



Integration of multicultural values in Civic Education learning through research-based learning

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Abstract:

The complex dynamics of Indonesia's pluralistic society necessitate innovative approaches to reconstruct Civic Education paradigms, specifically through the integration of multicultural values. This study investigates the implementation of Research-Based Learning (RBL)—operationalised through a systematic cycle of observation, data collection, analysis, conclusion, and application—as an innovative pedagogical model at Sanggar Anak Alam (SALAM). Employing a qualitative case study design, the research engaged 35 participants, comprising facilitators, students, and parents. Data were systematically gathered via in-depth interviews, participant observations, and document analysis, followed by thematic analysis and triangulation facilitated by ATLAS.ti software. The analysis yielded two primary findings: firstly, the embedding of multicultural values significantly enhances appreciation for diversity and cultivates an inclusive character amongst students; secondly, RBL effectively fosters civic competencies by actively engaging students in resolving contextualised social issues. These findings demonstrate that this model not only fortifies the internalisation of multicultural values but concurrently refines students' critical cognitive abilities, empathy, and collaborative skills. Ultimately, this framework exhibits substantial potential for adaptation within formal educational settings, thereby enriching the Civic Education curriculum to become more culturally responsive. This innovation posits a novel paradigm wherein inclusive pedagogy ensures equitable educational access, the RBL cycle refines instructional methodologies, and insights derived from non-formal education serve as a viable catalyst for fortifying institutional Civic Education.

Keywords: curriculum; elementary school learning; innovation; multicultural education

Introduction

In the context of 21st-century developments, international interactions and population mobility have driven an unprecedented intensity of contact between cultural groups. This phenomenon has heightened awareness of the reality of diversity while simultaneously giving rise to complex challenges such as intolerance, ethnocentrism, and social disintegration (Choi & Lee, 2020; Contreras et al., 2023; Vavrus, 2023). As a pluralistic nation with a broad spectrum of cultures, religions, and ethnicities, Indonesia is particularly vulnerable to such social friction (Fullinwider, 2015; Ormond & Vietti, 2022). Therefore, the national education system is required to respond to this dynamic by preparing a young generation that is not only academically competent but also possesses adequate multicultural citizenship competencies to live in harmony with differences.

Civic education is a compulsory subject in elementary schools, designed to instil civic competence and multicultural values. However, in practice, it has not fully addressed this challenge (Mazid et al., 2024; Thelma, 2024; White et al., 2023). Several key factors contribute to the underrepresentation of multicultural-based civic competence in the national curriculum. The dominance of a curriculum dense with instrumental cognitive content and oriented toward standardised evaluations leads to the neglect of affective dimensions such as empathy and tolerance, which are considered difficult to measure (Joint Research Centre: Institute for the Protection and Security of the Citizen et al., 2014). Furthermore, although multicultural values are included in learning outcomes, they are often not operationally defined, leaving teachers without practical guidance to transform them into contextual learning experiences (Dahliyana et al., 2024; Susanti & Suryadi, 2022). This systemic gap reflects the structural tension that Banks (2022) identifies between equity-oriented multicultural education frameworks and the practical realities of high-stakes curriculum implementation.

These factors compound a deficit in teachers' pedagogical capacity to teach multicultural dimensions through critical-reflective approaches, which ultimately returns classroom practice to safe but non-transformative doctrinal methods (Body et al., 2024; Siregar & Aswan, 2022). This results in a gap between the civic theory taught and the reality of pluralistic Indonesian society. Civic Education still tends to be textual and doctrinal, failing to stimulate students' critical thinking and social empathy sufficiently. Furthermore, innovative learning approaches such as Research-Based Learning, which have the potential to activate students in exploring and understanding the diversity around them, are still very rarely utilised in the Civic Education context (Bae-Dimitriadis & Ivashkevich, 2023). Westheimer & Kahne (2004) argue compellingly that effective civic education must develop not merely personally responsible citizens who follow rules, but also participatory and justice-

oriented citizens who can analyse structural injustice and take collective action, requiring pedagogical approaches that go significantly beyond content transmission.

Most previous research on Research-Based Learning (RBL) has been applied in science, natural sciences, engineering, and health at the university level (Al-Thani & Ahmad, 2025; Hanun et al., 2025; Suyatman et al., 2021). Key findings from various studies indicate that RBL is effective in improving cognitive skills, including analytical thinking, scientific literacy, and research methodology (Fakhriyah et al., 2023; Hemtasin et al., 2023). One study confirmed its effectiveness in improving critical thinking skills, with the experimental group's average score of 72.70 significantly higher than the control group's score of 58.73 (Arifin et al., 2022). The recent meta-analysis by Tuyet et al. (2024) confirmed a substantial mean effect size ($SMD = 1.27$) for inquiry-based learning on critical thinking across multiple educational levels, validating the approach's broader applicability. In the context of Civic Education, a multicultural approach is believed to promote open and critical thinking skills by respecting different views (Nuryadi et al., 2020; Pozo-Muñoz et al., 2023). However, research on RBL that focuses specifically on multicultural civic education remains limited to science contexts and is dominated by quantitative designs. Therefore, this study fills a research gap by exploring Research-Based Learning with a multicultural approach in Civic Education using a case study design. This topic remains very rarely explored.

