

Revitalization of Kindergarten Landscape to Encourage Early Childhood Education in Rural Areas

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Abstract

Purpose: This community service focuses on the revitalization of a kindergarten landscape in rural areas as an effort to stimulate the public's interest in early childhood education. The upgraded kindergarten's landscape is believed to increase students' motivation and learning interest.

Method: The methods employed in the study were based on the descriptive approach to identify the issues in the targeted areas. The data was collected using qualitative means which include interviews and field observations. The data was then analyzed to form the basis for decision-making and to choose the appropriate course of action to address the issues.

Practical Applications: The revitalization of the kindergarten landscape plays a major role in the children's learning experience. These spaces provide convenient outdoor activities and act as learning stimuli for the children to gain knowledge about nature. Furthermore, the appealing landscape could encourage the public to set their children in early childhood education.

Conclusion: This community service aims to revitalize the kindergarten landscape to create convenient outdoor spaces and act as a learning aid for the student. This service succeeds in providing an improved landscape for the kindergarten which contributes to the broader student learning experience. The more appealing landscape gave the school a fresh look to entice the public interest in early childhood education.



Introduction

One of a child's fundamental rights is the right to education. Kindergartens are places where children grow and develop their abilities and talents from their earliest age. It provides a solid learning foundation for children's transition to primary school. This transition between educational grades constitutes a critical developmental stage that will have a lasting consequence on their personality, the formation of their behavior, and their academic performance (Cui, 2019; Kokkalia et al., 2019; Purtell et al., 2020). Early childhood education is essential in fostering the growth of children's physical, social, and emotional development. Furthermore, it is known that learning in early childhood stimulates advanced creative thinking skills in children (Yalcin, 2015). Encouragement for all children to have pre-primary education to nurture early childhood development is in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in ensuring inclusive and equitable education.

The implementation of early education has been recognized in Songkorejo Hamlet, a rural area located in Jombok Village, Ngantang District, Malang Regency. Access to preschool education is provided by TK Raudlatul Athfal Nurul Iman, the sole kindergarten available in Songkorejo Hamlet. However, the urgency of early childhood education is not largely acknowledged, and this kindergarten finds it challenging to encourage parents to give preschool education to their young children.

Another urban-rural disparity in terms of early education provision is the facilities and resource availability (Qi & Melhuish, 2017). While TK RA Nurul Iman has adequate building facilities, its schoolyard does not provide sufficient space to accommodate students' outdoor activities. The school's landscape consists of a 125 m² front yard and a 36 m² garden area. The front yard is composed of ground soil which becomes muddy in the rainy season, reducing the student's comfort in carrying outdoor activities. Furthermore, from the aesthetic viewpoint, it lowers the school's appeal to the populace. The school garden should serve as a natural space that provides a visual screen, a place to relax, and a learning environment for the children. Study shows that children who are exposed to natural surroundings exhibit improvements in memory and attention levels, while also more resilience from mental fatigue (Li & Sullivan, 2016; Richardson et al., 2017). Unfortunately, the garden in TK RA Nurul Iman has yet to fulfill its intended role. This garden looks poorly maintained and is not optimally utilized as a learning aid for students.

The school's landscape plays an important role in children's learning experience (Venskuvienė & Makarskaitė-petkevičienė, 2021). As such, establishing the landscape as a convenient space for students to study, play, and relax becomes the utmost consideration. Moreover, an appealing school landscape is believed to increase the parents' interest in engaging their young children in education from the earliest age. Based on those reasons, the revitalization of the landscape of TK RA Nurul Iman serves as an effort to raise the public interest in early childhood education while also ensuring a thorough learning environment for the students.

Method

The methods adopted in this study were based on a descriptive approach that describes the characteristic of the phenomenon studied using an observational basis (Williams, 2007). This approach is particularly relevant where information is required directly from those experiencing the phenomenon under investigation (Bradshaw et al., 2017). The descriptive method employed to identify the issues in the TK RA Nurul Iman. The data was collected using qualitative means which include interviews, field observations, and focus group discussions (Bennett & Grant, 2016; Tümen Akyıldız & Ahmed, 2021). In this study, direct interaction with respondents was chosen as the interview method. Then, focus group discussion was conducted to generate greater understanding of the issues and establishing the appropriate courses of action to solve them (Boateng, 2012; Tümen Akyıldız & Ahmed, 2021).

