine Kusuma Aryani

 385-391 PDF

Application of Project Based Learning (PjBL) Assisted by Google My Maps on Students' Spatial Thinking Ability in Geography Learning Material Distribution of Natural Resources

Agus Supriyanto

 392-398 PDF

Mathematical Literacy Ability and Adversity Quotient in Climber Type Students

Ratna Fertikawati, Gunawan Gunawan

 399-408 PDF

Mathematical Creative Thinking Ability using the Discovery Learning Model with the Probing-Prompting technique for Vocational High School Students

Idhata Nurbaiti, Akhmad Jazuli

 420-427 PDF

Analysis of Fuzzy Thinking Processess in Students' Mathematical Communication at SMP Negeri 2 Banyumas

Helmy Wahyu Widiarti, Kusno Kusno, Anton Jaelani

 428-432 PDF

Problems of Students' Critical Thinking on the Material of Straight Line Equations of Students of SMP Muhammadiyah Larangan

Saudah Saudah, Fitrianto Eko Subekti

 441-448 PDF

Critical Analysis of Differentiated Learning Implementation on Science Literacy and Creativity in Elementary School Students

Ari Parwati, Subuh Anggoro

 449-455 PDF

The Influence of Learning Models Core (Connecting, Organizing, Reflecting and Extending) to Critical Thinking Ability and Achievement Students of Grade V of Tritih Kulon 05 State Elementary School

Kartika Wahyuningsih, Ristiana Dyah Purwandari

 456-463 PDF

The Effect of Experimental Methods on Visuals Activities and Skills Think Critical on Learning IPAS Change of Form Material

Wendi Neviasari, Subuh Anggoro

 464-466 PDF

Pengembangan Media Pembelajaran Interaktif Berbasis Canva untuk Meningkatkan Hasil Belajar Peserta Didik pada Pembelajaran IPA Kelas VI SD Negeri Gumilir 05

Nur Alfi Fatmawati, Subuh Anggoro

 467-475 PDF

The Effect of Tasuka Video on Pre-Reading Interest and Curiosity Character in Group B3 Students of TK Pertiwi DWP Setda Banjarnegara

Nur Subekti

 476-483 PDF

The Influence of Learning Models Problem-Based Learning on Pancasila Education Learning Outcomes for Grade IV Students SDN 2 Pandanarum, Banjarnegara Regency

Galih Budiarto

 484-488 PDF**Analysis of Mathematical Concept Understanding Based on Students' Learning Interest in Solving Algebraic Problems**

Findi Auliya Fatikhah, Hasnna Kariimah

 489-501 PDF**Flipped-Differentiated Learning (FDL) as an Innovative Learning Model to Improve Learning Outcomes**


Tri Purwaningsih

 508-511 PDF**The Influence of the Project Based Learning Model on the Ability to Think Critical and Creatively in Making a Dream House Class VI Science Subject SDN Gumilir 06**

Krista Adayu, Ristiana Dyah Purwandari

 512-516 PDF**Implementation of the Project for Strengthening the Profile of Pancasila Students (P5) in Increasing the Independent Attitude Ability of Grade IV Students at SDN 1 Kemawi**

Suryati Suryati, Ine Kusuma Aryani

 517-523 PDF**Qualitative Study on the Implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project through the Kebolingko Project in Forming the Sciencepreneur Spirit at State Elementary School 3 Gandatapa**

Dian Maharani, Ine Kusuma Aryani

 524-528 PDF

Implementation of Differentiated Learning Approach to Improve Social Skills and Student Learning Outcomes


Supriati Supriati, Sriyanto Sriyanto

 529-536

 PDF

Implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile (P5) Strengthening Project to Develop Students' Attitude of Responsibility at State Elementary School 4 Karangrau

Hayatun Ni'mah, Kuntoro Kuntoro

 537-541

 PDF

The Effectiveness of Direct Learning Model in Science Learning for Grade IV at SDN Sindangbarang 03

Rohfi Hestuti, Kuntoro Kuntoro

 542-546

 PDF

Influence of Approach Culturally Responsive Teaching Canva Helped with the Context of Regional Specialties on Students Interest in Learning and Learning Achievement in Social Sciences for Class VII Students SMP Maria Immaculata Cilacap

Shintia Hersiyani, Sriyanto Sriyanto

 547-551

 PDF

Exploring the Relationship Between Physical Care (Hair and Nails) and Reading Ability in Elementary School Children

