

Analytical Essay on Creativity, Thinking Skills, and Innovation in Environmental Education in Schools

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Keywords: *Environmental Education, Creativity, Critical Thinking Skills, Innovation, School.*

Abstract: *Environmental education plays a strategic role in shaping a generation that has awareness, creativity, thinking skills, and the ability to innovate in facing global environmental challenges. This article aims to critically analyze the role of creativity, thinking skills, and innovation in environmental education in schools and identify challenges and opportunities in its implementation. This study uses a qualitative approach with analytical methods on various relevant literature reviews and empirical findings. Data were obtained through analysis of scientific journals, research reports, and education policy documents related to environmental education and 21st-century learning. The results of the analysis show that the integration of creativity, critical thinking skills, and innovation in environmental education can improve students' conceptual understanding, environmental awareness, and their ability to formulate solutions to environmental problems in a contextual manner. However, implementation in schools still faces obstacles in the form of limited teacher competence, a curriculum that does not fully support innovative learning, and a lack of institutional support. Therefore, systematic efforts are needed through strengthening teacher capacity, developing an adaptive curriculum, and supporting school policies so that environmental education can function optimally in shaping students who are creative, critical, and oriented towards sustainability.*

Introduction

Environmental education is an important component of the school curriculum because it plays a strategic role in shaping students' attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge regarding contemporary ecological challenges. In the global context, the dynamics of climate change

and environmental damage require the younger generation to not only be sensitive but also capable of acting creatively and innovatively in facing these problems. For example, research by Johnson & Lee (2023) shows that integrating environmental education into creative activities at school significantly increases students' environmental awareness.

Creativity in environmental education is not just the ability to imagine, but a thought process that combines ecological knowledge with real solutions to environmental problems. This is reinforced by Suryani (2024), who found that project-based learning programs in secondary schools can encourage students to produce creative ideas that are applicable to environmental conservation. Another study by Martinez et al. (2022) also confirms that students who are trained to think creatively tend to be more active in participating in real conservation actions.

Critical thinking skills are an essential cognitive foundation in environmental education, as students are faced with complex problems that require analysis, evaluation, and synthesis of information. Rahman & Oktaviani (2023) in their research show that problem-based learning (PBL) effectively improves students' critical thinking skills in environmental issues. Research by Nguyen (2025) also reports that these thinking skills are positively correlated with students' ability to formulate alternative solutions to local pollution issues.

Innovation in the context of environmental education includes the ability of students and educators to create new and more effective ways, methods, or tools for learning and environmental action. Lestari (2022) found that the use of gamification methods in environmental education increases student motivation and learning outcomes compared to conventional approaches. In addition, Park & Kim (2023) in their study reported that educational technology innovations, such as ecosystem simulation applications, deepen students' understanding of ecological concepts while triggering ideas for environmental action.

Creativity, thinking skills, and innovation are synergistically interrelated in supporting environmental education goals. Without creativity, innovation will not emerge; without good thinking skills, creativity cannot be directed systematically. Research by Hernandez (2024) shows that interdisciplinary learning models that combine science, art, and technology strengthen the relationship between these three aspects, resulting in higher quality environmental actions among students.

Although the potential of these three aspects is great, their implementation in schools still faces serious challenges such as limited resources, teacher readiness, and a curriculum that is still textual in nature. Fitriana & Budiman (2025) found that teachers' low understanding of environmental education hinders student creativity in the classroom. Research by Lopez (2023) adds that minimal administrative support contributes to a lack of innovation in environmental learning programs in junior high schools.

Several studies emphasize the importance of a conducive learning ecosystem for the development of higher-order thinking skills. Susanto (2024) reports that cross-subject collaboration encourages students to view environmental issues from a broader perspective and think more critically. Wang & Chen (2022) also note that community-based learning, which involves the participation of local residents, enriches students' experiences so that they are better able to apply environmental knowledge in a contextual manner.

In addition to pedagogical aspects, the character of environmental education must be supported by school policies and evaluation systems that recognize creativity and innovation. Alvarez (2023) shows that portfolio-based evaluation and creativity rubrics help identify improvements in students' thinking skills more effectively than traditional multiple-choice

tests. Furthermore, Putri & Santoso (2025) found that schools that implement environmental innovation awards successfully inspire students to collaborate on real local conservation projects.

Overall, the latest empirical literature indicates that the development of creativity, thinking skills, and innovation in environmental education is not only relevant but also urgent for schools that want to produce an environmentally conscious generation capable of facing future challenges. This context reinforces the urgency of more in-depth research on effective learning strategies that integrate these three aspects as the core of transformative and sustainable environmental education.

