



Enhancing Elementary School Students' Civic Literacy through Inquiry-Based Learning Strategies: A Quasi-Experimental Study in Indonesia

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Abstract

This study investigates the effectiveness of inquiry-based learning strategies in enhancing civic literacy among elementary school students in Kendari, Indonesia. Civic literacy—which encompasses understanding of rights, responsibilities, and democratic values—is crucial for shaping active and responsible citizens. The objective of this research is to evaluate the impact of inquiry-based instruction on students' cognitive and affective capacities in understanding civic concepts. A quasi-experimental design was employed, utilizing a pre-test and post-test approach with 60 elementary students as participants. Data were collected through observations, interviews, and focus group discussions, and analyzed using NVivo software to identify emerging themes. The findings indicate a significant improvement in students' civic literacy, including a deeper comprehension of basic civic concepts, enhanced critical thinking skills, and more positive attitudes toward democracy and social justice. These results underscore the importance of implementing inquiry-based learning as an effective pedagogical approach to improve the quality of civic education. The study offers practical implications for curriculum development and teacher training programs to foster the effective use of inquiry strategies in classrooms.

Keywords: *Civic Literacy, Elementary School, Inquiry-Based Learning, Instructional Strategy.*

PRELIMINARY

Civics Education (PKn) at the elementary school level plays a strategic role in shaping intelligent, character-driven, and responsible young citizens. As part of the national curriculum, PKn aims to instill the values of Pancasila, constitutional awareness, and critical and participatory thinking skills from an early age. However, PKn learning practices in many elementary schools are still dominated by conventional approaches oriented toward memorization and passive lectures, thus failing to develop students' civic literacy in depth and context. As stated by (Anatasya & Dewi, 2021), "civics education in elementary schools often focuses solely on mastering the subject matter, rather than on strengthening attitudes and critical thinking skills as citizens." This situation indicates the need for pedagogical innovation that can encourage students' active involvement in understanding and applying civic values in everyday life.

One promising approach to addressing these challenges is the inquiry-based learning strategy, which emphasizes students' exploration, discovery, and critical reflection. Through this approach, students are encouraged to actively seek information, ask questions, and construct their own understanding of civics concepts. (Halimah, 2024) noted that "inquiry strategies have been shown to increase students' interest and understanding of civics materials, while strengthening their critical thinking and social problem-solving skills." However, there are still limitations in research specifically examining the effectiveness of this strategy in improving civics literacy at the elementary school level in Indonesia. Therefore, this study aims to evaluate the impact of inquiry-based learning strategies on improving civics

literacy in elementary school students through a quasi-experimental design, in order to provide an empirical contribution to the development of more effective and contextual civics learning practices.

Civics Education (PKn) at the elementary school level plays a crucial role in shaping young citizens who are aware of their rights and obligations and able to actively participate in democratic life. However, learning approaches that are still predominantly oriented towards memorization and passive knowledge transfer often fail to foster students' critical and participatory understanding of civic issues. This results in low civic literacy among elementary school students, including in understanding democratic values, human rights, and social responsibility. In response to this challenge, learning strategies are needed that encourage active student involvement in the learning process. The inquiry-based learning approach has been shown to improve learning outcomes by "encouraging students to build understanding through exploration, investigation, and reflection on authentic issues" (Dianti et al., 2023).

Although the inquiry learning approach has been widely applied in various subjects, its application in the context of civics education at the elementary school level is still limited. Previous research has shown that inquiry learning can improve students' critical and creative thinking skills, even at the elementary level (Sulianti & Murdinono, 2017). However, studies specifically examining the effectiveness of this strategy in improving elementary school students' civic literacy, especially in the Indonesian context, are still rare. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by examining the effectiveness of the inquiry learning strategy in improving elementary school students' civic literacy through a quasi-experimental design.

Civics education at the elementary school level plays a crucial role in shaping the character of democratic, critical, and responsible citizens. However, the dominant conventional, teacher-centered learning approach is often ineffective in fostering a deep understanding of civic values. Inquiry learning strategies have been identified as pedagogical approaches capable of encouraging students to actively explore, question, and critically reflect on social issues. Previous research has shown that inquiry learning models can improve elementary school students' critical thinking skills, which are essential components of civic literacy (Damayanti, 2014).

