

## EMPATHY-BASED LITERACY: DEVELOPING THE ESSAY ANTHOLOGY “*MERAJUT MAKNA DALAM KEBERAGAMAN: REFLEKSI PENDIDIKAN DAN BUDAYA*”, THROUGH A LOVE-BASED CURRICULUM

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### Abstract

This study aims to describe the learning process of opinion/essay writing among Grade XII students at MAN Kota Palangka Raya through the “Love-Based Curriculum” approach. This approach emphasizes empathy and emotional connectedness to social, environmental, and cultural phenomena. The research employed a descriptive qualitative method involving 54 students and 10 teacher representatives as research subjects. The findings indicate that this approach successfully encouraged students to write independently without coercion. A tangible outcome of this study is the publication of an essay anthology entitled “*Merajut Makna dalam Keberagaman: Refleksi Pendidikan dan Budaya.*” This success demonstrates that care-based literacy is capable of producing authentic and meaningful written works.

**Keywords:** Empathy-Based Literacy, Opinion Writing, Love-Based Curriculum

### INTRODUCTION

Writing opinion texts and essays is often perceived as a demanding task for Grade XII students in the Indonesian language curriculum, particularly because it requires critical thinking, personal reflection, and sensitivity to social issues (Keraf, 2010). In many classroom practices, writing instruction still emphasizes technical accuracy and structural conformity, which may limit students’ emotional engagement and authentic expression. As a result, students frequently write to fulfill academic requirements rather than to convey meaningful reflections.

In the context of MAN Kota Palangka Raya, this challenge intersects with the socio-cultural dynamics of the region. Palangka Raya is deeply rooted in the local philosophy of *Huma Betang*, which emphasizes togetherness, mutual respect, and harmony in diversity (Pemerintah Provinsi Kalimantan Tengah, 2020). At the same time, the region is confronted with contemporary environmental and digital issues that influence students’ daily lives and perspectives.

These conditions actually offer rich and contextual learning resources that remain

underutilized in writing instruction. Students are rarely guided to integrate their personal feelings, cultural values, and social realities into their written work, resulting in writing that lacks depth, relevance, and meaningful connection to their lived experiences.

To address this issue, this study implements the Love-Based Curriculum (*Kurikulum Cinta*), an approach adapted from the concept of Pedagogy of Care. This approach positions empathy and emotional connectedness as the foundation of literacy learning (Noddings, 2013). Writing is viewed not merely as a cognitive skill, but as an affective process in which students engage with social, environmental, and cultural phenomena using both critical awareness and humanistic sensitivity (Freire, 2008). Through warm, dialogical interactions between teachers and students, the learning process is guided by the principles of *asah*, *asih*, and *asuh*, allowing writing activities to become meaningful rather than instructional burdens.

Despite the growing discourse on literacy development, limited studies have explored empathy-based literacy as a pedagogical approach in teaching opinion and

essay writing at the senior secondary level, particularly within the context of Indonesian madrasahs and local cultural values (Sujati, 2021). This gap highlights the need for research that documents practical classroom implementation and tangible learning outcomes.

Therefore, this study aims to describe the learning process of opinion and essay writing among Grade XII students at MAN Kota Palangka Raya through the Love-Based Curriculum approach. Furthermore, it seeks to demonstrate how empathy-based literacy can foster students' independent writing practices, culminating in the publication of an essay anthology entitled "*Merajut Makna dalam Keberagaman: Refleksi Pendidikan dan Budaya.*"

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study design conducted at MAN Kota Palangka Raya. The qualitative approach was chosen to capture in-depth descriptions of the learning process, students' experiences, and the dynamics of empathy-based literacy practices within a natural classroom setting (Fiantika et al., 2022). The case study design allowed the researcher to focus on a specific educational context in which the Love-Based Curriculum was implemented as an alternative approach to teaching opinion and essay writing.

