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Literacy Gardens for Literacy Learning: An Ethnographic Study at Junior High School

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – This study aims to describe the use of the Literacy Garden as a medium for literacy learning and to explore the meanings, values, and learning culture formed through its implementation at a State Junior High School for Special Needs in Ternate City, Indonesia.

Methodology – This study employed a qualitative approach with an ethnographic design. The participants included the principal, teachers, students, and other stakeholders involved in implementing the Literacy Garden. Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Data were analyzed using data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The trustworthiness of the findings was established through source and technique triangulation. The ethnographic approach enabled an in-depth examination of the learning culture, social interactions, and literacy practices that developed through everyday activities in the school environment.

Findings – The Literacy Garden served as a contextual learning environment, providing students with opportunities to engage in reading, writing, environmental observation, discussion, and recounting of experiences. These activities created more concrete and meaningful learning experiences and supported students' participation in literacy practices. The Literacy Garden also contributed to the formation of a school literacy culture through reading routines, positive social interactions, teacher facilitation, and environmental engagement.

Contribution – The activities provided opportunities for students to develop confidence, independence, responsibility, cooperation, and communication skills. Overall, the Literacy Garden represents an inclusive and contextually grounded approach to literacy learning that connects literacy practices with students' everyday experiences and the school environment.

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INTRODUCTION

Literacy skills are a fundamental component of the educational process, providing the foundation for students to understand information, develop knowledge, communicate ideas, and strengthen critical thinking skills. However, developing literacy skills remains challenging, particularly for students with special educational needs. Students who experience reading difficulties or disabilities may require targeted and appropriately designed literacy instruction to support their reading and writing development (Everatt et al., 2026). In addition, motivation and engagement are important dimensions of literacy development, as students' active involvement in reading activities can influence their literacy learning and achievement. (Kiki Sushella et al., 2024). Limited reading interest, difficulties in comprehending and producing texts, low motivation to learn, and limited access to engaging, contextual learning media may therefore hinder students' participation in literacy activities. These challenges highlight the need for innovative learning approaches that accommodate students' diverse characteristics and needs while making literacy learning more meaningful, accessible, and enjoyable (Rahmi et al., 2026).

According to Y. R. Wibowo & Salfadilah, (2026) Students with special educational needs may encounter several challenges in developing their literacy skills. First, difficulties in basic reading skills may include recognizing letters, understanding letter–sound relationships, decoding words, and developing reading fluency. Second, limitations in reading comprehension may affect students' ability to identify key information, understand vocabulary, interpret texts, and connect what they read to their everyday experiences. Third, limited access to appropriate and accessible learning materials may create additional barriers when reading resources and literacy activities do not accommodate students' diverse cognitive abilities, language development, communication skills, and sensory needs. Fourth, limited participation in literacy learning may occur when instructional activities are predominantly teacher-centered, repetitive, or disconnected from students' daily experiences, reducing opportunities for active reading, discussion, writing, and communication. Finally, difficulties in transferring literacy skills to real-life contexts may prevent students from independently applying the knowledge and skills acquired through classroom activities to everyday situations. These challenges highlight the importance of developing inclusive, contextual, and differentiated literacy instruction that responds to individual learning needs while providing meaningful opportunities for students to practice and apply literacy skills in their daily lives.

At the Ternate City State Junior High School for Special Needs (SMPLB), students demonstrate diverse learning characteristics that make a uniform approach to literacy instruction less effective. Based on preliminary observations and assessments, some students continue to experience difficulties in basic reading and writing skills and demonstrate relatively low motivation to participate in learning activities. (Wong et al., 2026) In addition, the use of conventional and less contextualized instructional approaches may limit students' engagement with literacy activities (Salim et al., 2025).

These conditions indicate the importance of providing learning experiences that connect literacy instruction with students' immediate environments and everyday experiences. (Salim et al., 2025) Research on contextual literacy learning suggests that connecting reading activities with meaningful and familiar contexts can provide learners with opportunities to construct meaning from their immediate experiences (Sonnenschein et al., 2026) . Therefore, literacy instruction in special-needs settings needs to consider not only the acquisition of technical reading and writing skills but also the contexts in which these skills are practiced.

One innovative approach developed in response to these conditions is the Literacy Garden, a learning environment that integrates literacy activities with the school environment as a learning resource (Sibarani et al., 2026). Through the Literacy Garden, students are encouraged not only to read and write but also to observe objects and activities in their surroundings, discuss their observations, and document them through simple written texts. (Masdul et al., 2026) This approach provides students with concrete, experiential learning opportunities that can facilitate their understanding of literacy concepts (Rosyadi & Abidin, 2026). By utilizing familiar objects and situations as learning resources, the Literacy Garden can create a more accessible learning environment for students with special educational needs, particularly those who may benefit from direct observation, practical activities, and repeated interaction with their surroundings. Previous research involving

students with intellectual disabilities, for example, has demonstrated the potential of context-based learning media to support the development of early reading skills by connecting literacy instruction to meaningful learning experiences (Panjaitan et al., 2026).

The use of the school environment as a learning resource is also consistent with the principles of contextual learning, which emphasize connecting instructional content with students' real-life experiences. A learning environment can provide important opportunities for literacy development because literacy practices are not limited to formal classroom activities but can occur across different social and physical contexts. Research has shown that learning environments and available literacy resources can influence children's literacy development and engagement. Similarly, a systematic review of reading engagement research indicates that motivation and active engagement are central considerations in understanding students' literacy development. Thus, integrating the physical and social environment into literacy instruction may contribute not only to the development of reading and writing skills but also to students' participation, interaction, creativity, and confidence in learning. More importantly, literacy can be understood as a social and cultural practice rather than merely as the acquisition of technical reading and writing skills. From a social-practice perspective, literacy practices are shaped by the contexts, relationships, values, and meanings in which reading and writing occur (Rhamadani et al., 2026). Ethnographic approaches are particularly useful for examining these dimensions because they enable researchers to investigate how literacy is practiced and understood within specific social contexts (Anwar et al., 2026) . Studies of school literacy have likewise demonstrated the value of ethnographic perspectives for developing a more holistic understanding of literacy practices and the social interactions surrounding them (Oktaviany et al., 2026). Therefore, examining the Literacy Garden requires attention not only to its instructional function but also to how teachers and students interact with the environment, participate in literacy activities, and construct meanings through their everyday practices.

Despite the potential of environment-based literacy learning, the implementation of a Literacy Garden in a special-needs school requires further investigation, particularly from a social and cultural perspective (Y. R. Wibowo & Salfadilah, 2026). Existing research has examined contextual approaches and literacy interventions for students experiencing reading difficulties, but less attention has been given to how an environment-based literacy program is experienced and negotiated by members of a special-needs school community (Niman et al., 2026). Understanding these processes is important because literacy practices may vary according to the social context, participants, available resources, and meanings attached to literacy activities (Putri Lestari & Sugmawati, 2026).

