



Small Group Discussion Strategies Reviewed to Improve Student Learning Outcomes in Civics Learning at MI Sultan Agung

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the effectiveness of small group learning strategies in improving student learning outcomes in Civics Education at MI Sultan Agung. Civics, as a subject, plays a crucial role in shaping students' character, sense of responsibility, and awareness of democratic values. However, traditional teaching methods often result in passive student participation and low academic performance. To address this issue, this research implemented a classroom action research (CAR) approach consisting of two cycles, each comprising planning, action, observation, and reflection. The subjects of the study were fifth-grade students at MI Sultan Agung, totaling 28 participants. Data collection techniques included observation, tests, and documentation. The findings indicate a significant improvement in student learning outcomes after applying small group learning strategies. In the first cycle, the average student learning outcome reached 68.21, with 60.71% of students achieving the minimum mastery criterion (MMC). In the second cycle, the average score increased to 82.14, with 89.29% of students achieving the MMC. Furthermore, student engagement and participation in the learning process showed marked improvement, indicating that small group strategies promote collaboration, active learning, and critical thinking. These results support the conclusion that small group learning is an effective pedagogical approach for enhancing both cognitive and affective learning outcomes in Civics Education. This study contributes to the growing body of research advocating for student-centered learning environments and highlights the importance of interactive teaching methods in primary education. The implementation of small group learning is recommended as a sustainable strategy to improve educational quality, particularly in the context of civic education, where active student involvement is essential. Future research may explore the long-term impact of this strategy and its application across different subjects and educational settings.

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Introduction

Civics Education plays a vital role in shaping the democratic character, civic responsibility, and national identity of students, especially in primary education. It cultivates awareness of rights and obligations, encourages social participation, and promotes values such as tolerance, justice, and patriotism (Hoskins & Janmaat, 2019). However, Civics Education is often delivered through conventional teaching methods that focus on rote memorization, leading to low student engagement and poor academic outcomes.

In the context of Indonesian primary schools, particularly Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (MI), Civics is not merely an academic subject but a foundational component of character education. However, many students struggle to internalize civic values due to a lack of interactive and participatory teaching strategies (Sukardi et al., 2021). Traditional teacher-centered approaches have failed to foster critical thinking and collaborative skills, which are essential for 21st-century learning.

Small group learning has emerged as a promising pedagogical strategy to enhance student engagement, collaboration, and deeper understanding across various disciplines. It facilitates peer interaction, encourages active participation, and allows students to construct knowledge through dialogue and shared experiences (Gillies, 2016). When applied effectively, small group learning can significantly improve both cognitive and affective learning outcomes.

Several studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of small group learning in science and language education. However, its application in Civics Education, especially at the elementary level, remains underexplored (Slavin, 2014; Kagan, 2015). This indicates a gap in the literature that this study seeks to address by evaluating the impact of small group learning on student outcomes in Civics Education at MI Sultan Agung.

The relevance of student-centered learning models, particularly in fostering democratic values and social responsibility, has been emphasized in global education policies (UNESCO, 2017). Therefore, integrating small group learning into Civics Education aligns with broader international efforts to promote participatory citizenship education.

Research in developed contexts has shown that collaborative learning enhances student autonomy and motivation. However, fewer empirical studies have explored its implementation in under-resourced or religious-based educational institutions like MI in Indonesia (Nurhayati et al., 2022). This study provides a contextualized investigation into how such strategies function in these unique educational environments.

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on small group learning strategies specifically tailored for Civics Education in a primary Islamic school context. While many studies focus on academic achievement in STEM subjects, this study highlights how pedagogical strategies can improve civic knowledge and engagement.

Moreover, this study integrates classroom action research (CAR) methodology to allow for iterative improvement and reflective practice. This methodological approach enables educators to adapt teaching methods in real-time and observe their impact directly, which is particularly effective in dynamic classroom environments (Kemmis et al., 2014). Another contribution of this study is its focus on both learning outcomes and student attitudes. Civic education success is not only measured by test scores but also by how well students demonstrate responsibility, cooperation, and moral reasoning in class activities.

This research also addresses the call for more empirical studies that evaluate the implementation process of pedagogical models rather than just their outcomes (Hattie, 2015). By analyzing student participation, group dynamics, and teacher observations, this study presents a holistic view of small group learning in practice. Previous research has often generalized findings without accounting for sociocultural differences. This study situates itself within the cultural and religious context of MI Sultan Agung, where the integration of civic and moral education is fundamental to the curriculum (Fauzi & Sahabuddin, 2021).