The research participants consisted of 54 Grade XII students and a teacher who acted as a facilitator throughout the learning process. The students were selected as the primary subjects due to their direct involvement in the writing activities, while the teacher provided complementary perspectives regarding instructional strategies, student engagement, and learning outcomes. This combination of participants enabled a holistic understanding of both student-centered and instructional dimensions of the study.

Data were collected through multiple techniques to ensure data triangulation. Classroom observations were conducted to

document students' creative processes, emotional engagement, and interactions during writing activities. In-depth interviews were carried out to explore students' motivation, perceptions, and emotional responses toward opinion and essay writing. In addition, documentation in the form of students' written drafts and finalized essays was analyzed to examine the development of ideas and the manifestation of empathy in their written works.

The learning process was structured using the "Three Stages of Love" (*Tiga Tahap Cinta*), which guided students systematically from reflection to production. This stage-based model reflects the principles of character-based and humanistic education that emphasize moral development, emotional engagement, and reflective learning (Lickona, 2012). The first stage, internalization, involved observing and reflecting on social, cultural, and environmental phenomena surrounding the students. The second stage, construction, focused on organizing ideas through a systematic outline to help students develop coherent and reflective drafts. The final stage, production, emphasized revising and finalizing the essays, which ultimately resulted in the compilation of a published anthology. This staged process ensured that students experienced writing as a reflective, structured, and meaningful activity rather than a mechanical academic task.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Literacy Product Achievement: The Publication of an Essay Anthology

The results of the study indicate a significant achievement in students' literacy production. All 54 Grade XII students at MAN Kota Palangka Raya successfully completed their opinion and essay manuscripts during the learning process. This outcome is noteworthy because the writing activities were conducted based on students' intrinsic motivation rather than external pressure or grade-oriented demands. The students demonstrated a high level of commitment in completing their drafts,

revising their work, and finalizing their essays, suggesting that the learning environment successfully fostered autonomous writing practices.

The most tangible outcome of this learning process was the publication of an essay anthology entitled “*Merajut Makna dalam Keberagaman: Refleksi Pendidikan dan Budaya.*” The anthology consists not only of students’ reflective essays but also includes several contributions from teachers, symbolizing collaborative literacy practices within the school community. This publication represents more than a compilation of student assignments; it serves as a concrete indicator of meaningful learning outcomes and the internalization of empathy-based literacy values.

From a pedagogical perspective, the successful production of the anthology reflects the effectiveness of the Love-Based Curriculum in transforming students’ perceptions of writing. Writing activities were no longer viewed as mechanical academic tasks but as expressive and reflective practices connected to students’ emotional experiences and social awareness. This finding is consistent with previous studies indicating that reflective writing can improve students’ learning attitudes, creativity, and academic awareness (Sudirman et al., 2021). The emphasis on empathy and emotional connectedness encouraged students to explore issues related to education, culture, and the local philosophy of *Huma Betang*, thereby enriching the thematic depth of their essays.

This finding supports the assumption that care-oriented pedagogical approaches can enhance students’ engagement and creative autonomy in writing. When students are provided with a supportive and dialogical learning atmosphere, they are more likely to take ownership of their writing processes and produce authentic works. This is in line with Bouwer et al. (2024), who argues that positioning writing as dialogic meaning-making within supportive classroom communities can develop students’ competence, confidence, and sustained

engagement with writing as purposeful communication. The inclusion of teachers’ reflective writings further strengthened the culture of togetherness and mutual respect, reinforcing the principle of *asah* (mutual enlightenment), *asih* (mutual affection), and *asuh* (mutual care and guidance) as the foundation of the learning process (Ansori et al., 2025).

Moreover, the publication of the anthology serves as evidence that empathy-based literacy can generate sustainable learning products with real-world relevance. Instead of ending as classroom assignments, students’ works were transformed into a published book that documents their reflections and voices. This outcome demonstrates that literacy education grounded in care and cultural values has the potential to produce meaningful, authentic, and socially responsive written works. This finding is consistent with Rizal et al. (2024), who report that students’ writing development is significantly enriched through cultural literacy rooted in Indigenous culture, as it integrates students’ cultural narratives, values, and perspectives into literacy education.