Titien Yuliasuti, Ine Kusuma Aryani

 552-559

 PDF

Analysis of Student Learning Motivation in Coastal Environment

Irma Octaviani, Ana Andriani

 560-563

 PDF

Strengthening of Civic Disposition through Cooperative Learning Methods

Firsty Mariana, Ana Andriani

 564-572 PDF**Analysis of Student Activity and Learning Outcomes in 21st-Century Innovative Learning with the PjBL Learning Model in 5th Grade of Elementary School**

Istikomah Istikomah, Ana Andriani

 573-576 PDF**Use of Interactive Focus Cards in Educational Learning Pancasila for Class 1 Elementary School Students**

Diah Widyaningsih, Ine Kusuma Aryani

 577-583 PDF**Implementation of Project-Based Learning in Increasing the Concern of Class V Students of SDN 3 Tanjung towards Environmental Damage in Science Learning**

Dwi Rela Abdillah Khabib, Subuh Anggoro

 584-586 PDF**Develop Critical Thinking Skills through Steam Learning in Grade 5 at SD Negeri 2 Sawal Banjarnegara**

Lia Fherdiana, Sriyanto Sriyanto

 587-596 PDF**Implementation of Modern Learning Theory of John Dewey's Teaching Methods and Information Processing Theory in SD Negeri 1 Pesangkalan**

Isa Bowo Yudianto

 597-600 PDF

The Impact of the 7 Habits of Great Indonesian Children Program on the Discipline of Second Grade Students at SDN 2 Sibalung

Sunarsih Sunarsih, Sriyanto Sriyanto

 601-604 PDF**Implementation of Quizizz Interactive Media to Increase Enthusiasm and Participation of Grade VI Students of SDN 3 Lingasari in Science Learning**


Nova Abadul Fahmi, Subuh Anggoro

 605-609 PDF**Implementation of Ralph W. Tyler's Objective Model in Curriculum Development at Lingasari 1 Public Elementary School, Banyumas**

Catur Wulandari, Wakhudin Wakhudin

 610-615 PDF**Implementation of School Literacy Program in Improving Students' Reading Literacy Skills: A Qualitative Study at SD Negeri 2 Lingasari, Banyumas**

Bamas Aprihadi Setiawan, Wanda Nugroho Yanuarto

 616-622 PDF**Effectiveness of Using Canva-Based Learning Videos in Improving Critical Thinking Abilities of Elementary School Students: A Literature Study**

Arini Dina Styowati, Subuh Anggoro

 623-626 PDF**Implementation of the Problem-Based Learning Model to Enhance Critical Thinking Skills of Elementary School Students: A Literature Review**

Heri Sumadi


 627-631 PDF

The Influence of the Problem Based Learning (PBL) Model on Student Learning Motivation

Bahtiar Amin Zuhri

 632-635 PDF**Implementation of the Restitution Triangle in Building a Humanistic and Restorative School Culture at Kalibatur State Elementary School**

Ari Kusmiyati, Kuntoro Kuntoro

 636-640 PDF**The Influence of the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project on the Theme of Sustainable Lifestyle on the Creativity of Fifth Grade Students at SDN Mewek**

Kasmiati Kasmiati

 641-643 PDF**Increasing the Enthusiasm and Participation of 6 Grade Students of SD Negeri Ledug Through the Use of the kahoot in Science Learning**

Yusuf Yuniar Ratus, Subuh Anggoro

 644-647 PDF**Pengaruh Model Pembelajaran Kooperatif Tipe Teams Games Tournament Terhadap Keterampilan Kerja Sama Dan Komunikasi Peserta Didik Kelas IV Mata Pelajaran PKN SD Islam Al Azhar 16 Cilacap**

Luthfi Rifa'atun, Ana Andriani

 648-655 PDF**The Application of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) Method to Increase Motivation to Learn PPKN**

Ari Budi Prihandoko

 656-661 PDF

The Impact of Supervision on Teacher Preparation and Behavior: A Case Study of Public Elementary Schools in The Diponegoro Cluster, Punggelan District, Banjarnegara

Teguh Raharjo

 662-664

 PDF

Cognitive Assessment of Grade 6 Students of Slarang 02 Kesugihan Elementary School on the Material of Diseases Attacking the Movement System with the Ana Test Application

Puji Lestari, Subuh Anggoro

 665-668

 PDF

Evaluation of the Implementation and Impact of the My School My Pesantren Program at State Elementary School 1 Karangmangu in the 2024/2025 Academic Year