The process method employed in this study includes several stages: (1) Data collection phase with interviews and field observations to define the issues in TK RA Nurul Iman; (2) The implementation of the focus group discussions to determine the appropriate course of action concerning the issues being addressed; (3) The revitalization of the landscape of TK RA Nurul Iman to improve the visual aspect of the school and to enhance learning environments for the students. Two key areas were being improved: the school front yard and the garden. Block paving was chosen to increase both the functional and aesthetic purposes of the school front yard. Installing block paving is an effective way to make the front yard a more functional space for the students. Other benefits include low maintenance, high durability, and eco-friendliness. The improvements to the garden involve designing the area to meet its intended use to provide natural space and learning elements for the students.

Result

TK RA Nurul Iman is the only preschool facility available in Songkorejo Hamlet, Jombok Village, Ngantang District, Malang Regency. As an educational facility in rural areas, TK RA Nurul Iman faces a challenging advancement in encouraging the neighborhood to engage their children in early childhood learning. Furthermore, this school lacks convenient space to accommodate students' outdoor activities, as shown by the unfloored front yard and poorly maintained garden in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The landscape condition of TK RA Nurul Iman



This issue was addressed by installing block paving on the schools' front yard. This type of flooring was ideal to create more functional space for the students and hold benefits in terms of maintainability, durability, and sustainability. The block paving installation was conducted by five students of Civil Engineering Department Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang (UMM) as part of the University Student Community Service Program organized by UMM. This community service project was the result of collaboration between students and university lecturers from UMM and the resident of Songkorejo Hamlet.

The key activities of the community service program were determined through field observation and discussion with the Head of TK RA Nurul Iman. The issues being addressed were analyzed further in a focus group discussion which was attended by the representatives from UMM, TK RA Nurul Iman, and Songkorejo Hamlet (Figure 2). In this forum, the consensus was reached regarding the programs that will be implemented, which were: (1) block paving installation on the school front yard; and (2) re-landscaping the school's garden. The aims of the program were to improve the school's landscape by make it more visually appealing and functional.

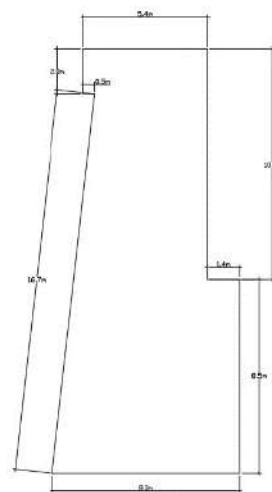
Figure 2. The open discussion forum with the representatives of UMM, TK RA Nurul Iman, and Songkorejo Hamlet



The installation of block paving was divided into several stages, as follows:

1. Stage one: the school front yard measurement. Before the paving was installed, the front yard area was measured to determine the required construction materials (Figure 3).

Figure 3. The measurement of the front yard area



2. Stage two: construction materials procurement. In this stage, community service teams experienced difficulties in procuring the materials needed for paving installation given the school location which is in the rural area. In the end, the construction materials were successfully obtained with the help of the Songkorejo resident.
3. Stage three: construction cost calculation and work schedule estimation. Since the paving installation was performed by the community service team, the cost calculation only involves the material procurements. After calculation, block paving installation in 125 m² area will require 1 truck sand and 125 m² block paving with the total cost of about Rp 6,700,000. Meanwhile, the construction work was estimated to be completed in 13 days which was broken down into four stages: site preparation, groundworks, block paving installation, and finishing works.

4. Stage four: paving block installation. This stage posed a significant challenge for the students as this was their first experience installing block paving. However, with the appropriate guidance and assistance from the Songkorejo residents, block paving could be successfully installed on the school's front yard. As described before, the installation process consists of several steps and is depicted in Figure 4 to 6.

