

# Social Studies Learning in Supporting the Nationalistic Character of Children of Indonesian Migrant Workers at the Community Learning Center (CLC) Sabah, Malaysia

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the role of social studies learning in supporting the development of nationalist character among children of Indonesian migrant workers attending the Community Learning Center (CLC) in Sabah, Malaysia. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through interviews, observations, and document studies with teachers, CLC administrators, and students. The results show that social studies learning not only functions as a means of transferring academic knowledge but also as a strategic medium for instilling national values and strengthening national identity in a transnational environment. Thematic, contextual, and participatory learning strategies, along with ethnopedagogical learning models based on local wisdom, along with routine activities such as flag ceremonies, national day commemorations, folklore, and traditional games, effectively foster students' national awareness. Despite facing challenges related to facilities and the influence of local Malaysian culture, social studies learning serves as a social mechanism that maintains the stability of national identity. This study recommends strengthening social studies education policies and capacities at CLCs to strengthen

the nationalism of young Indonesians abroad.

**Keywords:** social studies learning, national character, children of Indonesian migrant workers, community learning center, Sabah, Malaysia.

## INTRODUCTION

Children of Indonesian migrant workers in Sabah, Malaysia, face significant challenges in obtaining their right to an adequate education. These obstacles are influenced by several factors, such as remote geographic conditions, unclear legal status, and limited capacity of main schools, such as the Indonesian School of Kota Kinabalu (SIKK). As a result, many children of Indonesian migrant workers can only access education through Community Learning Centers (CLCs), which are generally located around oil palm plantations far from the city center (Safitri et al., 2021). CLCs were established in response to the educational needs of children of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia and are the result of bilateral cooperation between Indonesia and Malaysia. They guarantee every child's right to education. As alternative educational institutions, CLCs play a crucial role in providing equal learning opportunities for children of Indonesian migrant workers who

are unable to attend formal education in Malaysia (UNESCO, 2017).

Education at CLCs not only focuses on knowledge transfer but also plays a strategic role in shaping students' national character. Indonesia currently faces serious challenges related to the decline of nationalism among the younger generation, including millennials and the platinum generation. Various factors, such as social environment, life experiences, and interactions with local communities, influence the national identity of migrant children (Kasih, 2018). Children of migrant workers in Sabah are more exposed to Malaysian culture through local television, which has the potential to influence their cultural orientation and sociolinguistic abilities (Aziz et al., 2017). Efforts to strengthen national character can be carried out through education that instills the values of history, culture, tolerance, and a spirit of national unity (Finaldin & Yulianti, 2021). In this context, Social Studies (IPS) learning plays a strategic role in shaping students into good citizens, possessing social awareness, and contributing to community life (Gunawan, 2011). Social Studies learning also serves as a means to instill multicultural awareness and strengthen Indonesian national identity.

However, the implementation of social studies learning at CLCs still faces various obstacles. Limited resources and facilities, minimal teacher training in integrating cultural values and national character into learning, and the dominance of local culture are key challenges. According to data from the Indonesian School of Kota Kinabalu in 2022, the number of Indonesian students studying at CLCs reached 24,262, spread across Kota Kinabalu and Tawau. This number indicates a large population of children of Indonesian migrant workers who require attention to fostering national character through education.

Formal educators at CLC consist of teachers who act as learning facilitators, conveyors of values, and authoritative figures who serve as role models in students' daily lives. In this environment, learning focuses not only on

cognitive aspects but also on supporting character, particularly national character. Teachers are tasked with delivering relevant learning materials, nurturing students' learning processes, and educating with a humanistic and contextual approach to the social and cultural backgrounds of migrant workers' children. Students at CLC play an active role in the learning process as subjects of education, not merely objects. When the character education process at CLC is optimal, students will grow into individuals with noble character, a sense of pride as Indonesian citizens, behave politely, responsibly, and have a collective awareness of national values even when they are abroad. In addition to social studies learning, supporting national character can be achieved through the implementation of the ethnopedagogical learning model at the Sabah Community Learning Center (CLC). This is done through the integration of local Indonesian wisdom values into the teaching and learning process. CLC teachers use a contextual approach by linking subject matter to traditions, culture, and social practices familiar to the children of migrant workers. For example, in Indonesian and social studies lessons, teachers utilize local folklore, patriotic songs, traditional games, and discussions about Indonesian cultural symbols. This approach brings learning closer to students' lived experiences, so they feel valued and develop an emotional connection to their Indonesian identity. Furthermore, learning is conducted collaboratively and participatory, involving students in cultural project activities such as Nusantara art performances, national-themed speech competitions, and commemorations of Indonesian national holidays. This strategy encourages active student involvement and strengthens their understanding of national values.

