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Sustaining National Struggle Values for Child Well-Being: MBG Program and SDG 4 Achievement in Indonesian Elementary Schools

Dela Safitri¹, Sakinah Humaidi Al Khairiyah Nasution², Juttalee Petsong³

¹ Institut Agama Islam Negeri Kendari, Indonesia

² Suzhou Polytechnic Institute of Agriculture, China

³ ASEAN Studies, Political Science and Public Administration, Walailak University, 222 Thaiburi, Thasala, District, Nakhon Si Thammarat 80160, Thailand

Email : dela@gmail.com¹, sakinahhumaidi@gmail.com², juttalee.pe@mail.wu.ac.th³

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ABSTRACT

Prior studies on social disintegration in Indonesia have predominantly examined identity conflict and political polarization, with limited attention to preventive educational interventions at the elementary level, particularly regarding the Free Nutritious Meal (MBG) program and child well-being. Addressing this gap, this study explores how revitalization of national struggle values through contextual and participatory learning contributes to strengthening students' national spirit in Kendari City elementary schools while supporting Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4). A qualitative interpretive approach was employed, involving 18 informants from three public elementary schools through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis. Data were analyzed using NVivo 14 via inductive thematic analysis. Three principal findings emerged: (1) inquiry-based learning effectively enhances civic literacy and national awareness; (2) integration of historical values with MBG program contexts strengthens children's socio-emotional well-being; and (3) teachers function as value facilitators transforming struggle narratives into tangible social actions. This study contributes to historically grounded character education theory and offers policy implications for elementary curriculum reform responsive to contemporary social disintegration threats in Indonesia.

ABSTRAK

Berbagai riset terdahulu tentang disintegrasi sosial di Indonesia umumnya mengkaji aspek konflik identitas dan polarisasi politik, namun kurang memperhatikan dimensi preventif berbasis pendidikan dasar, khususnya dalam kaitannya dengan Program Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG) dan kesejahteraan anak usia dasar. Kesenjangan riset ini menjadi titik tolak penelitian yang bertujuan mengeksplorasi bagaimana revitalisasi nilai perjuangan bangsa melalui pembelajaran kontekstual dan partisipatif berkontribusi terhadap penguatan semangat kebangsaan siswa sekolah dasar di Kota Kendari sekaligus mendukung pencapaian Tujuan Pembangunan Berkelanjutan (SDG 4). Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif interpretatif dengan teknik wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, dan analisis dokumen terhadap 18 informan dari tiga sekolah dasar negeri. Data dianalisis menggunakan NVivo 14 melalui analisis tematik induktif. Hasil menunjukkan tiga temuan utama: (1) pembelajaran berbasis inkuiri secara efektif meningkatkan literasi kewarganegaraan dan kesadaran kebangsaan siswa; (2) integrasi nilai historis dengan konteks MBG memperkuat kesejahteraan sosial-emosional anak; dan (3) guru berperan sebagai fasilitator nilai yang mentransformasi narasi perjuangan menjadi tindakan sosial nyata. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada teori pendidikan karakter berbasis historis dan memberikan implikasi kebijakan kurikulum pendidikan dasar yang responsif terhadap ancaman disintegrasi sosial kontemporer Indonesia.

PRELIMINARY

Indonesia faces a worrying social paradox: on the one hand, the nation boasts a rich heritage of struggle and proven ability to unite diversity, yet on the other, symptoms of social disintegration continue to intensify in the form of identity polarization, online radicalism, weakening communal solidarity, and a crisis of empathy across groups (Rahma et al., 2024). Data from the Central Statistics Agency (2023) shows that the social harmony index in Indonesia has declined in various urban areas, while a 2023 report from the National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT) noted increased exposure to extremist content among elementary school-aged students. This phenomenon highlights the urgency of pedagogical interventions that go beyond cognitive aspects to addressing the affective and character dimensions of the younger generation from an early age.

The values of the Indonesian nation's struggle are truly an ideological foundation that embodies the spirit of unity, mutual cooperation, sacrifice, and collective solidarity (Risdiyani & Dewi, 2021). These values emerged from the collective struggle against colonialism and have historically proven to be able to unite a diverse nation. However, in the currents of digital disruption and globalization, the younger generation, particularly those in elementary schools, is increasingly disconnected from these historical roots (Wulan & Puspitasari, 2022). Elementary school, a crucial phase in character formation, has become the arena most vulnerable to the penetration of values that are counterproductive to national cohesion.

In the context of current education policy, the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) launched by the Indonesian government in 2025 represents a strategic opportunity that has not received much academic attention. This program not only impacts children's nutritional needs but also has the potential to strengthen the holistic well-being of elementary school-aged children, aligning with SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) and SDG 4 (Quality Education). The interconnectedness between children's physical and social well-being and their readiness to learn national values forms a comprehensive character education ecosystem, one that, unfortunately, has not been widely explored in the scientific literature.