### **Writing Process through the Love-Based Curriculum Approach**

The students’ success in producing opinion and essay texts was strongly influenced by the implementation of the Love-Based Curriculum. In this approach, the teacher functioned not as a rigid instructor but as a learning companion who accompanied students throughout their creative process. This dialogical relationship created a supportive learning atmosphere in which students felt emotionally safe to express personal reflections and social concerns. As a result, writing activities were perceived as meaningful learning experiences rather than compulsory academic tasks. This finding aligns with Chan and Aubrey (2021), who argues that dialogical teacher–student relationships significantly increase students’ willingness to engage in expressive writing. Similarly, Zahari et al. (2025) emphasize that

emotional safety in classrooms correlates positively with students' writing productivity and authenticity.

The writing process was organized into three interconnected stages representing different dimensions of love and care. In the first stage, self-love, students were guided to recognize their personal voices, writing potential, and reflective capacities. This stage strengthened students' confidence and identity as writers, supporting the notion that self-recognition is a crucial foundation for expressive literacy development (Halifah et al., 2024). The second stage emphasized love for others by encouraging students to observe and empathize with social and cultural phenomena in Palangka Raya, including interreligious tolerance and local wisdom rooted in the philosophy of *Huma Betang*. This stage reflects culturally responsive literacy practices, which, according to Hnit and Almana (2025), enable students to situate personal narratives within broader communal identities.

The third stage focused on love for the universe, in which students reflected on environmental issues such as forest fires and river pollution in the Kahayan River. Environmental-themed writing has been shown to enhance students' ecological awareness and moral reasoning, particularly when connected to local contexts (Kazazoğlu, 2025). Through these interconnected stages, the writing process not only developed students' technical skills but also nurtured their emotional awareness, social sensitivity, and environmental responsibility.

These three stages demonstrate how empathy-based literacy integrates cognitive, emotional, and moral dimensions in writing instruction. The gradual progression from self-reflection to social empathy and environmental concern enabled students to develop richer thematic awareness and more meaningful argumentative perspectives. This developmental trajectory supports Rizqiani and Astuti's (2025) assertion that reflective sequencing in writing pedagogy fosters deeper critical engagement compared to direct argumentative instruction. Furthermore, the integration of affective dimensions in literacy learning strengthens students' moral positioning in argumentative texts (Kholili & Mu'id, 2025), suggesting that writing competence and character formation can develop simultaneously.

To help students structure their ideas and start writing, the teacher offered two outline models as scaffolding tools, guiding them in organizing essays effectively. These outlines functioned as cognitive frameworks that guided students in structuring introductions, developing arguments, proposing solutions, and formulating reflective conclusions. The models were designed to remain flexible while ensuring coherence and thematic focus. The use of structured outlines reflects the scaffolding principle proposed by Surbakti et al. (2024), who notes that guided frameworks reduce cognitive overload during initial drafting stages. Table 1 presents the two outline models implemented during the writing process.

**Table 1. Outline Models Used in Empathy-Based Essay Writing**

<b>Text Section</b>	<b>Model 1: Cultural and Social Focus</b>	<b>Model 2: Environmental Focus</b>
Introduction	Introduction to the philosophy of <i>Huma Betang</i> in everyday school life	Description of current environmental conditions in Palangka Raya
Argument	Challenges in maintaining tolerance amid rapid social media information flows	Analysis of the causes of environmental degradation and moral responsibility of young generations
Action/Solution	Invitation to become a generation that spreads positive and inclusive content	Small actions students can take to protect local ecosystems
Conclusion	Conclusion that diversity is a strength rather than a source of division	Emphasis that caring for nature is part of faith and humanity

Following the implementation of these outline models, students demonstrated improved coherence and clarity in their writing. As shown in Table 1, the first model guided students to explore cultural and social themes, while the second model facilitated reflections on environmental issues relevant to their local context. The availability of alternative models allowed students to select themes aligned with their personal interests and emotional concerns, thereby strengthening engagement and ownership of the writing process. This supports the findings of Sari and Agustina (2022), who reports that providing thematic options increases students' intrinsic motivation and argumentative depth in essay writing.

