

Inquiry-Based Learning and Character Education

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ABSTRACT

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This study examines the integration of Question-Based Learning (QBL) with character education at TK PKK Talun, Ponorogo, using a qualitative research method with a case study approach. The main objective of the study is to explore how QBL supports students' character development and to identify the challenges and strategies involved in its implementation. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation, and were analyzed using interactive data analysis techniques. The findings indicate that QBL is effective in increasing student engagement, encouraging students to ask questions and think critically, and fostering the internalization of character values such as honesty and responsibility. However, challenges such as limited instructional time and students' lack of skills in formulating relevant questions remain significant obstacles. The implications of this study highlight the need for school policy support and teacher training to optimize the implementation of QBL within the context of character education. This study is expected to provide practical guidance for educators and policymakers in creating a more reflective and collaborative learning environment.

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INTRODUCTION

Education in the 21st century emphasizes not only the acquisition of cognitive knowledge but also the development of critical thinking and strong character values. Early childhood education, in particular, plays a crucial role in shaping students' foundational thinking skills and moral behavior. At this stage, learning experiences significantly influence how children perceive themselves, others, and the world around them (Dayanti et al., 2023; Wang, 2021). Therefore, learning approaches that actively engage students and encourage reflection are essential. One such approach is Question-Based Learning (QBL), which positions questioning as a central learning activity. Through meaningful questions, students are encouraged to explore ideas, express curiosity, and construct understanding independently. At the same time, character education has become a priority in many educational systems as a response to moral and social challenges faced by society (Fauzi et al., 2023; Hadziq et al., 2024; Wahjusaputri et al., 2025). Character education aims to instill values such as honesty, responsibility, empathy, and respect through consistent learning experiences. Integrating effective pedagogical strategies with character education is necessary to ensure that moral values are not merely taught theoretically but are internalized and practiced in daily behavior.

Question-Based Learning is theoretically grounded in constructivist learning theory, which emphasizes active student participation in the learning process. According to this perspective, learning occurs most effectively when students are encouraged to ask questions, reflect on their experiences, and engage in dialogue. Questions function as cognitive tools that stimulate curiosity, deepen understanding, and promote higher-order thinking skills. (Castell et al., 2022) argue that well-designed questioning strategies can enhance reflective thinking by prompting learners to analyze

situations, evaluate alternatives, and make reasoned judgments. In the context of early childhood education, questions help children articulate their thoughts and develop reasoning skills appropriate to their developmental level (Arif et al., 2024; Djibat et al., 2019). Rather than receiving information passively, students become active participants in meaning-making. However, the effectiveness of QBL depends heavily on how it is implemented in classroom practice. Teachers must be able to design relevant questions, create a supportive learning environment, and guide students in developing questioning skills. Without adequate pedagogical understanding, the potential benefits of QBL may not be fully realized.

Parallel to the development of cognitive skills, character education seeks to shape learners' moral and social behavior through the internalization of ethical values. Character education is not limited to teaching moral concepts but involves cultivating habits, attitudes, and behaviors that reflect positive character traits. Values such as honesty, responsibility, discipline, and cooperation must be embedded in everyday learning activities so that students can experience and practice them directly (Arif et al., 2024; Randani & Krismono, 2024). Research suggests that character education is most effective when integrated into classroom interactions rather than taught as a separate subject. The importance of contextual learning, where character values are connected to real-life situations and students' daily experiences. In early childhood settings, this integration is particularly important because young learners learn primarily through interaction, imitation, and reflection. Therefore, teaching methods that promote dialogue, reflection, and moral reasoning are highly compatible with the goals of character education.

Despite strong theoretical support for both Question-Based Learning and character education, gaps remain at the level of classroom implementation. In many educational settings, teaching practices are still dominated by lecture-based and teacher-centered approaches (Ariani & Ritonga, 2024; Basori et al., 2023; Tuala et al., 2024). Teachers often focus on delivering content efficiently rather than engaging students in reflective dialogue. Several factors contribute to this issue, including limited teacher understanding of student-centered learning models, insufficient professional training, and inadequate learning infrastructure. As a result, opportunities for students to ask questions, express opinions, and reflect on moral values are often minimal. Empirical evidence indicates that students frequently struggle to formulate meaningful or reflective questions, particularly those related to character values. This challenge suggests that questioning skills must be intentionally taught and practiced, rather than assumed to develop naturally. Without proper guidance, Question-Based Learning may fail to achieve its intended outcomes in both cognitive and character development.

