



Improving Civic Literacy on Population and Government in Elementary Schools: A Quasi-Experimental Study Based on Contextual Learning

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Abstract

The low level of civic literacy among elementary school students, particularly in understanding Indonesia's population and governmental system, poses a critical challenge in basic education. This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of contextual learning strategies in improving students' civic literacy. Employing a quasi-experimental approach with qualitative descriptive methods, the study was conducted at an elementary school in Kendari City. Data were collected through observations, interviews, and student learning documentation. The findings demonstrate that contextual learning significantly enhances students' understanding of governmental structures, citizen roles, and population issues by engaging them in relevant and participatory learning experiences. The study's outcomes highlight improvements in students' critical awareness, multimodal communication, and active classroom involvement. These findings underscore the importance of contextualized, student-centered civic education that is grounded in local experiences. The study contributes to the development of participatory pedagogy and advocates for inclusive civic education models within Indonesia's primary education system.

Keywords: *Civic Literacy, Contextual Learning, Elementary Education, Government System, Population.*

PRELIMINARY

Civics education at the elementary school level plays a strategic role in shaping the foundation of children's character and national identity from an early age. Through learning materials such as the Indonesian population and government system, students are introduced to the social and political structures that are integral to national life (Assingkily et al., 2023). A good understanding of these topics not only provides cognitive development but also contributes to the growth of self-awareness as responsible citizens (Print, 2007; Hoskins & Kerr, 2012). However, at the elementary school level, this material is often presented abstractly, detached from the students' real-life context, making learning less meaningful and more likely to be rote.

Various studies show that elementary school students experience difficulties in understanding concepts such as population size, distribution, government structure, and the role of state institutions, especially when presented without linking them to their concrete experiences (Sapriya, 2017; Budimansyah & Suryadi, 2020). The weaknesses of the conventional teacher-centered approach result in low student civic literacy, particularly in the dimensions of knowledge and conceptual understanding. Therefore, a contextual learning approach, which links material to students' daily environment and life experiences, is becoming increasingly relevant for integration into Civic Education teaching in elementary schools (Johnson, 2002; Nurhadi, 2004).

Although civics education has been integrated into the elementary school curriculum in Indonesia, many students still lack a thorough understanding of the material on population and government systems.

Field studies and learning evaluations show that most students simply memorize basic information without being able to relate this knowledge to the social realities around them (Budimansyah & Suryadi, 2020; Wahyudin, 2021). This indicates that civic literacy, particularly in terms of knowledge and conceptual understanding, remains low. Material on government structure, population size and distribution, and the role of state institutions is often only partially understood and not applicable to elementary school students' daily lives.

This problem is exacerbated by a learning approach still dominated by lectures and passive assignments, which do not allow students to actively experience and reflect on the context of citizenship (Assingkily, 2021). Without learning strategies that encourage connections between the material and the real world, students tend to learn citizenship education in a formalistic and superficial manner (Sukardi & Nugroho, 2019). Therefore, the main challenge faced in teaching the topic of population and government in elementary schools is how to design a more meaningful and contextual approach so that students can develop a civic literacy that is comprehensive, critical, and relevant to their lives.

Based on the identified problems, this study aims to test the effectiveness of implementing contextual learning strategies in improving elementary school students' civic literacy, particularly on the topic of the Indonesian population and government system. Contextual learning was chosen because it is able to connect academic content with students' real-life experiences, thus it is expected to strengthen their conceptual understanding and make learning more meaningful (Johnson, 2002; Berns & Erickson, 2001). By actively involving students in situations that reflect everyday life, this approach provides opportunities for students to construct their own knowledge through direct involvement.

Specifically, this study aims to determine the extent to which contextual learning strategies can improve students' understanding of the concepts of population size and distribution, government structure, and the role of citizens in the Indonesian government system. This study also aims to measure changes in students' civic literacy levels before and after the learning treatment, in order to obtain a valid empirical picture of the impact of this approach. By using a quasi-experimental design, this study is expected to contribute to the development of Civic Education learning strategies that are more contextual, applicable, and appropriate to the cognitive development needs of elementary school students (Slavin, 2006; Nurhadi, 2004).