The outline-based scaffolding proved effective in reducing students' anxiety when initiating their first paragraphs and maintaining logical organization throughout their essays. Rather than restricting creativity, the structured frameworks supported students in articulating complex ideas systematically and confidently. This outcome corroborates the study of Nadia et al. (2023), which found that structured pre-writing guidance significantly decreases writing anxiety while maintaining originality of ideas. Combined with the empathy-oriented stages of the Love-Based Curriculum, the use of outlines contributed significantly to the successful completion of students' essays and the production of a reflective anthology. These results suggest that cognitive scaffolding and affective engagement operate synergistically in empathy-based literacy practices.

### **Analysis of Success: Writing without Coercion**

The successful completion of essays by all 54 students and the involvement of 10 teachers in the published anthology were influenced by several key factors that supported students' autonomous and meaningful writing practices. One of the most prominent factors was the provision of writing autonomy. Students were given the freedom to select social, cultural, or

environmental phenomena that personally resonated with them. When students perceived a sense of ownership over their chosen topics, the writing process became more fluent and expressive. This autonomy fostered intrinsic motivation, enabling students to engage in writing activities voluntarily rather than as a response to external academic pressure. This finding is consistent with Apridayani and Waluyo (2025), who argues that topic ownership significantly enhances students' depth of reflection and argumentative persistence. Likewise, Wang et al. (2025) found that autonomy-supportive writing environments increase intrinsic motivation and reduce dependency on grade-oriented incentives.

Another important factor contributing to this success was the exemplary role of teachers as co-writers. Teachers actively participated in producing reflective essays that were published alongside students' works in the same anthology. This collaborative practice created a learning atmosphere resembling a "community of learners," in which hierarchical boundaries between teachers and students were reduced. Students reported feeling appreciated and respected because their writings were positioned on an equal footing with those of their teachers. This shared authorship strengthened students' confidence and reinforced the perception that their voices were valued within the learning community. Such findings resonate with Feliza (2025), who emphasizes that teacher modelling in authentic literacy production increases students' confidence and perceived legitimacy as writers. Furthermore, Omodan (2023) highlights that collaborative authorship practices foster egalitarian classroom cultures that promote dialogic learning and mutual respect.

The relevance of local contexts also played a significant role in enhancing students' engagement and writing quality. The issues explored in the essays were closely connected to students' lived experiences as members of the Central Kalimantan community. By relating essay topics to real-

life phenomena in Palangka Raya, such as cultural diversity, environmental challenges, and social harmony, writing activities became meaningful reflective practices rather than routine academic assignments. This contextual relevance enabled students to develop deeper emotional connections to their topics and produce more authentic and socially responsive written works. This outcome aligns with Sangaji et al. (2023), who assert that place-based literacy instruction strengthens students' emotional attachment to subject matter and enriches argumentative substance. Similarly, Sutrisno et al. (2024) reports that culturally grounded writing tasks enhance students' narrative authenticity and social awareness.

These findings indicate that writing instruction grounded in autonomy, modelling, and contextual relevance can effectively foster students' intrinsic motivation and sustain long-term engagement in writing. The absence of coercion did not reduce students' productivity; instead, it enhanced their creativity, responsibility, and sense of ownership. This result supports the assumption that empathy-based and care-oriented pedagogical approaches can transform writing classrooms into spaces for authentic expression and collaborative learning. In line with Mejia (2024), non-coercive pedagogical climates encourage students to perceive writing as a process of meaning-making rather than compliance, thereby strengthening both competence and character formation.

