



Empathy-Based Problem-Based Learning in Teaching Inspirational Story Texts at the Elementary School Level

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Abstract: This study explores how Problem-Based Learning (PBL) supports empathy-based interpretation and character-oriented literacy in teaching inspirational story texts at the elementary school level. Previous studies have often examined PBL in relation to comprehension, participation, or textual analysis, while limited attention has been given to its role as a pedagogical mechanism that connects empathy, moral interpretation, written reflection, and character formation. Using a qualitative embedded single-case study design, this research was conducted in a Grade VI Indonesian language classroom consisting of 25 students, with 14 main informants selected through purposive and maximum variation sampling. Data were collected through interviews, focus group discussions, classroom observations, and document analysis, and were analyzed thematically. The findings show that contextual problem orientation stimulated students' empathy before textual analysis, collaborative discussion supported moral interpretation, and teacher scaffolding helped students develop written reflections. The study identifies an empathy-based PBL mechanism in which contextual problems stimulate empathy, empathy encourages collaborative critical discussion, and discussion strengthens moral interpretation, written reflection, and character formation. The findings suggest that PBL can function as an integrative approach for connecting literacy, empathy, writing, and character education in elementary Indonesian language learning.

Keywords: Problem-Based Learning; Inspirational Story Texts; Empathy-Based Learning; Elementary Indonesian Language Learning; Moral Interpretation; Character Formation.

Introduction

Indonesian language learning in elementary schools should not be limited to the mastery of linguistic knowledge, text structure, and reading comprehension. In the context of twenty-first-century education, language learning is expected to develop students' literacy competence, critical thinking, communication, empathy, and character formation. This orientation is particularly relevant in the teaching of inspirational story texts because this genre contains narratives of struggle, perseverance, moral choice, and exemplary behavior. Inspirational stories allow students to encounter human experiences, interpret moral consequences, and reflect on values that are connected to their personal and social lives.

The pedagogical value of inspirational story texts lies in their ability to connect literacy learning with affective and moral development. Narrative texts can function

as simulations of social experience because readers are invited to understand characters, conflicts, intentions, and emotional situations (Mar & Oatley, 2008). In elementary education, this function is important because students need learning experiences that help them not only understand what a text says, but also reflect on why the message matters for their lives. Emotional and reflective learning also contributes to empathy development, especially when students are guided to connect learning materials with social and moral situations (Durlak et al., 2011; Kholis et al., 2025). Therefore, inspirational story texts should be taught as meaningful literacy resources rather than as objects of structural analysis alone.

However, the teaching of inspirational story texts often remains conventional. Students are frequently asked to read texts, identify structures, answer comprehension questions, and write short responses individually. Such practices may help students recognize textual elements, but they do not always encourage deeper moral interpretation, collaborative reasoning, or reflective writing. This limitation is important because literacy development at the elementary level requires students to engage in reading, discussion, meaning-making, and written expression as interconnected processes. Research on elementary students' writing also shows that students still experience difficulties in organizing and expressing ideas accurately in written form (Graham et al., 2012; Pardani et al., 2025). Thus, text learning should be designed to help students move from comprehension to interpretation and from oral discussion to written reflection.

Problem-Based Learning (PBL) offers a relevant pedagogical alternative for transforming conventional text-based instruction into a more active, reflective, and student-centered learning process. PBL is widely understood as a learner-centered instructional approach that begins with meaningful problems and requires students to construct knowledge through inquiry, collaboration, and reflection (Barrows, 1986; Hmelo-Silver, 2004; Savery, 2006). Schmidt et al. (2011) further explain that the PBL process involves activating prior knowledge, identifying learning issues, engaging in collaborative inquiry, and reflecting on the solutions constructed by learners. In PBL, students are not positioned as passive recipients of information. Instead, they are encouraged to identify problems, activate prior knowledge, discuss possible explanations, construct arguments, and reflect on what they have learned. This makes PBL relevant for Indonesian language learning because the teaching of texts requires not only comprehension, but also interpretation, reasoning, communication, and written expression.