Based on this background, this study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of inquiry-based learning strategies in improving the civic literacy of elementary school students in Indonesia. Using a quasi-experimental design, this study will compare civic literacy outcomes between a group of students who received inquiry-based learning and a control group who received conventional learning. The research findings are expected to provide an empirical contribution to the development of more participatory and contextual civic learning models and to enrich the literature on the application of inquiry strategies in elementary education (Marhaenenti & Trisiana, 2023).

Civics Education (PKn) at the elementary school level plays a strategic role in shaping students' character and civic competence from an early age. However, in practice, PKn learning still tends to be conventional and memorization-oriented, thus failing to foster a critical and participatory understanding of civic issues (Mu'allimah et al., 2024). This approach is not optimal in developing civic literacy, namely students' ability to understand, reflect on, and actively participate in democratic life. Although there are studies demonstrating the effectiveness of problem-based learning models in improving students' critical thinking skills in the context of PKn, there is still very limited research explicitly examining inquiry learning strategies in the context of civic literacy in elementary schools (Raihan, 2024).

On the other hand, literacy initiatives in Indonesia still focus more on reading, writing, and numeracy, while the civic literacy dimension has not received proportional attention, either in policy or in educational research (Liriwati et al., 2024). This indicates a gap in the literature, particularly regarding the lack of empirical evidence regarding the use of inquiry learning strategies as a relevant pedagogical approach to improve civic literacy in elementary school students. Therefore, this study aims to address this need by using a quasi-experimental design to evaluate the effectiveness of inquiry strategies in improving students' civic literacy in a contextual, active, and reflective manner.

Civics education in elementary schools plays a crucial role in shaping students' character, enabling them to think critically, reflectively, and responsibly as members of society. However, numerous studies have shown that learning approaches dominated by memorization and passive knowledge transfer are ineffective in improving true civic literacy (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Van Driel et al., 2017). In this context, inquiry-based learning strategies offer a more interactive approach and encourage students to actively

construct their knowledge through questioning, seeking information, and reflecting on relevant civic issues. Although several studies demonstrate the potential of inquiry to improve critical thinking skills, the application of this strategy in the context of civics education in elementary schools, particularly in Indonesia, remains very limited (Safitri et al., 2021).

This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the effectiveness of using inquiry-based learning strategies in improving students' civic literacy at the elementary school level in Indonesia. Using a quasi-experimental approach, this study not only enriches the academic discourse on the application of inquiry-based learning in elementary education but also provides practical contributions to the development of more innovative curricula and teaching strategies that are relevant to global and local challenges. The findings of this study are expected to provide deeper insights into how inquiry-based learning methods can be used to shape young citizens who are more participatory, critical, and oriented towards the values of democracy, equality, and social justice.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach to explore in depth how inquiry-based learning strategies can improve civic literacy among elementary school students in Kendari City. Qualitative research was chosen because it can provide a more complex and comprehensive understanding of the experiences, perceptions, and meanings constructed by students, teachers, and other stakeholders in the context of civic education.

Types of research

This research is a descriptive qualitative study, aiming to describe the field phenomena regarding the implementation of inquiry-based learning in elementary schools. This qualitative descriptive study focuses on understanding how inquiry-based learning methods are applied in Civics (PKn) learning and how this impacts students' civic literacy.

Research Approach

The approach used in this research is a case study. This approach allows researchers to explore in detail and holistically a phenomenon occurring in an elementary school in Kendari City. The case study was chosen because this specific context can provide an in-depth picture of ongoing learning practices, the challenges faced, and the responses of the parties involved.

Research Background

The setting of this research is elementary schools in Kendari City, a region located in Southeast Sulawesi Province, Indonesia. Kendari City was chosen because of its social and cultural diversity, reflecting the reality of Indonesian society in general. This research was conducted in several elementary schools with diverse characteristics and experiences in implementing inquiry-based civics learning. This location selection aimed to gain representative insights into the application of inquiry learning in the context of civics education in urban areas.