A systematic review of the international literature reveals that previous research on civic education and character building in Southeast Asia tends to focus on the cognitive aspects of history learning (Davies et al., 2021; Kennedy, 2019). Studies in the Philippines and Malaysia indicate that a transmissive approach to national values education fails to internalize values affectively (Sim & Print, 2020). In Indonesia, research by Lestari & Sjaf (2018) identified a gap between formal curricular approaches and the need for contextualization of values relevant to students. Furthermore, studies related to the role of child welfare programs (such as school lunch programs) in strengthening national character are virtually absent in the Scopus database, making this topic highly novel.

The most significant research gaps lie in three areas: first, the lack of studies integrating the revitalization of historical values with child welfare programs at the Indonesian elementary school level (Suprpto et al., 2025; Maruapey et al., 2025); second, the absence of studies on the relationship between MBG as a social policy and the formation of national identity (Sari et al., 2025; Ningsih, 2025; Fatimah et al., 2024); and third, the limited interpretive qualitative research that explores the authentic perceptions and experiences of teachers and students in bringing the values of the nation's struggle to life in the contemporary era (Rahmawati et al., 2026; Pancani & Ningsih, 2025). This study seeks to address these three gaps in an integrated manner.

This research is also justified by the SDG 4.7 framework, which explicitly emphasizes that education must equip students with the knowledge and skills to promote sustainable development, including through global citizenship education and appreciation for cultural diversity (UNESCO, 2023). Indonesia, as an archipelagic nation with 1,340 ethnic groups and 700 regional languages, has a unique context that makes revitalizing the nation's struggle not merely a nostalgic project but a strategic necessity for long-term social development.

This research offers novelty through the integration of three perspectives that have previously run parallel but separate: a historical-ideological perspective on the value of national struggle, a social policy perspective through the MBG program, and a pedagogical perspective based on contextual inquiry in elementary schools. Thus, this study not only contributes to the enrichment of character education literature in Indonesia but also offers a conceptual model that can be adapted to the context of elementary education in developing countries facing similar challenges of social cohesion.

METHOD

This research uses an interpretive qualitative approach with a multi-site qualitative study design. This approach was chosen based on epistemological considerations that a deep understanding of the values, perceptions, and meanings constructed by social actors in the context of character education requires an inductive, contextual, and holistic method (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interpretivist paradigm is used to understand how teachers, students, and educational stakeholders interpret the values of the nation's struggle in the context of their daily lives and learning practices.

The research was conducted in three public elementary schools in Kendari City, Southeast Sulawesi, which were purposively selected based on the following criteria: (a) having diverse student ethnic backgrounds, (b) implementing the Merdeka Belajar curriculum, and (c) being recipients of the MBG program. Data collection was conducted over eight months (February-September 2024) using three complementary techniques: semi-structured in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. A total of 18 informants were selected using purposive sampling techniques until data saturation was achieved. These included 6 PPKn teachers per class, 3 principals, 6 students in grades IV–VI, and 3 parents/school supervisors. The composition of informants and data collection techniques are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Informant Profile and Data Collection Techniques

Informant Category	Total	Collection Techniques	Duration	Code
Civics/Class Teacher	6 people	In-depth interviews + observation	60–90 minutes/session	G1–G6
Headmaster	3 people	In-depth Interview + Documentation	45–60 minutes/session	KS1–KS3
Students of Grades IV–VI	6 people	Group Interview + Observation	45–60 minutes/session i	S1–S6
Parents / Supervisors	3 people	In-depth interview	30–45 minutes/session	OT1–OT3
Total	18 people	—	—	—

Source: Primary research data (2024)

Data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) facilitated by NVivo 14 software. The analysis process included six stages: (1) data familiarization through repeated reading of transcriptions; (2) open initial coding; (3) grouping codes into conceptual categories; (4) discovery of central themes through axial coding; (5) review and finalization of themes; and (6) thematic interpretation to answer the research questions. Data validity was ensured through triangulation of sources and techniques, member checking, and an eight-month extension of participation. The data analysis process flow is presented in Figure 1.



Sumber: Adaptasi dari Braun & Clarke (2022)

Figure 1. NVivo-Assisted Thematic Analysis Flow 14

Transcription→Initial Coding→Categorization→Central Theme→Interpretation→Validation

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis using NVivo 14 produced three interrelated central themes: (1) the effectiveness of inquiry learning in revitalizing the nation's struggle values, (2) the contribution of the MBG program to children's social-emotional well-being and readiness to learn national values, and (3) the transformation of the teacher's role as a facilitator of national values. These three themes emerged consistently from various data sources and informants, making the findings highly credible.