Figure 4. From left sand bedding on the paving installation area; right: leveling properties using wooden post and thread.



Figure 5. Installation of paving block.



Figure 6. Installation of edge concrete restraint.



The school's front yard prior condition and the block paving installation result is shown side by side in Figure 7.

Figure 7. The prior and after block paving installation on school's front yard.



The next program executed was the re-landscape design of the school's garden. This project constitutes discussing the design concept with TK RA Nurul Iman representative and visualizing the concept into 2-dimensional and 3-dimensional engineering drawings. Due to time constraints, the community service team could not revitalize the garden based on the engineering drawings. However, the availability of established engineering drawings could serve as grounds for the Songkorejo community to revitalize the school's garden. The garden's engineering drawings can be seen in Figure 8 and 9.

Figure 8. The garden's site plan

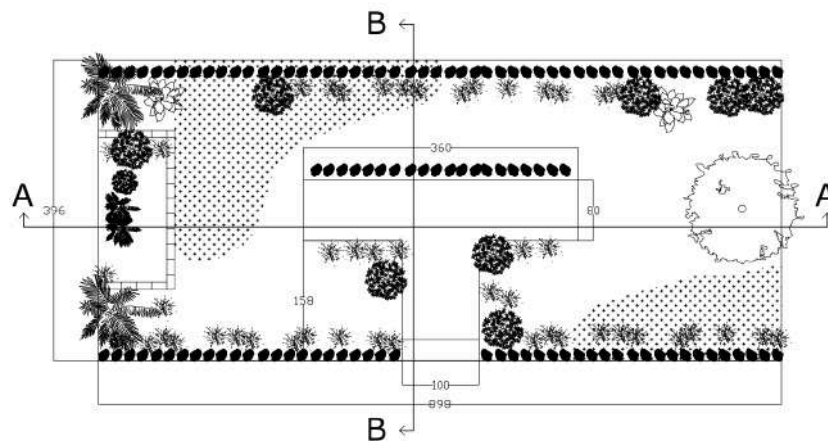


Figure 9. The garden's 3-dimensional drawing



Discussion

The landscape revitalization of TK RA Nurul Iman was performed to enhance the aesthetic and functional aspects of the kindergarten. The improved environment will be conspicuous for the parents and the students, which can further develop into an interest to engage with the school (Harackiewicz et al., 2016). Hence, the visually appealing kindergarten is believed to entice the public interest in early childhood learning. Learning should be supported by outdoor activities to improve the cognitive, linguistic, social-emotional, and motor skills of the children (Yıldırım & Akamca, 2017). The school's front yard and garden were revitalized to improve its functionality in supporting students' outdoor play and activities.

The program carried out includes two key activities: installing block paving on the

school's front yard and designing the school's garden which was intended as a natural space for children. Figure 7 shows the result of flooring the front yard with block paving. The school's yard looks neater and more aesthetically pleasing. The improved yard established a functional space for children to study, play, or do outdoor activities. Furthermore, the yard is accessible even in the rainy season as the rainwater will be easily absorbed due to the porous nature of block paving. This project has successfully attracted Songkorejo's residents' interest in TK RA Nurul Iman, as shown by the number of volunteers who came to help rejuvenate this kindergarten.

The second program was associated with re-landscaping the garden in TK RA Nurul Iman. The design concept was proposed considering the goals to utilize the garden as a natural space and learning aid for the students. The design result is depicted in Figures 8 and 9. Unfortunately, the community service team could not perform the garden re-landscape due to time constraints. However, the established design offers great assistance for the Songkorejo community to revitalize the school's garden.

Conclusion

The revitalization of the landscape of TK RA Nurul Iman aims to provide spaces where children can experience outdoor education. The public's interest in early childhood education is believed to be stimulated by the improved kindergarten environment. This community service succeeds in providing a more functional space for the students to engage in outdoor play and activities, which contributes to their broader learning experience. The improved school landscape plays a significant role in developing the public's interest in engaging their children in early childhood education.

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