Previous studies have shown that PBL and other student-centered approaches can strengthen higher-order thinking, long-term retention, motivation, collaborative learning, and student satisfaction (Dochy et al., 2003; Hmelo-Silver, 2004; Strobel & van Barneveld, 2009; Wijnia et al., 2024). Previous meta-analytic evidence also indicates that PBL can support students' understanding, application of knowledge, and assessment-related learning outcomes when compared with conventional instruction (Gijbels et al., 2005). In the Indonesian elementary and madrasah context, Khairullina and Prastowo (2024) show that ICT-based PBL can support higher-order thinking skills in IPAS learning at madrasah ibtidaiyah. Komariyah et al. (2021) also emphasize that Indonesian language learning materials can be designed to promote active student involvement and social interaction. These studies indicate that problem-oriented and participatory learning has strong potential for developing students' reasoning, participation, and literacy competence in elementary classrooms.

Despite these contributions, there remains a gap in the discussion of PBL in elementary Indonesian language learning, especially in relation to inspirational story texts. Existing studies tend to position PBL mainly as a strategy for improving learning outcomes, critical thinking, or students' active participation. Limited attention has been given to how PBL works as a pedagogical mechanism that links contextual problem orientation, empathy, collaborative discussion, moral interpretation, writing development, and character formation. This gap is crucial because inspirational story texts are not only cognitive texts to be analyzed structurally; they are also affective and moral texts that require students to feel, question, discuss, interpret, and reflect.

Dialogic and collaborative classroom interaction is central to this process. Through classroom talk, students are able to share perspectives, negotiate meaning, and develop reasoning with peers (Alexander, 2018; Vrikki et al., 2019). In the teaching of inspirational story texts, discussion can help students examine why a character succeeds, what values are represented in the story, and how those values may be applied in real life. Social and emotional learning research also suggests that learning activities that develop emotional competence, social awareness, and responsible decision-making can contribute to students' attitudes, behavior, and academic outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011). Therefore, PBL has the potential to connect text comprehension with empathy-based moral reflection.

Based on this gap, this study investigates the implementation of PBL in teaching inspirational story texts in a Grade VI elementary classroom. Unlike previous studies that mainly examine PBL as a strategy for improving comprehension, participation, or critical thinking, this study conceptualizes PBL as an empathy-based pedagogical mechanism. The novelty of this study lies in explaining how contextual problem orientation stimulates students' empathy, how empathy encourages collaborative critical discussion, how discussion supports moral interpretation, how moral interpretation strengthens written expression, and how the overall process contributes to character formation.

Therefore, this study aims to explore how PBL is implemented in inspirational story text learning and how it supports students' empathy, participation, moral interpretation, writing development, and character formation. The study is guided by the following research question: How does Problem-Based Learning shape empathy-based interpretation and character-oriented literacy learning in the teaching of inspirational story texts at the elementary school level?

Method

This study employed a qualitative embedded single-case study design to explore the implementation of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in teaching inspirational story texts in a Grade VI elementary Indonesian language classroom. This design was considered appropriate because the study focused on one bounded classroom context while examining several embedded units of analysis, including instructional strategy, students' learning experiences, classroom interaction, school-level curriculum support, and students' written reflections. An embedded single-case design enables researchers to investigate one case in depth while also analyzing multiple sub-units within the case (Yin, 2018).

The study was conducted in a Grade VI classroom at a public elementary school at SDN 014 Tanah Datar, Indonesia. The class consisted of 25 students. This classroom was selected because the teacher implemented PBL in teaching inspirational story texts as part of Indonesian language learning. The learning topic was considered

relevant because inspirational story texts require students not only to understand textual structure and moral messages, but also to reflect on values such as perseverance, empathy, courage, responsibility, and motivation. In the classroom, PBL was implemented by introducing students to contextual problems before they analyzed the structure and moral meaning of the text. The learning process began with a contextual problem presented through a short video or narrative, followed by group discussion, moral interpretation, and written reflection.