An ethnographic approach can therefore provide a deeper understanding of how the Literacy Garden becomes part of everyday school life and how its practices are interpreted by teachers and students. Based on these considerations, this study investigates the implementation of the Literacy Garden as a medium for literacy learning at the Ternate City State Junior High School for Special Needs through an ethnographic approach. The study focuses on how the Literacy Garden is implemented, how students and teachers participate in literacy activities, how social interactions develop during the learning process, and how the school community constructs meaning around environment-based literacy practices. The findings are expected to contribute to a deeper understanding of literacy learning for students with special educational needs and to provide insights into the development of contextual, inclusive, and environment-based literacy practices in special-needs education.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using an ethnographic approach. The ethnographic approach was selected because the study sought to develop an in-depth understanding of the literacy culture, practices, interactions, values, and meanings that emerged through the implementation of the Literacy Garden at a State Junior High School for Special Needs (SMPLB) in Ternate City (Creswell, 2016; Denzin, 2002; Miles, 1979) Ethnography is appropriate for examining social practices in their natural settings because it enables researchers to understand interactions, behaviors, and meaning-making within specific social and cultural

contexts (Chan et al., 2026a; Crosina et al., 2025; Lowis, 2025). In this study, ethnography was used to explore how the Literacy Garden was integrated into everyday learning practices at the school. Through participant observation and interactions with teachers and students, the researcher examined literacy activities, teacher–student interactions, student participation, and the use of the school environment as a literacy resource. This approach provided a contextual understanding of how the school community experienced and attributed meaning to the Literacy Garden

Research Location

The research was conducted at a State Junior High School for Special Needs (SMPLB) in Ternate City, North Maluku Province, Indonesia. The school was selected purposively because it had implemented a Literacy Garden as part of its literacy learning activities for students with special educational needs. The Literacy Garden integrates the school environment into the learning process by providing opportunities for students to engage in reading, writing, observation, discussion, and communication activities. The research setting provided an appropriate context for examining how an environment-based literacy program was implemented and experienced within a special-needs educational setting. In ethnographic research, the research setting is considered an important source of contextual information because social practices are understood in relation to the environment in which they occur (Reeves et al., 2008). Therefore, the school environment, classroom activities, teachers, students, and Literacy Garden activities were treated as interconnected elements of the research context.

Participants and Informants

Table 1. Research Participants and Their Roles

No.	Participants	Number	Role in the Study
1	School principal	1	Provided information about school policies, program management, and institutional support.
2	Teachers	3	Explained literacy learning strategies, classroom practices, and student participation.
3	Students	6	Shared experiences and perspectives on participating in Literacy Garden activities.
4	Parents	2	Provided information about students' literacy experiences and practices outside school.
	Total	12	

Participants and informants were selected using purposive sampling based on their involvement in, experience with, or knowledge of the Literacy Garden program. Purposive sampling is appropriate in qualitative research when participants are intentionally selected because they possess information or experience relevant to the phenomenon being investigated (Chan et al., 2026)). The primary informants consisted of the school principal, classroom teachers, and subject teachers who were directly involved in literacy learning activities. Students who participated in Literacy Garden activities were also included as participants to provide perspectives on their experiences and engagement with the program. Parents were considered as supporting informants when their perspectives were relevant to understanding students' experiences beyond the school environment. The selection of participants was guided by their relevance to the research questions and their direct experience with the Literacy Garden. Rather than seeking statistical representativeness, the study sought information-rich participants who could provide detailed accounts of the implementation and meaning of the literacy practices being investigated (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021a).

Data Collection

Data were collected through **p**articipant observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. The combination of these techniques enabled the researcher to examine the Literacy Garden from multiple perspectives and to support methodological triangulation. The use of multiple sources and methods can strengthen the credibility of qualitative findings by allowing researchers to compare and corroborate interpretations across different forms of evidence (Mashuri et al.,2026).

Observation

Participant observation was conducted to examine the implementation of the Literacy Garden in everyday learning activities. The observations focused on students' reading and writing practices, environmental exploration, teacher–student interactions, student participation, and the use of the school environment as a literacy resource. Field notes were used to document relevant activities and contextual conditions (Chan et al., 2026)

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the principal, teachers, students, and relevant supporting informants to explore their experiences and perspectives on the Literacy Garden. The interviews focused on teaching strategies, students' engagement, perceived benefits, implementation challenges, and the contribution of the Literacy Garden to literacy learning and school literacy culture (Laari, 2025). Interview questions were adjusted to students' communication abilities and educational needs. With participants' permission, interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis (Makateng & Mokala, 2025).

Documentation

Documentation was collected to obtain supporting evidence regarding the implementation of the Literacy Garden and its role in literacy learning. The materials included photographs of learning activities, literacy teaching materials, lesson plans, school literacy programs, students' written work, and relevant school documents. These materials were used to complement and compare information obtained through observations and interviews(Sun et al., 2025).

Data Analysis

The data obtained from observations, interviews, and documentation were analyzed using the qualitative data analysis framework developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). Their framework conceptualizes qualitative analysis as an interactive process involving data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification rather than a strictly linear sequence (Mashuri et al., 2026). The analysis was conducted throughout the research process, allowing emerging interpretations to inform subsequent examination of the data.

Data Condensation

The researcher organized, selected, focused, and simplified the data obtained from field observations, interview transcripts, and documents. Relevant statements and observations concerning the implementation of the Literacy Garden, literacy activities, teacher–student interactions, student participation, challenges, and participants' interpretations were identified and coded (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021b). Data that were not relevant to the research questions were excluded from further analysis. This process enabled the researcher to focus the large volume of qualitative data on information directly related to the objectives of the study (Polat, 2025).

Data Display

The condensed data were organized and displayed in narrative descriptions, thematic categories, matrices, and, where appropriate, tables. Data displays were used to identify relationships and patterns among literacy practices, participants' experiences, social interactions, and the school environment. According to Miles et al. (2014), data displays facilitate the organization of qualitative information and support researchers in identifying patterns, relationships, and emerging explanations (Misra et al., 2026).

Conclusion Drawing and Verification

The researcher identified patterns, themes, and meanings emerging from the data and developed interpretations concerning the implementation of the Literacy Garden as an environment-based literacy learning medium. Conclusions were continuously compared with observation records, interview data, and

documentary evidence to verify their consistency and credibility. In qualitative analysis, conclusion drawing and verification are interconnected with data condensation and display, allowing researchers to test emerging interpretations against the available evidence (Miles et al., 2014). The interpretation process focused not only on which literacy activities occurred but also on how participants experienced, negotiated, and constructed meaning around those activities within the school community (Anthony et al., 2023).

Trustworthiness of the Data

The trustworthiness of the findings was addressed through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, which are widely recognized criteria for assessing rigor in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Forero et al., 2018). In particular, credibility was supported through methodological and source triangulation, involving comparisons among observation data, interview accounts, and documentary evidence. Triangulation was used to examine whether information concerning the implementation and meaning of the Literacy Garden was consistent across different sources and methods. Repeated observations and continuous comparison of field notes, interview transcripts, and documents were also conducted throughout the analysis process. Such strategies can strengthen credibility by providing multiple forms of evidence for the interpretation of qualitative findings (Forero et al., 2018). The researcher also maintained detailed field notes and documented the analytical process to support dependability and confirmability. Reflexive consideration of the researcher's position and interpretation was incorporated throughout the fieldwork and analysis process because ethnographic research requires researchers to remain aware of how their presence and perspectives may influence the research process (Sayer, 2026).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the research process. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the relevant school authorities. Participants were informed about the study's purpose and procedures and allowed to participate voluntarily. Because the study involved students with special educational needs, particular attention was given to obtaining appropriate consent and protecting participants' privacy and confidentiality. Participants' names and other identifying information were not disclosed in the research report. Photographs and other forms of documentation involving students were used only with appropriate permission. The researcher also ensured that participation did not interfere unnecessarily with students' learning activities or expose participants to harm or discomfort.

