

Integrating Character Education into Elementary Civic Education: A Kohlbergian Perspective on Moral Development

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the integration of character education into Civic Education (PPKn) learning in elementary schools from the perspective of Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development. The research was conducted in three elementary schools in Lampung using a qualitative mini-research approach. Data were collected through teacher interviews, classroom observations, and student discussions. The findings reveal that character education is integrated into Civic Education through various strategies, including group discussions, collaborative learning, teacher role modeling, reflective activities, and the development of positive habits. These strategies aim to foster essential character values such as honesty, responsibility, discipline, tolerance, and cooperation among students. The study also found that most students remain at the preconventional and early conventional stages of moral development, where their behavior is largely influenced by external factors such as school rules, teacher supervision, rewards, and social acceptance. Several challenges were identified, including peer influence, inconsistencies between school values and students' social environments, and limited opportunities for moral reflection. To address these challenges, teachers employ contextual learning methods, provide positive role models, encourage reflective thinking, and collaborate with parents to reinforce character values beyond the classroom. The study concludes that the successful integration of character education in Civic Education requires continuous support from teachers, families, schools, and the wider community to promote students' moral growth and character development.

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INTRODUCTION

Character education is crucial to the educational process. Students benefit from character education in both academic and personal spheres, developing positive character traits, including integrity, honesty, responsibility, a strong work ethic, empathy, and others. All components of education, including character education, work together to ensure the successful implementation of the educational process. Character education is highly effective in teaching students the importance of developing positive character traits, which aligns with the character objectives of the national education system.

The key elements that constitute character education can be organized into three basic categories (Nida, 2013). These three elements are moral knowledge (or moral understanding), moral feelings (or moral emotions), and moral actions (or moral behavior). These three components are interrelated and influence one another in the process of building strong character and positive moral values in an individual. Effective character education focuses on these three components equally so that individuals demonstrate a good understanding of moral values, are able to experience moral values, and ultimately display those moral values in their daily interactions.

Character education instills strong morals and ethics and aims to improve educational outcomes as a result of school initiatives that emphasize students' character and moral education. According to Kohlberg, Piaget's approach to moral development and the similar outcomes in both cases stem from the complexity of the latter's theory. Unlike Piaget, Kohlberg, in his cognitive theory, focuses on growth through the construction of cognitive structures and views moral development as the result of an individual's self-acceptance and self-actualization that goes beyond merely fulfilling basic needs and relieving tension and anxiety. Kohlberg also states that most aspects of moral development are the same across all societies.

This is because every society has social relationships and conflicts that require establishing a moral order. Social relationships are the primary source for the formation of moral norms, and the internalization of these norms occurs during structural interactions between individuals. Moral development depends more on the environment and the quality of social and cognitive stimuli during an individual's development, and cannot be limited to an individual's experiences with their parents or experiences with disciplinary practices.

METHOD

Research Location and Time

This research was conducted at three elementary schools, namely:

1. Campang Raya Public Elementary School No. 2
2. State Elementary School 1 Air Naningan
3. State Elementary School 2 Langkapura Research address:
 1. Jl. Alimudin Umar, Sukabumi, Bandar Lampung
 2. Air Naningan, Air Naningan Subdistrict, Tanggamus
 3. Jl. Batukalam, Langkapura Subdistrict Research date:
 1. Friday, April 3, 2026, 9:00 AM–until completion
 2. Friday, March 27, 2026, 9:00 AM–until finished
 3. Friday, April 3, 2026, 11:00 AM–completion

Research Method

This research employs a mini-research and qualitative methodology. In this context, a qualitative approach is most appropriate because the purpose of this study is to understand how character education is integrated into Pancasila and Civic Education (PPKn) instruction in elementary schools. The research data includes teachers' responses, views, and experiences. This report presents descriptive data regarding the teaching of Pancasila and Civic Education as well as character education. This article aims to discuss the integration of character education into Pancasila and Civic Education (PPKn) lessons

in elementary schools, which is crucial and plays a significant role in shaping students' moral development.

