

How Civic Education Strategies Shape the Internalization of National Character: Evidence from Mixed Methods in Islamic Junior High Schools

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Abstract: This study examines how Civic Education (PKn) instructional strategies shape the internalization of national character among students in an Islamic junior high school context. Employing a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, quantitative data were collected from 135 students using a Likert-scale questionnaire and analyzed through descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation, and one-way ANOVA. Qualitative data were gathered through interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, and analyzed thematically. Quantitative results indicate a high overall level of national character internalization ($M = 4.12$), with love for the homeland ($M = 4.32$) and tolerance ($M = 4.21$) emerging as the strongest dimensions, while practical nationalism ($M = 3.89$) remains comparatively lower. A statistically significant moderate positive correlation was found between instructional strategies and national character internalization ($r = 0.46$, $p < .05$), alongside significant differences across grade levels ($F = 2.87$, $p = .042$), with higher internalization among Grade IX students. Qualitative findings explain these patterns by showing that participatory and experiential strategies such as discussions, simulations, and project-based learning, effectively foster students' affective engagement and moral reflection, yet opportunities for sustained behavioral enactment remain limited. The findings conceptualize national character internalization as a differentiated process encompassing moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action, where instructional strategies more strongly influence affective commitment than consistent civic behavior. Theoretically, this study contributes to citizenship education scholarship by refining the multidimensional understanding of value internalization. Practically, it highlights the need for inclusive and experience-based pedagogical approaches supported by structured opportunities for real-world civic practice in religious secondary schools.

Keywords: civic education; national character; mixed methods; learning strategies

How to Cite: Zulkarnain, A.I., & Supriadi, G. (2026). How Civic Education Strategies Shape the Internalization of National Character: Evidence from Mixed Methods in Islamic Junior High Schools. *At-Ta'lim: Jurnal Pendidikan*, 12 (1), 40-53. <https://doi.org/10.55210/attalim.v12i1.2423>

Introduction

Education plays a fundamental role not only in developing students' intellectual capacities but also in shaping their character as responsible citizens (Arif et al., 2023; Pasaribu et al., 2024). Within global debates on civic education, scholars increasingly argue that education for citizenship should not be reduced to the transmission of civic knowledge, but must instead facilitate the internalization of values that guide attitudes and everyday behavior. From this perspective, national character formation is understood as a complex educational process rather than a static policy outcome.

In the Indonesian context, national education explicitly aims to cultivate national character. In the Indonesian context, national education explicitly aims to cultivate national character grounded in Pancasila, the 1945 Constitution, Bhinneka Tunggal Ika, and commitment to the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI). This mandate is constitutionally reinforced through Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System, which positions character formation as an inseparable component of educational development (Hafizah et al., 2025; Adillah, 2022). However, international

and national scholarship alike suggests that the existence of strong normative frameworks does not automatically guarantee the successful internalization of values among students.

Rapid globalization, digitalization, and the Fourth Industrial Revolution have profoundly reshaped young people's value orientations, often weakening their attachment to local and national identities (Sima et. al., 2020; Voronkova et. al., 2023; Vargas & Cooper, 2024). In Indonesia and beyond, adolescents are increasingly exposed to transnational cultural influences that compete with civic and national commitments. Empirical evidence points to declining nationalism, rising intolerance, and low social awareness among youth, suggesting that national character education frequently remains at the level of symbolic affirmation rather than being translated into consistent daily practices (Kusumaningrum & Sulistyaningsih, 2021).

This condition creates an urgent educational challenge. If civic education fails to move beyond cognitive transmission toward meaningful internalization, schools risk producing students who understand national values conceptually but lack the commitment and behavioral consistency required for democratic citizenship. The persistence of this gap between moral awareness and moral action signals a critical need to re-examine how civic education strategies operate in practice. In particular, there is an urgent need for empirical research that not only measures students' endorsement of national values but also investigates how instructional strategies shape affective engagement and behavioral enactment, especially within religious school contexts where national and faith-based identities intersect

From a theoretical standpoint, value internalization has been conceptualized as a multidimensional process. Lickona's framework distinguishes between *moral knowing*, *moral feeling*, and *moral action*, emphasizing that understanding and valuing civic principles do not necessarily lead to their enactment. Bandura's social learning theory further explains that behavioral internalization depends on modelling, reinforcement, and repeated opportunities for practice, while Kolb's experiential learning theory highlights the role of active participation in transforming abstract values into personally meaningful experiences. Freire's critical pedagogy complements these perspectives by stressing dialogic and participatory learning as prerequisites for reflective and socially grounded citizenship. Taken together, these theories suggest that civic education strategies may operate unevenly across cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of national character, a distinction that remains insufficiently examined in empirical research.