Ari Dwi Atmojo, Subuh Anggoro

 669-673

 PDF

Analysis of the Implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka at SD Negeri 3 Karangsalam Based on the Scriven Evaluation Model

Yanuar Prima Nur Hakim, Sriyanto Sriyanto

 674-681

 PDF

Language Learning Challenges at Elementary School Age

Sri Astuti, Kuntoro Kuntoro

 682-685

 PDF

Implementation of Wordwall Interactive Media to Increase Enthusiasm and Participation of Grade IV Students of SDN Kaliputih in Jawa language Learning

Subur Widadi, Subuh Anggoro

 686-689

 PDF

Stylistic Study of Song Texts in the Album Menari Dalam Bayangan by Hindia

Aam Lusyana, Kuntoro Kuntoro

 690-696 PDF**PBL Model Based on Religious Values for the Implementation of Students' Habits and Understanding in Grade 5 of State Elementary School Wlahar 03**

Iswatun Hasanah, Ana Andriani

 697-704 PDF**The Relationship Between Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) with Entrepreneurship Theme and Elementary Students' Independent Attitude**


Trio Bagus Darmawan, Ristiana Dyah Purwandari

 705-712 PDF**Improving the Science Learning Outcomes of Grade V Students of SDN Rawaapu 06 Patimuan through the STAD Learning Model Assisted by Google Form**

Ernasari Sri Asih Wulandari, Ristiana Dyah Purwandari

 713-720 PDF**The Influence of the Project Based Learning Model on Creative Thinking Skills Students of Karangjati 01 Elementary School, Cilacap through Ecoprinting**

Wahyu Sagita Eka Cahyani, Ristiana Dyah Purwandari

 721-725 PDF**Implementation of Bruner's Learning Theory to Improve Understanding of Mathematical Concepts in Lower Grade Students of SDN Cimrutu 01 Patimuan with the Aid of Concrete Objects**

Ani Oktafiana, Ristiana Dyah Purwandari

 726-732 PDF

Implementation P5 Based Green Innovation For Increase Attitude Care Environment

Windi Masmodah, Ristiana Dyah Purwandari

 733-738 PDF**Implementation of the SSCS Learning Model to Improve Student Learning Outcomes on Data Presentation Material in Elementary School**

Lilis Saputri Handayani, Ristiana Dyah Purwandari

 739-745 PDF**The Utilization of Comic as Learning Media to Fulfill Student's Learning Needs**

Dian Wicaksono, Wanda Nugroho Yanuarto

 746-749 PDF**The Influence of Project-Based Learning Assisted by an Incubator Machine on Elementary Students' Participation and Activeness at Sekolah Dasar Negeri 1 Teluk, Banyumas**

Mohamad Januar, Wanda Nugroho Yanuarto

 750-753 PDF**Analysis of Learning Difficulties in Mathematics Among Fifth Grade SD Negeri Kalibatur Banyumas District in the 2024/2025 Academic Year**

Khomsah Nur Laeli, Kuntoro Kuntoro

 754-757 PDF**Challenges of Local Newspaper Sustainability in the Digital Era: Effect of Social Media Marketing on Customer Loyalty through Brand Image and Brand Awareness Development**

Rosnaini Daga, Rukman Pala

 758-767 PDF

The Effect of Digital Media Training on Computational Thinking and Information and Communication Technology Skills of Elementary School Teachers in Kawunganten District

Nila Rozana

768-770

 PDF

Action-Based Learning in Environmental Education for Elementary School Students Through Ecotourism

Faris Budiman Annas, Djuara P. Lubis, Dwi Retno Hapsari, Sumardjo Sumardjo

771-778

 PDF

Exploring the Use of Formative Assessment in EFL Classroom: Teaching Practices and Challenges

Fourest Prapsetyana Satmawati

779-786

 PDF

Critical Analysis of Principal Supervision on Teachers' Professional Competence in the Learning Process at State Kindergartens in Banjarnegara Regency

Agus Mudianto, Y. Suyitno, Ine Kusuma Aryani

787-791

 PDF

The Effect of Excellent Service and Product Image on Customer Loyalty Through Satisfaction as an Intervening Variable at PT. Papua Regional Development Bank Sentani Branch Office