### **Internalization of Local Wisdom and Religious Moderation in Students' Writing**

The published anthology "*Merajut Makna dalam Keberagaman: Refleksi Pendidikan dan Budaya*" represents a manifestation of humanistic learning in which opinion texts evolved from mere linguistic constructions into instruments of cultural reflection and social advocacy. The students' writings demonstrate that empathy-based literacy enabled them to integrate personal values, cultural identity, and social awareness

into reflective argumentative texts. This outcome confirms that writing instruction grounded in care and contextual relevance can transform academic writing into a medium for meaning-making and character formation. This finding resonates with Rahman et al. (2024), who argues that humanistic literacy pedagogy positions writing as a reflective act of identity construction rather than solely a technical linguistic exercise. Similarly, Prayogi et al. (2022) emphasize that contextual writing practices facilitate the integration of moral reasoning into argumentative discourse.

Local wisdom strongly shaped the thematic orientation of the anthology. Many students contextualized their opinion texts by drawing upon the philosophy of *Huma Betang*, which emphasizes togetherness, mutual respect, and harmony in diversity. Several essays described everyday experiences of interreligious tolerance within the multicultural school environment, illustrating how local cultural values were aligned with Islamic principles of moderation and peaceful coexistence. This finding indicates that the Love-Based Curriculum effectively facilitated the internalization of religious moderation through culturally responsive writing practices. Such results align with Andita and Tirtoni (2024), who states that embedding local philosophy in literacy instruction strengthens students' intercultural sensitivity and tolerance. Furthermore, Puspita and Aryanika (2025) reports that integrating religious moderation discourse into reflective writing encourages students to articulate balanced and inclusive perspectives in social issues.

Environmental awareness also emerged as a dominant theme reflecting students' ecological sensitivity. Given the geographical context of Central Kalimantan, numerous essays focused on the protection of peatlands and the preservation of the Kahayan River. Students expressed a strong sense of belonging to their natural environment and articulated moral responsibility toward ecological sustainability. These reflections

suggest that empathy-based literacy can foster place-based environmental consciousness and encourage students to perceive environmental care as an integral part of ethical and religious values. This supports the findings of Sunassee et al. (2021), who argue that place-based writing assignments increase students' ecological empathy and strengthen moral engagement with environmental issues. In addition, Prasetyo (2025) highlights that integrating environmental reflection into literacy practices enhances students' ethical reasoning and civic awareness.

In addition, students' writings reflected a distinctive identity as madrasah learners in Palangka Raya, locally known as the "Kota Cantik." The essays embodied the spirit of *Isen Mulang* (perseverance and resilience), portraying students as literate young citizens who are polite in argumentation yet critical toward contemporary digital social phenomena. This combination of politeness, critical awareness, and moral commitment illustrates the successful integration of literacy development, character education, and local identity formation. According to Sangaji et al. (2023), literacy practices that incorporate local identity narratives strengthen students' sense of belonging and cultural pride while maintaining critical engagement with modern challenges. Likewise, Akib et al. (2024) asserts that culturally grounded argumentative writing fosters balanced criticality—where assertiveness is accompanied by ethical responsibility.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that the Love-Based Curriculum not only enhanced students' writing competence but also supported the internalization of local wisdom and religious moderation. By situating writing instruction within students' cultural and ecological contexts, empathy-based literacy contributed to the development of reflective, tolerant, and socially responsible writers. In line with Ammaa et al. (2024), care-oriented literacy models are capable of bridging academic skill development with character education, thereby positioning

writing classrooms as spaces for both intellectual growth and moral cultivation.

## CONCLUSION

The implementation of the Love-Based Curriculum in teaching opinion and essay writing at MAN Kota Palangka Raya has exceeded conventional learning targets. The publication of the anthology "Merajut Makna dalam Keberagaman: Refleksi Pendidikan dan Budaya" serves as evidence that all 54 students were able to express their critical ideas voluntarily and meaningfully. The presence of teachers as co-writers further strengthened the literacy ecosystem within the madrasah. It can be concluded that the use of structured outlines combined with a humanistic approach effectively enhanced students' writing skills while simultaneously strengthening their sense of love for cultural identity and environmental sustainability.

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