Civic Education (PKn) occupies a strategic position as a formal vehicle for cultivating democratic participation, tolerance, and patriotism (Fortuna & Khadir, 2022; Umarova., 2023; Mulyana, 2024; Afan et al., 2024; Rosfiani et al., 2024). Normatively, it is expected to function not merely as a subject of knowledge transmission, but as a transformative space for shaping civic dispositions and behavioral commitments. However, critical scholarship suggests a persistent disjunction between these normative expectations and classroom realities. Civic education in many schools remains largely cognitive in orientation, privileging conceptual mastery and textbook-based instruction over dialogic engagement, experiential learning, and sustained practice (Santoso, 2021).

This cognitive dominance reflects a deeper structural issue: civic education is often assessed through measurable academic outcomes rather than observable civic behavior, thereby incentivizing knowledge acquisition over value internalization. Consequently, national values risk being reduced to abstract principles affirmed in examinations but insufficiently embedded in students' everyday conduct. The recurring gap between moral understanding and moral action indicates that the problem lies not only in students' attitudes, but also in how instructional strategies are conceptualized and enacted. Without pedagogical approaches that intentionally integrate affective engagement and behavioral reinforcement, civic education may reproduce symbolic nationalism rather than cultivate lived citizenship.

Previous studies on national character education have largely focused on curriculum design, instructional models, or value evaluation mechanisms. Although these studies offer useful pedagogical frameworks, they often conceptualize character education as a stable, uniform construct that can be transferred across contexts with minimal adaptation. Such an approach implicitly assumes that character formation is primarily a matter of technical implementation, thereby underestimating the sociocultural, institutional, and relational dynamics that shape how values are interpreted and practiced in specific school settings.

Research by Surawan et al. (2022), challenges this assumption by demonstrating that schools construct distinctive character education approaches grounded in their institutional visions and sociocultural environments. This finding exposes a limitation in much of the dominant literature: while contextual variation is acknowledged rhetorically, it is rarely examined analytically. Character education is frequently evaluated through generalized indicators that obscure internal tensions, contradictions, and uneven student experiences.

Furthermore, the heavy reliance on single-method designs either purely quantitative surveys or exclusively qualitative case studies, restricts the depth of analysis. Quantitative approaches tend to measure self-reported attitudes without probing how values are enacted in practice, whereas qualitative studies often provide rich narratives without examining broader patterns of association. As a result, existing research struggles to explain not only whether character education “works,” but how, for whom, and under what conditions internalization becomes affectively meaningful and behaviourally sustained. This methodological limitation leaves a significant gap in understanding the differentiated processes through which national character is formed within diverse educational contexts.

Moreover, empirical investigations that specifically examine how civic education teachers operationalize instructional strategies to internalize national values remain limited. Many studies emphasize the importance of character education at a conceptual level without sufficiently explaining how teaching strategies are enacted in classrooms, how students experience these strategies, or what constraints shape their implementation. This gap is particularly significant given the central role of teachers as mediators of value internalization through pedagogical choices, classroom interactions, and emotional engagement (Curren & Ryan, 2020; Sá & Serpa, 2020; Rijal et al., 2023). Emotional validation and empathy have also been identified as critical components in shaping holistic Islamic character, suggesting that value education necessarily involves affective as well as cognitive processes (Janah & Surawan, 2025).

The context of SMP Muhammadiyah Palangka Raya is academically significant because it represents a site where two normative frameworks religious devotion and national citizenship, are institutionally integrated rather than positioned in opposition. As an Islamic-based school within the Muhammadiyah educational network, it explicitly frames faith and national identity as mutually reinforcing commitments. This positioning challenges dominant secular assumptions in much of global citizenship education research, which often treats religion as peripheral, private, or even potentially tension-laden in relation to civic formation. Examining civic education in this setting is therefore not merely context-specific; it provides a theoretically relevant case for interrogating how national character is constructed when religious identity functions as a foundational rather than marginal element of schooling.