Although the classroom consisted of 25 students, this study selected 12 focal student participants for focus group discussions and deeper qualitative analysis. These students were selected to represent different levels of reading ability and classroom participation. In addition, one Grade VI teacher and one school leader or curriculum coordinator were involved as key informants. Therefore, the total number of main informants was 14. Purposive sampling was used to identify participants who were directly involved in or supported the PBL learning process, while maximum variation sampling was applied to the student participants to capture diverse learning experiences based on reading ability and classroom participation. The details of the informants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Informants

Informant Code	Informant Category	Number	Selection Criteria	Data Contribution
T1	Grade VI teacher	1	Teacher who implemented PBL in inspirational story text learning	Provided data on instructional design, problem orientation, group discussion, scaffolding, challenges, text selection, and character formation
SL1	School leader/curriculum coordinator	1	School leader or curriculum coordinator familiar with classroom learning innovation	Provided data on curriculum support and school-level orientation toward innovative learning
S1-S4	Focal students with high reading ability	4	Selected from the 25 students based on strong reading comprehension and active classroom participation	Provided data on active reasoning, moral interpretation, and group discussion
S5-S8	Focal students with moderate reading ability	4	Selected from the 25 students based on average reading comprehension and classroom participation	Provided data on learning experience, peer support, and collaborative understanding
S9-S12	Focal students with low reading ability	4	Selected from the 25 students because they needed support in reading and writing activities	Provided data on learning difficulties, teacher scaffolding, visual support, and writing development
Total main informants	Teacher, school leader, and focal students	14	Information-rich participants	Main sources of interview and FGD data
Classroom observation context	Grade VI students	25	Entire class involved in PBL learning activities	Provided classroom context for observing student engagement, group interaction, and PBL implementation

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, classroom observation, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the teacher and the school leader or curriculum coordinator. Focus group discussions were conducted with the twelve focal students in three groups based on reading ability: high, moderate, and low. The interviews and focus group discussions explored contextual problem orientation, students' participation in group problem solving, interpretation of moral messages, writing experiences, teacher scaffolding, implementation challenges, and the connection between inspirational story learning and character formation.

Classroom observation was conducted in two learning sessions and covered the entire Grade VI class consisting of 25 students. The first observation focused on the problem-orientation stage, students' emotional responses, and initial group discussion. The second observation focused on teacher scaffolding, group interaction, students' written expression, and implementation challenges during PBL. Document analysis was conducted on the lesson plan, learning materials, students' worksheets, and students' written reflections. Students' written reflections were analyzed to identify how students interpreted moral values, organized ideas, and connected the inspirational story with personal reflection. The primary document analysis focused on the twelve focal students, while classroom-level documents were used to support contextual interpretation of the PBL process.

Table 2. Data Sources and Coding System

Data Source	Number/Scope	Code Used in Findings	Analytical Function
Teacher interview	2 interview sessions	T1	Explaining instructional design, PBL implementation, challenges, scaffolding, and character formation
School leader/curriculum coordinator interview	1 interview session	SL1	Explaining school-level curriculum support and orientation toward innovative learning
Student focus group discussion	3 FGD sessions with 12 focal students	FGD-S1-S12	Exploring students' learning experiences, participation, moral interpretation, and writing reflection
Classroom observation	2 learning sessions involving 25 students	OBS1-OBS2	Examining problem orientation, student engagement, group interaction, teacher scaffolding, and classroom challenges
Lesson plan	1 document	DOC-LP1	Examining the alignment between instructional planning and PBL implementation
Learning materials/media	1 set	DOC-M1	Examining text selection, media use, and accessibility of learning materials
Students' written reflections	12 focal student documents	DOC-S1-S12	Examining students' moral interpretation, idea organization, and reflective writing
Classroom-level student work	Supporting classroom documents from 25 students	DOC-CW	Providing contextual support for classroom-level learning responses

The main instrument in this qualitative study was the researcher, supported by interview guides, focus group discussion protocols, observation sheets, and document analysis guidelines. The interview and discussion guides were developed based on the stages of PBL and the objectives of inspirational story text learning. The observation sheet was used to record classroom activities related to contextual problem orientation, student engagement, group interaction, teacher scaffolding, and

students' written responses. The document analysis guideline was used to examine lesson planning, media use, students' identification of moral values, idea organization, and reflective writing.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis began with repeated reading of interview transcripts, focus group results, observation notes, and student documents to gain familiarity with the data. Meaningful statements, observed classroom activities, and written responses were then coded based on recurring patterns related to PBL implementation. Similar codes were grouped into preliminary themes and reviewed across data sources. The themes were then refined and interpreted in relation to the research question. This process produced seven major themes: contextual problem orientation, collaborative problem solving, differentiated scaffolding, empathy-based moral interpretation, written reflection, implementation challenges, and character formation. These themes were synthesized into an empathy-based PBL mechanism in inspirational story text learning.