Previous studies in the field of civics education at the elementary school level have generally focused on the affective and moral aspects, while students' cognitive dimensions—particularly conceptual literacy regarding population and government systems—have received less in-depth attention (Budimansyah & Suryadi, 2020; Winataputra, 2016). Furthermore, most research addressing innovative learning strategies tends to be conducted at the secondary and tertiary levels, thus neglecting the pedagogical needs of early childhood students, who have different learning characteristics. Conventional, teacher-centered approaches still dominate civics learning at the elementary level, failing to provide sufficient space for students to directly experience or relate the material to the social realities they encounter daily (Sapriya, 2017).

Furthermore, few experimental studies have specifically tested the effectiveness of contextual learning approaches in improving elementary school students' civic literacy. The majority of studies use descriptive or qualitative methods, and few employ quasi-experimental designs to measure significant and measurable changes in student learning outcomes (Slavin, 2006; Wahyudin, 2021). This gap highlights the need for quantitative, intervention-based research that not only documents the learning process but also empirically tests how contextual learning strengthens students' understanding of essential civic concepts. This research aims to fill this gap and offer a pedagogical approach more suited to the needs of 21st-century learning in elementary schools.

This study offers an original contribution through the application of a quasi-experimental contextual learning strategy to improve elementary school students' civic literacy, specifically on the topic of Indonesian population and government systems. The novelty of this study lies in its pedagogical approach, which systematically integrates students' real-life contexts into the learning process while verifying its effectiveness through rigorous experimental methods. Unlike previous studies, which are primarily descriptive or theoretical, this study presents empirical evidence that can be used to strengthen context-based civic learning practices at the elementary level (Johnson, 2002; Berns & Erickson, 2001; Wahyudin, 2021).

The scientific justification for this research is very strong, considering the urgent need for pedagogical transformation in elementary schools to face 21st-century challenges, such as critical thinking, information literacy, and socio-civic skills. The context of Indonesian elementary education, which is still dominated by rote learning and minimal innovation, makes the results of this research relevant not only for the development of theory, but also as a practical reference in curriculum policy and teacher training. By emphasizing the integration between civic content and student experiences, this study broadens the horizon of understanding of how children learn to become conscious, reflective, and participatory citizens from an early age (Print, 2007; Hoskins & Kerr, 2012).

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach. This approach was chosen to explore in-depth the learning experiences of elementary school students in understanding the concepts of population and the Indonesian government system through contextual learning in Civics. The phenomenological approach allows for the examination of the subjective meanings students elicit from their involvement in the learning process based on real-life contexts (Assingkily, 2021; Moustakas, 1994; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The research was conducted at a public elementary school in Kendari City, Southeast Sulawesi. This school was selected purposively, considering its implementation of a project-based independent learning curriculum, openness to learning innovation, and the diversity of students' socioeconomic backgrounds. The school's environment, representing an urban community with complex citizenship challenges, makes it a relevant setting to explore the effectiveness of contextual learning in improving students' civic literacy.

Research Approach

The approach used in this research is a phenomenological one, focusing on individual experiences and perceptions regarding the political representation system in the region. This approach allows researchers to explore the meanings given by informants regarding the gap in political representation and its impact on their social and political lives. Using a phenomenological approach, this research seeks to capture the various perspectives existing within the community, including voters, legislators, and other stakeholders in the local political system.

Research Background

This research is set in Kendari City, one of the major cities in Southeast Sulawesi Province. The city is experiencing rapid urbanization and population growth, creating challenges related to the equitable distribution of political representation. Differences in population and access to public services between the city center and the suburbs affect the quality of government services and legislative representation. Kendari City was chosen as the research location due to its diverse population and socio-political dynamics, which reflect the unequal representation within a decentralized context.

Data collection technique

Data collection was conducted through three main techniques: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format to allow flexibility in gathering data from students and teachers regarding their perceptions of the relevance of the material to everyday life and how contextual strategies influence student understanding. Observations were conducted throughout the learning process, focusing on students' verbal and nonverbal interactions, teacher delivery methods, and the use of contextual media. Documentation in the form of photos of activities, teacher notes, student worksheets, and other learning artifacts was also collected to strengthen the validity of the data.

Data Analysis Techniques

Thematic analysis of data allows for a systematic and transparent analysis process, particularly in data coding, theme visualization, and inter-category relationships. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were then openly coded to identify units of meaning that emerged from student and teacher narratives. Next, codes were grouped into sub-themes and main themes using axial coding

techniques, resulting in thematic constructs such as "the connection between learning and the realities of students' lives," "the meaning of the concept of citizenship," and "student reflective engagement."