Academically, this context allows for critical engagement with a broader debate: whether civic education in religious schools strengthens pluralistic citizenship or reinforces insular identity formations. Yet empirical scholarship has rarely examined how instructional strategies mediate this intersection in concrete classroom practice. As a result, the relationship between religious identity and national character formation remains under-theorized and insufficiently evidenced, particularly in Southeast Asian Islamic school contexts.

Despite extensive studies on character education, limited attention has been given to how civic education strategies function as integrative mechanisms linking religious and national identity through empirically robust designs. Existing research has not adequately explained how instructional strategies operate simultaneously across cognitive, affective, and behavioural domains, nor how these domains interact within faith-based educational environments.

The central problem, therefore, is not the absence of character education programs, but the lack of empirical and theoretical clarity regarding how civic instructional strategies mediate the internalization of national values in contexts where religious and civic commitments intersect. The novelty of this study lies in three contributions: (1) it reconceptualizes national character internalization as a differentiated process encompassing moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action; (2) it empirically examines instructional strategies as mediating mechanisms rather than background variables; and (3) it employs a convergent mixed-methods design to integrate statistical relationships with lived classroom experiences within an Islamic school setting.

Responding to this identified gap, the present study investigates how civic education strategies shape national character internalization at SMP Muhammadiyah Palangka Raya. By integrating quantitative data on students' levels of internalization with qualitative evidence of pedagogical enactment and student experience, the study moves beyond program description toward a mechanism-oriented explanation of how values become affectively meaningful and behaviourally enacted. In doing so, it seeks to advance theoretical debates in citizenship education while providing contextually grounded insights into character formation in religious secondary schools.

Method

This study employed a mixed-methods approach with a convergent parallel design (Dawadi et al., 2021; Kajamaa et al., 2020), grounded in the epistemological assumption that the internalization of national character constitutes a multidimensional process encompassing cognitive understanding, affective commitment, and behavioral enactment. Civic education strategies therefore operate simultaneously across these dimensions and cannot be sufficiently captured through a single methodological lens. The convergent design was selected to allow quantitative and qualitative data to be collected concurrently and accorded equal analytical status, enabling direct comparison and integration of findings rather than sequential validation. This design is particularly appropriate for value-internalization research, where measurable outcomes and lived pedagogical experiences must be interpreted relationally rather than hierarchically.

The study was conducted at Muhammadiyah Junior High School in Palangka Raya. Quantitative data were collected from 135 students across Grades VII, VIII, and IX using a self-administered five-point Likert-scale questionnaire. A census approach was applied to include all students enrolled in civic education classes during the data collection period, ensuring adequate statistical power for correlational and comparative analysis.

Qualitative data were generated through semi-structured interviews with civic education teachers, the school principal, and selected students using purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria were defined to ensure information-rich cases aligned with the research objectives. Teacher participants were required to: (1) actively teach Civic Education (PKn) during the current academic year; (2) have at least two years of teaching experience at the school; and (3) demonstrate the use of participatory or experiential instructional strategies as identified through preliminary classroom observations and lesson plan review. The school principal was included due to their institutional role in shaping character education policy and school culture.

Student informants were selected based on three criteria: (1) active participation in civic education classes; (2) representation across grade levels (VII, VIII, IX); and (3) variation in levels of national character internalization (high, moderate, and lower scores based on preliminary quantitative

results). This variation sampling enabled exploration of differentiated experiences rather than only high-performing cases. A total of 12–15 students were interviewed to achieve thematic saturation while maintaining analytical depth.

Table 1 presents the demographic and academic characteristics of student respondents. The balanced distribution across grade levels and gender strengthens internal comparability, particularly for grade-level differences tested through ANOVA. Variation in participation levels and internalization scores provides sufficient dispersion for meaningful correlational analysis between instructional strategies and national character outcomes.