FINDINGS

Literacy Garden as a Learning Medium

The ethnographic findings revealed that the Literacy Garden served as a learning medium, connecting literacy activities to students' direct experiences in the school environment. This finding was developed from semi-structured interviews with the school principal, three teachers, six students, and two parents, supported by participant observations and documentation. The data indicated that the Literacy Garden was used to facilitate reading, writing, observation, discussion, and oral communication through learning materials associated with the surrounding environment. Rather than relying exclusively on textbooks and conventional classroom activities, the garden provided opportunities for students to engage with written language and learning tasks connected to plants, information boards, vocabulary cards, storybooks, and observation sheets.

The interview with the school principal provided an institutional perspective on the use of the Literacy Garden as a learning resource. The principal's account was intended to clarify the program's purpose, the school's support for literacy activities, and the garden's role in creating a supportive learning environment. This perspective was complemented by interviews with teachers, who provided information about how the garden was incorporated into instructional practices. One teacher explained:

> "*Literacy Garden is very important to add the intention of the student about reading in the school. Many students are sitting in the garden and taking a look at the information board about the plants and activities surrounding the school.*" (Teacher 1).

The teachers' accounts were examined alongside observations of learning activities in the garden. The observation records described activities in which students read information displayed on plant boards, identified plant names, observed plant characteristics, recorded information on learning sheets, and discussed their findings with teachers and peers. These activities illustrated how the garden environment could provide concrete references for literacy tasks. For example, plant information boards linked written words to objects students could observe directly, while observation sheets provided opportunities to record information gathered during learning activities. Such practices demonstrated the integration of reading, writing, and environmental observation within a shared learning context.

The interviews with students provided additional perspectives on their participation in Literacy Garden activities. Students were asked about their experiences, the learning materials they encountered, and the activities they undertook in the garden. One student described the experience as follows:

> "*I am super excited about this literacy garden because it helps me a lot with reading articles related to the plants, observing, identifying, and listening to the explanation directly from the teachers*" (Student 1).

Another student explained:

> "*Visiting the literacy Garden is my favorite activity in the school since I can see the beauty of flowers that I planted a month ago, I can also ask questions and read articles about the plants around the Garden"* (Student 2).

These accounts should be considered alongside the observation data to establish how students experienced and participated in the learning activities. The observations indicated that participation could take different forms, including reading words, identifying objects, answering questions, describing observations, and communicating information orally or in writing. Students' activities and responses varied according to the tasks provided and the instructional support available. The findings, therefore, emphasize the forms of participation documented during the study rather than assuming that all students engaged in the same activities or achieved identical learning outcomes.

The teacher interviews also provided an opportunity to examine how literacy activities were adapted to students' individual characteristics and abilities. Teachers could vary the complexity of tasks, the materials used, and the forms of response expected from students. For instance, activities might involve identifying plant names, reading short information texts, answering questions, recording observations, or providing simple oral descriptions. The following interview quotation should be used to demonstrate this instructional practice:

> "*I used to call them when it was time to learn Biology to visit the literacy Garden, then I prepared the articles about the plans around the park" (*Teacher 2).

The documentary evidence complemented these interview and observation findings. Photographs of the Literacy Garden, plant information boards, vocabulary cards, storybooks, and, where available, observation sheets provided information about the physical learning environment and the resources used during literacy activities. These materials demonstrated how written language and environmental objects were integrated within the learning setting. Photographs of learning sessions could further illustrate students' interactions with learning materials and their participation in garden-based activities. The documentary evidence was interpreted alongside the interview accounts and field notes rather than being treated as independent proof of learning improvement. Parents' interviews provided an additional perspective on students' literacy experiences outside school. Their accounts could help identify whether students discussed garden activities at home, showed interest in particular learning materials, or engaged in reading-related practices beyond the classroom. One parent's account may be presented as follows:

> "*I am so happy looking at my son, who is now diligent to read the books not only in school but also at home"* (Parent 1).

The parent interviews were used to complement the accounts provided by teachers and students. However, conclusions about the continuation of literacy practices at home were drawn only where supported by the parents' actual statements. Overall, the interview, observation, and documentary findings indicated that the Literacy Garden was used as a contextual learning medium through which literacy activities were connected with students' immediate environment. The principal and teachers provided information on the

program's institutional and instructional dimensions, while students and parents contributed perspectives on learning experiences and participation. The observations documented how reading, writing, observation, and communication were incorporated into garden activities, and the documentary materials illustrated the available learning resources. Taken together, these findings establish the empirical basis for understanding the Literacy Garden as a learning environment that connects literacy practices with environmental exploration and social interaction. The educational significance of this approach, particularly its relationship with contextual learning, social literacy practices, and inclusive pedagogy, is examined further in the discussion section.



Figure 1. Learning activities in the literacy garden

Developing a Culture of Literacy

The ethnographic findings indicate that a culture of literacy was gradually developing within the school through the integration of reading, writing, discussion, and environmental activities into students' everyday learning experiences. Based on participant observations, interviews with two teachers, one student, and one parent, and documentation of students' activities and learning products, literacy was not limited to formal reading and writing lessons. However, it increasingly became part of students' daily routines and interactions.

Observation data showed that students were gradually becoming familiar with reading activities before the beginning of classroom learning. Students were provided with approximately 10–15 minutes to read printed books or other available reading materials before lessons began. Some students also used their free time to read in the literacy corner, library, or Literacy Garden. These practices suggest that reading was increasingly incorporated into the daily rhythm of school life rather than being treated solely as a formal classroom activity.

> *"We try to make reading a regular activity for students before the lesson begins. Some students need reminders, while others are becoming more familiar with the routine. We also encourage them to choose reading materials that interest them."* (Teacher 1).

> *"Students have different reading abilities, so we provide materials that match their needs. Some students prefer picture books, while others can read short stories or simple informational texts. We want them to have opportunities to read and enjoy the activities"* (Teacher 2).

These accounts indicate that the development of a literacy culture involved establishing consistent reading routines while providing learning materials appropriate to students' individual abilities.

The development of literacy culture was also visible in students' writing activities. Students were not limited to copying or completing written exercises but were encouraged to produce reading summaries, short stories, poems, and simple observation reports. Through these activities, students had opportunities to communicate ideas based on what they had read, observed, and experienced.

"After reading a story or observing something in the garden, we encourage students to write a few sentences about what they have learned. Some students write simple descriptions, while others can make short summaries. We adjust the tasks according to their abilities." (Teacher 1**)**

The student interview provided an additional perspective on participation in literacy activities. The student described the experience as follows:

"I like reading books and looking at the plants in the garden. After observing the plants, I can write about what I see. Sometimes, my teacher helps me read the information and explain the words that I do not understand." (Student 1).

These accounts suggest that writing activities were used not only to develop written communication but also to encourage students to reflect on their reading and everyday experiences. The student's account also illustrates how teacher assistance could help connect reading, observation, and writing.

The interview data further indicated changes in students' participation during literacy-related activities. Teachers reported that students were encouraged to participate in discussions, answer questions, communicate their ideas, and present the results of their activities. Students were also encouraged to take responsibility for literacy-related tasks, such as maintaining reading journals, completing observation reports, and participating in class literacy projects.

*"We encourage students to express their ideas during reading and discussion activities. Some students are still shy and need guidance, but we give them opportunities to answer questions, talk about what they have read, and share their observations with their classmates." (*Teacher 2).

The student also described the opportunity to participate in classroom and garden activities:

"I enjoy learning in the garden because I can see the plants directly. I can read the information, ask my teacher questions, and tell my friends what I have learned." (Student 2).