The trustworthiness of the data was ensured through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was strengthened through triangulation of data sources and techniques by comparing teacher interviews, student focus group discussions, school-level data, classroom observation, and student documents. Dependability was maintained by documenting the research procedures, including participant selection, data collection stages, coding procedures, and theme development. Confirmability was supported by grounding the findings in direct excerpts, observation notes, and student documents. Transferability was strengthened by providing a detailed description of the research context, participant characteristics, learning topic, PBL implementation, classroom conditions, and the distinction between the full classroom context and focal student participants.

The study followed ethical principles in qualitative research. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the use of data for academic publication. Participation was voluntary, and participant identities were anonymized using codes. Although the study involved 25 students in the classroom observation context, only twelve focal students were selected for focus group discussions and deeper qualitative analysis. Therefore, the findings are not intended for statistical generalization, but to provide an in-depth understanding of how PBL was implemented in a specific elementary Indonesian language learning context and how it supported empathy-based moral interpretation, written reflection, and character formation.

Results

The findings of this study indicate that Problem-Based Learning (PBL) transformed the teaching of inspirational story texts from a conventional reading activity into an empathy-based, collaborative, and character-oriented literacy process. The evidence from teacher interviews, student focus group discussions, classroom observations, lesson documents, and students' written reflections shows that PBL worked through an integrated pedagogical sequence. Contextual problem orientation stimulated empathy; empathy encouraged collaborative critical discussion; discussion supported moral interpretation; moral interpretation strengthened written reflection; and written reflection contributed to character formation. The findings are presented in seven analytical themes, followed by a synthesis of the empathy-based PBL mechanism.

1. Contextual problem orientation created an affective entry point for text learning

The first finding shows that the teacher used a contextual problem as the initial stage of learning before introducing the formal structure of inspirational story texts. Instead of beginning with definitions, generic structure, or linguistic features, the teacher presented a short video and narrative about a child who continued going to school despite difficult and dangerous conditions. This strategy was designed to stimulate students' emotional engagement and curiosity before they analyzed the text.

"Students today often get bored when they are immediately asked to read long texts. Therefore, at the beginning of the lesson, I brought a problem that was close to their world. I showed them a video about a child who remained enthusiastic about going to school even though the child had to cross a road with crocodiles. From that moment, they began to feel touched and started asking, 'How could that happen, Ma'am?' That empathy was what we targeted first before entering the structure of the text." (T1, Interview, 6 April 2026; translated by the authors)

Classroom observation confirmed that the contextual problem functioned as an affective trigger. During the video presentation, students paid close attention to the character's struggle, several students asked spontaneous questions about why the child still wanted to go to school, and some students began connecting the story with their own school experiences (OBS1). The lesson plan also showed that the teacher intentionally placed contextual problem orientation before text-structure explanation, indicating that the learning sequence was designed to move from emotional engagement to textual analysis (DOC-LP1).

This finding suggests that the problem-orientation stage functioned as an affective entry point. Students were not immediately positioned as passive readers of a long text, but were first invited to respond emotionally to a real-life struggle. In this sense, the contextual problem did not merely serve as motivation. It prepared students to understand the moral meaning of the story before analyzing its textual structure.

2. Collaborative problem solving shifted students from passive reading to active reasoning

The second finding reveals that PBL shifted students' learning experience from individual reading and textbook-based exercises to collaborative problem solving. Students were organized into groups and asked to discuss why the character in the story succeeded and what values could be imitated from the character's struggle. This activity encouraged students to move beyond literal comprehension toward reasoning, value interpretation, and collaborative meaning-making.

