WRITING WITH IMAGINATION : A CREATIVE APPROACH TO ENHANCING ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' LITERACY

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ABSTRACT

Sanggar Anak Sungai Deli (Sasude) is a community-based learning center focused on educational and creative training activities. Its primary aim is to empower children living in the outskirts along the Deli River by nurturing their potential in various fields, including the arts, literature, environmental awareness, and other forms of creativity. This community service initiative aims to provide literacy mentoring to the children of the sanggar through an interactive and participatory writing approach. The core focus is to cultivate narrative thinking and self-expression through hands-on writing activities. The implementation process is structured into three systematic stages: planning, execution, and evaluation. During the implementation phase, participants were given the opportunity to write a narrative with the theme "I Will Become", accompanied by visual illustrations to enhance the meaning of their writing. Following this, the children were encouraged to present their work in front of their peers as an exercise in oral literacy and confidence building. The results of the program indicate a notable improvement in the children's understanding of literacy, particularly in selecting appropriate vocabulary, organizing ideas coherently, and articulating their thoughts verbally. More than just writing, the children began to grasp that literacy involves thinking critically, communicating effectively, and reflecting on the meaning behind their own narratives. These skills are expected to serve as a valuable foundation for their personal development in the future.

Keywords : Literacy, *Community learning center, Active learning*

INTRODUCTION

The level of literacy among the younger generation today requires serious attention, particularly in light of their increasing dependence on digital technology. This tendency is evident in their dominance as active users of various social media platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp. Such intensive engagement not only affects patterns of social interaction but also risks diverting their focus from the development of essential literacy skills, including critical thinking, analytical reading, and reflective writing (Putrayasa et al., 2024).

Furthermore, children as active users have full access to all features of social media, including the freedom to upload content, comment, and interact publicly. However, this access is often not accompanied by adequate digital literacy. As a result, various cases emerge in which they post inappropriate comments, messages, or content, reflecting a lack of ability to filter information, understand the ethics of digital communication, and evaluate the potential impact of their online activities. This situation indicates that literacy is not merely about the ability to read and write, but also encompasses the capacity to evaluate information critically and behave responsibly in digital spaces.

In response to this issue, the implementation team conducted a community service program for children at Sanggar Anak Sungai Deli (SASUDE), located on Brigjen Katamso Street, Gang Kesatria Sei Mati, Medan Maimun District, Medan City. The name *SASUDE* is derived from the Deli River, which constitutes an integral part of the geographical and cultural identity of the surrounding area. The SASUDE community was established in 2018 by Lukman Hakim Siagian, a local youth actively engaged in entrepreneurship and concerned with fostering children's creativity in marginal communities, together with his colleague Ulfa Julianty. Their initiative aimed to provide a creative space for children living along the Deli River to develop their potential, particularly in the fields of arts, culture, and literature.

Currently, the studio has 54 child members and 25 administrators who actively participate in various community activities. In addition, several volunteers frequently visit the community to share skills related to arts, literature, and creative expression with the children. Most of the members come from economically disadvantaged families, as their parents generally work in informal sectors such as becak drivers, domestic helpers, waste pickers, and other temporary jobs.

SASUDE focuses on educational and creative training activities designed to empower children in marginal areas to develop their potential in arts, literature, environmental awareness, and other creative fields (Baiduri & Sitopu, 2023). One of the programs organized by SASUDE is *Poetry Night*, which serves as a form of literary appreciation and a platform to strengthen literacy understanding, while also developing children's speaking and writing skills. In addition to Poetry Night, SASUDE also organizes various art and cultural activities open to the public, including training sessions, workshops, artistic performances, and other events aimed at introducing and preserving local cultural values (Sari & Lubis, 2023). Through the presence of SASUDE, children and adolescents in the surrounding area are expected to gain opportunities to express creativity, develop their potential, and broaden their understanding of arts, culture, and literacy, which may previously have been limited by the social and economic conditions of the marginalized community.