These accounts indicate that literacy culture involved not only reading frequency but also students' participation in communication, meaning-making, and collaborative learning activities. The Literacy Garden played an important role in this emerging literacy culture by providing a concrete environment where reading and writing could be connected to students' direct experiences. Students read plant labels and information, observed plants, recorded their observations, discussed what they had seen, and communicated their findings to teachers and peers. Consequently, literacy practices became intertwined with environmental observation, communication, cooperation, and responsibility.

"The garden gives students something real to observe. They can read plant names, look at the leaves and flowers, and then write or talk about what they see. This makes the activities more concrete because students can connect the words they read with objects in their surroundings" (Teacher 1).

The parent interview provided insight into the relationship between school literacy activities and students' experiences at home. The parent explained:

*"My child sometimes talks about the reading activities at school and the plants observed in the Literacy Garden. These activities encourage my child to share school experiences with the family. I believe that continued encouragement at home is also important for developing reading habits." (*Parent 1)

The teacher and parent accounts suggest that the Literacy Garden offered opportunities to connect school learning with everyday experiences. At the same time, communication between students and their families could help extend literacy-related conversations beyond the classroom. The observations also showed that the Literacy Garden encouraged students to use their free time for literacy-related activities. Students could read, observe plants, write short descriptions, or discuss their observations outside the conventional classroom setting. This created opportunities for literacy to become part of students' both informal and formal school experiences.

"When students have free time, some of them go to the garden to look at the plants or read the information displayed there. We encourage them to ask questions and share what they discover. In this way, literacy activities can continue outside the classroom."

Teachers also emphasized the importance of adapting activities to students' individual abilities and communication needs. Some students were given relatively simple tasks, such as identifying words, reading

short texts, or naming objects, whereas others were encouraged to write descriptions, summaries, or simple reports.

> *"Every student has different abilities. We provide simple reading tasks for students who need more support, while ready students can write longer descriptions or present their observations. We want everyone to participate, even though the tasks may be different"* (Teacher 1)

This account illustrates how differentiated instruction supported participation in a shared literacy environment. Rather than requiring all students to complete identical tasks, teachers provided opportunities for students to engage with literacy activities at appropriate levels of complexity. The development of literacy culture was also supported by the school environment. Reading corners, library facilities, the Literacy Garden, classroom literacy activities, and regular reading practices provided students with multiple opportunities to encounter and use literacy. The school environment, therefore, functioned as an interconnected literacy environment rather than as a collection of separate literacy activities. However, the interviews also revealed challenges in sustaining these practices. Teachers identified the limited availability of interesting and varied reading materials, inconsistent reading habits among some students, limited literacy time within the school schedule, and the need for greater parental involvement at home.

These accounts suggest that sustaining a literacy culture requires consistent school routines, accessible learning materials, appropriate instructional support, and cooperation between teachers and families. The documentation provided additional evidence of the emerging literacy culture. Photographs, student reading journals, reading summaries, poems, short stories, observation reports, and other learning products demonstrated that students were participating in reading and writing activities. These documents also showed that literacy activities were connected with communication, environmental observation, and collaborative learning. However, these materials should be interpreted as qualitative evidence of students' participation and developing literacy practices rather than as quantitative evidence of improved literacy achievement. From an ethnographic perspective, the significance of this finding lies in how literacy became embedded in the school's everyday culture. The perspectives of the two teachers, one student, and one parent provided complementary insights into the development of literacy practices. The teachers emphasized classroom routines, differentiated instruction, and the use of the Literacy Garden. The student described direct participation in reading, observation, and writing activities, while the parent highlighted the importance of connecting school experiences with encouragement at home.



Figure 2. Teachers' activities in literacy culture

Overall, the findings suggest that a culture of literacy at the State Junior High School for Special Needs (SMPLB) in Ternate City was gradually constructed through the interaction of school programs, teacher facilitation, accessible learning environments, student participation, and family support. The Literacy Garden contributed to this process by providing a contextual space where reading and writing could be connected to observation, communication, environmental awareness, and collaboration. Although challenges related to

resources, time, student consistency, and parental involvement remained, the emerging practices demonstrate that literacy culture can be developed through repeated, meaningful, contextualized, and socially situated activities. Therefore, the Literacy Garden can be understood as one component of a broader school literacy culture rather than simply as a physical garden or an alternative reading space.

The Meaning of Literacy Gardens for the School Community

Based on observations, interviews with two teachers, one student, and one parent, and documentation, the Literacy Garden at the State Junior High School for Special Needs (SMPLB) in Ternate City was understood by members of the school community as more than a green space or an alternative reading area. It was perceived as a learning environment that provided students with opportunities to engage in literacy through direct experience, interaction, observation, and communication. The meaning attached to the Literacy Garden was constructed through the everyday practices and interactions that occurred within the school environment. For teachers, the Literacy Garden served as a flexible learning medium that enabled them to connect instructional content to students' real-life experiences. Teachers used activities such as observing plants, reading information boards, identifying vocabulary, discussing observations, writing short descriptions, and recounting learning experiences. Teacher 1 explained:

> *"The Literacy Garden is not just a place for students to see plants. We use it as a learning space where students can read information, identify plant names, observe their surroundings, and write simple descriptions. Students can learn directly from what they see, so the activities become more meaningful for them."* (Teacher 1).

This statement illustrates how the teacher understood the garden as an environment that connected literacy activities with concrete experiences. Rather than relying exclusively on books or classroom explanations, the teacher used objects in the surrounding environment to encourage students to read, observe, and communicate their understanding. Teacher 2 emphasized the importance of the garden for accommodating students with different learning abilities:

> *"Each student has different abilities. Some students can read the information on the plant labels, while others need help identifying words or explaining what they observe. The garden gives us opportunities to adapt the activities so that every student can participate according to their abilities."* (Teacher 2).

This account indicates that the Literacy Garden's meaning was closely related to inclusive educational practice. The garden was perceived as a flexible environment in which teachers could modify learning tasks according to students' individual needs. Some students could identify and read plant names, while others could describe objects, answer questions, record observations, or communicate their experiences orally. Thus, the same environment could accommodate different levels of literacy participation. For students, the Literacy Garden was perceived as a more enjoyable and engaging learning environment. Observation data showed that students interacted with their surroundings by observing plants, reading information, asking questions, talking with peers and teachers, and expressing their experiences. The garden also provided opportunities for students to learn through movement, exploration, and direct experience. During the interview, one student described the experience:

> *"I like learning in the garden because I can see the plants directly. I can read their names, look at the leaves and flowers, and tell my teacher what I see. When I do not understand a word, I can ask my teacher for help"* **(**Student 1).

The student's account suggests that the garden provided opportunities to connect written language with visible objects and personal experiences. The student also emphasized the importance of interaction with the teacher in understanding unfamiliar words and participating in literacy activities.

The meaning of the Literacy Garden was also visible in students' social interactions. Literacy activities were frequently accompanied by discussion, cooperation, helping behaviors, and communication between students and teachers. Students could share their observations, ask for assistance, listen to peers, and communicate their ideas according to their individual abilities. These experiences indicate that the garden served not only as a space for reading and writing but also as an environment where students could engage in shared learning activities. Parents also perceived the Literacy Garden as a meaningful school innovation

because it provided their children with learning experiences beyond conventional classroom instruction. During the interview, one parent explained:

> "*I think the Literacy Garden is a good idea because children can learn outside the classroom. My child can talk about the plants and activities at school when coming home. I hope these activities will help my child become more confident, independent, and interested in learning*" (Parent 1).