Putri Indriani, Rosnaini Daga, Nasir Hamzah

792-800

 PDF

The Influence of Elementary School Teachers' Community in the Use of Digital Media on Self-Efficacy and Information and Communication Technology Skills in The Cut Nyak Dien Cluster, Cilacap Selatan

Titin Sumarni

801-805

 PDF

Implementation of the Sciencepreneur Approach through Project-Based Learning in Making Natural Shampoo to Improve Critical Thinking Skills of SD UMP Students in the 2024/2025 Academic Year


Latifah Dwi Utami, Ristiana Dyah Purwandari

 806-810

 PDF

The Effect of Capcut Application on Creative Thinking and Learning Achievement of Grade VI Students in Science Subjects at SDN Tambaksari 04


Dwi Arianti

 811-816

 PDF

Synergy of Transformational Leadership and Improving Managerial Competence of School Principals: A Case Study in State Elementary School 2 Selanegara


Siti Nur Hasanah, Ine Kusuma Aryani

 817-824

 PDF

The Use of Canva in Indonesian Language Learning in Grade 6 at State Elementary School 1 Locondong

Wahyu Yuliawan, Ine Kusuma Aryani

 825-831

 PDF

An Effort to Increase the Learning Activeness of Class VIII B Students in IPS Subjects with the Problem Solving Method at SMP Pemda 2 Kesugihan

Karina Tri Anggraeni, Beny Wijarnako Kertopati

 832-842

 PDF

Communicating Science: Insights from Indonesian Higher Education Institutions

Eko Prasetyo Nugroho Saputro, Ismi Dwi Astuti Nurhaeni, Andre N. Rahmanto, Sri Hastjarjo

 843-856

 PDF

The Impact of Using Quizizz Paper Mode on Results Study Student and The realization of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Elementary School

Munofa Khoeron Rizoq, Ristiana Dyah Purwandari

 857-861

 PDF



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Action-Based Learning in Environmental Education for Elementary School Students Through Ecotourism

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the implementation and impact of action-based learning in environmental education for elementary school students through ecotourism, using Organic Agro-Edu Tourism (AEWO) Mulyaharja in Bogor, Indonesia as a case study. Employing a qualitative research approach, data were collected through interviews, focus group discussions, observations, and document analysis involving students, teachers, local residents, and AEWO staff. The findings reveal that AEWO provides meaningful, hands-on learning experiences in organic agriculture, fostering emotional and cognitive connections to nature. Students gain not only agricultural knowledge but also develop greater empathy, responsibility, and appreciation for environmental sustainability. The integration of local farmers in the learning process enhances the authenticity and relevance of education, while the ecotourism setting enables place-based learning that extends beyond classroom boundaries. This research concludes that action-based learning within ecotourism frameworks significantly contributes to raising environmental awareness and shaping pro-environmental behavior among young learners.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Environmental education plays a critical role in fostering an understanding of the environment and promoting sustainable practices among individuals, particularly the youth. As the world's environmental issues grow more pressing, it becomes clear that increasing environmental literacy is essential. This kind of education not only prepares future generations to tackle ecological challenges but also equips them with the skills necessary for being responsible citizens and fostering sustainable development (Hu & Hsin, 2023). One of the key benefits of solid environmental education is that it encourages students to act in environmentally friendly ways.

Studies show that well-designed educational programs can lead to real changes in how students interact with the environment. For example, a meta-analysis looking at the impact of environmental education on young people reveals a strong effect on their environmental behaviors, even with the challenges that come with changing habits (Wetering et al., 2022). This underscores how environmental education can go beyond just sharing knowledge and actually inspire positive actions. Plus, this learning process is enhanced by the emotional and personal aspects of education, which teachers should weave into environmental lessons to cultivate responsible citizenship (Lovren & Marušić-Jablanović, 2023).

Moreover, environmental education is a multi-faceted endeavor that links people to meaningful experiences within their environments. The educational process is not merely one of knowledge transfer, rather,

it is also an attempt at the inspiring of changed attitudes or behaviour toward nature. By using advanced technology, especially virtual and augment reality, teachers can give the students controlled environments in which the students can actively experiment with and learn about environmental issues. According to Maipas et al., (2021) meaningful learning can be secured through the use of such methods and techniques.

In schooling framework it is necessary to make the students essentially literate in the environment along with the other subjects (Hu & Hsin, 2023). When students are equipped with such literacies, their ability to confront global environmental challenges is also improved. In light of the growing recognition of sustainability throughout society, Wetering et al. (2022) states it has become increasingly important to include environmental education in the curriculum of students.