"Learning was fun this way, Ma'am. Usually, we only read the textbook and answer questions individually. Yesterday, we were given a group task to solve a problem: what made the character in the story successful, and what can we imitate from the character? We even competed to express our opinions in the group." (S1, Interview, 7 April 2026; translated by the authors)

The focus group with students with high reading ability also indicated that PBL gave them space to explain ideas, compare interpretations, and help peers understand the character's struggle (FGD-S1-S4). Observation data supported this pattern. During group work, students exchanged ideas, responded to peers' arguments, and negotiated the values represented by the character (OBS1). The discussion was not limited to identifying the story's moral message. Students were encouraged to reason

about the causes of the character's success and connect the character's perseverance with their own learning experiences.

This finding shows that PBL encouraged active reasoning rather than passive comprehension. Students did not simply identify the moral message as a fixed answer. They discussed, compared, justified, and constructed meaning through collaborative interaction. Thus, group-based problem solving became a key process through which students moved from reading the text to interpreting its moral meaning.

3. Student participation required differentiated scaffolding

The third finding shows that student participation in PBL required differentiated support because students had different levels of reading ability and learning confidence. Students with stronger reading ability were generally more confident in identifying the main problem, explaining the character's struggle, and initiating group discussion. Students with moderate reading ability participated more actively after receiving peer explanations and teacher prompts. Meanwhile, students with lower reading ability needed simplified text, visual media, repeated explanation, and direct teacher scaffolding before they could participate more confidently. The teacher identified reading ability as a practical challenge in implementing PBL:

"Some students were still slow in understanding the essence of a rather long story text. Therefore, the solution was to vary the text media by combining it with inspirational pictures." (T1, Interview Summary, April 2026; translated by the authors)

Data from the focus group with moderate-ability students showed that peer explanation helped them understand the story more easily before they formulated their responses (FGD-S5-S8). Meanwhile, students with lower reading ability emphasized the importance of visual media, teacher questions, and peer assistance in helping them understand the text and participate in group discussion (FGD-S9-S12). Observation data also showed that students with high reading ability tended to initiate discussion, while students with lower reading ability became more involved after receiving teacher guidance and visual support (OBS1; OBS2).

This finding indicates that PBL did not automatically create equal participation among all students. Its effectiveness depended on the teacher's ability to simplify texts, provide visual support, manage group composition, and scaffold students' understanding. Therefore, differentiation became an important component of PBL implementation in elementary language learning. PBL should not be applied as a rigid instructional sequence; it needs to be adapted to students' reading levels, classroom conditions, and learning confidence.

4. Empathy-based discussion strengthened students' moral interpretation of inspirational story texts

The fourth finding shows that PBL strengthened students' moral interpretation through empathy-based discussion. The teacher intentionally targeted empathy before students entered the stage of textual structure analysis. This means that students' understanding of inspirational story texts was developed not only through cognitive identification of text elements, but also through emotional engagement with the character's struggle.

"From that point, they began to feel touched and started asking, 'How could that happen, Ma'am?' That empathy was what we targeted first before entering the structure of the text." (T1, Interview, 6 April 2026; translated by the authors)

Classroom observation showed that empathy emerged when students discussed the difficulty faced by the character and questioned why the character continued going to school despite dangerous conditions (OBS1). Students' written reflections also showed that several students identified perseverance, courage, gratitude, responsibility, and motivation as values learned from the inspirational story (DOC-S2; DOC-S5; DOC-S9). For example, one student wrote that the story taught them "not to give up even when learning feels difficult" (DOC-S5), while another student connected the character's struggle with the need to be grateful for easier access to school (DOC-S9).

This finding indicates that empathy became the foundation for students' understanding of the inspirational story. Through emotional response, questioning, group discussion, and written reflection, students constructed the moral meaning of the text. The moral message was not simply transmitted by the teacher as a fixed conclusion; it was developed through students' engagement with the character's struggle and their reflection on values relevant to their own lives.