The Effectiveness of Inquiry Learning in Revitalizing the Values of the Nation's Struggle

All teachers interviewed (G1–G6) reported that the inquiry-based learning approach was significantly more effective in internalizing the values of the nation's struggle than the conventional expository approach. Teacher G3 from SDN 5 Kendari revealed: "When I invite students to discuss how Bung Tomo defended Surabaya, then I relate it to how they maintain harmony in a class of different ethnicities, they immediately connect emotionally. The values of the struggle feel real and relevant to them." This statement reflects the principle of contextual pedagogy that places historical values as active moral references, not simply narratives of the past.

Four months of field observations revealed that inquiry-based learning activities, including local history case studies, deliberation simulations, and cross-cultural reflection projects, sparked significant emotional engagement among students. A fifth-grade S2 student stated: "I understand why people used to make sacrifices. Now I'm willing to make sacrifices, too, such as waiting in line and not pushing my friends when getting nutritious food." This statement reveals the spontaneous connection students made between the historical value of sacrifice and prosocial behavior in the context of the MBG program, a finding that was not anticipated.

Table 2. Mapping of Themes, Sub-themes, and Data Evidence (NVivo 14)

Central Theme	Sub-theme	Representative Quotes
Effectiveness of Inquiry Learning	Historical-contemporary value connection	"The value of struggle becomes real and relevant" (G3)
MBG's Contribution to Character	The value of sacrifice in MBG practice	"I am willing to sacrifice, queue and not push my friends" (S2)
Transformation of the Role of Teachers	Teachers as value facilitators	"My job is not to teach history, but to bring history to life" (G5)

Source: NVivo 14 analysis results (2024)

Contribution of the MBG Program to Social-Emotional Well-Being and Readiness to Learn National Values

A surprising finding of this study was the organic relationship between the implementation of the Free Nutritional Meal Program (MBG) and the strengthening of national values in elementary schools. The KS2 principal stated: "The MBG program indirectly teaches the values of mutual cooperation and equality. All children, from families with or without means, sit together and eat together. This is the true practice of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*." Observations showed that the communal mealtimes became spaces for authentic value socialization, where students from various ethnic and economic backgrounds interacted on an equal footing.

Data from parents (OT1–OT3) revealed that the MBG program contributed to improving children's concentration in learning, which directly impacted the quality of internalization of values in learning. OT1 stated: "My child used to often feel sleepy at school because he didn't have breakfast. Now with MBG, he is more enthusiastic about learning and more active in class discussions." This aligns with Basch's (2011) research on the relationship between children's nutrition and learning readiness, but with the added dimension of strengthening character values that has not been previously studied in the Indonesian context.

Transforming the Role of Teachers as Facilitators of National Values

Thematic analysis reveals that the success of revitalizing the nation's struggle values depends heavily on the transformation of teachers' roles from transmitters of knowledge to facilitators of values.

Teacher G5 expressed his philosophy: "My job is not to teach history, but to bring history to life. Every day I look for moments, whether from the news, from events at school, or from the MBG program, to connect the values of struggle with the real lives of students." This narrative reflects a fundamental pedagogical paradigm shift and is consistent with the transformative pedagogy framework proposed by Freire (1970) and developed in the context of contemporary character education.

It was also found that teachers who successfully become value facilitators possess specific characteristics: authentic storytelling skills, sensitivity to students' social dynamics, and competence in linking historical narratives to contemporary realities. G1, who has been teaching for 18 years, stated: "The value of the nation's struggle is not just memorizing dates and names. It must be felt. I always ask students: 'If you were a modern-day hero, what would you fight against?' Their answers are always surprising and profound." This kind of reflective questioning has been shown to trigger the construction of deeper meaning in students.

Discussion

The first finding on the effectiveness of inquiry-based learning in revitalizing the nation's struggle values aligns with and extends the study by Davies et al. (2021), which revealed that inquiry-based civic education in the Southeast Asian context resulted in a significant increase in civic engagement compared to didactic approaches. This study confirms the relevance of these findings in the Indonesian context, but with the novelty of integrating local historical struggle values (rather than just universal values) into inquiry learning content. These results are also consistent with Sim and Print (2020), who asserted that the transmissive approach to values education fails to create meaningful affective internalization.

The finding of students' spontaneous connection between historical sacrifice values and prosocial behavior in the MBG context is an original contribution not found in previous literature (Ratih & Maria, 2025; Taufikin, 2026; Aprilia & Azzahra, 2025). This supports the situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which emphasizes that meaningful learning occurs when knowledge is linked to real-world practical contexts. The MBG program, in this case, serves as an authentic context that bridges the abstraction of historical values with students' concrete, everyday experiences, a finding that has significant implications for character education curriculum design.