1.1 Ecotourism and Sustainable Development

In recent times, ecotourism has been defined as a type of travel which involves visiting pristine natural areas for the appreciation of nature with the intention of conserving it along with improving the quality of life for local people Choo & Halim (2022). Such definition brings out the usefulness of balanced tourism which strives to aid in the achievement of sustainable development (Tešin et al., 2020). Filimonau and Perkins argue that there is an increasing trend in the definitions provided for ecotourism which seem to differ on aspects such as responsibility, education, culture and relation to nature (Filimonau & Perkins, 2023).

Further, it is viewed as a niche form of tourism that goes alongside conservation by addressing the socio-economic needs of local people aiming at striking a balance between preservation and tourist pleasure (Lovelesh et al., 2024). Hence through its practices, this form of tourism supports the need for sustainability as well as ecological balance while promoting community welfare. Ecotourism plays a central role in environmental education by fostering a sense of responsibility toward natural systems among diverse age cohorts.

Research indicates that ecotourism functions much like play-based learning, particularly for younger visitors; this immersive experience helps to establish affirmative connections with the outdoors and cultivates a pro-environment attitude during formative early years (King et al., 2020). In addition, it functions as a vehicle for community-based educational outreach, where the locals articulate the need for environmental education as essential for sustainable development (Ruiz, 2024). Such cross-disciplinary frameworks are particularly marked by specialized places like mangrove ecosystems, which allow students to learn experientially about conservation (Afifah et al., 2024).

Participation in ecotourism helps locals better understand their natural resources, resulting in enhanced community awareness and more sustainable behavior (Koliouska & Andreopoulou, 2023). Hence, besides fostering economic sustainability, ecotourism serves as an important channel for outside-in environmental education. Organic Agro Edutourism (AEWO) Mulyaharja is a vibrant agritourism site situated in Mulyaharja Village, Bogor, West Java, Indonesia. Covering roughly 23 hectares at the foot of Mount Salak, the property enjoys fresh mountain air, sweeping vistas, and extensive terraced rice paddies often likened to the famous landscapes of Ubud.

AEWO's leading appeal lies in its commitment to organic farming. Since earning certification in 2015, the venue has been stewarded by local farmers and women's farmer groups, known locally as KWT, who oversee the rice fields, a hydroponic garden, and assorted vegetable plots. School groups are especially enthusiastic about the immersive farm days that let them work the soil—using everything from a water buffalo's steady pull to a modern tractor's roar—plant seeds, prepare organic compost, monitor a small biogas unit, and finally gather the golden rice.

Yet the experience does not end there. Guests are free to wander past the paddies into carefully stocked fish ponds, pause at information kiosks showing off local micro- and small-business products, taste freshly cooked Sundanese meals in the café, pedal along shaded bike paths, or spend the night as the village elders do. This mix of activities deepens learning, puts money in local pockets, and quietly promotes both climate-smart agriculture and grassroots empowerment.



Fig. 1. Rice fields of Organic Agro-Edu Tourism (AEWO) Mulyaharja

1.2 Action-Based learning

Action-based learning has emerged as a powerful pedagogical approach within environmental education, foregrounding direct, hands-on experiences that invite learners to engage with ecological principles in the most immediate and tactile of ways. When this model is woven into the fabric of educational programmes—especially those situated in ecotourism environments—it does more than clarify concepts; it forges lasting cognitive understandings and nurtures deep emotional ties to the natural world.

King and colleagues observe that playful, hands-on activities embedded within ecotouristic programmes act as a vital teaching mechanism for fostering a sense of environmental responsibility among younger learners; such strategies enable children to build enduring bonds with nature and to cultivate the pro-environmental outlook that tomorrow's conservation efforts will require (King et al. 2020). In a related argument, Türkmen argues that successful outdoor education relies not merely on well-designed content but on genuine community engagement, so that each lesson is anchored in the pressing environmental issues learners see every day (Türkmen 2023).

A vivid illustration of this principle appears in the work of Afifah and her colleagues, who demonstrate how mangrove-centered ecotourism operates as a dynamic learning space, exposing students to the complexity of coastal ecosystems and encouraging them to acquire knowledge by seeing and doing rather than by sitting in a classroom (Afifah et al. 2024). Their findings resonate with a wider body of research affirming that experiential settings typical of ecotourism spur sustainable behaviours and embolden individuals to translate knowledge into concrete environmental action (Khattak et al. 2021).