This statement reflects the parents' perception that the Literacy Garden extended learning beyond the classroom by providing experiences that children could discuss with their families. The parent also associated the garden with the development of confidence, independence, and interest in learning. These interpretations reflect the parents' views rather than independently measured outcomes. However, they demonstrate that the garden's significance extended beyond literacy instruction to encompass broader aspects of students' participation and development. The interviews further suggest that the meaning of the Literacy Garden was shaped by the different roles of teachers, students, and parents within the school community. Teachers emphasized its instructional flexibility and potential to accommodate diverse learning abilities. The student highlighted direct experience, enjoyment, and opportunities to ask questions, while the parent emphasized learning beyond the classroom and the potential for children to share their experiences at home. These perspectives reveal that the garden was understood through the everyday experiences of those who participated in or observed its educational activities.

From an ethnographic perspective, the different interpretations of the teachers, students, and parents demonstrate that the meaning of the Literacy Garden was collectively constructed through everyday school practices. The garden was simultaneously understood as a learning resource, a social space, an environmental learning setting, and a component of the school's literacy culture. Its educational significance did not originate solely from its physical design. Instead, its meaning emerged from how members of the school community used, interpreted, and incorporated the space into their educational activities. Overall, the findings indicate that the Literacy Garden held multiple meanings for the school community. For teachers, it provided a contextual and adaptable learning medium; for the student, it offered an engaging space for reading, observation, and communication; and for the parent, it represented an educational initiative that connected school learning with children's experiences beyond the classroom. These perspectives demonstrate how the Literacy Garden became meaningful through interactions among the physical environment, literacy activities, and the experiences of those involved in its implementation.

Supporting Factors

The findings identified several factors that supported the implementation of the Literacy Garden at the State Junior High School for Special Needs (SMPLB) in Ternate City. Based on observations, interviews with two teachers, one student, and one parent, and documentation, these factors included teacher commitment and creativity, student enthusiasm, the availability of environmental learning resources, and parental support. Together, these factors contributed to the use of the Literacy Garden as a contextual learning environment that connected literacy activities with students' everyday experiences. The first supporting factor was teacher commitment and creativity in implementing literacy activities. Teachers played an important role in integrating the Literacy Garden into learning by developing activities that used the available resources in the school environment. These activities included reading about plants, identifying vocabulary, observing plants, writing observations, storytelling, discussion, and producing simple written work. Teacher 1 explained:

> *"We try to use the garden as much as possible in our learning activities. Students can read plant names, observe their surroundings, and write simple sentences about what they see. We develop activities based on the available resources and the students' abilities."*

This statement illustrates how teacher creativity contributed to the integration of literacy with environmental learning. Rather than treating the garden as a separate recreational space, the teacher incorporated its features into reading, writing, and communication activities. Teacher 2 emphasized the importance of adapting activities to students' individual needs:

"Not all students can complete the same tasks. Some students can read the information boards and write descriptions, while others need assistance with identifying words or expressing their observations. We adjust the activities so that everyone has an opportunity to participate."

This account indicates that differentiated instruction was an important supporting factor in implementing the Literacy Garden. Teachers adapted the complexity of activities according to students' individual abilities, allowing them to participate in shared learning experiences through different forms of literacy engagement.

The second supporting factor was student enthusiasm and participation. Observations indicated that students engaged in activities such as observing their surroundings, asking questions, discussing their findings, and completing reading and writing tasks. The outdoor environment provided a different learning experience from the conventional classroom and offered opportunities for students to interact directly with concrete objects. During the interview, one student explained:

"I like learning in the garden because I can see the plants and read their names. I can also tell my teacher what I see and write about the plants. Learning outside the classroom is enjoyable because I can look at things directly."

The student's account suggests that direct interaction with the environment made literacy activities more engaging and meaningful. The garden offered opportunities to connect written words with visible objects and personal experiences. Such participation also allowed students to practice communication by describing their observations and sharing their ideas with teachers. The third supporting factor was the availability of environmental learning resources. The presence of plants, information boards, open spaces, and simple learning facilities provided accessible materials for contextual learning. Students could directly observe objects that became the focus of reading, discussion, and writing activities. The combination of these resources enabled teachers to design literacy activities without relying exclusively on conventional classroom materials. Observations of students reading plant labels, identifying vocabulary, and recording their observations demonstrated how the school environment could become an integral part of the learning process. The fourth supporting factor was parental support. The parent interviewed expressed a positive perception of the Literacy Garden and emphasized its potential to connect school activities with children's experiences at home. The parent explained:

"I think the Literacy Garden is beneficial because children can learn directly from their surroundings. My child sometimes talks about the plants and activities at school when coming home. I support activities like this because they give children opportunities to learn in different ways."

This statement indicates that parental support was reflected in the program's positive reception and appreciation of its educational value. The parents' account also suggests that experiences in the Literacy Garden could become topics of conversation at home, providing opportunities for children to communicate what they have learned at school. Although the interview does not establish that parental involvement directly improved students' literacy achievement, it demonstrates the importance of family perceptions in sustaining school-based learning initiatives. Overall, the findings indicate that the implementation of the Literacy Garden was supported by the interaction of teacher commitment, instructional creativity, student participation, accessible environmental resources, and parental support. Teachers transformed the garden into a contextual learning medium; students participated in activities that connected literacy with direct experience; the school environment provided learning materials; and the parents expressed support for the initiative. These factors contributed to the development of a learning environment in which reading, writing, observation, and communication could be integrated into everyday school activities.

Constraints and Strategies for Addressing Them

Despite the supporting factors, the implementation of the Literacy Garden at the State Junior High School for Special Needs (SMPLB) in Ternate City encountered several constraints. Based on observations, interviews with two teachers, one student, and one parent, and documentation, the main challenges involved the limited availability of reading materials and supporting facilities, differences in students' abilities, unpredictable weather conditions, limited instructional time, and the need for continued support from the school community. These constraints influenced how teachers organized literacy activities and adapted the garden's use to students' learning needs.

The first constraint was the limited availability of reading materials, learning media, and supporting facilities. The number and variety of resources were not always sufficient to accommodate students' different interests and learning needs. Teacher 1 explained:

> *"We still need more reading materials that are suitable for our students. Some students are interested in picture books, while others need simple texts with clear illustrations. We try to use the materials available in the school, including the information displayed in the garden."*

This statement indicates that teachers need to make effective use of existing resources to sustain literacy activities. Rather than depending entirely on printed books or specialized learning media, teachers incorporated environmental objects and plant information into reading and writing tasks. This approach enabled the garden to function as a learning resource even when conventional materials were limited. The second constraint concerned differences in students' characteristics and abilities. Students varied in their abilities in reading, writing, communication, concentration, and participation. Consequently, teachers needed to provide different levels of assistance and adapt activities according to individual needs. Teacher 2 described this challenge:

> *"The students have different learning needs. Some can read and write independently, while others need repeated explanations, examples, or individual assistance. We must be patient and adjust the activities so that each student can participate."*

This account demonstrates that inclusive literacy activities required flexibility, preparation, and continued teacher guidance. To address these differences, teachers simplified instructions, provided examples, repeated explanations, and divided tasks into manageable steps. Some students were encouraged to identify words or read short texts, while others completed written descriptions or observation reports. These adjustments allowed students to participate in the same learning environment through activities suited to their individual abilities. The student's interview provided an additional perspective on the challenges of participating in literacy activities. The student explained:

> *"Sometimes I do not understand the words on the information boards, so I ask my teacher to explain them. When the teacher helps me, I can understand the words and continue the activity."*

This account illustrates the importance of teacher assistance in helping students engage with literacy materials in the garden. It also indicates that direct exposure to written information did not always guarantee independent understanding. Students sometimes required explanations and guidance to connect unfamiliar words with the objects they observed. The third constraint involved weather conditions. Rain and excessive heat sometimes required teachers to modify outdoor activities or move learning activities to more suitable spaces. These conditions affected the organization of activities that depended on students' direct interaction with the garden. Teachers, therefore, needed to consider the weather when planning observation, reading, and writing tasks. When outdoor conditions were unsuitable, literacy activities could be continued using available classroom materials, photographs, or previously recorded observations. Such adjustments helped maintain continuity in literacy learning while recognizing the practical limitations of an outdoor environment.

