



FROM VALUES TO BEHAVIOR: THE ROLE OF CIVICS EDUCATION IN DEVELOPING EMPATHY AND TOLERANCE AMONG ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Article History Receive: 15-04-2026 Revision: 07-05-2026 Accept: 30-06-2026	Civic Education plays a strategic role in developing students' civic values; however, understanding values does not automatically translate into everyday behavior. This study explores how Civic Education contributes to transforming civic values into empathetic and tolerant behavior among elementary school students. Using a qualitative case study design, the research was conducted at SD Muhammadiyah 11 Kota Medan, Indonesia. Participants included Civic Education teachers and elementary school students selected purposively. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis and analyzed thematically. The findings indicate that the transformation of values into behavior occurs through interconnected processes of value understanding, social experience, teacher modeling, habituation, and reflection. Empathy was manifested through students' concern, perspective-taking, and willingness to assist peers, while tolerance emerged through respect for differing opinions, acceptance of differences, cooperation, and constructive conflict resolution. The study proposes that Civic Education should move beyond normative value transmission toward participatory and socially embedded learning experiences that enable students to practice civic values in everyday interactions and relationships.
Keywords	Civic Education; Empathy; Tolerance; Value Internalization; Elementary School

1. INTRODUCTION

Elementary education constitutes a critical stage in the formation of citizens' moral, social, and civic dispositions. At this level, schools do not merely function as institutions for transmitting academic knowledge but also as social environments in which children learn how to understand others, negotiate differences, cooperate with peers, and translate shared values into everyday conduct (Zakiah et al., 2023). This developmental function is particularly important in plural societies, where the

sustainability of democratic and civic life depends not only on citizens' knowledge of rights and responsibilities but also on their capacity for empathy, mutual respect, and tolerance (Siregar & Salminawati, 2023; Anggito & Sartono, 2022). International evidence increasingly recognizes empathy, tolerance, trust, and relationship skills as important social and emotional competencies associated with positive educational and social outcomes (OECD, 2026).

Diversity in ethnicity, religion, language, culture, and social background constitutes an important foundation of national life, yet diversity does not automatically generate inclusive social relations. At the school level, children encounter difference in concrete and everyday forms: differences in friendship groups, socioeconomic backgrounds, cultural practices, religious identities, abilities, and personal characteristics (Rijal et al., 2025). Consequently, tolerance should not be understood merely as an abstract civic value to be memorized but as a practical competence expressed through respect, inclusion, willingness to listen, and the ability to coexist with others. Recent studies in Indonesian elementary education continue to demonstrate the strategic importance of Civic Education in cultivating tolerance, respect for diversity, multicultural awareness, and prosocial dispositions among students (Dwintari & Murdiono, 2023; Khosiah et al., 2026).

However, the presence of civic and moral values in the curriculum does not necessarily guarantee their manifestation in students' actual behavior. This issue points to a fundamental problem in character and citizenship education: the gap between knowing values and living values (Fadillah et al., 2025). This discrepancy raises an important theoretical and pedagogical question: why does the acquisition of civic values not always develop into corresponding social behavior? Classical character education provides an important foundation for addressing this question. Lickona (1991) argues that character development involves the interconnected dimensions of *moral knowing*, *moral feeling*, and *moral action*. From this perspective, understanding what is morally right represents only one dimension of character formation. Students must also develop affective capacities that enable them to care about others and motivational capacities that encourage them to act consistently with the values they understand. In other words, the transformation from values into behavior requires a process of internalization

that connects cognition, emotion, judgment, social interaction, and action (Lickona, 1991; Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Nucci et al., 2014).

Civic Education in elementary school has been expected to develop knowledgeable, responsible, democratic, and morally grounded citizens. Yet, in practice, the implementation of PKn may still be constrained by instructional approaches that prioritize conceptual understanding, factual knowledge, and the memorization of civic norms. Recent research in Indonesian elementary schools has explicitly identified the limitations of lecture-dominated and memorization-oriented approaches, suggesting that such pedagogies provide insufficient opportunities for students to experience, negotiate, and enact civic values in authentic social situations (Khosiah et al., 2026; Ni Putu Adi Utami & Dewa Bagus Sanjaya, 2025).

The problem, therefore, is not simply whether schools teach tolerance and empathy, but how Civic Education enables students to transform civic values into lived social practices. This distinction is theoretically significant. A student who can define tolerance has not necessarily developed the capacity to accept disagreement; a student who can identify empathy as a positive value has not necessarily learned to recognize another person's emotional experience or respond to it constructively. Civic learning becomes meaningful only when values are embedded within processes of social interaction, reflection, dialogue, perspective-taking, and repeated behavioral practice. Studies have shown that participatory pedagogies, heterogeneous group interaction, role-playing, discussion, teacher modeling, and contextual learning can provide opportunities for students to experience diversity and translate abstract values into interpersonal conduct (Dwintari & Murdiono, 2023; Khosiah et al., 2026).