Ruiz's research highlights that integrating environmental education into ecotourism opens avenues for a wider range of viewpoints across age, cultural, and socio-economic groups. Because students come to class with such different backgrounds and interests, instructors need to stay nimble and adjust their teaching strategies on the fly. Doing so helps every learner feel included and turns information transfer into a hands-on experience they won't forget (Ruiz, 2024).

When instructors incorporate active, problem-centred activities into their lesson designs, they do much more than rehearse key dates or rehearse mathematical rules; they provide a live demonstration of the kinds of thinking and behaviour students will require in order to confront today's pressing climate and environmental crises. Such experiential classes frequently take learners beyond the confines of the classroom, igniting immediate, place-based participation in local recycling initiatives, community allotments, or citizen-science investigations.

1.3 Research Questions

Based on previous discussions, this study is designed to answer two research questions:

1. How is action-based learning related to environmental education conducted at the Organic Agro Edutourism (AEWO) Mulyaharja ?
2. What are the benefits of action-based learning at Organic Agro Edutourism (AEWO) Mulyaharja in raising environmental awareness among elementary school students?

2. RESEARCH METHOD

In this study, we investigate qualitatively. Qualitative research is concerned with examining the personal meanings people give to events, life processes and how these are attached to the social world . Qualitative data enables researchers to delve into timelines, see sequential effects of events and acquire explanatory insights. High-quality qualitative in fact often is the discovery machine and it enables the authors to develop provisional ideas, test a new framework or theory (Miles and Huberman, 2014). This study used data sources from a range of data obtained by means of interviews, focus group discussion, non-participatory observations and document analysis.

Yin (1984) states that interviews should be relatively free-flowing rather than structurally controlled in case studies. In the current study, method of interviews taken in conversation were open ended question interviews. The questions were designed to find facts and eliciting the opinion of respondents on specific incidents. Non-Participatory Observation method in qualitative research is a data collection method conducted by observing the research object without direct involvement in the observed situation (Creswell, 2013). This study involved seven informants who were interviewed.

These seven informants represent teachers, elementary school students, local residents and the ecotourism managers. This research was conducted in Organic Agro-Edutourism (AEWO) Mulyaharja, Bogor City, Indonesia. The research took place from February 2024 to December 2025. This study employed data analysis techniques proposed by Miles and Huberman (2014), which include data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. Microsoft Excel and NVivo is used to process the data. The first step in the analysis process is data reduction, which is defined as the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming raw data from written field notes.

The next step is data display, which refers to a structured set of information that facilitates conclusion-drawing and action-taking. The final step is conclusion drawing or verification, which involves searching for

meanings, noting regularities, patterns, explanations, possible configurations, causal flows, and propositions. Researchers then draw conclusions, which are continuously verified throughout the research process (Miles and Huberman, 2014). Ethical consideration was of paramount importance in this regard of research, so that the rights and welfare of all concerned parties were safeguarded. In advance of the research, I had gotten consent of all the informants to data collection and interview. I elaborate the research concern, the research objectives and the methods to acquire data for all the informants so as to be granted permission for doing the study.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Organic Agro-Edu Tourism (AEWO) Mulyaharja serves as an important platform for environmental education, particularly by engaging students directly in organic farming through hands-on activities. The site spotlights organic rice cultivation, allowing visitors to witness the principles of sustainable agriculture in practice.

“At AEWO, what they emphasize is organic—organic rice fields. So everything related to organic practices, especially rice, can be found there” (FGD, May 19, 2024).

This approach clearly illustrates AEWO’s intention to weave organic agriculture into the very fabric of its tourism and pedagogical programmes. Because rice is such a vital staple across Indonesia, the lesson becomes both immediately relevant and culturally resonant for the learners. By anchoring the initiative in organic rice production, AEWO Mulyaharja familiarises young people with food systems that avoid harmful chemicals while safeguarding soil health and long-term sustainability.



Fig. 2. AEWO’s staff is giving directions to the students

Beyond its role as a popular tourist spot, AEWO Mulyaharja operates as a living classroom where learners can participate in practical farming tasks woven into school excursions and broader environmental initiatives. A participant recently remarked,

“It can also serve as an educational space, especially because there are a lot of school events held there” (FGD, May 19, 2024).