The fourth constraint was limited instructional time. Teachers needed to balance curriculum requirements with the time students needed to observe, discuss, write, and complete activities in the Literacy Garden. Students who needed repeated explanations or individualized assistance sometimes required additional time to complete tasks. Teacher 1 explained:

> *"Activities in the garden can be interesting for students, but they take time. Students need opportunities to observe, ask questions, and write about what they see. We must organize the activities carefully so that they fit into the available lesson time."*

This statement suggests that the successful integration of the Literacy Garden depended on careful planning and the selection of activities that could be completed within the available instructional period. Teachers addressed this challenge by organizing tasks into manageable units, prioritizing specific learning objectives, and integrating garden-based activities into existing lessons rather than treating them as entirely separate programs. The interviews also highlighted the importance of continued support from parents and the broader school community. Although the parent expressed a positive perception of the Literacy Garden,

sustaining literacy practices required continued encouragement and cooperation between school and home. The parent explained:

> "*The garden provides children with different learning experiences, but they also need encouragement to continue reading and learning at home. I believe that cooperation between parents and teachers is important so that children receive support both at school and in the family.*"

This statement indicates that the parent recognized the importance of maintaining connections between school-based activities and learning at home. Parental support could include encouraging children to discuss their school experiences, providing opportunities to read, and communicating with teachers about their learning needs. However, the interview evidence reflects the parents' perspective and does not establish the extent to which these practices were consistently implemented across families.

In response to these constraints, teachers employed several practical strategies. They adapted activities according to students' abilities, used simple materials available within the school environment, provided individual assistance, and modified activities when weather conditions made outdoor learning difficult. Teachers also organized activities flexibly to accommodate instructional time and students' varying learning needs. These strategies demonstrated that implementing the Literacy Garden required continuous adjustment rather than following a single fixed procedure.

From the perspective of the school community, addressing these constraints was not solely a matter of improving the physical garden. It also involved developing appropriate teaching strategies, selecting accessible learning materials, organizing time effectively, and maintaining communication between teachers and parents. The parents' account reinforced the importance of cooperation between home and school, while the teachers' accounts highlighted the need for flexibility and practical solutions within the learning environment.

Overall, the findings indicate that the implementation of the Literacy Garden was shaped by both enabling conditions and practical challenges. Limited resources, differences in students' abilities, weather conditions, instructional time, and the need for continued community support influenced how literacy activities were organized. Nevertheless, teachers responded by adapting materials, differentiating tasks, providing assistance, and modifying activities as circumstances warranted. These responses demonstrate the importance of contextual decision-making in sustaining literacy activities for students with special educational needs.

From an ethnographic perspective, the Literacy Garden can be understood as a social and cultural learning space rather than simply a physical learning medium. Its significance emerged through repeated practices of reading, writing, observing, discussing, cooperating, and caring for the environment. The experiences of the two teachers, one student, and one parent reveal how the garden's implementation was shaped by different perspectives and everyday interactions within the school community. The garden provided opportunities for literacy participation, but its educational value depended on how teachers organized activities, how students engaged with them, and how the school community responded to practical challenges.

Therefore, the Literacy Garden should not be presented as a program that automatically improves students' literacy skills. Rather, the ethnographic findings suggest that it created meaningful conditions for literacy participation and contributed to the development of a school literacy culture. Its sustainability depended on the interaction between the physical environment, teachers' pedagogical practices, students' diverse learning needs, available resources, and support from the broader school community.

DISCUSSION

The Literacy Garden as a Contextual Learning Medium

The findings indicate that the Literacy Garden at the State Junior High School for Special Needs (SMPLB) in Ternate City functioned as a contextual learning medium that connected literacy activities with students' direct experiences in the school environment. (Anwar et al., 2026)

Through plant information boards, vocabulary cards, storybooks, and observation sheets, students were provided with opportunities to read, identify vocabulary, observe objects, write descriptions, and communicate their experiences (Literasi Digital Ibu-Ibu KWT Cempaka Desa Kademangan et al., 2026) .This finding suggests that the educational value of the Literacy Garden was not limited to providing an alternative reading space; rather, it lay in connecting written language with meaningful experiences in students' immediate surroundings(Taqwa et al., 2026).

This interpretation is supported by Teacher 1, who explained that students visited the garden and examined information boards about plants. Student 1 similarly expressed enthusiasm about reading articles, observing plants, and listening to teachers' explanations. These accounts suggest that the presence of concrete objects provided a context in which students could relate written information to their observations. For example, reading a plant label while observing the corresponding plant enabled students to encounter vocabulary within a meaningful environmental context. (Haumahu et al., 2026) .However, the findings demonstrate opportunities for contextualized learning rather than independently measured improvements in reading comprehension (Renaldy et al., 2026)

The relationship between contextual experiences and literacy development can be understood through research that emphasizes the importance of explicit and systematic instruction for students with reading difficulties. Salsabila et al.,(2026) Al, in a review of 14 meta-analyses and systematic reviews, concluded that explicit and systematic reading and writing interventions can support foundational reading skills, while also identifying continuing questions about how best to improve comprehension. This research provides a useful theoretical connection to the present study because the Literacy Garden combined environmental experiences with reading, writing, and teacher guidance(Zakiyah et al., 2026). Nevertheless, environmental observation should complement, rather than replace, explicit literacy instruction. The findings also highlight the importance of teacher mediation. Teacher 2 explained that articles about plants were prepared for students during garden-based learning activities. This practice illustrates that the environment became an instructional resource through teachers' decisions about materials and activities (Enshanty et al., 2025).

Students did not simply encounter plants independently; they were guided to read information, identify objects, ask questions, and express their observations. The educational significance of the garden, therefore, depended on the interaction between the physical environment, instructional planning, and students' participation (Berliningrum, 2026). For students with special educational needs, this relationship is particularly important because access to the same learning environment does not necessarily mean that all students can engage with written information in the same way. Some students may be able to read plant labels independently, while others may need illustrations, simplified vocabulary, repeated explanations, or individual assistance. Normasari, (2026) In their systematic review of specially designed instruction, they highlighted the importance of understanding how instruction is adapted to learners' needs and how such instruction is implemented in educational settings.

In the present study, the Literacy Garden provided a flexible environment in which teachers could organize a range of literacy activities according to students' abilities.Thus, the main contribution of the Literacy Garden as a contextual learning medium lies in its potential to connect written language, concrete observation, and guided communication (Sari et al., 2026). Its educational value depends not simply on moving learning activities outdoors but on how teachers structure tasks, provide accessible materials, and support students in constructing meaning from written information(Fadjria et al., 2026).

Developing a Culture of Literacy Through Everyday School Practices

The findings show that a culture of literacy was gradually developed through recurring reading, writing, discussion, and communication activities within the school environment. The provision of approximately 10–15 minutes for reading before lessons, the availability of reading corners and library materials, and opportunities to read in the Literacy Garden indicate that literacy was incorporated into students' everyday school routines(Syaihu Indrajaya et al., 2026). These practices suggest that literacy was treated not only as a formal instructional objective but also as an activity that could become part of everyday school life(Dewi Nurfadilah, 2026).