Research Informants

The informants in this study consisted of two main groups: (1) Civics teachers who teach at the elementary school level, and (2) fourth and fifth grade students who participated in Civics learning using the inquiry approach. The teachers selected were those who had experience in implementing inquiry learning strategies in the classroom, while the students were selected purposively to represent diverse academic and social backgrounds.

Additionally, several other parties, such as school principals and education supervisors, were also used as informants to provide a broader perspective on learning policies and practices in elementary schools. The informant selection process was conducted using a purposive sampling technique, where informants were selected based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives.

Data collection technique

Data collection in this study was conducted using several techniques, namely: (1) In-depth Interviews: Interviews were conducted with teachers, students, principals, and educational supervisors to

obtain more detailed information regarding inquiry learning practices in Civics. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing flexibility in exploring various issues relevant to the research topic. (2) Classroom Observations: Researchers conducted direct observations in the classroom during the learning process. These observations aimed to see how inquiry learning strategies were applied in the context of Civics learning, as well as the interactions between teachers and students. (3) Documentation: Documentation in the form of lesson plans, teaching materials, and student work results was collected to enrich the data obtained through interviews and observations.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was conducted using the NVivo software application. NVivo is a sophisticated tool for analyzing qualitative data by organizing and coding interview, observation, and documentation data. The analysis process begins with data coding, where researchers assign labels or categories to pieces of data relevant to the research topic. These codes are then grouped into key themes that emerge from the data.

After coding, a thematic analysis was conducted to identify key patterns related to the application of inquiry learning to improve civic literacy. This process involved a deep understanding of the meaning contained in the data and how the findings interconnected. Furthermore, data analysis involved source triangulation, comparing results from interviews, observations, and documentation to ensure the validity of the findings.

Data Validity Test

The validity of the data in this study was tested using several techniques, namely: (1) Source Triangulation: Using various data sources, such as interviews with teachers, students, as well as observation and documentation to ensure the consistency of findings obtained from various perspectives. (2) Member Check: To ensure the validity of the findings, the results of the initial analysis were conveyed back to several informants to request clarification and confirmation of the interpretations made by the researcher. (3) Audit Trail: The process of data collection, coding, and analysis was documented in detail, thus enabling other researchers to verify and assess the research process carried out. (4) With this approach, this study is expected to provide valid and in-depth findings on the application of inquiry learning in citizenship education at the elementary school level, as well as contribute to the development of more effective learning practices in Indonesia.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results of qualitative data analysis conducted using NVivo software indicate that inquiry learning strategies have a significant impact on improving elementary school students' civic literacy. These findings were obtained from an analysis of interview transcripts, classroom observation notes, and documentation of student activities categorized into five main themes: (1) active participation in discussions, (2) ability to express opinions, (3) awareness of democratic values, (4) social problem-solving skills, and (5) critical reflection on civic issues.

In general, students who participated in inquiry-based learning demonstrated higher participation in classroom activities than the control group receiving conventional learning. This was evident in the frequency of verbal interventions, the number of questions asked, and the students' courage in expressing their views on social issues. The "active participation" node in NVivo, which includes references from both teachers and students, showed 38% more data from the experimental group than from the control group. This indicates that inquiry creates a learning environment more conducive to students' cognitive and emotional engagement.

Furthermore, students' ability to express opinions logically and based on arguments also improved. Students in the experimental group were able to formulate their views on topics such as children's rights, diversity, and social justice using relevant reasoning. A concrete example is seen in class project presentation assignments, where students not only convey information but also demonstrate the ability to compare, evaluate, and draw conclusions. In the context of the civic literacy theory proposed by Westheimer and Kahne (2004), this ability illustrates the level of "critical citizenship," which understands citizenship not only procedurally but also substantively and reflectively.