Regarding statistical procedures, quantitative analysis was conducted sequentially as follows: (1) Data screening and assumption testing, including normality and homogeneity checks; (2) Reliability analysis using Cronbach's Alpha to ensure internal consistency of measurement scales; (3) Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) to determine overall levels and indicator rankings of national character internalization; (4) Pearson's product-moment correlation to examine the strength and direction of the relationship between instructional strategies and national character internalization; and (5) One-way ANOVA to test differences in internalization across grade levels.

This sequence ensured that measurement validity and distributional assumptions were established prior to inferential testing. Quantitative and qualitative findings were then integrated during the interpretation stage using joint display analysis to generate meta-inferences regarding how instructional strategies influence affective and behavioural dimensions of national character.

Table 1. Student Demographic and Academic Characteristics (N = 135)

Variable	Category	n	%
Grade Level	Grade VII	45	33.3
	Grade VIII	45	33.3
	Grade IX	45	33.3
Gender	Male	67	49.6
	Female	68	50.4
Participation in Civic Education Activities	High	42	31.1
	Moderate	63	46.7
	Low	30	22.2
Overall National Character Internalization Level	High (≥ 4.00)	76	56.3
	Moderate (3.00–3.99)	59	43.7

The quantitative instrument measured students' internalization of national character across four indicators, nationalism, tolerance, love for the homeland, and social awareness, reflecting both affective and behavioral orientations of citizenship. In parallel, the construct of instructional strategies was operationalized not as a generic pedagogical variable but as students' perceptions of observable teaching practices that emphasize participation, experiential learning, and contextualization. As detailed in Table 2, these indicators capture strategies theorized in civic education and character education literature to foster affective engagement and moral action rather than rote cognitive acquisition.

Table 2. Indicators of Instructional Strategies in Civic Education

Instructional Strategy Indicator	Description
Participatory discussion	Teacher facilitates dialogue, debate, and reflective questioning on civic issues
Simulation / role-play	Students enact civic roles involving deliberation, decision-making, and conflict resolution

Instructional Strategy Indicator	Description
Project-based learning	Civic projects linking national values with real-life or community problems
Collaborative learning	Group-based activities emphasizing cooperation and shared responsibility
Contextualization of learning	Connecting civic concepts to students' daily experiences and local contexts

Content validity of the instruments was established through expert judgment involving five validators, consisting of three university lecturers with expertise in civic education and educational measurement, and two experienced Civic Education (PKn) teachers. The selection of validators followed recommendations for content validation procedures in educational research, emphasizing subject-matter expertise and familiarity with construct operationalization (Mertler, 2024). All validators had a minimum of five years of professional experience in teaching, curriculum development, or research related to civic and character education.

The validation process was conducted in two iterative stages. In the first stage, validators evaluated each questionnaire item in terms of relevance, clarity, representativeness, and alignment with the theoretical constructs of national character internalization and instructional strategies. A four-point relevance scale was used to avoid neutral responses and to strengthen judgment precision, as commonly recommended in instrument validation studies (Elangovan & Sundaravel, 2021). Validators also provided qualitative comments for item refinement.

Based on the first review, several revisions were made, including: (1) rephrasing ambiguous or double-barrelled statements, (2) eliminating redundant items, (3) refining behavioural indicators to ensure observable alignment with moral action dimensions, and (4) simplifying wording to ensure appropriateness for junior high school students. Items that received low agreement from validators were revised or removed. In the second stage, the revised instrument was returned to the validators for confirmation of conceptual alignment and clarity. Minor linguistic refinements were incorporated before finalization.

Following content validation, reliability analysis using Cronbach's Alpha demonstrated satisfactory to excellent internal consistency across all dimensions, with coefficients exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Elangovan & Sundaravel, 2021). High reliability supports the use of composite scores in subsequent correlational and comparative analyses without inflating measurement error, consistent with established psychometric standards (Izah et al., 2024).