According to Talcott Parsons' structural-functional theory, the CLC education system plays a vital role in maintaining social stability and balance for the children of migrant workers. The implementation of social studies learning based on nationalism

not only serves to provide knowledge but also to strengthen adaptation, integration, and preservation of cultural values. This contributes to the creation of social balance at the individual, family, and community levels as a whole. Parsons views society as a social system composed of various parts or institutions (family, religion, education, economy, politics, etc.) that are interrelated and mutually supportive. Each part has a specific function to maintain the balance of the system as a whole (Parsons, T. (1951).

Talcot Parsons' structural-functional theory begins with four essential functions for all "action" systems, known as AGIL. Through AGIL, the concept of structure and systems was developed. According to Parsons (Nursalam et al., 2020), a function is a collection of activities aimed at fulfilling a specific need or system requirement. With this definition, Parsons believes that there are four essential functions required for all systems, known as AGIL. First, adaptation, a system must cope with critical external situations. The system must adapt to the environment and adapt that environment to its needs. Second, goal attainment, a system must define itself to achieve its primary goal. Third, integration, a system must regulate the interrelationships of its component parts. The system must also manage the interrelationships of the other three essential functions. Fourth, latency, pattern maintenance, a system must equip, maintain, and improve both individual motivation and the cultural patterns that create and sustain motivation.

This explanation demonstrates that Parsons emphasizes the hierarchy in which integration occurs in two ways. First, each lower level provides the conditions or power for the higher level. Second, everything at a higher level controls everything at a lower level. As it developed, structural-functional theory became increasingly complex, understanding the context of global and transnational society. The function of education is not only to maintain domestic order but also to serve as an instrument for strengthening national identity amidst high

social and cultural mobility (Sulistiawati & Nasution, 2022).

Previous research has discussed the dynamics of social studies learning in supporting the nationalistic character of Indonesian migrant workers' children. First, research conducted by Rachmat, A., Alamari, MF, & Nurdin, I. (2024), discussed the instillation of nationalism in Indonesian migrant workers' children in Malaysia through community service activities in the form of teaching activities about nationalism for the children of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia which was carried out for 4 months (1 semester) at Sanggar Bimbingan Sungai Mulia 5, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The results of this activity showed positive results where children's knowledge about Indonesia was not only as their parents' country of origin but also about the history, culture, ideology and foundation of the state as well as social life in Indonesia. Second, research conducted by Prasetyo, D (2016), discussed the influence of nationalistic character education in the family on the nationalistic character of children in migrant workers' families in the palm oil plantation sector. The results of this study suggest that there is a positive influence of nationalistic character education in the family on children's nationalistic character. The coefficient of determination obtained in this study was 25.50%, which shows that the extent of children's nationalistic character is influenced by nationalistic character education in the family.

In general, these studies demonstrate the importance of social studies learning in supporting the nationalistic character of Indonesian migrant workers' children. However, none have explored this issue in CLC schools and locations in Sabah, Malaysia. This study aims to fill this gap and provide a novel approach to the study of social studies learning practices in supporting the nationalistic character of migrant workers' children at CLC Sabah, Malaysia. Therefore, this study is crucial for assessing the role and effectiveness of social studies learning in supporting the

development of nationalistic character among Indonesian migrant workers' children in Sabah, Malaysia. The results are expected to contribute to the development of national education strategies relevant to the transnational context and serve as a policy basis for the education of Indonesian migrant workers' children abroad.

## MATERIALS & METHODS

This research was conducted at a Community Learning Center (CLC) located in Sabah, Malaysia. CLCs are educational institutions specifically established to serve the learning needs of children of Indonesian migrant workers residing in Malaysia, particularly in Sabah. The majority of Indonesian migrant

workers' families live in oil palm plantation areas, which are the primary locations for CLCs. Several areas in Sabah that have these learning centers include Tawau, Sandakan, Lahad Datu, Kinabatangan, and Kota Kinabalu. CLCs serve as a place for migrant children to receive education and social interaction, thus becoming a strategic space for the formation and strengthening of national character. Furthermore, Sabah's unique socio-cultural context, situated at the intersection of Indonesian culture as their origin and Malaysian culture as their home, is an important factor in the educational process and identity formation of migrant children.



Figure 1: Map of Sabah, Malaysia



Figure 2: Flag Ceremony and Indonesian Cultural Activities

Qualitative research is a type of research that explores and understands the meaning in a number of individuals or groups of people originating from social problems (Creswell, 2017). Using a descriptive qualitative approach with the aim of understanding in depth the learning of social studies and the character of nationalism of children of Indonesian migrant workers in the Community Learning Center (CLC). The main data sources come from two categories, namely primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained through in-depth interviews and observations with social studies teachers, CLC managers and children of Indonesian migrant workers as students in the CLC. Meanwhile, secondary data was

obtained from curriculum documents and social studies learning tools in the CLC, official reports from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology regarding the implementation of the CLC in Malaysia.