Educational reforms in Indonesia emphasize character building and moral education. Yet, there is limited research on how teaching strategies like small group learning align with these national priorities, particularly in Islamic primary schools. This study contributes to filling that research void. One challenge in Civics Education is making abstract values and concepts relatable to students. Small group learning allows for contextual discussion and real-life examples, thus improving conceptual understanding and relevance (Zhou & Brown, 2017). Teachers often face difficulties managing group activities effectively, especially in large or mixed-ability classrooms. This study also explores practical strategies for implementing small group learning within the specific constraints of MI Sultan Agung, offering insights into classroom management and instructional design.

The implementation of small group learning is supported by constructivist learning theories that emphasize active knowledge construction through social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978; Palincsar, 1998). This theoretical foundation underscores the potential of small group learning to enhance student-centered pedagogy.

This research further considers the role of the teacher as a facilitator rather than a transmitter of knowledge. In small group settings, the teacher's role shifts to guiding

discussion, posing critical questions, and supporting cooperative inquiry, all of which are essential in civic education.

This study also investigates how group composition, task design, and group norms influence learning outcomes. These variables are often overlooked in previous studies, which limits the replicability and effectiveness of small group strategies in diverse settings (Webb et al., 2014).

The integration of moral, social, and cognitive dimensions in Civics Education requires innovative teaching methods. Small group learning, when aligned with civic values, offers a holistic approach to education that prepares students for active citizenship (Ismail et al., 2020). Furthermore, the study aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 4, which advocates for inclusive, equitable, and quality education. By focusing on interactive learning in a primary Islamic school, the study contributes to inclusive education discourse in the global South.

Finally, the insights generated from this research will be valuable for policymakers, curriculum developers, and educators aiming to improve Civics Education through practical, evidence-based strategies. The findings will also support professional development programs focused on innovative pedagogy in primary education.

Methods

This study employed a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design to investigate the effectiveness of small group learning strategies in improving student learning outcomes in Civics Education. CAR was chosen as it allows for iterative cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection, which are essential for understanding the dynamics of pedagogical interventions in real classroom settings (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014). The research was conducted over two cycles to ensure comprehensive analysis and reflection.

The study was carried out at MI Sultan Agung, an Islamic primary school located in East Java, Indonesia. The participants consisted of 28 fifth-grade students (15 male and 13 female), selected purposively due to their relevance to the subject matter and accessibility. The classroom teacher collaborated with the researcher during the planning and implementation stages to ensure the practical relevance and smooth execution of the intervention.

Each cycle of the research comprised four stages: (1) Planning, which involved designing learning activities based on small group learning principles; (2) Action, where the designed lessons were implemented in the classroom; (3) Observation, which focused on monitoring student participation, interaction, and academic performance; and (4) Reflection, where results were analyzed to identify improvements for the next cycle.

The small group learning strategy involved dividing students into heterogeneous groups of 4–5 members. Tasks were designed to promote collaboration, discussion, and mutual accountability. The role of the teacher shifted from content deliverer to facilitator, guiding students through structured group activities aligned with Civics learning objectives.

Data collection techniques included classroom observation, learning outcome tests, and documentation. Observations were conducted using a structured rubric to assess student engagement, participation, and cooperative behavior during group activities. Learning outcome tests were administered at the end of each cycle to measure academic improvement. Documentation, including lesson plans, student worksheets, and photographs of classroom activities, supported the qualitative analysis.

Data analysis was conducted using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative data from test scores were analyzed to determine improvements in student achievement, while qualitative data from observations and documentation were analyzed thematically to capture changes in student behavior and group dynamics. A comparison between the results of Cycle I and Cycle II was made to evaluate the progression and effectiveness of the intervention.

To ensure validity and reliability, data triangulation was employed by comparing results from multiple sources (tests, observations, and documentation). Peer debriefing with fellow educators was also conducted during the reflection stage to enhance the credibility of the findings.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Permission was obtained from the school principal and classroom teacher. Informed consent was also secured from the students' parents or guardians. The study ensured that students participated voluntarily and that their identities were kept confidential.

This methodology enabled a systematic and reflective exploration of small group learning strategies in the context of Civics Education. By involving real classroom practices and engaging students in interactive learning experiences, the study provided rich insights into how cooperative learning can be effectively implemented in primary Islamic schools.