5. Peer discussion and teacher scaffolding supported students' written reflection

The fifth finding indicates that PBL supported students' written expression through peer discussion and teacher scaffolding. One student reported that she initially felt confused about what to write. However, group discussion and teacher guidance helped her organize ideas, arrange words, and construct sentences.

"Honestly, at first I was confused about what to write. Fortunately, during the group discussion, we were guided to arrange words, and that helped me construct sentences." (S2, Interview, 7 April 2026; translated by the authors)

Observation data supported this statement. During the writing stage, the teacher guided students by asking them to restate the character's problem, identify the values found in the story, and arrange their ideas into short written responses (OBS2). Students' written work showed movement from simple identification of moral values to more reflective statements about perseverance, gratitude, and learning motivation (DOC-S3; DOC-S7; DOC-S11). For instance, one student initially wrote a short moral message, but after group discussion revised it into a clearer reflection about continuing to study despite difficulties (DOC-S7).

This finding shows that discussion in PBL functioned as a bridge between oral reasoning and written expression. Peer discussion helped students generate ideas, while teacher scaffolding helped them organize those ideas into clearer written responses. Therefore, PBL did not only facilitate classroom discussion. It also supported students' ability to produce reflective writing based on their understanding of the story.

6. Adaptive instructional strategies were needed to overcome time and reading challenges

The sixth finding shows that PBL implementation faced practical challenges, particularly time management and students' reading ability. The teacher explained that Grade VI students were also preparing for examinations, so the duration of PBL activities needed to be managed carefully. In addition, some students needed more support in understanding longer inspirational story texts.

"The biggest challenge in Grade VI was managing time because the students were also focusing on exam preparation. However, through PBL, the inspirational story material became integrated with their character formation. The solution was that

the story texts I selected had to be truly interesting, simple in language, but meaningful.” (T1, Interview, 13 April 2026; translated by the authors)

Observation data showed that the teacher managed this challenge by limiting the duration of the problem-orientation stage, dividing students into groups, and guiding discussion with focused questions (OBS2). The lesson plan also showed that the teacher selected a text with simple language and supported it with visual media to help students understand the story more easily (DOC-LP1; DOC-M1). These adaptations enabled the teacher to maintain the core stages of PBL while adjusting them to classroom time and students' reading readiness.

This finding indicates that successful PBL implementation in elementary classrooms requires adaptive instructional planning. Teachers need to manage time, select accessible texts, use meaningful media, and provide guiding questions so that PBL remains feasible for students with different reading abilities.

7. PBL integrated literacy learning with character formation

The seventh finding reveals that PBL connected inspirational story text learning with character formation. The teacher perceived that PBL made the material more meaningful because students were encouraged to reflect on the values represented in the story. Although Grade VI students were preparing for examinations, the teacher believed that PBL enabled inspirational story learning to contribute to character development.

“Through PBL, the inspirational story material became integrated with their character formation.” (T1, Interview, 13 April 2026; translated by the authors)

The school leader also confirmed that innovative learning was encouraged because it helped teachers connect curriculum content with student participation and character development:

“Learning models such as PBL are important because they make students more active and help teachers connect lesson content with character development.” (SL1, Interview, April 2026; translated by the authors)

Students' written reflections supported this finding. Several students connected the story with personal values such as not giving up, being grateful for access to education, helping friends, and becoming more motivated to study (DOC-S4; DOC-S8; DOC-S12). These reflections indicate that inspirational story texts became a medium for developing both literacy competence and moral awareness. Students were not only asked to identify textual elements, but also to reflect on values such as perseverance, empathy, courage, responsibility, and motivation.

Thus, PBL repositioned Indonesian language learning as a space where literacy, critical thinking, empathy, and character education can be developed simultaneously.

8. An empathy-based PBL mechanism in inspirational story text learning

Overall, the findings show that the implementation of PBL in inspirational story text learning produced an integrated pedagogical mechanism. The process began with contextual problem orientation, which stimulated students' empathy and curiosity before textual analysis. This empathy encouraged students to participate in collaborative problem solving, where they discussed the character's struggle, identified the reasons for the character's success, and reflected on values that could be imitated.

