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Learning Doesn't Have to Be About Sitting Still: The Revolution of Active Learning in Elementary Schools Through Outdoor Learning Methods

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the application of outdoor learning methods as an alternative to learning in elementary schools that have been dominated by passive conventional methods. Conventional methods that focus on lectures and written assignments have proven to be less effective in encouraging active involvement, creativity, and the development of 21st-century skills such as critical thinking and collaboration. Outdoor learning offers a dynamic learning paradigm with direct experience outside the classroom, which not only increases students' motivation and conceptual understanding, but also strengthens social skills and environmental awareness. This approach allows for cross-disciplinary integration and contextual learning that is relevant to the needs of the 21st century. The study used a descriptive qualitative approach with observations, interviews, and documentation studies on teachers, students, and principals who have implemented outdoor learning. The results show that outdoor learning is able to improve the quality of learning through meaningful real experiences, strengthen students' emotional and cognitive involvement, and support the development of soft skills. However, challenges in the form of compiling assessment indicators and limited facilities need to be overcome. In conclusion, outdoor learning is an innovative pedagogical strategy that is effective in preparing students to become holistic individuals who are adaptive and ecologically and socially responsible...

INTRODUCTION

Conventional learning methods that still dominate many elementary schools in Indonesia tend to focus on passive sitting activities, listening to teacher lectures, and doing written assignments in the classroom. This model is very limited in encouraging active student involvement and provides little space for exploration or development of

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creativity. In fact, according to Putri et al (2023), an effective learning process occurs through social interaction and direct experience that actively builds knowledge construction. Classes that require students to just "sit still" tend to ignore the differences in children's learning styles, especially for those who are more kinesthetic and require physical involvement to understand concepts. In the long term, this pattern has the potential to create students who lack the ability to think critically, argue, or solve problems independently.

In contrast, approaches such as outdoor learning offer a new, more dynamic paradigm, where students are invited to learn outdoors, either through environmental observation, direct experimental activities, or contextual educational games. This type of learning has proven to be more effective in building conceptual understanding while fostering students' curiosity. A study by Maulia (2023) shows that outdoor learning experiences can increase learning motivation, strengthen social relationships between students, and support high-level thinking skills. In other words, outdoor learning is not only a solution to boredom in the classroom, but also a pedagogical strategy that can answer the needs of 21st century learning (Saputra & Anita, 2025). Therefore, it is important for elementary schools to start redefining teaching methods by integrating outdoor activities as part of a sustainable curriculum.

The development of 21st-century competencies is a crucial issue in the world of global education, especially because rapid social and technological changes demand individuals who are adaptive, collaborative, and able to think critically. Competencies such as collaboration, communication, creativity, and problem-solving are not skills that can be honed optimally through passive or memorization-based learning alone. In fact, contextual learning that places students as active subjects has proven to be more capable of training these skills simultaneously. Outdoor learning, as a form of active learning, provides ample space for the development of these soft skills (Sisi & Parisu, 2025). For example, when students work together to solve problems in nature exploration activities, they not only learn about subject matter such as science or social studies, but also naturally train their communication, negotiation, and emotional management skills. This is in line with the constructivist approach which emphasizes the importance of direct experience and meaning in the learning process (Tishana et al., 2023; Sinaga et al., 2024).

Furthermore, outdoor learning provides opportunities for cross-disciplinary integration that are highly relevant to the demands of 21st century competencies. In one activity outside the classroom, students can simultaneously hone their scientific literacy skills, logical thinking, and environmental awareness. According to the Partnership for 21st Century Learning (P21), the future curriculum must combine project-based learning and real contexts to produce individuals who are ready to face global challenges sustainably. Outdoor learning facilitates this because it allows students to experience complex situations that require reflective and strategic thinking. For example, observing a river ecosystem not only introduces the concept of ecology, but also opens up a discussion space about the environmental crisis, public policy, and social responsibility. Thus, this method not only enriches the learning experience, but also brings education closer to life, forming students who are not only academically intelligent, but also resilient and wise in making decisions in the future.

The use of the environment as a learning resource in the outdoor learning method marks an important shift in the educational paradigm from merely transferring knowledge to forming ecological and sustainability awareness. The surrounding environment, which has often been marginalized in the formal learning system, is actually a very rich and

contextual source of knowledge. Through exploratory activities in nature, students can directly observe the dynamics of the ecosystem, learn about biodiversity, and understand the impact of human activities on the environment. This not only strengthens students' cognitive understanding of science and geography materials, but also fosters empathy and responsibility for nature from an early age. Research by Rahayu et al (2024) shows that direct learning experiences in nature are more effective in forming pro-environmental attitudes compared to theoretical classroom learning. Therefore, making the environment an alternative learning space is not just a complement, but an essential pedagogical strategy in shaping the character of the future generation with an ecological perspective.