Based on these problems, Research-Based Learning is proposed as a relevant and innovative approach to Civic Education. In the civics context, this model can be directed toward exploring the socio-cultural realities in students' environments, so that multicultural values such as respect, tolerance, and social justice are not only understood as abstract concepts but are discovered and experienced directly through a simple research process (Luthfi et al., 2020; Prasetyo et al., 2023). The integration of Research-Based Learning and multicultural values in Civic Education is expected to transform learning into a more contextual and meaningful experience. This research contributes by developing an innovative model of Civic Education learning grounded on multicultural values through Research-Based Learning, applicable to the elementary school context, and offering a reference for educators and policymakers in revitalising the role of Civic Education as a vehicle for forming intelligent, critical, and inclusive citizens in Indonesia's pluralistic society.

Method

This study uses a descriptive qualitative method with a case study approach to explore practices and experiences of multicultural teaching at Sanggar Anak Alam (SALAM), a non-formal educational institution. The case study design is appropriate for this study because it enables an

in-depth, naturalistic examination of a bounded educational context, capturing the complexity of multicultural pedagogy in action rather than reducing it to measurable variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). SALAM was selected as the research site because of its explicit commitment to culturally responsive, student-centred learning and its established track record of integrating multicultural values into all dimensions of educational practice.

Participants were selected purposively and included 35 people: facilitators (10), the SALAM founder (1), parents (10), and students (15). The selection criteria included a minimum of 3 years of facilitator experience and diverse socio-economic and demographic backgrounds to ensure a variety of perspectives (Berndt, 2020). Data collection was conducted through open-ended interviews with different question protocols for each participant group, lasting from 30 minutes to 1.5 hours. Interview transcripts were verified by participants to ensure data accuracy (Aminas et al., 2025; Keramati & Gillies, 2024). Researchers also observed SALAM activities, such as class discussions and research presentations, to obtain comprehensive contextual data. Participant anonymity was maintained through the use of pseudonyms.

Data analysis was carried out in two complementary stages. First, source triangulation was conducted by comparing the results of interviews with facilitators, parents, and students to conduct initial coding. Second, thematic analysis was continued with the assistance of Atlas—ti software to identify themes emerging from coded data (Friese, 2019). The combination of these methods strengthens the validity of findings: triangulation ensures data consistency, while thematic analysis connects and interprets emerging patterns (Friese, 2019; Gulsia & Yadav, 2023; Ismail & Sarudin, 2022). Triangulation ensured consistency across participant groups, while thematic analysis helped connect and interpret emerging patterns. This approach allowed researchers to explore the application of Research-Based Learning to instil citizenship competencies and character in students, and to examine the dynamics of collaboration among facilitators, parents, and the school community in creating innovative learning practices.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

Pedagogical Innovation and Strategy in Strengthening Civic Competence

The results of the qualitative analysis, based on thematic analysis, reveal that the multicultural learning innovation is formed by the complementary perspectives and roles of three main stakeholders: facilitators/teachers, parents, and schools/government. Their synergistic collaboration creates a dynamic multicultural learning ecosystem. Key perspectives from informants reflect the multi-actor nature of this ecosystem:

"My children here, besides being equipped with values education, are also given a broader understanding of academic knowledge." (D1)

"The best way to innovate multicultural learning is to integrate it into school habituation programs." (D16)

"The SALAM learning system is an innovation in teaching the national curriculum by internalising the learning cycle into the learning process." (D15)

"Innovation is more about providing training to teachers on multicultural education and easing the administrative burden." (D17)

Results of interviews with parents indicate the formation of citizenship competencies and positive characters in students within the inclusive environment:

"The attitude that most distinguishes them from other children out there is that people usually think they are stubborn because they usually have a mindset that makes them sometimes able to criticise something they think is wrong." (D1)

"Responsibility for oneself is an attitude that is characteristic of Salam children." (D1)

"The most visible character is being able to accept other people's views or differences." (D12)

"They are braver in arguing and more confident." (D18)

These findings show that multicultural-based learning not only emphasises knowledge acquisition but also the formation of responsive civic attitudes and behaviours that are foundational to democratic participation.