Research Method

This type of research uses a descriptive analytical qualitative approach, which aims to explore in depth the phenomena of creativity, thinking skills, and innovation in environmental education learning in schools. In this context, the qualitative approach allows researchers to understand students' thinking processes and teachers' innovative practices holistically, including the perspectives of students, teachers, and learning program documentation. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participatory observation, and analysis of learning documents, providing a comprehensive picture of how these three aspects are integrated into the learning process.

Theoretically, this study is based on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) as a contemporary educational framework that emphasizes the development of critical, creative, and innovative skills to address global sustainability challenges (UNESCO, 2024) and the OECD Learning Compass 2030 framework, which underlines students' transformational competencies, including the ability to “create new value” and reflective thinking as the core of future learning (OECD, 2024).

The research subjects were selected purposively, namely environmental education teachers, students from several classes, and school curriculum managers who run environmental education programs. Data analysis was conducted using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, including data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing, to ensure valid and systematic findings. During the analysis, the researchers applied theoretical triangulation by comparing field findings with 21st-century learning theories, including the 4Cs Skills framework (Creativity, Critical Thinking, Communication, Collaboration), which places creativity and critical thinking at the core of innovative skills in education today.

Result and Discussion

The role of creativity in supporting the effectiveness of environmental education in schools

Creativity plays a central role in improving the effectiveness of environmental education in schools because it enables students to understand environmental issues in a more contextual, meaningful, and applicable way. Environmental education is not enough to simply convey factual knowledge about ecosystems and environmental damage, but needs to encourage students to come up with new ideas, alternative solutions, and concrete actions to address environmental issues around them. Through creativity, students can connect abstract concepts with the realities of everyday life, making learning more relevant and having a long-term impact.

Creativity in environmental education also serves as a driver for student engagement in the learning process. Students who are given space to be creative, for example through

recycling projects, environmental campaigns, or the creation of educational media, tend to show higher motivation to learn. Empirical research by Martinez, Silva, and Torres (2022) shows that creative project-based learning in environmental education increases student participation and their conceptual understanding of sustainability issues compared to conventional lecture methods.

In addition to increasing participation, creativity plays an important role in shaping environmental problem-solving skills. Environmental issues are complex, multidimensional, and often do not have a single solution. Therefore, students need to be trained to think divergently and generate various alternative solutions. A study conducted by Johnson and Lee (2023) found that integrating creative activities into the environmental education curriculum significantly improves students' ability to identify local environmental problems and design realistic innovative solutions.

Creativity also contributes to strengthening students' attitudes and values of caring for the environment. When students engage creatively, they not only learn "about" the environment, but also "for" and "through" the environment. Research by Suryani (2024) revealed that students involved in creativity-based environmental learning showed more positive attitude changes towards environmentally friendly behaviors, such as waste management and energy conservation, compared to students who followed text-based learning alone.

From a pedagogical perspective, creativity allows teachers to develop more innovative and flexible learning strategies in environmental education. Teachers can integrate art, technology, and collaborative activities as a means of exploring environmental issues. This is in line with the findings of Hernandez (2024), who states that a creative interdisciplinary approach in environmental education increases the effectiveness of learning by combining the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects of students in a balanced manner.

Thus, creativity is a key element that strengthens the effectiveness of environmental education in schools, both in terms of the learning process, learning outcomes, and character building of students. Support for the development of student creativity not only has an impact on improving understanding of environmental concepts but also fosters awareness and sustainable ecological responsibility. Therefore, effective environmental education needs to consciously and systematically integrate creativity as an integral part of learning planning, implementation, and evaluation.

Forms of learning innovation applied in environmental education in schools

Learning innovation in environmental education in schools has emerged as a response to the increasing complexity of environmental issues that cannot be resolved through conventional learning approaches. This innovation emphasizes changes in learning methods, strategies, and media so that students not only understand environmental concepts theoretically but are also able to apply them in real life. Innovative environmental education encourages active, contextual, and participatory learning so that students can develop creativity and higher-order thinking skills in dealing with multidimensional environmental issues.

One form of learning innovation that is widely applied is Project-Based Learning, in which students are directly involved in solving real environmental problems around their school or community. Through projects such as school waste management or local plant conservation, students learn to design solutions creatively and systematically. An empirical study by Martinez, Silva, and Torres (2022) shows that the application of Project-Based

Learning in environmental education can significantly improve students' critical thinking skills and sense of ecological responsibility.

Another form of innovation is problem-based learning, which places environmental issues as the starting point for learning. Students are encouraged to analyze the causes, impacts, and alternative solutions to environmental problems, such as water pollution or climate change. Research by Rahman and Oktaviani (2023) proves that Problem-Based Learning is effective in improving students' analytical thinking and decision-making skills in the context of environmental education, as students become accustomed to dealing with real-world problems that do not have a single answer.