The mechanism continued through moral interpretation and written reflection. Peer discussion and teacher scaffolding helped students organize ideas, arrange words, and express reflections in written form. At the same time, the learning process connected textual understanding with character formation.

The central contribution of this study lies in identifying an empathy-based PBL mechanism in elementary Indonesian language learning. This mechanism can be formulated as follows: contextual problem orientation stimulates empathy; empathy encourages collaborative critical discussion; critical discussion supports moral interpretation; moral interpretation strengthens written reflection; and written reflection contributes to character formation.

This sequence shows that PBL transforms inspirational story text learning from a conventional reading activity into an integrated process of literacy development, critical thinking, empathy, writing, and character education.

Table 3. Triangulated Summary of Research Findings

Theme	Interview/FGD Evidence	Observation/Document Evidence	Interpretation
Contextual problem orientation	The teacher used a video or narrative about a child struggling to attend school before explaining text structure (T1).	Students paid attention, asked spontaneous questions, and responded emotionally to the problem (OBS1); the lesson plan placed contextual problem orientation before text-structure analysis (DOC-LP1).	PBL functioned as an affective entry point before textual analysis.
Active reasoning	A student stated that group discussion made learning more enjoyable and encouraged students to express opinions (S1); high-ability students used discussion to explain and compare ideas (FGD-S1-S4).	Students exchanged ideas and responded to peers during group discussion (OBS1).	PBL shifted learning from passive reading to collaborative problem solving.
Differentiated scaffolding	Moderate-ability students needed peer explanation (FGD-S5-S8), while low-ability students needed teacher guidance and visual support (FGD-S9-S12).	High-ability students initiated discussion; moderate- and low-ability students needed peer support, teacher prompts, and media support (OBS1; OBS2).	PBL requires scaffolding, simplified texts, and media support for diverse learners.
Empathy-based moral interpretation	The teacher targeted empathy before discussing text structure (T1).	Students discussed the character's struggle (OBS1); written reflections identified perseverance, courage, gratitude, responsibility, and motivation (DOC-S2; DOC-S5; DOC-S9).	Empathy became the basis for students' critical interpretation of moral messages.
Written reflection	A student stated that discussion helped her arrange words and construct sentences (S2).	Teacher guided students to identify problems, values, and reflections (OBS2); written work showed reflective statements about values learned from the story (DOC-S3; DOC-S7; DOC-S11).	Peer discussion and teacher guidance supported written expression.
Implementation challenges	The teacher identified time management and reading ability as key challenges (T1).	The teacher limited orientation time, used focused questions, and selected simple texts with visual support (OBS2; DOC-LP1; DOC-M1).	PBL requires adaptive planning, time control, text simplification, and media support.

Character formation	The teacher stated that PBL connected inspirational story learning with character formation (T1); the school leader supported innovative learning for character development (SL1).	Students' reflections connected the story with perseverance, gratitude, helping others, and learning motivation (DOC-S4; DOC-S8; DOC-S12).	PBL integrated literacy learning with moral reflection and character education.
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Discussion

The findings of this study show that Problem-Based Learning (PBL) transformed inspirational story text learning from a conventional reading activity into an empathy-based and character-oriented literacy process. The central contribution of this study lies in identifying how PBL works as a pedagogical mechanism that connects contextual problem orientation, empathy development, collaborative reasoning, moral interpretation, written reflection, and character formation. This mechanism extends previous discussions of PBL in language learning by showing that PBL is not only useful for increasing classroom participation or text comprehension, but also for integrating affective, cognitive, social, and moral dimensions of literacy learning.

1. From text-centered instruction to empathy-based problem-oriented literacy

The first important contribution of this study is the finding that contextual problem orientation functioned as an affective entry point before textual analysis. In conventional text-based instruction, students are often introduced directly to definitions, generic structures, linguistic features, and comprehension questions. In contrast, the teacher in this study began the lesson with a contextual problem related to a child's struggle to attend school. This sequence encouraged students to feel, question, and connect emotionally with the situation before analyzing the inspirational story text.

