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Innovative Civic Education Strategies in Elementary Schools

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Abstract

The development of civic competence at the primary school level is often stuck in rote learning that does not encourage the internalization of the values of rights, obligations, and responsibilities as democratic citizens. This study aims to explore the application of the inquiry approach as an innovative strategy in civic education to improve students' understanding of these basic civic concepts. Using a qualitative research design with a case study approach, data were collected through interviews, observations and document analysis involving teachers and students in one primary school in Kendari City, Indonesia. Data analysis was conducted to identify the main themes that emerged. The results showed that the inquiry approach encouraged students to construct knowledge through reflection, dialog, and contextual exploration. Students were able to connect personal experiences with the concepts of rights, obligations, and responsibilities in a meaningful way, and showed improved critical thinking skills and active participation. This research contributes to strengthening the theory of civic education and provides practical implications in designing learning that is oriented towards democratic values from an early age.

Keywords: *Civic Education, Elementary School, Inquiry Learning, Rights and Responsibilities.*

PRELIMINARY

Civics education is a crucial foundation for developing a young generation aware of their national identity, human rights, and social responsibilities as citizens. Amidst 21st-century challenges such as increasing social polarization, massive digital penetration, and weakening social cohesion, elementary schools are strategically positioned to instill civic values early and meaningfully (Hoskins et al., 2012; Kerr et al., 2020). However, the reality of civics education at the elementary level still tends to be normative, with a pedagogical approach that emphasizes memorization and direct instruction rather than developing critical and reflective understanding. This impacts students' limited ability to fully grasp the concept of citizenship, particularly regarding the interconnected rights, obligations, and responsibilities within the life of the nation and state (Print, 2013; Astarita et al., 2024).

To address these challenges, a learning approach is needed that allows students not only to receive information but also to actively engage in the exploration and reflection process on civic concepts. The inquiry approach, which positions students as active participants in the process of seeking and constructing knowledge, is a relevant pedagogical alternative in this context (Levstik & Barton, 2015; Assingkiy, 2021). This approach enables contextual, dialogic, and meaningful learning, enabling students to connect civic values to their real-life experiences in their social environment. Therefore, strengthening civic literacy in elementary schools through inquiry strategies is increasingly urgent and requires systematic, evidence-based implementation.

Although citizenship education has been formally incorporated into primary school curricula in many countries, its pedagogical implementation often fails to foster a deep and contextual understanding of civic values among students (Torney-Purta et al., 2001; Veugelers, 2007). In many classrooms, the teaching of civic concepts—particularly the notions of rights, responsibilities, and obligations—remains

superficial, with a tendency to emphasize memorization rather than critical engagement. This gap between curricular goals and pedagogical realities poses significant challenges in shaping children as reflective and participatory citizens from an early age (Print, Ørnstrøm & Nielsen, 2002). Without appropriate strategies that encourage exploration, inquiry, and connections to real-life situations, students are unlikely to internalize civic concepts in meaningful and lasting ways.

Furthermore, existing classroom practices often ignore the interdependence of civic values, treating rights, obligations, and responsibilities as separate constructs rather than a dynamic and integrated ethical framework (Hoskins & Crick, 2010). This fragmented approach diminishes students' ability to connect civic principles to everyday actions, interpersonal relationships, and broader societal roles. Therefore, there is an urgent need for pedagogical models that not only deliver civic content but also encourage inquiry, dialogue, and experiential learning—especially at the elementary level of primary education. The inadequacy of current methods to instill these values holistically underscores the urgency to explore innovative citizenship education strategies that align with the developmental needs and life experiences of young students (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Kerr et al., 2010).

The purpose of this study is to design and analyze an innovative civics education strategy at the elementary school level, based on an inquiry-based learning approach. This study seeks to explore how such a pedagogical model can facilitate students' in-depth understanding of civic concepts—namely, rights, responsibilities, and obligations—as fundamental elements of democratic citizenship. Given the developmental stage of elementary school-aged students, an inquiry approach is particularly powerful in enabling them to construct meaning through active engagement, questioning, and reflection (Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2008; Pedaste et al., 2015). By situating civic concepts in a real-life context, this study aims to bridge the gap between normative civic ideals and students' everyday lived experiences.