Result

The implementation of small group learning strategies in Civics Education at MI Sultan Agung yielded significant improvements in both student learning outcomes and classroom engagement. This section presents the results of the two cycles of classroom action research, followed by a comprehensive discussion that connects the findings with existing literature.

Cycle I Results

In the first cycle, students were introduced to small group learning activities for the first time. They were divided into heterogeneous groups, each comprising four to five students. The learning materials focused on topics such as rights and responsibilities of citizens, national identity, and democratic principles. The average student score in the post-test was 68.21, with 60.71% of students meeting or exceeding the Minimum Mastery Criterion (MMC), which was set at 70. Observational data indicated that while some students actively participated in group discussions, others were passive and dependent on their peers. Group dynamics were still forming, and some students had difficulty sharing tasks and expressing their opinions.

Cycle II Results

Based on the reflections from Cycle I, improvements were made in the second cycle. These included assigning clearer roles within groups, using more structured worksheets, and incorporating reflection questions to deepen understanding. The outcomes showed marked improvement: the average post-test score rose to 82.14, with 89.29% of students achieving the MMC. Observations revealed a significant increase in participation, cooperation, and student confidence during discussions. Students were more engaged, asked critical questions, and demonstrated a deeper understanding of civic concepts.

Discussion

The findings support the assertion that small group learning enhances student academic performance and classroom interaction (Gillies, 2016; Slavin, 2014). The increase in post-test scores and observation results from Cycle I to Cycle II clearly indicate that collaborative learning activities contribute to better knowledge retention and comprehension. These results are consistent with studies emphasizing the effectiveness of cooperative learning in building critical thinking and communication skills (Johnson & Johnson, 2017).

The success of the intervention can be attributed to the active learning environment fostered by small group interactions. According to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, learning is a socially mediated process, and students construct knowledge more effectively through dialogue and collaboration (Vygotsky, 1978). This theory underpins the pedagogical shift observed in this study, where students moved from passive recipients to active constructors of knowledge.

Furthermore, the classroom setting allowed for differentiated learning, as students with varying abilities contributed according to their strengths. This aligns with recent research that advocates for flexible groupings and task design to maximize individual potential within a cooperative framework (Webb et al., 2014).

One notable outcome was the improvement in students' civic attitudes, such as responsibility, respect, and empathy, which emerged during group discussions. This highlights the dual function of Civics Education—not only as an academic subject but also as a moral and character development platform. These findings support the argument that small group learning can foster both cognitive and affective dimensions of education (Ismail et al., 2020).

However, the implementation process also presented challenges. In Cycle I, several students struggled with role clarity and time management within groups. This underscores the need for careful planning, teacher facilitation, and continuous monitoring to ensure equitable participation. As emphasized by Kagan (2015), group learning must be accompanied by structured activities and well-defined goals to be effective.

Another implication of this research is its potential for scalability in similar educational settings. Although conducted in a religious-based school, the principles of small group learning are adaptable and can be integrated into other contexts where student engagement and civic understanding are a priority.

The findings of this study fill a significant gap in the literature by providing empirical evidence on the application of small group learning strategies in primary-level Civics Education in Indonesia. Previous studies have focused predominantly on STEM subjects or secondary education, leaving Civics at the elementary level underexplored (Nurhayati et al., 2022; Fauzi & Sahabuddin, 2021).

This study also offers a novel contribution by incorporating character education values within the framework of cooperative learning. The emphasis on civic values in group interactions adds depth to the understanding of how learning environments can shape both knowledge and behavior.

In conclusion, small group learning strategies proved effective in enhancing student learning outcomes and civic engagement in Civics Education at MI Sultan Agung. The positive changes observed across the two research cycles indicate that when implemented with structured support, cooperative learning can serve as a powerful tool for meaningful educational transformation.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the implementation of small group learning strategies significantly improves student learning outcomes and engagement in Civics Education at MI Sultan Agung. Through structured collaboration and active participation, students not only achieved higher academic performance but also demonstrated enhanced civic attitudes such as cooperation, responsibility, and respect. The results affirm that small group learning, when effectively facilitated, fosters both cognitive and affective

development, making it a powerful pedagogical approach in primary education. This research contributes to the growing body of evidence supporting student-centered learning and offers practical insights for educators seeking to promote democratic values through interactive teaching strategies.

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