Empathy occupies a particularly important position within this process because it may function as an affective bridge between the

recognition of moral values and the enactment of tolerant behavior. Empathy enables individuals to recognize and respond to the perspectives, feelings, and experiences of others, whereas tolerance concerns the willingness to respect and coexist with difference (Irayanti et al., 2026). For example, recent research has examined the internalization of tolerance through diversity posters and reported positive learning outcomes (Rijal et al., 2025). Other studies have explored cooperative learning strategies, including Think-Pair-Share, as mechanisms for strengthening tolerance, communication, cooperation, and respect among elementary students. While these studies provide valuable pedagogical evidence, they tend to emphasize intervention effectiveness rather than examining the deeper process through which students interpret, internalize, negotiate, and ultimately enact civic values in everyday social relationships.

There remains a methodological and theoretical gap concerning the transformation of civic values into everyday behavior. Existing research has established that PKn can contribute to tolerance, diversity awareness, and character formation (Khosiah et al., 2026; Ni Putu Adi Utami & Dewa Bagus Sanjaya, 2025). However, there is still insufficient understanding of what occurs between the teaching of a civic value and its manifestation as a student's social behavior. This intervening space involves complex processes of meaning-making, emotional engagement, peer interaction, reflection, modeling, reinforcement, and habitual practice. Consequently, there is a need to move beyond asking whether PKn influences character and instead investigate how students experience the movement from civic values to civic behavior.

This issue is also relevant to broader debates concerning the relationship between the formal curriculum and the lived curriculum. International research on social and emotional learning suggests that competencies may be formally embedded within curriculum frameworks without necessarily being translated

effectively into students' everyday experiences. The OECD has similarly highlighted that the presence of social and emotional skills in official curriculum documents does not automatically mean that these competencies become part of students' attained learning or teachers' daily pedagogical practice (OECD, 2026). This observation is particularly relevant to Civic Education, where the normative presence of values such as humanity, justice, respect, cooperation, and tolerance must be accompanied by pedagogical experiences capable of connecting formal learning with lived social interaction.

Accordingly, this study departs from the assumption that the central challenge of Civic Education is not merely the transmission of values, but the transformation of values into behavior. The study positions empathy as an important affective dimension in the internalization of civic values and tolerance as a key manifestation of students' capacity to live with and respect difference. Rather than examining PKn solely as a subject that delivers normative knowledge, this research conceptualizes it as a pedagogical and social space in which students encounter civic values, interpret their meanings, emotionally relate them to others, and potentially enact them in everyday interactions. How does Civic Education learning contribute to the transformation of civic values into empathetic and tolerant behavior among elementary school students?

The study seeks to contribute theoretically by developing a more process-oriented understanding of the relationship between civic values, empathy, and tolerance. Specifically, it proposes that the transformation from value to behavior should not be understood as a linear process of knowledge acquisition but as a dynamic process involving value exposure, meaning-making, emotional engagement, social interaction, reflection, and behavioral enactment. Practically, the findings are expected to provide implications for the design of Civic

Education learning that moves beyond normative instruction toward more dialogic, participatory, experiential, and socially embedded pedagogies.

Ultimately, this research contributes to a broader reconceptualization of Civic Education at the elementary level. If the objective of Civic Education is to prepare students not merely to know what good citizenship means but to practice citizenship in their relationships with others, then empathy and tolerance must be understood as lived civic competencies rather than abstract curricular ideals. The central concern of this study, therefore, is captured in a fundamental educational transition: from knowing values to living them from values to behavior.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore how Civic Education contributes to the transformation of civic values into empathetic and tolerant behavior among elementary school students at SD Muhammadiyah 11 Kota Medan, Indonesia. Participants were selected through purposive sampling and included Civic Education teachers and elementary school students who had direct experience with Civic Education learning and peer interactions. Data were collected through classroom and school-based observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Data were analyzed thematically through an iterative process of data familiarization, initial coding, categorization, theme development, and interpretation (Alam, 2020). The analysis also compared students' stated understanding of civic values with their observed behavior to identify potential gaps between *knowing values* and *living values*. Data credibility was strengthened through source and method triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, and examination of contradictory or negative cases. Ethical procedures included obtaining permission from the school, informed consent from parents or guardians, student assent, voluntary participation, and anonymization of participants' identities. Through this design, the study sought not merely to describe students' levels of

empathy and tolerance, but to explain how Civic Education experiences are interpreted, internalized, and transformed into everyday social behaviors that reflect empathy, respect, inclusion, and tolerance.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Internalization of Civic Values through Civic Education Instruction