Furthermore, this study aims to provide practical pedagogical insights for educators in implementing inquiry-based civic education, particularly within the framework of the Indonesian Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka), which emphasizes student-centered learning and value exploration (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). Through qualitative analysis using NVivo, this study aims to identify patterns of student understanding and the transformative potential of inquiry-based strategies in fostering early civic literacy. Ultimately, these findings are expected to inform curriculum design and classroom learning practices, as well as contribute to the broader discourse on democracy education in elementary schools (Kerr & Huddleston, 2015).

Although civics education has long been recognized as a crucial element in students' character development, numerous studies have highlighted that existing learning strategies in elementary schools are not yet effective in fostering a deep understanding of rights, obligations, and responsibilities (Osler & Starkey, 2005; Torney-Purta et al., 2001). Most approaches still focus on conventional knowledge transfer, prioritizing memorization and normative understanding without encouraging critical reflection or the application of these values in everyday life (Lindsell, 2018). At the same time, existing curricula often fail to address more complex, integral aspects of citizenship, such as active participation in social life and awareness of global issues that impact national identity (Hahn, 2010). Therefore, there is an urgent need to design more innovative and reflective approaches that enable students to internalize civic concepts through direct experience and active interaction in the learning process.

Although several attempts have been made to integrate inquiry-based approaches into civics learning, there is a lack of research examining the comprehensive application of this approach at the elementary school level, particularly in developing a holistic understanding of the rights, obligations, and responsibilities of citizenship (Mansouri, 2016; Janks & Vasquez, 2015). Existing research focuses primarily on civics learning at the secondary or tertiary level, and tends to overlook the significant potential of inquiry-based approaches to deepen the understanding of young students (Kerr, 2008). Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by developing an inquiry-based civics learning strategy in elementary schools and exploring its impact on students' understanding of their rights, obligations, and responsibilities as members of society. This research not only offers a new perspective on civics education methodology but also makes an important contribution to more progressive and applicable educational policies at the elementary level.

Civics education in elementary schools plays a crucial role in shaping children's understanding of their rights, obligations, and responsibilities as members of society. However, despite numerous efforts to

integrate civic values into the curriculum, the dominant approach in many elementary schools tends to be expository and limited to memorizing normative concepts (Journell, 2016). This risks producing shallow understandings disconnected from students' real-life contexts. In response to this challenge, this study aims to design and test an inquiry-based civics learning strategy that can deepen students' understanding of their roles as citizens. The inquiry approach, which emphasizes students' active involvement in seeking and analyzing information, enables them to develop a more critical and reflective understanding of the concepts of rights, obligations, and responsibilities (Lewin & Stryker, 2018).

This study also fills a significant gap in the existing literature, given the limited research linking civics education with inquiry approaches at the elementary school level (Kerr, 2003). The primary contribution of this study lies in the development of a learning strategy that is both applicable and evidence-based, using NVivo analysis to explore the outcomes of implementing an inquiry approach in the context of civics education. Thus, this study not only provides an innovative pedagogical alternative but also provides empirical evidence that strengthens the effectiveness of inquiry as a tool for improving children's civic literacy, in line with the demands of the Independent Curriculum, which encourages experiential learning (Suryadi, 2022). Going forward, the findings of this study are expected to make a significant contribution to the development of civics education in elementary schools, while enriching the discourse on character education in Indonesia.

METHOD

Types and Approaches of Research

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore and deeply understand the inquiry-based civic education strategy implemented in elementary schools. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore the perspectives of students, teachers, and principals regarding the implementation of civic education and the effectiveness of the inquiry approach in internalizing the values of rights, obligations, and responsibilities. The case study approach provides a more focused framework for analyzing learning practices contextually in one or more specific settings (Stake, 1995).