The community service activities targeting children in the studio are designed to provide interactive learning experiences that support the strengthening of literacy skills while equipping them with competencies relevant to their future. This article aims to examine in depth the process of improving children's literacy through an interactive writing approach and to evaluate the effectiveness of this method in fostering sustainable literacy development.

METHODS

This community service program was designed to develop children's literacy skills and enhance their self-confidence in expressing themselves. The program was conducted at Sanggar Anak Sungai Deli (SASUDE) in Medan City in June 2024 and involved participants aged 8 to 12 years. During its implementation, the service team was accompanied by a supervising lecturer who actively served as a facilitator and as a communication liaison with the management of the community studio. The program was carried out through three main stages: planning, implementation, and evaluation. The details of the activities in each stage are presented in the following diagram.

Table 1. Stages of Activity Implementation

No	Stages	Description of Activities
1	Planning	1. The selection of the activity location was carried out by the supervising lecturer and students by considering several strategic aspects, such as the geographical proximity between the university and the partner studio, as well as the sustainability of institutional relationships that had previously been established through the supervising lecturer's collaborative experience with the studio management. 2. The students, together with the supervising lecturer, conducted an in-depth assessment of the studio's environmental context, the learning profiles of the participants, and the literacy learning outcomes in order to formulate intervention strategies that are relevant and based on the actual needs in the field. 3. The students and the supervising lecturer established strategic coordination with the studio management, particularly the mentor-teachers, to identify the most relevant forms of community service activities. This coordination also aimed to gather information regarding available supporting facilities as well as the various pedagogical challenges faced by the mentors in developing the literacy skills of the studio participants.
2	Implementation	1. The formulation of literacy activities, the scheduling of implementation, the selection of participating classes, and the planning of technical operational aspects were carried out systematically to ensure the effectiveness, relevance, and sustainability of the program to be implemented. 2. The program socialization was conducted with the studio management and mentor caregivers as an initial step to build mutual understanding, increase active participation, and ensure the optimal involvement of participants

		throughout the entire series of activities.
		3. The implementation of narrative text writing activities was organized through a program entitled *Writing with Imagination: A Creative Method for Improving Elementary School Children's Literacy*. The program was designed to stimulate imaginative thinking while simultaneously developing students' literacy skills in an innovative and engaging manner.
3	Evaluation	1. The evaluation of the literacy activities was conducted in a reflective and evidence-based manner to assess the program's effectiveness, identify achievements and challenges, and formulate recommendations for improving the quality of implementation in the future.

To support the implementation of the activities, the implementation team together with the supervising lecturer prepared supporting materials in the form of HVS paper and colored pencils. These materials were used as creative expression tools for the studio participants to write imaginative stories while simultaneously representing them through colorful visual illustrations.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Diagnostic Assessment of Participants' Basic Abilities and Literacy Needs

During the implementation stage of the community service program, the implementation team together with the supervising lecturer conducted literacy activities designed in a participatory and educational manner with the participants of Sanggar Anak Sungai Deli (SASUDE). The activity adopted the theme *"I Will Become"*, which aimed to explore the aspirations and personal potential of the children through both written and oral literacy practices. The activity began with an open discussion facilitated by the implementation team. The children were invited to share their future aspirations and explain the reasons behind the professions or roles they hoped to pursue.

This discussion activity not only encouraged the children to think reflectively but also helped them develop the confidence to express their opinions verbally in a supportive environment. This statement is consistent with the findings of Sholihah and Amaliyah (2022), who emphasize that discussion activities have the potential to encourage students to think critically and foster the courage to express their opinions. However, it is important to note that the effectiveness of discussions in shaping critical thinking and confidence largely depends on how the discussion is facilitated. Without clear guidance, a safe atmosphere, and the active role of a facilitator, discussions may be dominated by only a few participants while others remain passive. Therefore, the pedagogical approach to conducting discussions needs to be carefully designed so that the expected benefits can be achieved more evenly among participants (Widiastuti & Kania, 2021; Ismawardani, Siburian, & Sitorus, 2024).