This comment illustrates why so many schools choose the site for lessons that centre on ecology and sustainability. The combination of untamed scenery and carefully designed teaching stations gives students a first-hand feel of their subject matter, far removed from the usual four walls of a lecture hall. Such experiences in the open air are crucial for bridging the gap between theory and practice, sharpening students’ analytical abilities, and encouraging them to consider seriously what stewardship of the planet actually means. One of AEWO’s unique features is its long-time cooperation with the Mulyaharja farmer community.

This partnership significantly enriches the educational programme. The curriculum outlines environmental issues. However, the farmers who actually manage the terrain generally teach the courses. It includes people whose work and customs are connected to the local landscape. As students spend time with the growers, they learn long-established techniques—how to prepare the soil, how to plow a field, and how to transplant rice seedlings. As mentioned in the interview,

“Those who teach how to plow the fields, dig the soil, and plant the rice are actually real local farmers from the area” (FGD, May 19, 2024).

These shared activities mean that lessons extend far beyond the classroom. Students work side by side with men and women who have tended these lands for decades, so knowledge becomes a muscle memory rather than a set of abstract concepts. That experience creates a channel between the young and the old, allowing local stories and customary practices to pass from one generation to the next in hands-on, immediate ways. Meeting the farmers also instills a sense of respect for their daily toil and makes it painfully clear how much human effort lies behind the meals they take for granted. Recognising this effort is, in itself, an important step toward deeper environmental awareness and a lasting sense of gratitude.



Fig. 3. Students learn to plow the field accompanied by local farmers.

Students benefit tremendously from taking part in the environmental education program at AEWO Mulyaharja because they learn outdoors. There are no classroom walls, when they are in an open air classroom they are able to see, touch and involve themselves in nature and farming. School doesn't feel like a chore but an expedition. One teacher put it simply:

"I think it's very beneficial. Basically, this kind of outdoor learning has so many advantages, especially when children are directly involved in the activities" (ES, November 21 2024, teacher).

That observation points to a truth many educators have felt for years: hands-on work in a natural setting catches students' interest in a way a traditional class room never can. When learners plant seeds, pull weeds, or circle a pond with a magnifying glass, they do much more than memorize vocabulary; they practice science with their whole bodies and senses. The impact lingers long after the visit, sparking conversations at home and gentle, lifelong habits toward conservation.

AEWO Mulyaharja aims to develop cognitive abilities through educational activities while also ensuring food value and sustainability. Students aren't merely watching but are actively engaged in each and every stage of the process of growing rice. Through this activity, students get a firsthand understanding of the food, the labor that goes behind it and how it is produced. As the teacher explained,.

"So we educate our children to appreciate rice more—understanding how it's planted, how the soil is prepared, and all that" (ES, November 21, 2024, teacher).

The AEWO program teaches us to be grateful for what we have and conserve our resources. When the students experience the growing of food first-hand, they will view it as not something that is 'instant', but will rather appreciate the effort, time and collaboration with the world it took to achieve such food being created. Creating more conscious behaviours and attitudes could help foster lasting concern for the environment with this shift. Students who took part in an environmental education program at AEWO Mulyaharja expressed their gratitude for the experience and knowledge received. One student shared their experience, saying,

"My group was assigned to go there to plow the rice field first. After that, we were told to plant rice together with the local men, and I planted just enough rice" (FTH, November 21, 2024, student).

This shows how pupils are engaged in real agricultural practices that make them understand the origin of food better. The direction of farmers of the local area helps students to engage with the actual implementers of sustainable agriculture. As a result of this experience, students develop a greater respect for nature and food production. Along with gaining agricultural knowledge, the environment was found to be much more relaxed and less stressful by students as compared to the classroom. The open space gave a more relaxed vibe where students felt comfortable with their surrounding and expressed freely.

"In the classroom, it's hard to stay calm—some kids are noisy. But outside, it feels more comfortable and we can play too" (ZK, November 21, 2024, student).

This quote shows that being outside in the natural world will help you feel calm. It will also help you focus a lot better too! Allowing students freedom to move about helps them stay motivated. It also helps develop social and emotional skills through play-based learning activities.



Fig. 4. Students play fish-catching games.

In addition, the program instilled in students a greater appreciation for and responsibility for natural resources such as food. Students learned through experience how much hard work goes into making rice. They also understood the value of food and the need to not waste it.

"We shouldn't waste food. People have worked so hard just to produce rice for everyone" (ZK, November 21, 2024, student).