Learning innovation is also demonstrated through the use of digital technology and interactive media, such as ecosystem simulation applications, environment-based learning videos, and online learning platforms. Digital media allows students to visualize complex environmental processes, making learning more interesting and meaningful. An empirical study by Park and Kim (2023) found that the use of simulation-based educational technology in environmental education not only improves students' conceptual understanding but also encourages innovative ideas in designing environmental solutions.

In addition, community-based learning has become a form of innovation that connects schools with the surrounding community. In this approach, students learn directly from environmental management practices in the community, such as waste banks or local conservation activities. Research by Wang and Chen (2022) shows that student involvement in community-based learning strengthens reflective thinking skills and increases environmental awareness, as students understand that environmental solutions require cross-sector collaboration.

Overall, various forms of learning innovation in environmental education, ranging from Project-Based Learning, Problem-Based Learning, the use of digital technology, to community-based learning, have a significant contribution in developing students' creativity and thinking skills. Existing empirical studies confirm that learning innovations not only improve cognitive learning outcomes but also shape students' environmental awareness and innovative abilities. Therefore, the sustainable application of learning innovations is key to making environmental education more relevant, effective, and transformative in schools.

Factors that influence the development of students' creativity and thinking skills in environmental education at school

The development of students' creativity and thinking skills in environmental education is influenced by various interrelated factors, both from the internal aspects of students and the external learning environment. Environmental education requires students to understand complex and contextual ecological issues, thus requiring critical, reflective, and creative thinking skills. A learning environment that provides space for exploring ideas and solving real problems is the main foundation for encouraging this development.

One important factor is the learning strategies and models used by teachers. Active, contextual, and problem-based learning has been proven to be more effective in stimulating students' creativity and higher-order thinking skills. Empirical research by Rahman and Oktaviani (2023) shows that the application of problem-based learning in environmental education can improve students' critical thinking skills because they are directly involved in analyzing and solving environmental problems around them.

In addition to the learning model, the role of teachers as facilitators and innovators is also very decisive. Teachers who have a good conceptual understanding of environmental education and innovative pedagogical skills tend to be able to create learning that encourages

student creativity. An empirical study by Fitriana and Budiman (2025) found that teacher readiness, including an open attitude towards creative learning methods, has a significant effect on students' ability to develop innovative ideas related to environmental issues.

Another factor that is no less important is the school environment and culture. Schools that support collaborative learning, open discussions, and environment-based project activities provide space for students to develop broader thinking skills. Research by Susanto (2024) revealed that a school culture that encourages cross-subject collaboration can strengthen students' creativity and analytical thinking skills in understanding environmental issues in a multidisciplinary manner.

The use of media and learning technology is also a supporting factor in the development of creativity and thinking skills. Technology allows students to perform simulations, explore environmental data, and visualize complex ecological concepts. An empirical study by Park and Kim (2023) shows that the use of interactive technology in environmental education not only improves conceptual understanding but also stimulates students to think creatively in designing innovative solutions to environmental problems.

Overall, the development of students' creativity and thinking skills in environmental education is influenced by a combination of pedagogical factors, teacher professionalism, school culture, and the use of technology. When these factors support each other, environmental education not only functions as a means of knowledge transfer but also as a vehicle for shaping a generation capable of critical, creative, and innovative thinking in facing future environmental challenges.

Challenges faced by teachers and schools in integrating creativity, thinking skills, and innovation into environmental education

One of the main challenges faced by teachers in integrating creativity, thinking skills, and innovation into environmental education is limited conceptual and pedagogical understanding. Many teachers still interpret environmental education as merely conveying material about the environment, without linking it to higher-order thinking processes and the development of student creativity. This causes learning to tend to be informative and less cognitively challenging, so that students' potential for critical and innovative thinking has not been optimally developed.

In addition, the readiness and competence of teachers in applying innovative learning models is also a significant obstacle. Research by Fitriana and Budiman (2025) shows that most teachers are not accustomed to using project-based or problem-solving approaches in environmental education due to a lack of ongoing training. As a result, learning still focuses on textbooks and lecture methods, which do not provide enough space for students to explore, create, and develop critical thinking skills.

Another challenge arises from time constraints and a heavy curriculum load. Teachers often feel pressured to complete the material targets, making it difficult to allocate time for exploratory and innovative learning activities. Empirical research by Lopez (2023) reveals that administrative pressure and academic-based evaluation requirements make teachers reluctant to try creative approaches in environmental education, as they are considered to take longer and are difficult to measure with conventional tests.