Data collection techniques were conducted through three methods. First, in-depth interviews were used to explore the experiences and views of informants regarding social studies learning and the nationalistic character of Indonesian migrant workers' children at the CLC. Second, observations were conducted to directly observe the social studies learning process at the CLC in fostering children's nationalistic character. Third, document studies were

used to examine documents owned by social studies teachers and CLC managers, which could include curriculum documents and social studies learning tools at the CLC, and official reports from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology regarding the implementation of the CLC in Malaysia. Data analysis was conducted thematically, starting with data reduction to filter information relevant to the research focus. Next, the data were presented in the form of interpretive narratives to reveal the processes, patterns, and social values that emerged. Conclusions were drawn inductively, by linking field findings and document studies.

## **RESULT & DISCUSSION**

### **Implementation of Social Studies Learning at CLC Sabah**

The results of the study indicate that the implementation of Social Studies (IPS) learning at the Sabah Community Learning Center (CLC) has been strategically directed to achieve two main functions, namely (1) the transfer of academic knowledge in accordance with the Indonesian national curriculum, and (2) the instilling of national values as an integral part of the character formation of students. In this context, teachers have a very central role. They not only act as material deliverers, but also as learning facilitators, authoritative figures, and role models who are able to represent the values of Indonesian culture and nationalism in everyday life. The IPS learning strategies used by the teachers involve a combination of thematic, contextual, and participatory approaches. Learning materials are selectively chosen to be relevant to the realities of the lives of migrant workers' children living in oil palm plantation areas and transnational environments. For example, learning about the history of the Indonesian nation's struggle is delivered by linking the migration experiences of students' families, so that students can understand the importance of collective struggle and national values in the context of their current lives. Likewise with the values of Pancasila,

teachers try to relate them to everyday social events and experiences, such as inter-ethnic tolerance in Sabah, mutual cooperation in the CLC environment, and respect for differences.

Beyond material aspects, habituation activities also play a crucial role in strengthening national character. Routine activities such as Monday flag ceremonies, commemorations of national holidays (e.g., Indonesian Independence Day, Heroes' Day), and cultural competitions are actively held. These activities are not merely ceremonial, but rather serve as a means of internalizing national values through students' social and emotional experiences. In this process, children are encouraged to use Indonesian as the primary language in learning and school culture activities, thus creating an environment that consistently affirms their national identity. However, the implementation of social studies learning at CLC still faces several challenges. Limited infrastructure, such as a lack of textbooks, learning media, and adequate classrooms, hinders the optimization of the learning process. Teachers also face difficulties in accessing relevant professional training, particularly in developing learning models that can effectively integrate cultural values and national character within the Malaysian social context. Furthermore, the dominance of local Malaysian culture in students' daily lives poses a challenge in consistently instilling Indonesian national values.

### **Nationalistic Characteristics of Children of Migrant Workers**

The nationalistic character of Indonesian migrant workers' children in Sabah is diverse and influenced by the intensity of their interactions with both Indonesian and Malaysian environments. Research findings indicate that most students exhibit pride in their Indonesian identity, as evidenced by their enthusiasm for participating in national activities, their use of national attributes, and their ability to sing patriotic songs and the national anthem. They also demonstrate respect for national symbols such as the red

and white flag and the Garuda Pancasila emblem. However, there are strong indications of a shift in cultural orientation due to more intensive exposure to the Malaysian social and media environment. Some students are more fluent in local Malay than in standard Indonesian, and have a broader knowledge of Malaysian culture and public figures than of Indonesian history and national figures. This phenomenon can be understood as an inevitable form of socio-cultural acculturation, given that children grow up and interact in the context of Malaysian society on a daily basis.

This situation demonstrates the strategic role of social studies learning as a "cultural bridge" connecting Indonesian identity with the realities of life in other countries. Social studies learning serves as a means to strengthen national awareness and prevent a disconnection in the national identity of young Indonesians abroad. If social studies learning strategies are not implemented consistently and structured, students' national identity could potentially be weakened, which in the long term could impact their emotional attachment to Indonesia.