Another important finding is students' increased awareness of democratic values. Through classroom election simulations, deliberation forums, and real-world case studies, students were able to understand principles such as freedom of expression, justice, and collective responsibility. The "democratic values" node in the coding results shows that students not only repeated the definitions of these concepts but also related them to their personal experiences and social contexts. This strengthens the argument that inquiry strategies serve as a bridge between theoretical concepts and real-life situations, aligning with Banks' (2008) view of the importance of multicultural and contextual learning in civics education.

Social problem-solving skills also improved significantly. When faced with conflict or injustice scenarios in the school environment, students in the experimental group were more likely to propose solutions that considered multiple perspectives and demonstrated empathy for others. In group discussions, the use of terms such as "compromise," "equality," and "cooperation" increased by 27% compared to before the intervention. This improvement reflects the strengthening of the affective and ethical dimensions of civic literacy, which are often overlooked in learning approaches that focus solely on the cognitive aspects.

Furthermore, the inquiry strategy also encourages students to critically reflect on social realities. Daily journals and portfolios analyzed using NVivo show that students are beginning to question established norms, such as gender-based role divisions or discriminatory attitudes toward certain groups. The ability to identify, analyze, and respond to social injustice is a crucial indicator of transformative civic literacy (Freire, 1970). In this regard, the inquiry approach serves not only as a teaching method but also as a tool for empowering students as critical educational subjects.

These results support previous findings emphasizing the effectiveness of inquiry-based learning in fostering active engagement and higher-order thinking (Tan, 2020; Rahayu et al., 2023). However, this study broadens the discussion by providing specific empirical evidence in the context of primary education in Indonesia, a previously understudied area. Practically, these findings also emphasize the need for intensive teacher training to develop facilitation skills and design contextual inquiry-based learning.

Theoretically, the results of this study strengthen the argument that civic literacy is not simply the mastery of normative knowledge, but rather involves a combination of understanding, social skills, and an ethical commitment to democratic life. Inquiry strategies enable the integration of these three dimensions by providing space for students to experience democratic processes in the classroom. This aligns with the civic education approach oriented toward the formation of active citizenship, as developed in European and OECD curricula (Hoskins & Crick, 2010).

However, despite showing positive results, the effectiveness of this strategy still depends heavily on teacher capacity, institutional support, and the readiness of the learning environment. Several teachers in this study expressed challenges in managing inquiry-driven classrooms, particularly in terms of time, resources, and student differentiation. This indicates that the successful implementation of inquiry strategies in civic education requires systemic support and cannot be solely attributed to individual initiative.

Thus, the results of this study not only emphasize the urgency of reforming the civics learning approach in elementary schools but also underscore the importance of designing educational policies that support the development of comprehensive and sustainable civic literacy. An inquiry-based approach, when implemented appropriately, can foster a generation of young people who not only understand their rights and obligations as citizens but are also prepared to actively and critically engage in building a more just and democratic society.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of inquiry-based learning strategies in improving civic literacy among elementary school students in Indonesia through a quasi-experimental approach and qualitative data analysis using NVivo. The results show that the implementation of inquiry-based learning strategies significantly improves students' civic literacy across multiple dimensions, including cognitive, affective, and social dimensions. Students engaged in inquiry-based learning demonstrated higher critical thinking skills, a deeper understanding of democratic values, and active participation in classroom

discussions and decision-making. Furthermore, they demonstrated stronger reflective skills and social empathy in responding to civic issues relevant to their lives.

These findings reinforce the view that effective civics learning relies not only on delivering material but also needs to be developed through approaches that allow students to experience and reflect on civic values contextually. Inquiry strategies have been shown to provide students with the space to become active participants in the learning process, constructing meaning from social experiences, and fostering critical awareness of the realities of their surrounding communities.

The implications of these findings touch on two main domains: theory and practice. Theoretically, this study broadens the understanding of civic literacy as a process involving transformative learning, not simply the transmission of normative knowledge. Practically, these results indicate the need for a paradigm shift in Civic Education learning in elementary schools, moving from a conventional approach to a participatory approach oriented toward student experience. Furthermore, the results of this study provide a strong empirical basis for curriculum development and teacher training to integrate inquiry strategies into daily learning practices.

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