More critically, this approach also contains an important socio-political dimension. When students are invited to engage in environment-based learning, they not only learn about nature as an object, but also as part of an interconnected social system. They are invited to understand that environmental problems are inseparable from economic factors, public policy, and the consumer culture of society. Thus, outdoor learning can be an initial space for critical education that forms students' transformative awareness of global issues such as the climate crisis, deforestation, and unequal access to natural resources. Lestari et al (2023) emphasize that liberating education is education that links social reality with students' learning experiences. In this context, learning in nature is not just "walking while learning", but is a strategy to build an alternative narrative to education that has so far been too focused on classrooms and exam scores. Therefore, outdoor learning is not only relevant, but also urgently needs to be adopted more widely in order to create a generation that is not only intelligent, but also aware of its ecological and social responsibilities.

Innovation in teaching methods, especially through the outdoor learning approach, is not only a pedagogical alternative, but also a strategic response to the stagnation of the education system that has relied on a one-way instructional model for too long. In the context of basic education, this method presents more interactive learning, which allows for stronger emotional and intellectual engagement of students. When students learn in a real and open context, the learning process becomes more meaningful because it is directly connected to everyday life experiences. According to Damayanti et al (2024) in the Self-Determination theory, students' intrinsic motivation will increase when they are given autonomy, appropriate challenges, and connectedness to their learning environment. Outdoor learning answers these three aspects: students feel freer, actively involved, and connected to the real world. This is a form of innovation that is not only technical-methodological, but also philosophical, because it positions students as whole and independent learning subjects.

In addition, outdoor learning encourages teachers to act not as information centers, but as facilitators who design authentic and reflective learning experiences. This is both a challenge and an opportunity to improve the professionalism of educators. Teachers are required to be more creative, flexible, and able to integrate various disciplines in their learning designs. In the long term, this transformation will have an impact on the formation of a more collaborative and process-oriented learning culture, not just the end result such as grades or exams alone. A study by Rofii (2023) found that outdoor learning increases student self-confidence, encourages active participation, and improves social relationships in study groups. Thus, innovation in teaching methods through outdoor learning is not just an adjustment to modern educational trends, but a paradigmatic leap towards more relevant, comprehensive, and sustainable learning.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach that aims to describe in depth the implementation and impact of outdoor learning methods in learning in elementary schools. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to understand the experiences, perceptions, and interactions between teachers and students in a real context holistically. The subjects of the study included class teachers, grade IV–VI students, and principals, who were selected purposively from elementary schools that had implemented outdoor learning activities. Data collection techniques included participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation studies to obtain rich and contextual data.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques, starting from data reduction, presentation, to drawing conclusions. Data validity was maintained through triangulation of techniques and sources, as well as confirmation of results to informants (member checking). Researchers played an active role as the main instrument, directly observing the process in the field and reflecting on the findings to ensure depth of meaning. With this method, the study is expected to be able to provide a comprehensive picture of the effectiveness and challenges of outdoor learning, as well as its contribution to active and contextual learning at the elementary school level.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Implementation of Outdoor Learning in Elementary School Learning

1. Planning and Integration Strategy of Outdoor Learning in Elementary School Curicculum

In an effort to improve the quality of learning in Elementary Schools, the implementation of the outdoor learning method is becoming one of the increasingly popular strategies because it is considered capable of providing a more real and meaningful learning experience for students. The results of observations show that the success of the implementation of outdoor learning is highly dependent on careful planning and integration with the elementary school curriculum. Teachers who have successfully implemented this method have generally adapted the Learning Implementation Plan (RPP) with a contextual and project-based approach, especially in science and social studies subjects. One teacher said,

> *"I always prepare lesson plans with out-of-class activities that are directly integrated with the lesson material, for example, we invite our students to observe the ecosystem in the school garden so that learning is more lively and easy to understand."*

This approach not only brings the subject matter to life, but also makes learning more relevant and meaningful for students because they can experience the phenomena being studied directly. This strengthens the concept of contextual learning which according to Kholifah (2024) is able to increase student engagement and deepen understanding of concepts through real experiences. Thus, outdoor learning becomes an important bridge between theory and practice that can build deep understanding and increase student learning motivation.