The student shows an increasing empathy to the labour of the farmers as reflected in this writing. It also shows that experiential education can impact personal values and daily behavior. When students learn by doing, they get to internalize sustainability principles meaningfully. Implementation of Action-Based Learning at AEWO Mulyaharja is a very effective learning activity on Environmental Education for elementary students. When students get directly involved in organic farming—like ploughing the rice field, planting the seeds and preparing the soil—they learn through experience no matter how much they learn something theoretical about organic farming.

As highlighted in student and teacher interviews, these activities help develop emotional and cognitive links with nature. King et al. (2020) stresses that a hands-on learning using play-based methods in ecotourism settings fosters a child's emotional bonding with nature which is important to develop pro-environmental behaviour. AEWO's context, combining ecotourism and education, fits well into this framework as it is an environment where ecological concepts are internalised through action and play. Furthermore, AEWO Mulyaharja's work with local farmers to lead educational activities improves the students' connection to community and environment.

This reference further supports Türkmen's (2023) claim, which holds that outdoor environmental education based in the local culture and issue system of the community would help foster conservation values. Moreover, such education would make learning more locally relevant. A student reflected, *"We shouldn't waste food. Individuals attempted to cultivate rice just for everybody"* (ZK, November 21, 2024) shows tax emergence of humanisation and awareness of environmental responsibility. The AEWO's program draws on to Afifah et al. (2024) whose findings show places with educational ecotourism such as mangrove forest may become dynamic ecosystems classroom that cultivate appreciation and care for nature through direct experience.

AEWO Mulyaharja fosters environmental literacy and an ethical attitude toward nature through the engagement of students in real-life agricultural settings. According to Ruiz (2024), education based on ecotourism should be flexible and allow all kinds of learners to take part in ecological actions. AEWO is an example of how ecotourism-based action learning can develop environmental values among young people. Integration of action-based learning at AEWO Mulyaharja ecotourism proved to have a significant contribution in increasing environmental awareness of elementary school students.

Schoolchildren have the opportunity to be involved in environmental practices – plowing rice fields, planting, composting, learning from visiting local farmers – all hands-on learning experiences. This engagement encourages cognitive and affective bonding with the natural world, allowing children to understand the significance of sustainability as an experienced reality, rather than a sedentary phenomenon. Choo and Halim (2022) describes ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural areas in order to appreciate and to conserve nature, as well as endorsing local communities," which could be seen to incarnate AEWO's strategy.

As described by Filimonau and Perkins (2023), contemporary ecotourism combines the context of responsibility, culture, and education, which implies AEWO as being a good place for environmental learning as a result of ecotourism that is embedded in community-based and nature focused activities. Indeed, AEWO's model of development is well in line with ecotourism general objectives as it links conservation and community empowerment. The students not only learn about how rice grows in sustainable harmony with nature, but they

also gain an insight into the effort and local knowledge characteristics of food production, which also leads to an increase in respect for the environment, and the people who depend on it.

This is in accordance with Lovelesh et al. (2024) that ecotourism should strike between nature preservation and the economic and social claims of local people. Working with local farmers and getting dirt under their finger nails hammers home the realization for students that environmental issues and cultural heritage are inseparable. As Tešin et al. (2020) highlight, protection of the natural and cultural resources is one of the cornerstones of sustainable development. Thus AEWOMulyaharja is not just a place of ecotourism, rather it is a space for environmental education that transforms, that provides children a sense of the environment that is based on action, empathy, and local/global knowledge.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this research provides an insight on how action-based learning which is attached to environmental education can be implemented in ecotourism settings to address RQ1 as shown with the case of AEWOMulyaharja. On the other hand, this combination of natural scenes, and learning by doing agricultural practices and working with local farmers shows that learning in a natural environment produces ecological comprehension and a sense of place. It showed us how action-based learnings can help to promote environmental education towards students in places such as AEWOMulyaharja, further more, this method help students to experience environmental knowledge outside the textbook and to be memorable.

In addition, the positive outcomes seen in the learning activities of AEWOMulyaharja have provided further basis for RQ2. Students gain a greater appreciation of nature, empathy for those whose livelihoods depend on close interactions with nature, and an understanding of sustainability in their day to day lives. Such results suggest that action-based learning not only teaches but also changes the way students think about and treat the environment. A similar positive impact on environmental behavior could therefore be achieved through action-oriented programs (as evidenced by AEWOMulyaharja) with elementary school students at Mulyaharja

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