Strengthening Civic Competence Through a Research-Based Learning Pedagogical Framework

Results of qualitative analysis of facilitators and parents revealed that instilling civic competence is the main factor influencing class dynamics in a multicultural perspective. Table 1 presents the factors influencing class dynamics.

Table 1 emphasises that multicultural education recognises the uniqueness, freedom, and diversity of individual experiences. Its primary focus is on creating a dialogic space that facilitates all variations of student background and potential.

Table 1. Factors Influencing Class Dynamics in a Multicultural Perspective

No	Indicator	Aspect	Illustration Quote
1.	Social Environment	Multicultural Understanding; Differences in Social Status	"Of course, this is important, especially for my two young children. The school system here really reflects diversity well, because

			the students come from various social classes." (D1)
2.	Individual Character	Character Differences; The Uniqueness of Each Individual; Differences in Learning Security	"I joined Salam in 2019. Initially, I was unfamiliar with Salam's learning system because I thought it was similar to a formal school, but I soon realized that it was different. SALAM functions as an alternative school that supports children's learning by embracing their diverse backgrounds. Salam does not categorize children's potential." (D14)
3.	Learning Process	Freedom to Learn; Process Orientation; Differences in Learning Experience	"The concrete activities that I do are more about providing a dialogue space for students." (D19); "This approach does not only focus on results but emphasizes the learning process itself." (D13)

The implementation of Research-Based Learning (RBL) received a positive response from facilitators. Students' perceptions of authentic research activities strongly support multicultural learning:

"The most memorable activity was when I conducted a survey at several stations for a station game creation project." (D17)

"When I interviewed the duck seller." (D1)

"Activities to find data on how to make pottery." (D5)

"An unforgettable experience when I tried to explain the results of tarot cards." (D8)

"When trying to disassemble the AC machine." (D7)

These activities are not merely memorable; they train investigative, analytical, and communication skills that constitute core components of civic competence. Despite the model's recognised importance, its implementation faces challenges, primarily in adapting the multicultural RBL model to a more uniform national curriculum structure. Identified obstacles include:

"It is quite difficult, because teachers in formal schools are already burdened with so much administration, let alone being forced to understand the diverse characteristics of children. While the learning system may not be feasible to adopt entirely, adapting some of the learning values is still possible for formal education." (D18)

"Regarding adaptation, this is not entirely possible, as this system was designed as an alternative solution for non-formal schools. Adaptation may require consideration and support." (D4)

Strategic solutions identified include: increasing teacher capacity through cultural acceptance training accompanied by reducing administrative burdens (D16), and a partial integrative adaptation approach: "implementing certain stages of the Research-Based Learning cycle into existing subjects is feasible" (D13). This integrative strategy allows for the infusion of multicultural values and research skills into the national curriculum structure without significant disruption (Amilleanda et al., 2022; Banks, 2016; Mahmud, 2023).

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that the effectiveness of multicultural educational innovations depends heavily on the dynamics among various actors within the educational ecosystem. This concept aligns with Bronfenbrenner (2009) developmental ecology theory, which emphasises that interactions between various nested environmental systems influence individual development. El Zaatari & Maalouf (2022) demonstrated that Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory effectively explains how students' civic and social belonging develops through interactions across multiple ecological system levels, and that school microsystem practices, mesosystem collaborations, and exosystem institutional supports all contribute to the formation of inclusive identities and civic dispositions. In this study's context, informant D16's statement about integrating innovations into "school habituation programs" represents an intervention at the mesosystem level, where reciprocal relationships between schools and daily routines occur (Richter et al., 2022). Meanwhile, institutional support in the form of teacher training and reduced administrative burdens (D17) operates at the exosystem level, indirectly creating conditions conducive to the realisation of an inclusive learning environment.

The effectiveness of this educational ecosystem is reflected in students' development of civic competence. *First*, independent and critical thinking is demonstrated through the ability to "criticise something they deem wrong" (D1). This ability constitutes the foundation of what Westheimer & Kahne (2004) term the "justice-oriented citizen," who does not merely comply but actively analyses and questions social injustice. Their framework, derived from a two-year empirical study of democratic education programs, distinguishes three citizen types: personally responsible, participatory, and justice-oriented. The civic dispositions evidenced at SALAM most closely resemble the justice-oriented type, representing the highest level of civic development. *Second*, personal and social responsibility, embodied in "responsibility for oneself" (D1), reflects the internalisation of autonomous values that are prerequisites for broader social responsibility.

Third, respect for differences, reflected in the ability to "accept the views or differences of others" (D12), goes beyond passive tolerance. This

represents active recognition of diversity, which is the essence of multicultural education (Freire & Valdez, 2021; Japar et al., 2022; Wang, 2008). *Fourth*, the courage and confidence demonstrated by "being more daring in debating and confident" (D18) indicate mastery of communication skills essential for participation in the democratic public sphere. These findings collectively strengthen the proposition that effective citizenship education must simultaneously build civic knowledge, civic disposition, and civic skills (Cogan, 1999).