Research findings indicate that Civics Education at SD Muhammadiyah 11 Medan is not merely aimed at mastering knowledge regarding Pancasila, norms, rights and obligations, and social life; it also serves as a space to internalize civic values into the students' daily behavior. Observations reveal that the instructional process involves teachers connecting lesson content with the students' concrete experiences. Values such as respecting others, cooperation, responsibility, helping peers, respecting differing opinions, and collaborative problem-solving emerge across various learning activities.

During lessons, teachers go beyond conceptual explanations by posing questions and presenting situations that prompt students to reflect on their behavior in everyday life. For instance, when discussing communal life, teachers guide students to understand the importance of respecting peers who possess different opinions, abilities, habits, or character traits. The lesson then proceeds to group discussions, giving students the opportunity to put these values into practice directly.

Interviews with teachers reveal that character building is not viewed as an activity separate from Civics Education. Teachers explain that values like empathy and tolerance are more easily grasped by students when linked to their actual classroom experiences. Consequently, teachers strive to transform instruction from the mere delivery of concepts into a process of habituation. "It is not enough to simply tell children that we must respect our peers; they must be given the chance to practice it—for example, during discussions, group work, or when a classmate is facing difficulties." (Interview with the Grade VI teacher, June 15, 2026). This statement indicates that the internalization of values is achieved through a combination of understanding values, social experience, role

modeling, and habituation. The teacher serves not merely as a conveyor of subject matter but also as a model of civic behavior within the classroom environment.

Observational findings also reveal that students are beginning to respond to these values through simple behaviors. During group activities, some students assist peers who struggle to understand tasks, allow others to express their opinions, and attempt to resolve differences of opinion through discussion. However, such behaviors are not yet consistently exhibited by all students; some still show a tendency to dominate discussions or prefer working with peers perceived to possess similar ability levels.

These findings demonstrate that the internalization of values is a gradual process. Values conveyed by the teacher do not automatically translate into behavior; rather, they require repeated experience to become habits. Thus, the success of Civics Education in shaping student character is determined not only by the material taught but also by how these values are put into practice during students' social interactions.

2. Manifestation of Empathy in Student Behavior

Observations indicate that student empathy manifests primarily through concern for a peer's situation, a willingness to help, the ability to understand others' feelings, and responsiveness to peers facing difficulties. Such behaviors emerge during both formal learning activities and informal interactions among students. In group learning sessions, for instance, students were observed spontaneously assisting peers who were struggling to complete tasks. Some students also re-explained concepts in simpler language when they noticed a peer had not grasped the teacher's instructions. Furthermore, when a student answered a question incorrectly, others refrained from mockery, instead offering encouragement to try again. Students do not necessarily develop tolerant behavior simply because they know tolerance is a virtue; behavioral change is more likely to occur when students can view social experiences from another person's perspective.

Empathy is also evident in interactions outside of structured learning activities. Observations revealed that students showed concern when aware of a peer's difficulties—such as forgetting study materials, struggling with assignments, or facing obstacles during class activities. While these expressions of concern were relatively simple, they demonstrated that the value of empathy was beginning to translate into tangible actions.

Interviews with students reinforced these observational findings. One student explained that helping a peer is considered a positive behavior because anyone might face difficulties at some point. "If a friend doesn't understand an assignment, I usually help explain it. If I don't understand, they help me too." (Interview with Fatimah, 6th-grade student, June 16, 2026). This statement highlights the reciprocal nature of empathetic practice. Students view helping not merely as a moral obligation but as an integral part of social relationships that enable mutual support.

Teachers also noted that the most readily observable indicator of empathy is a shift in how students respond to their peers' situations. Students who previously tended to ignore a peer's difficulties began to show concern, particularly when teachers reinforced such positive behavior. Thus, within the context of this study, empathy is understood not only as the cognitive ability to comprehend others' feelings but also as the capacity to translate that understanding into concrete social responses. These findings demonstrate a relationship between Civics Education learning and the development of students' social dimensions.

3. Fostering Tolerance through Student Social Interaction

In addition to empathy, research findings indicate that Civics Education contributes to the development of tolerant behavior among students. Tolerance is particularly evident in students' ability to accept differences, respect peers' opinions, collaborate with peers of varying temperaments, and avoid actions that demean or exclude others. Observations reveal that group interactions provide one of the clearest contexts for witnessing the practice of tolerance. When

assigned group tasks, students must interact with peers who possess different personalities and abilities. In such situations, students learn to manage personal impulses, listen to others' views, and reach collective decisions.