Table 3. Reliability Statistics of Research Instruments (Cronbach's Alpha)

Variable	Dimension / Indicator	Items	Alpha	Interpretation
National Character Internalization	Nationalism	5	0.82	Good
	Tolerance	5	0.85	Good
	Love for the homeland	5	0.88	Very good
	Social awareness	5	0.80	Good
Overall National Character Scale	-	20	0.90	Excellent
Instructional Strategies	Participatory discussion	4	0.81	Good
	Simulation / role-play	4	0.83	Good
	Project-based learning	4	0.86	Very good
	Collaborative learning	4	0.84	Good
	Contextualization of learning	4	0.82	Good
Overall Instructional Strategies Scale	-	20	0.92	Excellent

Qualitative data were generated through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis of lesson plans and school programs to examine how instructional strategies were enacted and experienced. Thematic analysis was conducted using open, axial, and selective coding procedures as outlined by Lochmiller (2021). The coding process was performed manually to allow close interpretive engagement with the data, given the manageable size of the dataset. Transcripts were read repeatedly, initial codes were generated inductively, and categories were refined iteratively into broader themes linking instructional strategies with affective and behavioral expressions of national values. Coding consistency was enhanced through peer debriefing and analytic memo writing.

Trustworthiness was ensured through source triangulation (teachers, students, principal), methodological triangulation (interviews, observations, documents), and member checking to confirm interpretive accuracy (Liu & Wang, 2021; Ekornes & Bele, 2021). These procedures strengthened credibility and reduced interpretive bias.

Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings was conducted at the interpretation stage using a joint display matrix, which is reproduced in the Results section (Table 4). Rather than merely juxtaposing findings, quantitative statistical patterns (means, correlation coefficients, and ANOVA results) were systematically aligned with qualitative themes to examine convergence, complementarity, and divergence. This joint comparison logic enabled explanation-building rather than simple confirmation.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings generated three core meta-inferences. First, instructional strategies exert a stronger influence on affective internalization than on sustained behavioral enactment. This is evidenced by high scores in love of homeland and tolerance, a moderate correlation ($r = 0.46$), and qualitative findings showing that participatory strategies foster emotional engagement but do not consistently translate into habitual civic action. Second, national character internalization is differentiated rather than uniform. Lower scores in practical nationalism and limited real-world application indicate that moral knowing and moral feeling develop more readily than moral action. Third, the effectiveness of participatory strategies is mediated by classroom dynamics and structural constraints. Uneven student engagement suggests that pedagogical design alone is insufficient without inclusive facilitation and sustained institutional support.

Together, these meta-inferences provide a mechanism-oriented explanation of how civic instructional strategies shape differentiated processes of national character formation.

Table 4. Integration Logic of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings (Joint Display)

Quantitative Results	Qualitative Evidence	Meta-Inference
High scores on tolerance and love for the homeland	Discussion and simulation foster emotional engagement and moral reflection	Instructional strategies are most effective at the affective level
Moderate correlation between strategies and character	Uneven classroom implementation and limited practice opportunities	Internalization is differentiated, not uniform
Lower scores on practical nationalism	Few sustained civic actions beyond classroom activities	Behavioral internalization requires structural support

Results and Discussion

Based on questionnaire data collected from 135 students, the overall mean score for national character internalization was 4.12 on a five-point Likert scale, indicating a generally high level of perceived character development. As shown in Table 1, this overall score is supported by consistently strong mean values across indicators, particularly those associated with affective and relational

dimensions. Indicators reflecting emotional attachment and social orientation toward national values demonstrate stronger internalization than those related to behavioral enactment, suggesting variation across dimensions of character formation.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics of National Character Internalization Indicators (N = 135)

No.	Indicator	Mean	SD	Rank	Interpretation
1	Love for the Homeland	4.32	0.48	1	High
2	Tolerance	4.21	0.52	2	High
3	Social Awareness	4.05	0.56	3	High
4	Practical Nationalism	3.89	0.61	4	Moderate-High
Overall National Character		4.12	0.49	-	High

Table 5 provides a detailed comparison across indicators, showing that *love for the homeland* and *tolerance* occupy the highest ranks, while *practical nationalism* is positioned lowest despite remaining within the moderate high category. The relatively larger standard deviation observed for practical nationalism further indicates greater variability in students' experiences and engagement with this dimension.

This pattern is further illustrated in Figure 1, which visually highlights the differentiation among character education indicators. The figure shows that indicators reflecting attitudinal and affective dimensions such as love for the homeland and tolerance consistently reach higher average scores, while practical nationalism remains comparatively lower. This visual contrast reinforces the quantitative finding that students demonstrate stronger endorsement of national values at the level of understanding and attitudes than in their consistent enactment in daily practices.