Data visualization was performed using word clouds, cluster analysis, and thematic mapping to emphasize consistency between themes and clarify conceptual relationships among findings. This step not only increased the credibility of data interpretation but also strengthened the empirical representation of student learning experiences.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

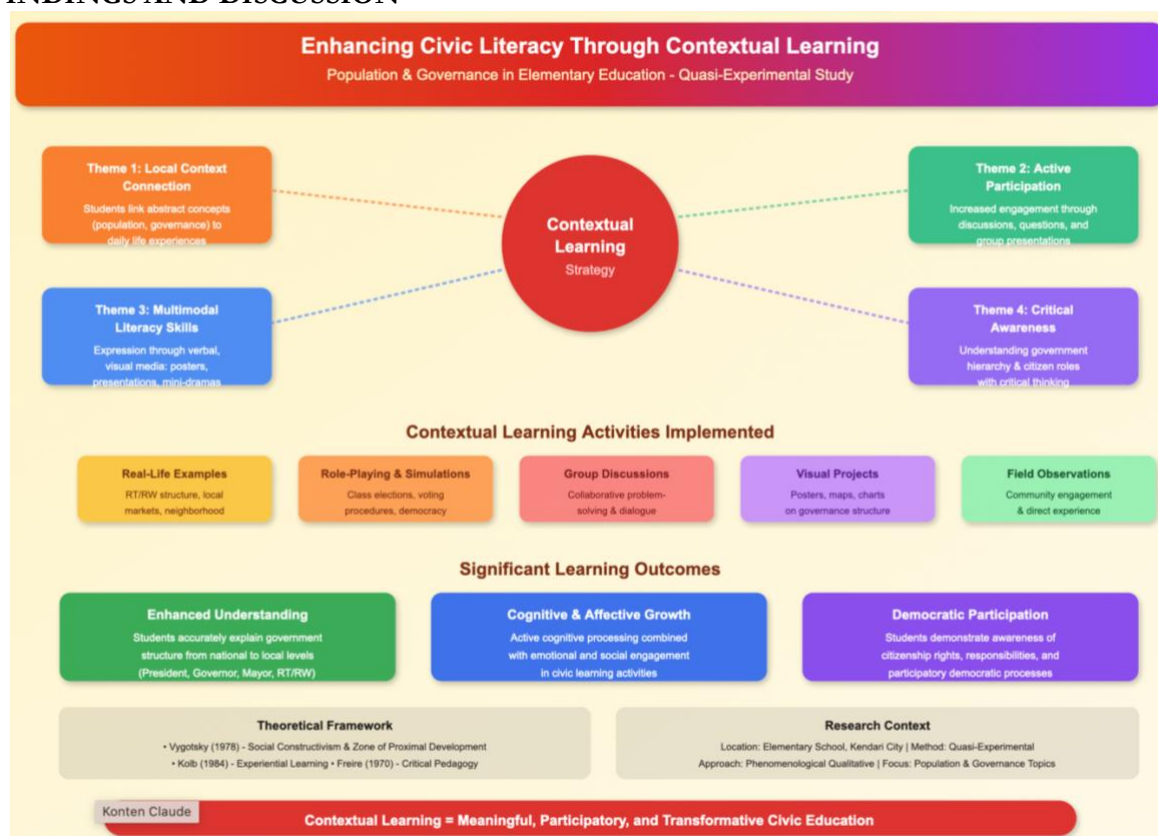


Figure 1. Enhancing Civic Literacy Through Contextual Learning

The results of this study indicate that contextual-based learning strategies significantly influence the improvement of elementary school students' civic literacy, particularly on the topic of the Indonesian population and government system. Data analysis 14 enabled researchers to identify patterns, themes, and relationships between concepts that emerged from interviews, classroom observations, and documentation of student learning outcomes. The coding process yielded several dominant themes: the connection of concepts to the local context, increased student participation, strengthening of verbal and visual civic literacy skills, and the growth of critical awareness of national life.

In the theme of connecting concepts to local contexts, students were able to connect abstract concepts such as population density, government systems, and the role of citizens to their daily experiences. This was reinforced by student quotes appearing in the "daily activities" and "neighborhood structure" data, where they cited concrete examples such as neighborhood associations (RT), neighborhood associations (RW), class president elections, and traditional markets as analogies for socio-political life. This aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) view that learning becomes meaningful when it occurs within the zone of proximal development through social interactions and real-world contexts.