An analysis of classroom dynamics reveals that multicultural education fundamentally recognises the uniqueness, freedom, and diversity of individual experiences (Barton & Ho, 2020; Buzzetto-Hollywood et al., 2024). Three key factors identified are: (1) Social Environment, where diversity of students' social backgrounds (D1) creates a community environment facilitating natural intergroup interaction; (2) Individual Character, with recognition of each child's uniqueness (D14) that prevents generalization of potential and ensures an inclusive approach; and (3) Learning Process, which focuses on "freedom to learn" and "process orientation" (D13), creating ideal conditions for the development of citizenship competencies. This tripartite framework resonates with Banks' (2022) five dimensions of multicultural education, particularly equity pedagogy, prejudice reduction, and empowering school culture, all of which require attention to both individual student characteristics and the broader social environment of learning.

The Research-Based Learning syntax has proven to be an effective pedagogical strategy in this context (Hemtasin et al., 2023). Students' authentic research activities constitute manifestations of learning that train the investigative, analytical, and communication skills that are core components of civic competence. Through Research-Based Learning, students are not merely passive objects but active agents who construct knowledge through interactions with complex and diverse social realities, a process that aligns with the principles of social constructivism (Glassman et al., 2023; Tilak & Glassman, 2022). Glassman et al. (2023) provide the theoretical foundation for understanding why RBL works. By positioning students within zones of proximal development, supported by facilitator scaffolding and peer collaboration, the RBL cycle enables students to develop civic concepts not as memorised content but as socially constructed, personally meaningful understandings. This theoretical alignment between Vygotsky's social constructivism and RBL pedagogy is particularly significant for multicultural education because it implies that civic concepts such as tolerance, justice, and democratic participation are most deeply learned when students actively construct them through engagement with real social diversity rather than receiving them as transmitted facts.

Despite its positive impact, the implementation faces substantive challenges, primarily in adapting multicultural RBL to a more uniform national curriculum structure. This challenge is exacerbated by the high administrative burden on teachers (D18) and the nature of SALAM's system, which was originally designed for non-formal contexts (D4). To address these obstacles, two strategic solutions were identified: strengthening teacher agency through cultural acceptance and inclusive learning training, accompanied by reducing administrative burdens (D16); and a partial integrative adaptation approach, in which implementing certain stages of the RBL cycle into existing subjects is feasible (D13). This integrative strategy is supported by the argument that it allows multicultural values and research skills to be infused into the national curriculum structure without causing significant disruption, thereby mitigating resistance to change (Amilleanda et al., 2022; J. A. Banks, 2016; Mahmud, 2023).

Overall, this study underscores that strengthening civic competence in a multicultural environment requires a holistic and systemic approach. Innovation lies not in a single method but in building a collaborative ecosystem supported by relevant pedagogical strategies such as Research-Based Learning. While the challenges of adapting to a rigid curriculum framework are real, solutions that strengthen teacher capacity, provide targeted policy support, and employ thoughtful adaptation strategies offer a viable path for replication or adaptation in broader formal education contexts.

Conclusion

Strengthening citizenship competencies in a pluralistic society requires a holistic and systemic approach. The key to success lies in integrating multicultural values into Civic Education to create inclusive, dialogic spaces, strengthened by synergistic collaboration among teachers, parents, and schools. This study confirms that the Research-Based Learning (RBL) pedagogical framework is effective in transforming students' roles into active researchers, thereby optimising the development of citizenship competencies, including investigative, analytical, and communication skills. The civic dispositions observed at SALAM, particularly critical thinking, tolerance, social responsibility, and communicative confidence, reflect the justice-oriented citizenship ideal articulated by Westheimer and Kahne (2004) and the integrative multicultural education framework proposed by Banks (2022).

This study has limitations because it focuses on a case study at Sanggar Anak Alam, so the findings and models produced cannot necessarily be generalised to other educational contexts with different characteristics. Theoretically, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory provides an explanatory framework for understanding how actors in the microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem at SALAM create conditions for the development of multicultural civic competence.

Vygotsky's social constructivist framework, as elaborated by Glassman et al. (2023), provides the pedagogical foundation for understanding why RBL is particularly well-suited for developing deep civic knowledge and values. Future research is recommended to test this multicultural integration model and RBL in broader and more diverse contexts, including formal schools with diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, to measure the model's effectiveness and adaptability across various educational settings and to examine further the mechanisms through which RBL cycles can be integrated into national curriculum structures without compromising their transformative potential.

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Ethics Approval

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