Previous studies have examined the effectiveness of Question-Based Learning in enhancing students' critical thinking skills. Students who actively engaged in questioning activities demonstrated better problem-solving abilities and deeper conceptual understanding (Hadziq et al., 2024; Jubba et al., 2021). Similarly, studies in character education have shown that values are more effectively internalized when students are involved in reflective and participatory learning processes (Munawwar, 2020; Safitri & Lateh, 2025). Moral reasoning develops through discussion, inquiry, and reflection rather than direct instruction alone (Jannah et al., 2024; Nabila & Auliya, 2023; Yana et al., 2023). However, most existing research treats Question-Based Learning and character education as separate domains. Few studies have explored how these two approaches can be integrated into a single instructional framework, particularly in early childhood education contexts. This lack of integration represents a significant gap in the literature and limits the practical application of both concepts in classrooms.

Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by exploring the integration of Question-Based Learning and character education in an early childhood education setting. By adopting a qualitative case study approach, this research aims to examine how QBL can support the development of

character values, identify challenges faced by teachers and students, and explore strategies used to overcome these challenges. The study is conducted at TK PKK Talun, Ponorogo, as a contextual example of how integrated learning approaches are implemented in practice. The findings of this study are expected to contribute both theoretically and practically by providing insights into effective instructional strategies for combining cognitive and moral education. Furthermore, this research aims to offer practical recommendations for educators, school leaders, and policymakers in designing learning environments that are reflective, interactive, and character-oriented.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design using a case study approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The qualitative approach was selected because the primary objective of this research is to gain an in-depth understanding of the implementation of Question-Based Learning (QBL) and character education at TK PKK Talun, Ngebel District, Ponorogo Regency. A case study approach allows the researcher to explore the phenomenon holistically within its real-life context, particularly in early childhood education settings. This approach is considered more appropriate than a quantitative method because the focus of the study is on exploring meanings, perceptions, and instructional practices involving direct interaction with research participants. Through qualitative inquiry, rich and contextualized data can be obtained to explain how Question-Based Learning is implemented and how character values are developed in daily classroom activities.

Data collection was conducted using three main techniques: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. In-depth interviews were carried out with purposively selected informants consisting of the school principal, classroom teachers, and several parents. The selection of these informants aimed to capture diverse perspectives regarding the implementation of Question-Based Learning and character education in the school. To ensure clarity and confidentiality, informants were coded as presented in the following Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristic Informant

Informant Code	Position/Role	Number	Description
NS1	School Principal	1	Policy maker and instructional leader
NS2	Class A Teacher	1	Teacher implementing the learning approach
NS3	Class B Teacher	1	Teacher implementing the learning approach
NS4	Parent of Class A	1	Representative of Class A parents
NS5	Parent of Class B	1	Representative of Class B parents

Participant observation was conducted by directly observing classroom learning activities. This observation aimed to examine teacher–student interactions during the implementation of Question-Based Learning and to identify how students’ character development emerged through these learning processes. The observation focused on instructional activities, communication patterns between teachers and students, and students’ responses to the learning methods applied. In addition, documentation was collected in the form of daily activity records, student portfolios, and relevant learning materials. These documents supported the findings obtained from interviews and observations and provided a more comprehensive understanding of the learning implementation at TK PKK Talun.

The data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation were analyzed using the interactive data analysis model proposed by Miles and Huberman. Data analysis began with data reduction, which involved selecting, organizing, and categorizing data relevant to the research focus while eliminating irrelevant information. The reduced data were then presented in descriptive narratives and tables to facilitate the identification of patterns and themes. Finally, conclusions were

drawn based on recurring patterns identified in the data, and verification was conducted through data triangulation by comparing information from different sources. This continuous process ensured the credibility and validity of the research findings.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The Implementation of Question-Based Learning

The implementation of Question-Based Learning (QBL) significantly enhances student engagement in early childhood classrooms at TK PKK Talun. Classroom observations revealed that students were more attentive and actively involved during learning activities when teachers used questions as the primary instructional strategy. Rather than passively receiving information, students were encouraged to respond, express opinions, and interact with both teachers and peers. This active participation created a more dynamic learning environment where students felt motivated to engage with the learning content. Engagement was evident not only in verbal responses but also in students' body language, enthusiasm, and willingness to participate in classroom discussions.

Further observations showed that open-ended questions played a crucial role in sustaining students' attention. When teachers posed questions related to students' daily experiences, children responded more enthusiastically and showed curiosity about the topic being discussed. These questions stimulated students to think, recall personal experiences, and connect abstract ideas with concrete situations. As a result, learning became more meaningful and relevant for students. Teachers reported that students who were usually quiet became more confident in participating when guided through simple, supportive questioning techniques.

Interviews with teachers revealed that QBL encouraged a shift from teacher-centered to student-centered learning. Teachers acted more as facilitators who guided students' thinking rather than as sole providers of knowledge. This shift allowed students to take greater ownership of their learning process. Teachers observed that students were more willing to take risks in answering questions and were less afraid of making mistakes, which contributed to a positive classroom atmosphere.