However, although many teachers have been able to integrate outdoor learning into the curriculum, there are still significant challenges, especially in terms of compiling assessment indicators that are in accordance with the characteristics of outdoor learning. Teachers still have difficulty determining how to measure student competencies objectively in the context of activities outside the classroom. One teacher stated,

> *"Assessing learning outcomes from field activities is difficult because not all aspects can be measured by written tests or quizzes. We need indicators that can assess students' observation skills, collaboration, and attitudes."*

This challenge is in line with the findings of Umkabu (2023) who stated that evaluation in outdoor learning requires assessment tools that are different from traditional methods, involving cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects holistically. Therefore, it is important to have special training for teachers so that they are able to design valid and reliable assessment instruments, and are supported by institutional policies that facilitate the optimal implementation of this learning method.

In addition, the success of outdoor learning is highly dependent on institutional support and teacher capacity. Schools must provide adequate facilities and policies that support the implementation of outdoor learning, such as flexible schedules and access to the surrounding environment that can be used as learning resources. This support also includes ongoing training for teachers to improve their competence in designing, implementing, and assessing outdoor learning. As explained by Vičič Krabonja et al (2024), investment in teacher professional development is crucial to implementing learning innovations sustainably. With institutional support and increased teacher capacity, outdoor learning can run effectively and provide a significant positive impact on the quality of learning, especially in building real, relevant, and enjoyable learning experiences for students.

2. The Role of Teachers and Readiness of Facilities in Supporting Outdoor Learning Activities

Teachers play a central role as facilitators in outdoor learning activities, functioning not only as material deliverers, but also as managers of a learning atmosphere that encourages active student involvement outside the formal classroom. A teacher who was interviewed said,

> *"I try to create a fun and interactive atmosphere during extracurricular activities so that students not only receive theory, but also experience the learning process directly through exploration and collaboration."*

This is in accordance with the concept of constructivist learning which emphasizes the importance of direct experience in building knowledge. Teachers who have high initiative and flexibility in adapting learning methods in the field can create a more participatory and collaborative learning process, which ultimately increases student motivation and understanding. Research by Halamury et al (2025) also shows that the role of teachers as adaptive and responsive facilitators to student needs greatly contributes to learning success, especially in learning contexts that require interaction with real environments such as outdoor learning.

However, the implementation of outdoor learning is not free from significant challenges related to the readiness of supporting facilities in schools. Many schools still face limited access to adequate green open spaces, which are the main media in outdoor learning. In addition, the lack of relevant teaching aids and learning media in the field narrows the variety of methods that teachers can use. One teacher also highlighted the importance of the safety aspect by stating,

> *"We don't have a clear SOP for activities outside the classroom, so teachers and students sometimes feel worried if something happens during the activity."*

This condition shows that the existence of standard operating procedures (SOP) is an urgent need to ensure the safety and smooth implementation of outdoor learning. Scientifically, a conducive learning environment and adequate facilities greatly affect the effectiveness of learning (Ruwaidah et al., 2025). Without adequate infrastructure support, the potential of outdoor learning as an innovative and enjoyable learning method is difficult to optimize optimally.

In addition, support from the principal and institutional policies also play an important role in the sustainability of the outdoor learning program. A principal said in an interview,

> *"We always try to support teachers in activities outside the classroom, but budget and regulatory constraints sometimes limit our room to maneuver."*

Strong support from school leaders can open up opportunities for teachers to more freely develop creative and effective outdoor learning methods. Policies that explicitly accommodate outdoor learning activities including budget allocation, implementation time, and teacher training are important foundations for ensuring the sustainability and improvement of program quality. The concept of learning by doing put forward by Dewey (1938) in Aji et al (2024) supports the importance of direct and contextual learning experiences, which are the core of outdoor learning. Thus, the success of implementing outdoor learning is highly dependent on the synergy between teachers' abilities in facilitating learning, the readiness of facilities and infrastructure, and structural support from the institution. For this reason, increasing teacher capacity, developing supporting facilities, and formulating policies that support innovative learning must be top priorities for the world of education.

The Impact of Outdoor Learning on Student Engagement and Competence

1. Increasing Students' Emotional and Cognitive Involvement in the Learning Process

Learning that involves emotional and cognitive involvement of students is one of the main keys in creating an effective and meaningful learning process. Based on the results of interviews and observations, outdoor learning activities have been proven to be able to significantly improve both aspects. Students not only become more enthusiastic, but also more active in asking questions and discussing. One student said,

> *"I am more enthusiastic about learning because I can see firsthand what I am learning, so it's not just theory."*

This statement illustrates how real experiences in learning make students feel more emotionally involved. The teacher also emphasized,

> *"After the out-of-class activities, I saw that students remembered and understood the material more quickly because they experienced it themselves."*

In this way, students experience direct learning and not just receive information passively, so their understanding becomes deeper and stronger.