### **Social Studies Learning as a Mechanism for Social Integration**

Within Talcott Parsons' structural-functional theoretical framework, social studies learning at the CLC can be analyzed as part of a social system that performs the functions of adaptation, integration, goal achievement, and pattern maintenance (AGIL). First, Adaptation is evident in the CLC's efforts to adapt the social studies curriculum and learning strategies to the local socio-cultural conditions of Sabah. Teachers creatively connect national subject matter to the context of students' daily lives, so that learning becomes relevant and easy to understand. Second, Goal Attainment is evident in the setting of clear learning objectives, namely to shape students who not only possess social studies knowledge but also possess a strong sense of nationalism and national character. Third, Integration is realized through collaboration between teachers, students,

CLC administrators, and the parent community in creating a conducive learning environment. Social and cultural activities involving the entire CLC community strengthen social cohesion and a sense of belonging to Indonesian identity. Fourth, Latency (pattern maintenance) is evident in the routine of national activities and the continuous reinforcement of national symbols. This process serves to maintain the sustainability of national values in the long term and strengthen the motivation and patterns of Indonesian culture in migrant children living in a foreign environment.

Thus, social studies learning serves not only as a means of academic instruction but also as a social mechanism that maintains the stability of national identity in a transnational context. CLCs serve as miniature models of Indonesian society abroad, where national values and identity are continuously reproduced and transmitted to the younger generation.

### **Implications for Transnational Education**

The results of this study emphasize that social studies learning plays a strategic role in maintaining the continuity of the national identity of young Indonesians living abroad. In the era of globalization, international labor mobility, and cross-border cultural contact, CLCs play a role not only as formal educational institutions but also as agents of cultural diplomacy and strengthening national identity. The implication is that more comprehensive policy support is needed from the Indonesian government to strengthen the capacity of social studies learning in CLCs. These efforts include providing adequate learning facilities and infrastructure, developing a social studies curriculum that is responsive to the transnational context, and improving teacher competency through pedagogical and national training. Furthermore, synergy is needed between the state, migrant communities, and schools to create a social environment that supports the sustainable formation of national character. With the right strategy, social studies learning can be

an effective instrument in shaping young Indonesian citizens with character, a strong sense of national awareness, and the ability to critically adapt to the context of global life without losing their national identity.

### **Strengthening National Character through an Ethnopedagogical Learning Model Based on Local Wisdom**

The implementation of a local wisdom-based ethnopedagogy model has been proven to contribute to strengthening the nationalistic character of migrant worker children. Based on observations and interviews, there has been an increase in students' awareness of Indonesian national symbols (the red and white flag, the national anthem Indonesia Raya, and Pancasila) and a growing sense of pride in being Indonesian citizens. Learning activities that highlight students' regional cultures also foster a sense of belonging to a national identity, even though they live outside of Indonesia. Values such as mutual cooperation, respect for teachers, social awareness, and a spirit of togetherness emerge consistently in learning activities. By strengthening local values imbued with national significance, migrant worker children are able to build a strong identity amidst a heterogeneous social environment. The research results indicate that the ethnopedagogical learning model can be an effective strategy for fostering nationalism in the children of migrant workers living abroad. Integrating local culture into learning not only strengthens cognitive knowledge about Indonesia but also shapes affective attitudes and concrete behaviors that reflect national values. In the context of the CLC, this model also serves as a means of preserving the national identity of Indonesia's young generation abroad.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrates that Social Studies (IPS) learning plays a strategic role in supporting the development of nationalist character among children of Indonesian migrant workers studying at the Community Learning Center (CLC) in Sabah, Malaysia.

Social Studies learning at the CLC serves not only as a means of transferring cognitive knowledge, but also as a medium for instilling national values, strengthening national identity, and fostering social awareness in students within a transnational context. Teachers play a crucial role as agents of change through the implementation of thematic, contextual, and participatory learning strategies. Routine activities such as flag ceremonies, commemorating national holidays, and fostering the use of the Indonesian language serve as important vehicles for internalizing national values. However, this process still faces challenges, including limited infrastructure, a lack of professional teacher training, and the strong influence of local Malaysian culture on students' daily lives.

From the perspective of Talcott Parsons' structural-functional theory, the CLC education system plays a crucial role in maintaining adaptation, integration, goal achievement, and the maintenance of nationalist value patterns (AGIL). Through these functions, social studies learning contributes to social stability and the preservation of national identity within the communities of Indonesian migrant children abroad. These findings have important implications for Indonesian education policy for diaspora communities. The government needs to strengthen support for CLC, both through improving the quality of the curriculum and teacher training, as well as providing adequate learning facilities. Furthermore, collaboration between the state, migrant communities, and educational institutions is needed to create a learning environment capable of fostering nationalism sustainably. Thus, social studies learning can function optimally as a strategic instrument in shaping a young generation of Indonesians with character, a strong national identity, and preparedness to face global challenges without losing their national identity.

### Declaration by Authors

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