Contextual learning has also been shown to increase active student participation in the learning process. Observational data shows a surge in the frequency of active participation, such as asking questions, discussing, and group presentations. This is reflected in the inter-code relationship graph (node

matrix) between "student activity" and "class engagement." This increase indicates that students are not only cognitively understanding but also affectively and socially engaged, supporting the active learning theory proposed by Bonwell & Eison (1991).

The civic literacy aspects referred to in this study are not limited to the ability to read texts, but also include the ability to understand socio-political structures, think critically about the role of citizens, and express ideas through various media. Findings from the "verbal expression" and "student visual products" nodes show that students are able to communicate their understanding in the form of presentations, posters, and mini-dramas. This approach enriches the multimodal literacy model as proposed by Kress (2003), which states that communication in the modern era involves various modes besides text.

Contextual learning strategies also support a systematic understanding of government hierarchy. Data findings indicate that many students were able to accurately explain the structure of government from the central government to the regional governments and list the main duties of the president, governor, and mayor. This was achieved through the use of visual media and classroom simulations, such as role-playing and voting, which was reinforced by the coding results for the "understanding of government structure" and "democratic participation" nodes. This aligns with the concept of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), which emphasizes direct experience as the basis for learning.

The findings of this study provide a theoretical contribution to the development of participatory and contextual citizenship pedagogy. A student-centered teaching model integrated with the local context can transform students' understanding and attitudes toward citizenship issues. In practice, teachers play a key role as learning facilitators who design activities based on students' real-life experiences, thus encouraging authentic engagement. This is also relevant to the critical pedagogy approach (Freire, 1970), which emphasizes education as a process of liberation and reflective dialogue.

However, this study has limitations in terms of coverage and number of participants. The study was conducted in only one elementary school in Kendari City, which may not represent the broader cultural and geographic variations in Indonesia. Furthermore, the quasi-experimental design, dominated by qualitative analysis, limits the statistical generalizability of the results. Based on these limitations, further research is recommended to adopt a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative and qualitative strengths. The study could also be expanded to various regions with different socio-cultural backgrounds to test the consistent effectiveness of contextual learning in improving civic literacy. Longitudinal studies are also needed to assess the sustainability of the learning's impact on students' civic behavior and values.

The social implications of these findings are significant. Improving civic literacy at the elementary level contributes to developing young citizens who are aware of their rights and responsibilities, understand the structure of government, and are able to think critically about national and state life. Ethically, this contextual approach values the diversity of students' experiences and promotes equal participation in learning. Inclusive, locally context-based learning supports the principle of social justice in education (Banks, 2008) and is an important foundation for strengthening democracy in the future.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that contextual learning strategies significantly improve elementary school students' civic literacy, particularly on the topic of the Indonesian population and government system. The contextual approach facilitates the connection between the teaching material and the realities of students' lives, increases active participation, and encourages the expression of understanding through verbal and visual media. Students not only understand the structure of government factually but also demonstrate critical thinking skills and an awareness of their roles and responsibilities as citizens from an early age. The learning process based on real-life experiences, discussions, and simulations strengthens students' cognitive, affective, and social engagement, which aligns with a progressive pedagogical approach.

Theoretically, these findings enrich the literature on citizenship pedagogy by emphasizing the importance of local context in the learning process. Contextual strategies enable more meaningful, relevant, and liberating learning, as emphasized in social constructivism and critical pedagogy theories. The practical implications are significant for elementary education: teachers are encouraged to adopt empowering approaches that ground civics material in students' daily lives. Furthermore, the curriculum needs to provide greater space for the integration of local contexts so that students can understand civic

concepts more concretely and reflectively. These findings also contribute to strengthening democratic values from an early age, which are an important foundation for building national character.

However, limitations of this study include its limited scope, conducted in only one elementary school in Kendari City, and the use of a quasi-experimental design with a qualitative approach, which limits the generalizability of the results. Data interpretation relies on accurate coding and the validity of triangulation. Therefore, future research should adopt a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative and qualitative strengths to generate a more comprehensive and generalizable understanding. Further studies are also recommended in diverse social and geographic settings and involving a broader sample to test the consistency of the effectiveness of contextual strategies.

From a social and ethical perspective, the results of this study emphasize the importance of inclusive citizenship education that is relevant to students' lived experiences. By positioning students as active participants in learning, this approach helps shape a generation of young people who not only understand theoretical concepts but also possess social competence, moral responsibility, and political awareness from an early age. This is a significant contribution to the development of a just and civilized democratic society.

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