During certain discussion activities, differences of opinion arise regarding answers or methods for completing tasks. Rather than immediately dictating the "correct" answer, the teacher allows students to explain their respective reasoning. Students are then guided to listen to their peers' views and arrive at a joint decision. This process offers concrete experience in the practices of tolerance and deliberation.

One student remarked: "Sometimes my opinion differs from my friends'. We usually discuss it first, then choose the most suitable answer." (Interview with Alif, 6th-grade student, June 16, 2026). This statement demonstrates that tolerance manifests not only as the acceptance of peers who are different but also as the ability to manage differing opinions. This distinction is crucial because, within Civics Education, tolerance should not be interpreted merely as a passive attitude of "allowing" differences to exist; rather, it encompasses the ability to interact constructively amidst diversity. It is insufficient for students simply to state that they respect differences. Tolerance acquires true meaning when embodied in actions such as listening to peers, accepting diverse group members, assisting peers in need, refraining from mockery, and resolving conflicts without discrimination.

The teacher also noted that, given the students' developmental stage, tolerant behavior requires ongoing guidance. Some students still show a tendency to select specific peers for group activities or struggle to accept opinions that differ from their own. Consequently, the teacher provides repeated reinforcement to ensure students understand that differences are not grounds for shunning or belittling their peers. These findings demonstrate that social interaction serves as a crucial medium for fostering tolerance. Civic education provides a framework of values, while the classroom environment offers a space for students to test and practice those values in real-life situations.

4. Teacher Role Modeling and Habituation as a Link between Values and Behavior

Research findings indicate that the transformation of values into behavior does not occur solely through instructional content. Teacher modeling and the cultivation of classroom habits are crucial factors in this process. Observations reveal that teachers strive to demonstrate behavior consistent with the values they teach. They provide students with opportunities to speak, listen to their questions, respond respectfully without belittling them, and treat them relatively fairly. When conflicts or differences of opinion arise among students, teachers tend to employ a dialogic approach rather than resorting to immediate punishment.

This pattern teaches students that the value of respecting others is not merely subject matter to be memorized, but a way of interacting. Such modeling is reinforced through habitual practices such as collaborating, sharing tasks, helping one another, expressing gratitude, apologizing for mistakes, and allowing peers to speak. A Civics Education teacher noted during an interview: "If we want children to respect others, the teacher must also demonstrate how to respect the children. It is not enough to simply convey the material; it must be exemplified." These findings highlight the teacher's strategic position in the value transformation process, acting as an educator, facilitator, role model, and mediator in students' social interactions.

The teacher plays a pivotal role in bridging the gap between values and behavior. Beyond merely delivering content, the teacher acts as a pedagogical mediator who creates learning environments, facilitates dialogue, manages conflict, and models the application of civic values. Consequently, the transformation process from values to behavior can be visualized as a sequence: understanding values → social experience → modeling → habituation → reflection → empathetic and tolerant behavior. This sequence demonstrates that changes in student behavior do not occur instantaneously. While Civics Education provides a normative foundation, the internalization of values requires repeated social practice and a supportive environment.

4. CONCLUSION

Civic education plays a significant role in fostering empathy and tolerance among elementary school students. However, its effectiveness cannot be measured solely by a student's ability to grasp civic concepts. A more fundamental challenge lies in ensuring that the values learned are transformed into dispositions and behaviors within social life. Research indicates that civic education is crucial to this transformation process, which unfolds through mechanisms of internalization involving understanding, role modeling, social experience, habituation, and reflection. Empathy is primarily demonstrated through care and a willingness to help peers, while tolerance is evidenced by the ability to accept differences, respect opinions, and collaborate with other students. Teachers should act as facilitators of value-based experiences rather than mere conveyors of norms. Simultaneously, the school culture must be cultivated to align with the values being taught. Ultimately, the success of civic education is not defined merely by a student's ability to state that tolerance is an important value. True success lies in their capacity to acknowledge the presence of others, understand diverse perspectives, and act respectfully when these values are genuinely put to the test in daily life.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatera Utara (UMSU) for the institutional support and academic environment provided throughout the implementation of this research. The authors also extend their appreciation to SD Muhammadiyah 11 Kota Medan for granting permission and providing access to the research site. Special thanks are addressed to the school principal, teachers, and students who participated in the research and contributed their time, experiences, and valuable information during the observation, interviews, and documentation processes. Their cooperation and support were essential to the completion of this study.

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