Parents also noticed increased engagement at home. Several parents reported that their children began asking more questions about daily activities and demonstrated greater curiosity about their surroundings (Djibat et al., 2019; Yana et al., 2023). This suggests that the impact of QBL extended beyond the classroom and influenced students' learning behaviors in everyday contexts. Such findings indicate that QBL fosters an inquiry-based mindset that supports continuous learning.

Additionally, classroom documentation showed improvements in students' participation records and learning portfolios. Teachers noted an increase in students' contributions during group discussions and storytelling sessions. These records provide evidence that QBL not only improves engagement during lessons but also encourages consistent participation over time. This finding demonstrates that Question-Based Learning effectively enhances student engagement by creating interactive, meaningful, and student-centered learning experiences. Increased engagement serves as a foundation for both cognitive development and character formation in early childhood education.

The Internalization of Character Values

Question-Based Learning plays a significant role in supporting the internalization of character values among students. Through structured and reflective questioning, teachers were able to guide students to recognize and understand values such as honesty, responsibility, cooperation, and respect. Instead of directly instructing students about moral behavior, teachers encouraged students to reflect on their actions through questions related to real-life situations. This approach allowed character values to emerge naturally within learning activities.

Observations showed that teachers frequently used moral-reflective questions, such as asking students how they felt after helping a friend or why telling the truth is important. These questions prompted students to think about the consequences of their actions and consider the feelings of others. As a result, students began to demonstrate greater empathy and awareness of social norms. This reflective process helped students move beyond rote moral instruction toward genuine understanding.

Teachers reported that QBL made character education more meaningful and less authoritarian. Rather than imposing rules, teachers guided students to discover moral values independently. This method was particularly effective for young learners, who respond better to dialogue and storytelling than to abstract moral explanations. Teachers observed that students were more likely to practice positive behaviors when they understood the reasons behind them.

Parents also confirmed positive behavioral changes at home. Interviews revealed that children became more responsible in completing simple tasks and more honest in communicating their feelings (Bekti Kusuma & Soraya, 2023; Martzoukou, 2022). Parents attributed these changes to the reflective questioning techniques used at school, which encouraged children to think before acting.

Documentation analysis supported these findings, showing consistent references to character-related discussions in lesson plans and daily activity records. Student portfolios also included reflections and drawings that illustrated moral understanding, such as helping friends or sharing toys. This finding highlights that Question-Based Learning effectively supports character education by facilitating reflection, moral reasoning, and internalization of values. When character education is embedded within questioning strategies, values become lived experiences rather than abstract concepts.

Challenges in Implementing Question-Based Learning

Despite its benefits, the study identified several challenges in implementing Question-Based Learning effectively. One major challenge was limited instructional time. Teachers reported that engaging students in meaningful questioning and reflection required more time than traditional lecture-based methods. As a result, teachers sometimes struggled to balance curriculum demands with reflective discussions, particularly during tightly scheduled school days.

Another significant challenge was students' limited ability to formulate relevant questions. Observations showed that many students initially struggled to ask reflective or value-oriented questions. This limitation is largely attributed to students' developmental stage and lack of prior exposure to inquiry-based learning. Teachers noted that without proper scaffolding, students tended to ask superficial or unrelated questions.

Teacher competence also emerged as a challenge. Some teachers expressed uncertainty about how to design effective questions that align with both learning objectives and character values. Interviews revealed that teachers had limited training in Question-Based Learning strategies, which affected their confidence in implementing this approach consistently.

Infrastructure constraints further complicated implementation. Limited learning media and instructional resources restricted opportunities for interactive questioning activities. Teachers relied heavily on verbal questioning due to the lack of visual aids and interactive materials that could stimulate deeper inquiry.

Parents also faced challenges in reinforcing QBL at home. Some parents reported difficulty understanding the learning approach and supporting reflective questioning practices outside school. This gap reduced the continuity of character education between school and home environments. Overall, these challenges indicate that while Question-Based Learning is effective, its implementation requires adequate time, teacher training, supportive infrastructure, and parental involvement to achieve optimal outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the integration of Question-Based Learning (QBL) with character education at TK PKK Talun, Ponorogo, is effective in fostering both student engagement and the internalization of character values in early childhood education. The findings demonstrate that QBL encourages active participation, critical and reflective thinking, and meaningful dialogue, which support the development of positive character traits such as honesty, responsibility, cooperation, and empathy. Although challenges remain, including limited instructional time, students' initial difficulties in formulating reflective questions, and teachers' need for greater pedagogical support, these obstacles can be addressed through appropriate questioning strategies, professional collaboration, and parental involvement. The study highlights that when implemented thoughtfully and supported by adequate training and school policies, Question-Based Learning serves as a practical and contextual approach for integrating cognitive development and character education, contributing to the creation of a reflective, interactive, and character-oriented learning environment in early childhood settings.

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