This hands-on experience-oriented learning is in line with the experiential learning theory proposed by Kolb (1984), which states that the best learning process occurs through a cycle of concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and application (Aini & Nugroho, 2025). When students are involved in real activities, they not only memorize concepts, but are also able to connect theory with the practices they experience, so that the knowledge gained is more meaningful and easy to remember. Research by Ramadhan & Hindun (2023) also emphasizes the importance of emotional and cognitive involvement in learning, where emotional involvement increases motivation and positive feelings towards learning, while cognitive involvement hones critical and creative thinking skills. Interactive processes such as observation, exploration, and discussion that occur in outdoor learning encourage students to actively think and solve problems independently or with friends, which are important capital in developing 21st century competencies.

In addition, learning in a real environment helps students relate the concepts learned to their direct experiences, so that the material taught does not feel abstract and far from everyday life. This is very important to build a strong relationship between new knowledge and the knowledge that students already have. Thus, students' memory of the material becomes stronger and lasts longer. Teachers as facilitators also play an important role in accompanying and guiding student reflection during and after outdoor activities, so that the learning experience can be processed optimally into a deep understanding. Thus, experiential learning methods such as outdoor learning not only improve academic results, but also foster positive attitudes and sustainable critical thinking skills.

2. Strengthening 21st Century Competencies and Building Student Character

The implementation of outdoor learning has a very significant impact on strengthening 21st century competencies, especially critical thinking skills, communication, and teamwork. Learning activities carried out outside the classroom such as environmental observation, recording findings, and collaborative problem solving force students to actively interact, discuss, and exchange opinions. This is different from conventional learning which is more passive and individual. A teacher who is experienced in outdoor learning said,

> *"I see students becoming more confident in expressing their ideas and more open during discussions because the atmosphere outside the classroom is more relaxed yet challenging."*

This situation is very conducive to honing critical thinking skills because students must analyze natural phenomena directly, propose hypotheses, and find solutions together. Thus, outdoor learning effectively builds skills that are much needed in the modern world that is full of dynamics and complexity.

In addition, outdoor learning also increases environmental awareness and forms strong social characters in students. When students interact directly with nature, they not only learn theories about ecosystems or biodiversity, but also feel for themselves the importance of maintaining cleanliness and environmental sustainability. This awareness is reflected in their behavior which is more caring and responsible for the surrounding environment. Research by Sofyan et al (2025) supports this by showing that learning experiences in nature increase student motivation and foster positive attitudes towards the environment and a sense of social responsibility. Intense interaction with the real environment also helps students develop empathy and moral values that are important for strong characters. These characters are not only rooted in cognitive aspects, but also in attitudes and values that prepare students to face future social and ecological challenges.

Furthermore, contextual learning through outdoor learning adds meaning and relevance to learning in students' daily lives. When students can directly relate theory to real experiences, the subject matter becomes easier to understand and remember. As stated by Supriani & Arifudin (2025), context-based learning can shape students' character to be reflective and responsible from an early age. This approach not only adds depth to academic understanding, but also fosters self-confidence and intrinsic motivation in learning. With strong 21st century competencies and mature characters, students are better prepared to face increasingly complex and rapidly changing global challenges. Therefore, outdoor learning is not just an alternative method, but an effective educational strategy to produce holistic individuals who are able to contribute positively to society and the environment.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of outdoor learning in Elementary Schools shows that this method is able to improve the quality of learning by providing real and meaningful learning experiences for students. The success of outdoor learning is highly dependent on careful planning, integration into the curriculum, and adequate support from facilities. Teachers play an important role as facilitators who create an interactive and enjoyable learning atmosphere outside the classroom. However, the main challenges faced are the preparation of objective assessment indicators and the limited facilities and clear SOPs. With proper training and support from school policies, outdoor learning can be implemented effectively. This method has been proven to increase students' emotional and cognitive involvement, so that understanding of the material becomes deeper. In addition, outdoor learning also strengthens 21st century competencies such as critical thinking, communication, and teamwork. Learning in a real environment helps students relate theory to direct experience, so that the material is more relevant and easier to remember. Interaction with nature also fosters environmental awareness and strong social character. Overall, outdoor learning is an innovative learning strategy that prepares students to become holistic individuals ready to face future challenges.

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