Teacher 1 explained that students were encouraged to read before lessons began, although some still required reminders. This finding illustrates that the development of a literacy culture involves establishing consistent opportunities for participation while recognizing differences in students' interests and abilities(Keislaman dan Kemasyarakatan et al., 2026) .Repeated reading opportunities may help students become familiar with literacy activities, but the establishment of a sustained culture also requires accessible reading materials, appropriate guidance, and meaningful opportunities to use language (Dewi Nurfadilah, 2026)

The findings further indicate that literacy activities extended beyond reading to include writing summaries, short stories, poems, descriptions, and observation reports. Teacher 1 explained that students were encouraged to write a few sentences after reading or observing objects in the garden. Student 1 also described writing about plants after observing them, sometimes with the teacher's assistance, to understand unfamiliar vocabulary. These accounts demonstrate that reading and writing were connected through activities in which students interpreted information and expressed their understanding.

Research by Tri Ambasari et al., (2026) provides relevant support for this interpretation. Their systematic review of 28 empirical studies on differentiated instruction in elementary reading education identified several instructional approaches, including differentiation of content, process, and learning products, as well as explicit reading instruction and assessment-informed teaching. These findings reinforce the importance of providing different ways for students to engage with reading materials and demonstrate their understanding. In the Literacy Garden, students could participate through word identification, oral descriptions, short written responses, or more extended writing tasks, depending on their abilities (Rahmansyah et al., 2026).

The emerging literacy culture also involved oral communication and social interaction. Teacher 2 explained that students were encouraged to express ideas during reading and discussion activities, although some remained shy and needed guidance (Hidayati Purnama Lubis et al., 2026). Student 2 similarly described reading information, asking questions, and sharing learning experiences with classmates. These accounts indicate that literacy practices were not restricted to individual reading and writing but also involved communicating meaning and participating in shared learning activities (Purnama sari et al., 2026).From this perspective, the Literacy Garden contributed to a broader school environment in which literacy was practiced across different activities and locations. The garden, reading corners, library, and classroom routines provided interconnected opportunities for students to encounter and use written language. Nevertheless, the findings should not be interpreted as proof that all students developed stronger literacy skills or established consistent reading habits. The evidence instead demonstrates the presence of recurring literacy practices and opportunities for participation.

The Meaning of the Literacy Garden for the School Community

The findings reveal that the Literacy Garden held different but complementary meanings for teachers, students, and parents. Teachers viewed it as a flexible instructional resource, students experienced it as an engaging environment for observation and communication, and the parent interviewed perceived it as an opportunity for learning beyond the classroom(Ampofo et al., 2026.

These different perspectives suggest that the meaning of the Literacy Garden emerged through the everyday experiences and interactions of the school community. For teachers, the garden provided opportunities to connect instructional activities with students' immediate surroundings. Teacher 1 described how students could read plant information, identify vocabulary, observe their environment, and write simple descriptions (Apriani et al., 2026). Teacher 2 emphasized that the garden enabled teachers to adjust activities to accommodate differences in students' learning abilities. These accounts indicate that the garden was valued not only as an alternative physical setting but also as an environment in which instructional tasks could be adapted to individual needs (Anderson, 2026).

This finding is consistent with the discussion by Apriani et al. (2026), whose systematic review emphasized the importance of examining how specially designed instruction is defined and implemented in practice. In the present study, instructional flexibility was reflected in the different forms of participation available to students. Some students could read information boards independently, while others required

support to identify words, answer questions, or describe what they observed. The same environment could therefore accommodate different learning activities, although it did not eliminate the need for individualized support(A. S. Wibowo et al., 2026). For students, the garden was associated with enjoyment, direct observation, and opportunities to ask questions. Student 1 explained that seeing plants firsthand, reading their names, and asking the teacher for help made learning in the garden meaningful (Sumatera et al., 2026). This account suggests that the connection between written words and observable objects provided opportunities for students to relate literacy activities to their experiences. It also highlights the continuing importance of teacher–student interaction in helping students understand unfamiliar vocabulary.

The parents' perspective provides an additional dimension. Parent 1 expressed support for the garden because it offered children opportunities to learn outside the classroom and discuss their experiences at home. The parent also hoped that the activities would encourage confidence, independence, and interest in learning. These statements indicate that the Literacy Garden was perceived as an initiative with potential benefits extending beyond formal literacy instruction. However, confidence and independence were expressed as parental expectations rather than as outcomes measured independently by the study. Miller and Khatib (2023) emphasize the importance of recognizing family literacy practices and developing partnerships between families, schools, and communities. Their discussion highlights that literacy can be supported through everyday interactions and family experiences, rather than only through formal school instruction. This perspective is relevant to the present study because the parents' account suggests that school activities sometimes became topics of conversation at home. From an ethnographic perspective, these findings demonstrate that the Literacy Garden acquired meaning through how members of the school community used and interpreted the space. It functioned simultaneously as an instructional resource, an environment for exploration, a setting for communication, and a component of the school's literacy culture. Its significance was therefore shaped by the interaction between the physical environment, teachers' practices, students' experiences, and family perceptions.

Supporting Factors in the Implementation of the Literacy Garden

The findings identified four factors supporting the implementation of the Literacy Garden: teacher commitment and creativity, student enthusiasm, the availability of environmental learning resources, and parental support. These factors indicate that the implementation of a school literacy initiative depends on the interaction between pedagogical practices, available resources, student participation, and relationships between school and family(Lowis, 2025).

Teacher commitment and creativity were particularly important because teachers transformed the garden into a learning resource through planned instructional activities. Teacher 1 explained that students were encouraged to read plant names, observe their surroundings, and write simple sentences about what they saw(Putri, et al., 2026). Teacher 2 emphasized that activities were adapted to students' abilities so that everyone could participate. These accounts suggest that the garden's educational value emerged through teachers' instructional decisions rather than from the physical environment alone(Fikri Hakim Putra et al., 2026). This finding is consistent with Besar Perpustakaan dan Literasi Pertanian et al., (2026) , whose systematic review identified differentiation of content, instructional processes, and learning products as important approaches in reading instruction. Their review suggests that teachers can organize reading activities in different ways to respond to learner diversity. In the Literacy Garden, such differentiation was reflected in activities ranging from identifying vocabulary to reading short texts, writing descriptions, and communicating observations. Student enthusiasm was another supporting factor(Everatt et al., 2026). The student interviewed expressed enjoyment in observing plants, reading their names, and writing about the environment. Such experiences suggest that the garden provided opportunities for students to engage with literacy through direct observation(Sonnenschein et al., 2026)

Nevertheless, the positive account of one student should not be generalized to all students. Rather, it illustrates how environmental learning activities could be experienced as engaging by individual participants(Moleong, 2017).The availability of environmental resources also supported the program. Plants, information boards, open spaces, and observation materials provided accessible resources for connecting

written language with concrete objects. These resources allowed teachers to design literacy activities using the existing school environment. However, environmental resources were most useful when combined with appropriate texts, clear instructions, and guidance suited to students' abilities. Parental support provided a further source of encouragement. Parent 1 expressed a positive view of the Literacy Garden and described how the child sometimes discussed plants and school activities at home. This account suggests that school experiences could provide opportunities for communication between children and family members. Miller and Khatib (2023) emphasize the importance of recognizing family literacy practices and building partnerships between home, school, and community. In the present study, the parents' account illustrates this potential connection, although it does not establish a direct effect on literacy achievement. Overall, the supporting factors were interconnected. Teachers organized the activities, environmental resources provided learning opportunities, students participated according to their abilities, and parental encouragement could help maintain interest beyond school. The findings, therefore, suggest that sustaining the Literacy Garden requires more than maintaining a physical space; it requires continued instructional planning, accessible materials, and cooperation among members of the school community.