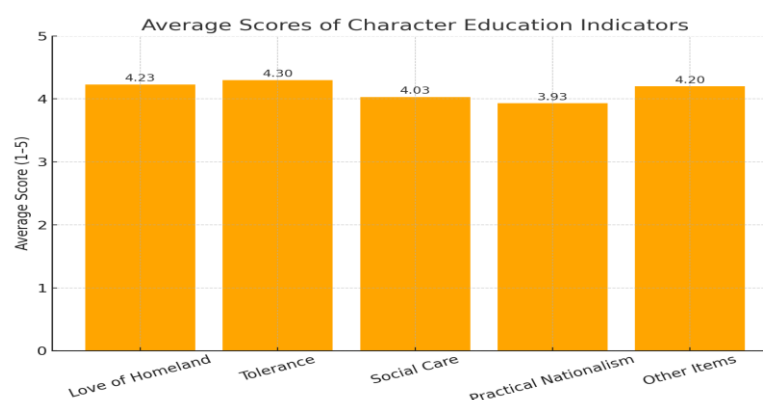


Figure 1. Character Education Indicators

Taken together, Table 5 and Figure 1 indicate that national character development among students is not uniform across dimensions. Affective commitment appears to be more firmly established, whereas behavioral internalization shows greater variability and weaker consolidation.

Qualitative data provide further insight into this pattern. During interviews, several students reported that civic education lessons were effective in helping them understand national values conceptually, yet they felt less confident in applying these values consistently in everyday interactions. One seventh-grade student stated:

"I understand why loving the country is important, but sometimes I don't know how to show it in everyday situations."

This statement illustrates how students' cognitive and affective acceptance of national values does not always translate into practical action, aligning with the lower mean score and higher variability observed for the practical nationalism indicator in the quantitative results.

Prior to conducting inferential analysis, statistical prerequisite tests were performed to ensure the suitability of parametric procedures. Normality of the data distribution was assessed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, while homogeneity of variance was examined using Levene's test. The results indicated that the data met the assumptions of normal distribution ($p > .05$) and homogeneity ($p > .05$), supporting the use of parametric statistical techniques.

To examine the relationship between civic education teachers' instructional strategies and students' internalization of national values, a Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was then conducted. The results are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Pearson Correlation between Instructional Strategies and National Character Internalization

Variables	r	p-value	Interpretation
Instructional Strategies × National Character	0.46	< 0.003	Moderate positive relationship

The analysis revealed a statistically significant moderate positive correlation between instructional strategies and national character internalization ($r = 0.46$, $p = 0.003$). Substantively, this coefficient indicates that approximately 21% ($r^2 = 0.2116$) of the variance in students' national character internalization scores is associated with differences in instructional strategies implemented by teachers. This finding suggests that instructional strategies play a meaningful role in shaping students' national character. However, the moderate effect size also indicates that a considerable proportion of variance remains influenced by factors beyond classroom instruction, such as peer interaction, family background, and broader school culture.

Interview data help contextualize this relationship. Teachers reported that participatory strategies such as discussions, simulations, and project-based learning increased students' engagement and understanding of national values. One civic education teacher explained:

"When students are actively involved, they begin to see national values as something relevant to real life, not just lesson content."

Students echoed this perception, particularly in relation to tolerance and social awareness. An eighth-grade student noted:

"The mock trial activity helped me learn how to speak politely and respect other opinions."

Students similarly reported that interactive activities supported their understanding of tolerance and democratic communication, helping explain the positive association observed in the quantitative analysis.

Prior to conducting the one-way ANOVA, statistical assumptions were tested to ensure the appropriateness of the analysis. In addition to normality testing, homogeneity of variance across grade levels was examined using Levene's test. The results of Levene's test indicated that the assumption of homogeneity of variance was met ($p > .05$), suggesting that the variance of national character internalization scores did not differ significantly across Grades VII, VIII, and IX. This finding supports the validity of proceeding with the standard one-way ANOVA procedure.

A one-way ANOVA was then conducted to examine differences in national character internalization across grade levels. The results, summarized in Table 7, indicate a statistically significant difference among grades ($F = 2.87$, $p = 0.042$). These results suggest that at least one grade level differs significantly in its mean internalization score compared to the others.