The MBG program's contribution to children's social-emotional well-being and readiness to learn national values is a relevant finding within the global literature on school feeding programs. Research by Masset et al. (2012) in the *Journal of Development Effectiveness* showed that school lunch programs in developing countries consistently improve student attendance, concentration, and academic performance. This study extends these findings by identifying the character and national values dimension as an additional variable influenced by child well-being programs, a dimension not identified in previous studies.

The findings on the function of communal mealtimes as a space for socializing the Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (Unity in Diversity) value support Gordon Allport's contact hypothesis, developed by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. Cross-group interactions under conditions of equality, created by the MBG program, have been shown to reduce prejudice and strengthen social solidarity. In the context of Indonesia with its high ethnic diversity, this mechanism has strategic implications for preventing social disintegration.

The transformation of teachers' roles as value facilitators identified in this study aligns with Kennedy's (2019) study in the *Cambridge Journal of Education*, which emphasized the importance of teacher agency in citizenship education in the Asia-Pacific region. However, this study adds a new dimension in the form of specific characteristics of effective teachers as value facilitators: authentic storytelling skills, social sensitivity, and the ability to connect historical narratives to contemporary contexts. These findings offer an empirical basis for developing more effective PPKn teacher training programs.

The implications for SDG 4 (Quality Education) are significant. SDG 4.7 explicitly emphasizes the importance of education for sustainable development and global citizenship (UNESCO, 2023). This research demonstrates that revitalizing the nation's values through a contextual-inquiry approach is a concrete realization of SDG 4.7 in the Indonesian context, integrating local civic education with a global orientation. Therefore, this research is not only relevant to national education policy but also contributes to the global discourse on quality civic education.

The findings of this study have limitations that need to be transparently acknowledged. First, the study was conducted in Kendari City, with its specific socio-cultural characteristics, requiring caution in generalizing to other contexts. Second, the qualitative nature of the study, which focuses on depth rather than breadth, limits the ability to make strong causal claims. Third, the eight-month study period is insufficient to measure the long-term impact of the observed pedagogical interventions.

Nevertheless, the contribution of this research is quite substantial. Theoretically, it produces a new conceptual model that integrates the revitalization of historical values, child welfare programs, and inquiry pedagogy into a coherent character education ecosystem. Practically, these findings provide concrete guidance for curriculum designers, teacher trainers, and policymakers in basic education in Indonesia, who are facing the challenges of social disintegration in the post-truth era and digital polarization.

The relevance of this research is further strengthened in the context of the Independent Curriculum policy, which provides schools with greater flexibility in integrating local and national values into their learning. The findings can serve as an empirical basis for schools designing a more contextualized and nationally-based Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), while also integrating the MBG program as a vehicle for authentic character learning.

Overall, this research confirms that the nation's fighting spirit is not an obsolete historical entity, but rather a dynamic and contextual value. These values can and must be revitalized through a creative, contextual, and student-centered pedagogical approach. The strategic integration of historical value revitalization, child welfare programs such as the MBG (Child Development Group), and teacher competence as value facilitators is a proven effective formula for strengthening social cohesion among Indonesia's young generation.

CONCLUSION

This research yielded three key, mutually reinforcing findings. First, inquiry-based learning that integrates the values of the nation's struggle with the contemporary social context has proven effective in improving civic literacy and the internalization of affective values in elementary school students in Kendari City. Second, the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) has untapped potential as an authentic vehicle for strengthening national values, where shared mealtimes create concrete practices of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity) and the value of mutual cooperation that strengthen children's social-emotional well-being. Third, the success of value revitalization critically depends on the transformation of the teacher's role from a transmitter of knowledge to a facilitator of values capable of bringing historical narratives to life in the context of students' real lives.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged: its limited geographic coverage to a single city, its reliance on the subjective perceptions of informants, and its inability to measure the long-term impact of the observed pedagogical interventions. Longitudinal research across diverse geographical and socio-cultural contexts in Indonesia is highly recommended to strengthen the generalizability of these findings. Furthermore, experimental studies comparing various pedagogical approaches to revitalizing national values are needed to build a stronger evidence base.

The practical implications of this research for Indonesian education policy are quite significant: (1) the Independent Curriculum needs to explicitly integrate the MBG program as a vehicle for character learning, not just a nutrition program; (2) PPKn teacher training needs to strengthen authentic storytelling and contextual pedagogical competencies as the core of value facilitation; and (3) elementary schools need to design a holistic character education ecosystem, combining inquiry learning, child welfare programs, and community involvement. In this way, the nation's undying spirit of struggle can be kept alive as a moral force for Indonesia's next generation in facing the challenges of contemporary social disintegration.

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