Research Background

This research was conducted in several elementary schools located in Kendari City, Southeast Sulawesi. The selection of these locations was based on the need to understand the local context in implementing civic education, considering the social and cultural diversity in the area. Kendari City was chosen because of its diverse social characteristics, including economic differences, ethnicity, and access to education, which can influence how civic values are taught in elementary schools. The schools involved in this study were selected considering the diversity of school types and status, both in urban and suburban areas.

Research Informants

The informants in this study consisted of three main groups, namely: (1) Civics Teachers (6 people), who have more than five years of teaching experience and are directly involved in the development and implementation of the civics curriculum in their respective schools. (2) Elementary School Students (30 people), who were selected purposively by considering differences in grade levels (grades IV and V) and socio-economic backgrounds to obtain diverse representation. (3) School Principals (3 people), who provided insight into curriculum implementation policies and support for the development of inquiry-based civics learning strategies in their schools.

Informant selection was carried out using a purposive sampling approach, to ensure that the data obtained was relevant to the research objectives and was able to provide in-depth insights into the implementation of citizenship learning strategies.

Data collection technique

Data collection was conducted through three main techniques: (1) Semi-Structured Interviews: Interviews were conducted with teachers, principals, and selected students. These interviews were designed to explore their views, experiences, and feelings regarding the implementation of inquiry-based

civics education. Interview questions were developed to explore their understanding of rights, obligations, and responsibilities, and how the inquiry approach was used to teach these concepts. (2) Participatory Observation: Researchers observed the classroom learning process, focusing on student interactions with teachers, as well as the application of the inquiry approach in teaching civics. Observations were conducted for 4 weeks with two sessions per week in each participating school. (3) Documentation: Collection of documents related to the learning syllabus, teaching materials, and student work that reflected their understanding of civic values. This documentation was used to explore how learning strategies were implemented in real contexts (Assingkily, 2021).

Data Analysis Techniques

Data collected through interviews, observations, and documentation were analyzed using thematic analysis with the help of NVivo software. NVivo was used to facilitate the process of organizing, categorizing, and analyzing qualitative data that was narrative and unstructured in nature. The analysis process was carried out with the following steps: (1) Data Transcription: All recorded interviews and observations were transcribed verbatim. (2) Initial Coding: The available transcript data were then coded to identify the main themes that emerged related to the implementation of civic education, the inquiry approach, and its influence on the understanding of rights, obligations, and responsibilities. (3) Categorization: After coding, the larger themes were further analyzed to identify patterns and relationships between factors that influence the implementation and understanding of citizenship in elementary schools. (4) Thematic Analysis: The themes that emerged from the data were categorized and analyzed to find relationships, patterns, and in-depth findings. The analysis was conducted with a focus on how the inquiry approach influenced students' understanding of rights, obligations, and responsibilities as citizens.

Data Validity Test

To ensure the validity of the data, this study used several techniques to test the credibility and reliability of the data, including: (1) Source Triangulation: Data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation were compared to verify the consistency of the findings. (2) Member Checking: The results of interviews and data analysis were relayed to several informants to obtain feedback on the accuracy of the researcher's interpretation. (3) Audit Trail: The entire research process, from data collection to analysis, was documented in detail to allow for audit and verification by other parties (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). (4) Researcher Reliability: The researcher collaboratively worked with colleagues experienced in qualitative research to verify the results of the data analysis, thereby ensuring the validity and credibility of the findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data analysis revealed that the inquiry approach in innovative civic education strategies significantly shaped and strengthened elementary school students' understanding of the concepts of rights, obligations, and responsibilities as citizens. Data obtained from in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and documentation were analyzed thematically, resulting in several key themes indicating that inquiry is not only a method but also a means to encourage students' cognitive and affective engagement in the civic learning process.

One dominant theme that emerged was "actively understanding citizenship rights." In inquiry-based learning activities, students do not simply receive information from the teacher, but rather engage in exploration of various contextual situations that encourage them to recognize their rights as individuals and as members of the school community. For example, through simulated classroom deliberations and group discussions on real-world issues in the school environment, students demonstrated an increased understanding of the right to express opinions and the right to fair treatment. This aligns with the principles of social constructivism theory, where meaningful learning occurs through social interaction and the negotiation of meaning in authentic contexts (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1996).