Table 7. ANOVA Results for National Character Internalization across Grade Levels

Source	F	p-value	Interpretation
Grade Level	2.87	0.042	Significant difference

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings provides a mechanism-oriented explanation of the observed statistical relationships. The ANOVA results indicate that Grade IX students demonstrate significantly higher levels of national character internalization compared to Grades VII and VIII ($F = 2.87$, $p = 0.042$). While statistically this suggests a cumulative developmental trend, qualitative findings clarify *why* this pattern occurs.

Interviews and classroom observations reveal that older students exhibit greater confidence in articulating opinions, engaging in deliberative discussions, and assuming civic roles during simulations and project-based activities. These behaviours are not merely reflections of age differences, but of prolonged exposure to participatory civic learning environments. Grade IX students reported feeling more accustomed to dialogic instruction and more comfortable expressing disagreement respectfully. In contrast, younger students frequently described hesitation, fear of making mistakes, and reliance on teacher direction.

These qualitative insights suggest that the statistical grade-level differences are mediated by two key mechanisms: (1) sustained experiential exposure to participatory strategies, and (2) gradual development of communicative confidence and reflective capacity. Over time, repeated engagement in discussions, simulations, and collaborative tasks appears to strengthen affective attachment and moral reasoning, thereby consolidating national values more deeply.

Thus, the higher internalization scores among Grade IX students cannot be interpreted solely as age-related maturation. Rather, they reflect the cumulative effect of pedagogical socialization within a structured civic learning environment. This integrative explanation demonstrates that instructional strategies influence national character indirectly through sustained participation, emotional validation, and progressive habituation of civic practices.

Overall, the findings indicate that strategies for strengthening national character through Civic Education (PKn) at Muhammadiyah Junior High School in Palangka Raya are generally effective. This is reflected in the high average internalization score ($M = 4.12$), suggesting that students perceive positive impacts from instructional strategies designed to foster national values (Rosyad et al., 2022; Saputri et al., 2023). In line with Lickona's framework, the results show stronger development in the dimensions of moral knowing and moral feeling than in moral action, indicating that while students understand and value national principles, their consistent enactment remains less stable (Rijal, Kosasih, et al., 2023; Arif et al., 2023; Hafizallah, 2024; Rizqi et al., 2025).

The high scores for love for the homeland ($M = 4.32$) and tolerance ($M = 4.21$) suggest that participatory and contextual learning strategies, such as discussion, simulation, and project-based learning, are particularly effective in strengthening students' affective commitment to national values. These findings are consistent with prior studies highlighting the role of dialogic and experiential civic education in fostering tolerance, respect for diversity, and civic awareness (Dwintari & Murdiono, 2023; Boss & Krauss, 2022; Miftakhu Rosyad et al., 2022; Saputri et al., 2023). Kolb's experiential learning theory provides a strong explanatory basis, as students' narratives demonstrate how mock trials, group discussions, and contextual projects transform abstract civic concepts into personally meaningful experiences (Champell, 2019). However, while prior studies have acknowledged the importance of experiential learning in civic education, most have examined it either descriptively as an innovative teaching model, or in relation to general learning motivation and engagement. Few studies have empirically linked experiential strategies to differentiated dimensions of national character internalization, particularly by integrating affective and behavioral outcomes within a mixed-methods framework.

The novelty of this research lies in extending Kolb's experiential perspective beyond general instructional effectiveness toward a mechanism-based explanation of value internalization within the specific context of Muhammadiyah Junior High School in Palangka Raya. As an Islamic-based institution that explicitly integrates religious devotion with national identity, the school provides a

distinctive environment in which civic values are framed not only as constitutional obligations but also as moral-religious commitments. Rather than merely demonstrating that participatory strategies are “effective,” this study shows how experiential learning within this integrative religious–national framework selectively strengthens moral feeling and reflective awareness. At the same time, it reveals that such strategies do not automatically produce consistent moral action. By empirically differentiating internalization into moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action in an Islamic school setting, this research advances a more context-sensitive theoretical model of how experiential civic pedagogy operates across multiple dimensions of character formation.