Constraints and Strategies for Addressing Implementation Challenges

Despite its educational potential, the Literacy Garden faced several practical constraints, including limited reading materials and facilities, differences in students' abilities, unpredictable weather, limited instructional time, and the need for sustained support from families(Safiqa et al., 2024). These challenges demonstrate that an alternative learning environment does not automatically resolve the difficulties associated with literacy instruction for students with special educational needs. The first constraint was the limited availability of appropriate reading materials (Wong et al., 2026).

Teacher 1 explained that the school needed more resources suited to students' different interests and abilities, including picture books and simple texts with clear illustrations. This finding suggests that the garden's environmental resources could supplement conventional reading materials but could not replace them entirely. Students still needed varied texts and accessible materials to support vocabulary development, reading practice, and comprehension(Kiki Sushella et al., 2026). The second constraint concerned differences in students' learning abilities. Teacher 2 explained that some students could read and write independently, whereas others required repeated explanations, examples, and individual assistance(Rahmansyah et al., 2026).Student 1 similarly reported needing the teacher's help to understand unfamiliar words on information boards. These accounts demonstrate that exposure to written information does not necessarily guarantee understanding(Syaihu Indrajaya et al., 2026)

Normasari, (2026) identified differentiation of content, process, and learning products as important approaches in reading instruction. This research provides a relevant basis for interpreting the teachers' strategies in the Literacy Garden, including simplifying instructions, providing examples, repeating explanations, and adjusting task complexity. Students could engage with the same environment through different activities, such as identifying words, reading short texts, describing plants, or writing simple observations. However, differentiation requires careful planning and continued instructional support. (Sari et al., 2026) found that explicit and systematic literacy interventions are important for students experiencing reading difficulties, while also identifying the need for further research into the instructional approaches that best support comprehension. Accordingly, the Literacy Garden should complement structured literacy instruction through planned vocabulary activities, guided reading, explicit explanations, and appropriate writing tasks.The third constraint involved weather conditions. Rain and excessive heat sometimes made outdoor activities difficult. This finding illustrates a practical limitation of outdoor learning: although the environment provides concrete learning resources, its use is influenced by conditions beyond teachers' control. Possible strategies include using photographs, printed materials, plant specimens, or previously recorded observations when outdoor activities cannot be conducted. The fourth constraint was limited instructional time. Teacher 1 explained that students needed time to observe, ask questions, and write about what they saw. These activities could be time-consuming, particularly when students required additional explanations or individual assistance. Teachers therefore needed to align garden-based activities with realistic instructional

objectives. For example, a lesson could focus on identifying vocabulary or writing a short description rather than requiring students to complete several complex tasks simultaneously.

Finally, the findings highlighted the importance of cooperation between school and family. Parent 1 emphasized that children needed encouragement to continue reading and learning at home. Sibarani et al.,(2026) in a study of home–school partnerships and literacy development, discussed the importance of building relationships between schools and families to support children's literacy learning. This perspective reinforces the relevance of communication between teachers and parents, although the present study does not establish how consistently families supported literacy activities at home. Overall, the challenges and strategies indicate that implementing the Literacy Garden required ongoing pedagogical adjustment. Teachers adapted materials, differentiated tasks, provided individual assistance, and modified activities according to weather conditions and available instructional time. These responses demonstrate that the sustainability of the program depended on practical decision-making, appropriate learning resources, and continued cooperation between school and family.

The Literacy Garden as an Inclusive and Socially Situated Learning Environment

Taken together, the findings suggest that the Literacy Garden functioned as an inclusive and socially situated learning environment in which literacy activities were connected with environmental exploration, communication, and differentiated participation. Its educational significance emerged from the interplay among physical resources, teacher facilitation, students' experiences, school routines, and family perspectives. First, the garden provided opportunities to connect written language with observable objects. Students could read plant labels, identify vocabulary, record observations, and communicate their findings. Second, recurring reading and writing activities contributed to the integration of literacy into everyday school practices. Third, the different perspectives of teachers, students, and parents revealed that the garden held multiple meanings within the school community. Finally, differentiated tasks and teacher assistance created opportunities for students to participate according to their abilities. These findings are relevant to inclusive education because meaningful participation does not require every student to complete identical tasks. Instead, students may engage with shared learning activities through different forms of support and expression. Achmad et al. (2024) emphasize the relevance of differentiated approaches to reading instruction, while Al Otaiba et al. (2023) highlight the continuing importance of explicit and systematic literacy interventions for students experiencing reading difficulties.

Together, these studies suggest that contextual learning environments are most useful when integrated with instructional approaches responsive to learners' needs. The ethnographic contribution of the present study lies in illustrating how an environmental learning space became meaningful through everyday school practices. The Literacy Garden was not simply a physical location for reading; it was a setting in which teachers organized learning activities, students interacted with written and environmental information, and members of the school community interpreted their experiences. Its potential depended on how the environment was used and how instructional activities were adapted to students' needs. Nevertheless, the findings should not be interpreted as definitive evidence that the Literacy Garden improved literacy achievement. The interviews, observations, and documentary materials documented literacy activities and participants' experiences, but they did not provide standardized measures of changes in reading or writing proficiency. Future research could combine ethnographic observation with individual literacy assessments and longitudinal observations to investigate whether sustained participation is associated with measurable changes in literacy skills. In conclusion, the Literacy Garden can be understood as one component of a broader school literacy culture. Its potential lies in connecting contextual learning, differentiated instruction, recurring literacy practices, and community participation. The findings suggest that environmental learning spaces can provide meaningful opportunities for literacy participation among students with special educational needs when supported by appropriate materials, teacher guidance, and an inclusive instructional approach.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, the Literacy Garden at the State Junior High School for Special Needs in

Ternate City can be understood as a contextual learning environment that supports literacy practices among students with special educational needs. Through an ethnographic approach, the study shows that the Literacy Garden functions not merely as a physical space for reading and writing, but also as a learning environment in which literacy is connected with students' direct experiences, social interactions, environmental exploration, and everyday learning activities. The findings indicate that participation in Literacy Garden activities provided students with opportunities to engage in reading, communication, vocabulary development, observation, discussion, recording, and recounting experiences. These activities also created opportunities to develop responsibility, cooperation, environmental awareness, and independence. Rather than treating literacy as an isolated classroom activity, the Literacy Garden embedded literacy practices in meaningful, contextual experiences accessible to students with diverse learning needs.

The implementation of the Literacy Garden was supported by the involvement of school leaders, teachers, students, and parents, as well as the availability of an appropriate learning environment. At the same time, the study identified several challenges, including limitations in facilities and resources, differences in students' abilities, and the need to adapt activities to individual learning needs. Teachers addressed these challenges through flexible, creative, and differentiated learning strategies, demonstrating the importance of teacher adaptation and school-level support in sustaining inclusive literacy practices. Overall, the Literacy Garden represents a contextual and inclusive approach to strengthening literacy culture in special education settings. Its significance lies not only in providing a physical space for literacy activities but also in creating opportunities for students to experience literacy as a social, experiential, and environmentally situated practice. The findings therefore suggest that Literacy Gardens have potential as a context for developing school-based literacy practices in special education and other educational settings, provided that implementation is adapted to students' needs, school resources, and local contexts.

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