Another prominent finding was "student reflection on social obligations." During observation sessions, teachers encouraged students to identify their obligations as members of the class and the community at large. When students were asked to devise solutions to simple social problems (such as school cleanliness or peer solidarity), they not only identified their roles but also demonstrated a growing

understanding of the consequences of neglecting those obligations. This inquiry fostered a conceptual understanding that obligations are not burdens but rather part of an interconnected social life, in line with the values of cooperation and collective responsibility upheld in the Indonesian context (Tilaar, 2002).

Further analysis showed that "understanding responsibility as an attitude and action" emerged as a theme integrating the concepts of rights and obligations. The inquiry approach encouraged students to understand responsibility not only as a normative concept but also as a concrete action in everyday life. Students associated responsibility with the courage to admit mistakes, help friends, and maintain public facilities at school. The inquiry process facilitated in-depth reflection, allowing students to develop an understanding that being a responsible citizen is not just about knowing the rules, but also about applying those values in real life (Banks, 2008; Kerr, 1999).

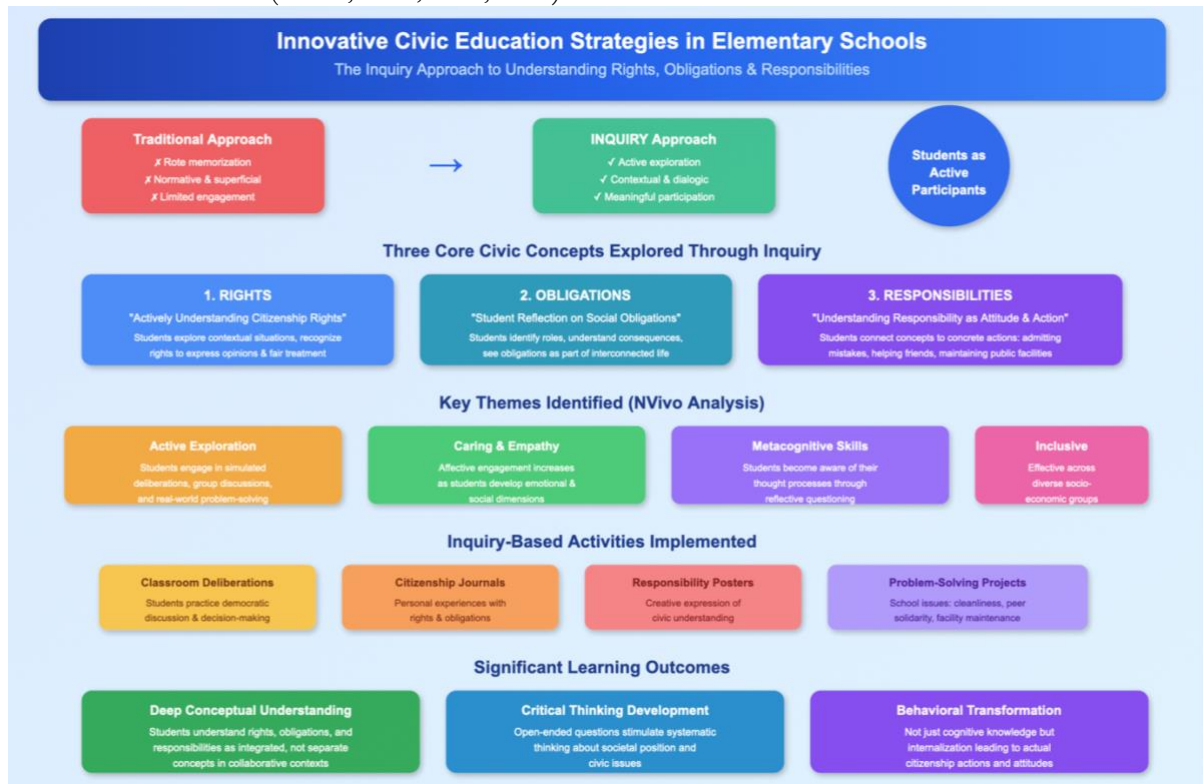


Figure 1. Innovative Civic Education Strategies in Elementary Schools

Data from teacher interviews indicate that the inquiry approach provides ample space for students to explore and discover the meaning of civic values for themselves. Teachers stated that compared to the expository approach, the inquiry strategy is more effective in fostering a sense of ownership of civic issues. Teachers also emphasized that the open-ended questions posed during the learning process stimulate critical thinking and lead students to think systematically about their position in society. This supports the view that civic learning should not be indoctrinating, but rather dialogic and transformative (Freire, 1970; Johnson & Johnson, 2002).