From Lawrence Kohlberg's perspective, you are at the preconventional and conventional stages. Civic education that integrates character values—including discipline, responsibility, honesty, and cooperation can enhance students' moral reasoning so that they behave well not only because they are motivated by fear of punishment, but also because they understand the importance of moral values in social life.

Data Collection Techniques

Data collection involved interviews with teachers, classroom observations, and focus group interviews with students to gain insights into the application of the character values of discipline, responsibility, honesty, and cooperation during learning activities. The data is then analyzed descriptively in accordance with Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development. The aim is to identify how character education implemented by teachers contributes to the growth of students' moral reasoning and the school community in general.

Research Subjects

This mini-research study focuses on the work of Civic Education (PKn) teachers in elementary schools, who were selected because they play a crucial role in integrating character education into the learning process. Teachers are the primary source of data for obtaining information about strategies, methods, and learning activities used to instill character values in students, including discipline in daily life, responsibility, honesty, cooperation, and mutual respect. The researcher examined how character education is implemented in the Civic Education classroom setting and how it relates to moral development based on Lawrence Kohlberg's theory through interviews and direct observation.

The following are the names of the informants:

Informant

1. Mrs. Masnah, S.Pd, Gr
2. Informant 2: Mrs. Rusnaini, S.Pd
3. Informant 3: Ms. Yolanda Priyandani, S.Pd.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Integration of Character Education in Civic Education According to Lawrence Kohlberg

The integration of character education into Civic Education (PPKn) involves deliberately embedding values such as honesty, responsibility, tolerance, discipline, and cooperation into classroom learning. In the three schools examined in this study, teachers described using discussions and group work to give students opportunities to exchange opinions, present arguments, complete shared tasks, and practise respecting differences. These activities also allow teachers to observe how students express opinions and respond to classmates. From a Kohlbergian perspective, such situations can provide opportunities for students to consider rules, social expectations, and the reasons underlying moral decisions (Kohlberg, 1981; Lestari & Marzuki, 2020).

The interviews indicated that the participating teachers used several complementary strategies to integrate character values into PPKn lessons. These included discussion, teacher role modelling, assignments, adherence to classroom rules, and reflection after learning activities. The practices described by the teachers created opportunities for students to demonstrate honesty when expressing opinions, responsibility when completing tasks, and tolerance when encountering different viewpoints. These findings are consistent with research emphasizing the role of teachers as models and guides in students' ethical and moral development (Aini & Ramadhan, 2024). However, the strategies alone do not establish the moral-development stage of each student; students' reasoning would need to be examined directly through appropriate moral dilemmas or follow-up interviews (Kohlberg, 1981; Hasanah, 2019).

Classroom observations also recorded behaviours that did not consistently reflect the values being taught, including incomplete or late assignments, dishonesty in individual or group tasks, and difficulty listening respectfully to others. These observations suggest a gap between the presentation of moral values and their consistent enactment in classroom situations. They should not, by themselves, be taken as proof that character education had no effect or that students definitively belonged to a particular moral stage. Kohlberg's framework concerns the reasoning used to justify moral decisions, rather than behaviour alone; therefore, claims about students' moral reasoning should be supported by evidence of how students explain their choices (Kohlberg, 1981; Hasanah, 2019).

Students' Moral Understanding in Civic Education

The teachers' accounts suggest that students were familiar with values such as honesty, discipline, and responsibility, but did not always apply them consistently. Teachers' instructions, school rules, and the surrounding social environment appeared to be important influences on students' behaviour. This pattern is relevant to Hasanah's (2019) study of elementary students, which found that students' moral reasoning may remain strongly influenced by avoiding punishment and by immediate consequences. The present study's findings should nevertheless be interpreted as teachers' reports and classroom observations, rather than as a formal assessment of every student's moral-development stage.