Picture 1. Discussion and guidance session conducted by the implementation team with the studio participants during the community service activities in the field; Source: Personal Collection.

After the discussion session, the participants were provided with HVS paper and colored pencils to creatively express their dreams. The children wrote down their aspirations accompanied by illustrative drawings representing their hopes. This activity provided them with opportunities to develop their imagination while simultaneously strengthening their literacy skills in narrative, visual, and pictorial forms. Illustrated media play an important role in supporting the development of children's literacy skills, particularly in the aspect of reading (Mahardhani et al., 2021). In addition to facilitating text comprehension through visualization (Nurannisaa, 2017), such media can also stimulate children's interest in reading from an early age. Furthermore, the illustrated works produced by each child can serve as a source of inspiration and useful information for their peers, encouraging the creation of a collaborative and supportive learning environment. During this activity, the implementation team and the supervising lecturer actively assisted each child in the processes of writing and drawing while providing positive feedback to build their self-confidence. The children's works were then presented in front of the group as a form of appreciation for their thinking process and their courage in communicating their ideas (Sholihah & Amaliyah, 2022).

Picture 2. Implementation of the Main Activity with the Sanggar Children Source : Personal Collection.

Overall, this activity not only served as a means of strengthening children's literacy skills in writing and reading (Irmansah & Irfan, 2023), but also functioned as a strategy to foster motivation (Putra et al., 2019), self-awareness, and aspirations for the future. The approach employed positioned children as active subjects in the learning process while simultaneously reinforcing the values of inclusivity and appreciation for the diversity of their dreams.

Interactive learning approaches play a crucial role in enhancing students' literacy skills. The implementation of this interactive activity successfully created a space that encouraged the studio participants to actively express their thoughts about their future aspirations. This activity demonstrated that interactive learning approaches serve as an engaging method for the children in the studio, as they provide opportunities for self-reflection while also helping them recognize their own potential (Utami & Azizah, 2023). This is important because it enables children to begin envisioning their future more concretely and with greater confidence.

Although this activity showed success in encouraging children's expression and participation, another important aspect should not be overlooked: its function as a medium for developing basic literacy skills, particularly in reading and writing. In this context, the activity aligns with the findings of Anindya et al. (2023), which indicate that the use of visual media such as posters can effectively improve writing skills, particularly in composing descriptive texts. However, the effectiveness of such media largely depends on well-structured instructional design and the active involvement of facilitators in guiding children's thinking and writing processes.

In this activity, children were directly involved in composing paragraphs, which required them not only to understand the structure of main ideas but also to select appropriate and meaningful vocabulary. Through this process, the children learned how to construct descriptive paragraphs (Inggriyani & Pebrianti, 2021; Wiratama et al., 2022). While this effort deserves appreciation, it should also be noted that facilitators must ensure that the guidance provided in paragraph construction is conducted consistently and systematically. This is essential so that children do not merely write, but also genuinely understand the essence of developing logical and well-structured ideas.

CONCLUSION
The literacy activities conducted with the participants of Sanggar Anak Sungai Deli (SASUDE) successfully created a participatory, reflective, and inclusive learning environment. Through the interactive approach themed *"I Will Become,"* the children were not only encouraged to express their aspirations and personal potential both orally and visually, but were also trained to think critically and communicate their ideas in a supportive atmosphere. This activity strengthened basic literacy skills such as reading, writing, and constructing paragraphs in a logical and structured manner, while also fostering self-confidence and awareness of future aspirations. Although the results were positive, the effectiveness of this activity largely depended on the quality of discussion facilitation and guidance provided during the writing process. Therefore, consistent and well-directed

mentoring is essential to ensure that the intended literacy outcomes can be achieved comprehensively and sustainably.

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