From the school's perspective, limitations in facilities, infrastructure, and institutional support are also serious obstacles. The implementation of innovative learning in environmental education often requires supporting facilities such as learning media, access to technology, and a flexible learning environment. A study by Park and Kim (2023) found that schools with limited educational technology tend to find it difficult to develop simulation-

based learning innovations, digital projects, or online collaboration that can stimulate students' creativity and thinking skills.

In addition to structural factors, a school culture that does not support innovation exacerbates these challenges. In some schools, creativity and critical thinking are not yet systematically appreciated in the learning process or assessment. Research by Susanto (2024) shows that a school culture that is still oriented towards compliance and memorization of material hinders teachers from experimenting with creative learning approaches in environmental education.

Overall, the challenges in integrating creativity, thinking skills, and innovation into environmental education are multidimensional, covering aspects ranging from individual teachers, curriculum, school institutions, to educational culture. Therefore, collaborative efforts are needed in the form of improving teacher competence, reforming the assessment system, providing supporting facilities, and strengthening a school culture that encourages creativity and innovation. Without comprehensive handling, environmental education risks losing its strategic role in shaping a generation that is capable of critical, creative, and solution-oriented thinking towards environmental issues.

The impact of innovative learning on students' environmental awareness and behavior

One of the main challenges in integrating creativity, thinking skills, and innovation into environmental education is teachers' limited conceptual understanding of learning approaches oriented towards 21st-century skills. Many teachers still interpret environmental education as merely imparting factual knowledge, rather than as a space for developing students' critical and creative thinking. An empirical study by Rahman and Oktaviani (2023) shows that teachers who do not understand problem-based learning models tend to use lecture methods, resulting in the potential for developing students' higher-order thinking skills not being optimized.

In addition to pedagogical understanding, teachers' limited competence in designing innovative learning is also a significant obstacle. Teachers often find it difficult to integrate environmental issues into contextual and interdisciplinary learning that encourages student creativity. Research by Fitriana and Budiman (2025) found that the lack of continuous professional training related to environmental education has a direct impact on the lack of learning innovation applied in the classroom, especially in secondary schools.

The next challenge comes from the curriculum structure and evaluation system, which are still oriented towards cognitive achievement and test results. A dense curriculum often limits teachers' space to develop creative and exploratory activities in environmental education. A study by Alvarez (2023) revealed that the conventional test-based assessment system is unable to accommodate the assessment of students' creativity and critical thinking skills, making teachers reluctant to develop innovative learning that is not in line with formal evaluation requirements.

From an institutional perspective, school and educational management support are also determining factors for the successful integration of creativity and innovation. Schools that lack a clear environmental vision or supporting policies tend to treat environmental education as an additional activity rather than an integral part of the learning process. Research by Lopez (2023) shows that weak administrative support and a lack of learning facilities have an impact on the low implementation of environmental education innovation at the school level.

In addition to internal school factors, the diverse characteristics of students also present their own challenges for teachers. Differences in social backgrounds, learning motivations, and environmental experiences require teachers to apply flexible and adaptive learning

approaches. However, time constraints and high teacher-student ratios often hinder teachers in facilitating learning that encourages creative exploration and in-depth critical discussion in environmental education.

Overall, the challenges in integrating creativity, thinking skills, and innovation in environmental education are complex and interrelated, covering pedagogical, curricular, institutional, and student characteristics. Therefore, systematic efforts are needed in the form of improving teacher competence, reforming learning evaluation, and providing school policy support oriented towards the development of thinking skills and innovation. By overcoming these challenges, environmental education can function optimally as a vehicle for shaping a creative, critical, and sustainability-oriented generation.

Conclusion

Environmental education in schools plays a strategic role in shaping students who possess creativity, critical thinking skills, and the ability to innovate in facing increasingly complex environmental problems. The integration of these three aspects in the learning process has been proven to increase students' awareness, attitudes, and abilities in formulating solutions to environmental issues in a contextual and sustainable manner. However, its implementation still faces various challenges, ranging from limited understanding and competence of teachers, a curriculum that does not fully support innovative learning, to a lack of institutional support from schools. Therefore, strengthening environmental education needs to be carried out systematically and sustainably in order to produce a generation that cares about the environment, is creative, critical, and adaptive to future challenges.

Based on these conclusions, it is recommended that schools and education stakeholders improve teacher capacity through continuous training focused on developing creativity, higher-order thinking skills, and learning innovation in environmental education. In addition, it is necessary to develop a more flexible and contextual curriculum and evaluation system to provide space for creative and project-based learning. Further research is expected to empirically examine the most effective innovative learning models in environmental education and their impact on students' actual behavior in protecting and preserving the environment, so that it can become the basis for more appropriate and sustainability-oriented educational policy-making.

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