Kohlberg's theory distinguishes preconventional reasoning, in which decisions may be guided by punishment or personal benefit, from conventional reasoning, in which individuals increasingly consider social approval, rules, and the maintenance of social order (Kohlberg, 1981). In the present study, teachers described instances in which students appeared to follow rules particularly when supervision was present or when school expectations were clearly enforced. Some students were also reported to follow their peers' decisions even when they appeared to recognise that those decisions were not ideal. Such accounts may indicate tension between personal judgement and the desire for peer acceptance, but they are not sufficient on their own to classify students' moral stages. A more direct assessment of students' justifications would be needed to make that determination (Hasanah, 2019; Kohlberg, 1981).

The way teachers structure learning may affect whether students have opportunities to explain the reasons behind moral rules. When instruction focuses only on compliance, students may have limited opportunities to consider why a rule is fair or how a decision affects other people. By contrast, discussions of realistic situations and guided reflection can invite students to articulate and reconsider their reasoning. This approach is consistent with Kohlberg's emphasis on moral judgement and with research highlighting teachers' roles in guiding children's ethical and moral development (Kohlberg, 1981; Aini & Ramadhan, 2024).

Challenges in Implementing Character Education

The interview data identified peer influence as one challenge in sustaining character education. Teachers reported that students sometimes adjusted their behaviour to gain acceptance from classmates, even when peer expectations conflicted with values promoted at school. This suggests that character education needs to account for the social relationships in which students make everyday decisions. Research on character education in Pancasila and Civic Education likewise identifies contextual and environmental factors as relevant to implementation, although the specific influence of peers should be examined in relation to the evidence collected in each setting (Lestari & Marzuki, 2020; Hasanah, 2019).

Another challenge described in the study was the perceived inconsistency between the values promoted at school and behaviours students encountered in their wider social environments. When students receive different messages about honesty, responsibility, or respect across settings, applying school-taught values may become more difficult. The present study records this as a concern raised through the research process; it does not independently establish the prevalence of such inconsistency outside the participating schools. Coordination among teachers, families, and the wider school community may help reinforce shared expectations for students' behaviour (Lestari & Marzuki, 2020; Uge et al., 2022).

Teachers' Efforts to Overcome Challenges

Teachers described adapting learning activities to students' needs and using discussions, group work, debates, reflection, and examples from everyday life to connect PPKn concepts with students' experiences. These methods can provide opportunities for students to explain their views, listen to others, and consider the consequences of different choices. The findings describe the approaches reported by the participating teachers; they do not demonstrate that any one method is universally effective. The use of contextual activities is consistent with the broader importance of planning and implementing character education through classroom learning (Lestari & Marzuki, 2020; Kohlberg, 1981).

The teachers also described reinforcing character values through routines such as arriving on time, completing and submitting assignments, maintaining neatness, being honest, and respecting classmates and teachers. Repeated practice can make school expectations visible in everyday activities, but it should be paired with opportunities for students to understand why those expectations exist. Research on discipline in elementary schools similarly highlights habituation and teacher example as approaches for supporting students' behavioural development (Uge et al., 2022).

Teacher role modelling was another strategy identified in the study. Teachers are not only responsible for explaining subject content; their everyday conduct can also demonstrate how honesty, responsibility, discipline, and respect are expressed in practice. For young learners, consistency between what teachers say and what they do can make the values taught in lessons more concrete. This interpretation aligns with research describing teachers as role models who guide students' ethical and moral development (Aini & Ramadhan, 2024; Uge et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

Educators, in their efforts to enhance character education, tailor their approaches based on the unique needs of students in their classes.¹¹ From the interview results, it is understood that if teachers want students to be active with the material they are learning, they will do their utmost to plan the most effective teaching strategies using methods such as discussions, group work, debates, and reflections that can help students actively absorb moral values. They also draw examples from real life and apply them so that students can understand Civic Education (PKN) material as it applies to real-world behavior. This indicates that civic education instruction is expected to be active

Positive habits are also integrated into character education as part of the school's teaching strategy. Simple practices students can adopt include punctuality, responsibility for completing and submitting homework, honesty, neatness, and respect for fellow students and teachers.¹² Students are expected to learn desired values, as well as develop and practice them. This is crucial for the character education of school-age children, as the learning process is slow, gradual, and ongoing.

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