Despite these strengths, the comparatively lower score for practical nationalism ($M = 3.89$) points to a persistent gap between attitudinal endorsement and behavioral enactment, even within a school culture that normatively promotes value integration. From the perspective of Bandura’s social learning theory, this gap reflects limited opportunities for modelling, habituation, and sustained reinforcement of national values in everyday institutional practices (Osborn et al., 2020; Koutroubas & Galanakis, 2022). Although religious narratives and civic discourse reinforce moral commitment at the symbolic level, consistent behavioral internalization appears to depend on structured opportunities for repeated practice beyond classroom simulations. Without such reinforcement mechanisms, value internalization at SMP Muhammadiyah Palangka Raya like in many educational contexts, tends to consolidate more strongly at the cognitive and affective levels than at the level of habitual civic conduct.

The qualitative findings further indicate that instructional strategies did not benefit all students equally. Students who were shy or less confident tended to participate more passively, reducing their engagement in experiential learning activities. This uneven participation echoes Freire’s (1970) argument that meaningful learning requires inclusive participation and suggests that participatory strategies may unintentionally privilege more expressive students unless accompanied by differentiated instructional support (Shor, 2024).

Quantitative analysis reinforces this interpretation. The moderate positive correlation between instructional strategies and national character internalization ($r = 0.46$; $p < 0.05$) indicates that pedagogical design plays a meaningful role in shaping students’ values, although it explains only part of the variance. Constructivist perspectives from Piaget and Vygotsky help explain this finding by emphasizing that values are actively constructed through social interaction and contextual engagement rather than transmitted directly (Chen, 2024; Díez-Palomar et al., 2020; Aida et al., 2025). At the same time, the moderate strength of the relationship suggests that national character development is influenced by factors beyond classroom instruction alone.

Differences across grade levels further highlight the developmental nature of value internalization. Higher scores among Grade IX students are consistent with Kohlberg’s theory of moral development, which posits that moral reasoning and value consistency evolve as individuals accumulate social experience and reflective capacity (Lehalle, 2020; Lind, 2023). This interpretation is supported by qualitative data showing that older students were more confident in articulating civic values and engaging in learning activities than their younger peers.

Taken together, the findings suggest a sequential mechanism through which civic education strategies shape national character formation. Participatory strategies such as discussions, simulations, and project-based learning, first generate active engagement and dialogic interaction, positioning students as contributors rather than passive recipients of civic knowledge. This engagement fosters affective involvement, as students begin to experience national values as emotionally meaningful rather than merely normatively prescribed. Through repeated reflection, peer exchange, and contextualized learning, civic concepts are transformed into internal commitments, strengthening moral knowing and moral feeling. In this way, experiential participation functions as the mediating bridge between instructional design and value internalization.

However, the movement from internalization to consistent behavioural habituation remains more complex. While students may endorse and emotionally affirm national values, translating these commitments into stable civic conduct requires sustained modelling, reinforcement, and structured opportunities for practice beyond classroom simulations. Limited time, uneven participation, and insufficient institutional follow-through constrain this final stage, resulting in stronger affective consolidation than habitual action. Thus, the mechanism revealed in this study indicates that participatory civic pedagogy effectively activates and deepens internalization, yet the durability of moral action depends on broader structural and cultural reinforcement within the school environment.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, civic education at Muhammadiyah Junior High School in Palangka Raya demonstrates substantial effectiveness as an institutional mechanism for strengthening students' national character, particularly in fostering moral awareness and affective commitment. The high overall mean score ($M = 4.12$), alongside strong indicators of love for the homeland (4.32) and tolerance (4.21), suggests that instructional strategies are generally effective in shaping students' value orientations. However, the comparatively lower score for practical nationalism (3.89) indicates that internalized values are not yet consistently translated into daily behavioural practice, reflecting differentiated development between attitudinal endorsement and habitual action.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings further indicates that participatory and experiential strategies are generally effective in strengthening affective engagement, yet behavioural consolidation remains constrained by limited practice opportunities and uneven participation. These findings imply that strengthening national character requires not only classroom-based instruction but also sustained institutional support and inclusive pedagogical approaches. Future research should employ longitudinal or comparative designs to examine the durability and contextual variability of character internalization across different educational settings.

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