Furthermore, documentation shows that inquiry projects such as "citizenship journals" and "posters about school citizen responsibility" that students worked on demonstrated their ability to express understanding creatively. In these journals, students wrote about their personal experiences related to the application of rights and obligations, such as defending a friend who was treated unfairly or taking the initiative to clean the classroom without being asked. Through this approach, students not only understand values cognitively but also experience an internalization process that leads to behavioral transformation (Torney-Purta et al., 2001).

The analysis also found that students' affective engagement increased. The theme of "caring and empathy" emerged from coding students' narratives while discussing and responding to peer issues. This data supports the argument that an inquiry approach not only strengthens rational understanding of

citizenship concepts but also develops the emotional and social dimensions that are important in character education (Noddings, 2005).

Furthermore, observations indicate that the inquiry strategy helps students develop metacognitive skills. Students become more aware of their own thought processes when answering questions such as "Why should I help my friend?" or "What happens if I don't follow the classroom rules?" This demonstrates that the approach successfully activates the reflective process essential to learning that fosters critical and responsible citizenship (Levinson, 2011).

Additionally, an interesting pattern emerged from the observations that students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds were still able to engage enthusiastically in the inquiry process. This indicates that the inquiry approach is inclusive and adaptive to diversity, as long as teachers are able to facilitate a safe and open learning space. This aligns with previous studies showing that inquiry-based pedagogical strategies tend to be more effective in reaching students with diverse learning styles and experiences (Shulman, 1986; Darling-Hammond, 2008).

Overall, the results of this study indicate that the inquiry approach in innovative citizenship education strategies is able to create an in-depth, participatory, and reflective learning space, where students can build a comprehensive understanding of their rights, obligations, and responsibilities as young citizens.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the inquiry approach in civic education strategies in elementary schools is highly effective in building students' understanding of the concepts of rights, obligations, and responsibilities. Based on the results of data analysis, it was found that students were not only able to concretely identify their basic rights, but also demonstrated a growing understanding of social obligations in school life, as well as an awareness of taking responsibility reflectively in solving shared problems. These three aspects are not understood separately, but are integrated in a collaborative, exploratory, and contextual learning experience.

Theoretically, these findings reinforce the social constructivism and critical pedagogy approaches in civic education, which position students as active subjects in the process of forming civic values. The inquiry approach has been shown to support the development of critical thinking skills, social empathy, and reflective capacity from elementary school age. The practical implications of these findings are highly relevant to the policy direction of the Independent Curriculum, which encourages context-based learning and active student participation. Teachers, as learning facilitators, have a strategic role in designing inquiry experiences that encourage students' intellectual and affective engagement with civic issues.

Furthermore, this research also highlights the importance of systemic support for optimal implementation of inquiry-based learning at the elementary school level. This support includes professional teacher training, sufficient time within the learning schedule, and the development of contextual learning resources that encourage critical and in-depth exploration of civic values. Implementing this strategy not only contributes to students' academic achievement in Pancasila Education but also supports the development of reflective, caring, and responsible citizen character.

As a recommendation, further research is recommended to develop a more systematic and measurable civic inquiry learning model and test it across different social and cultural contexts to broaden the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, a longitudinal approach can be used to observe the long-term impact of this strategy on the formation of students' civic identities. At the policy level, the results of this study can serve as a basis for strengthening the curriculum and teacher training in inquiry-based civic education at the elementary level. Thus, civic education will not only serve as an instrument of knowledge but also a space for the formation of values, attitudes, and actions of democratic and responsible citizens.

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