This finding is consistent with the basic principle of PBL, which positions meaningful problems as the starting point of learning. [Barrows \(1986\)](#), [Hmelo-Silver \(2004\)](#), and [Savery \(2006\)](#) argue that PBL encourages students to construct knowledge through inquiry, collaboration, and reflection. However, the present study extends this principle by showing that, in inspirational story text learning, the problem does not only function as a cognitive trigger. It also functions as an affective trigger that prepares students to interpret moral meaning.

This finding is also related to research on narrative and empathy. [Mar and Oatley \(2008\)](#) argue that narrative fiction can simulate social experience because readers engage with characters, conflicts, and emotional situations. [Bal and Veltkamp \(2013\)](#) also show that emotional transportation in fiction can influence empathy. Similarly, [Koopman and Hakemulder \(2015\)](#) explain that literary reading may foster empathy and self-reflection when readers are guided to engage with characters' experiences and moral situations. In this study, students' empathy was stimulated not only through reading the story, but also through the contextual problem presented before textual analysis.

2. Collaborative discussion as a bridge from empathy to critical reasoning

The second contribution of this study is the finding that collaborative problem solving helped students move from emotional engagement to critical reasoning. After students were emotionally engaged with the contextual problem, they were asked to discuss why the character in the story succeeded and what values could be imitated.

This activity shifted students from passive reading to active reasoning because they had to explain, compare, and negotiate interpretations with peers.

This finding supports the concept of dialogic teaching, which emphasizes the importance of classroom talk in developing students' thinking. [Alexander \(2018\)](#) argues that dialogic interaction can support reasoning when classroom discussion is structured and purposeful. Similarly, [Vrikki et al. \(2019\)](#) show that dialogic practices allow students to build ideas through interaction. In this regard, [Kim and Wilkinson \(2019\)](#) emphasize that dialogic teaching functions as a pedagogy of classroom talk through which students construct, challenge, and reconstruct meaning with others. In the present study, group discussion became a space where students developed moral reasoning through peer exchange. Students did not simply receive the moral message from the teacher; they discussed the character's struggle, examined the causes of success, and related the values to their own lives. This pattern is consistent with discussion-based approaches in language classrooms, where structured classroom discussion can deepen students' understanding and support interpretive reasoning ([Applebee et al., 2003](#)).

This finding also strengthens previous studies on PBL in Indonesian language learning. Prior studies have shown that PBL can improve students' ability to analyze the structure and linguistic features of inspirational story texts ([Arsan et al., 2023](#); [Aulia et al., 2023](#)). However, the present study offers a different emphasis. It shows that PBL does not only support structural analysis of texts, but also facilitates moral interpretation through collaborative discussion. Thus, the novelty of this study lies in explaining how students' empathy becomes a foundation for critical discussion and value interpretation.

3. Differentiated scaffolding as a condition for meaningful participation

The findings also show that students' participation in PBL was not uniform. Students with higher reading ability were more confident in initiating discussion and explaining the character's struggle, while students with moderate and lower reading ability needed peer support, teacher guidance, visual media, and simplified text. This finding is important because it shows that PBL does not automatically create meaningful participation for all students. The model needs to be supported by differentiated scaffolding.

This finding is consistent with [Hmelo-Silver et al. \(2007\)](#), who emphasize that PBL and inquiry-based learning are not unguided learning processes. Students need appropriate scaffolding to manage complex tasks, formulate ideas, and construct understanding. [Lazonder and Harmsen \(2016\)](#) also show that guidance plays an important role in inquiry-based learning. In this study, scaffolding appeared in several forms, including teacher prompts, peer explanation, visual support, simplified texts, and guided writing activities. This finding is in line with [Belland \(2013\)](#), who explains that well-designed scaffolds can support both motivation and cognition, particularly when students are expected to participate in complex learning tasks such as PBL. The implication is that PBL in elementary language learning should not be applied rigidly.

The implication is that PBL in elementary language learning should not be applied rigidly. Teachers need to consider students' reading ability, confidence, and readiness to participate. This is especially important in inspirational story text learning because students are required not only to read and understand the story, but also to interpret moral values and express reflections. Therefore, differentiated scaffolding becomes a key condition for ensuring that PBL supports both active students and students who need additional support.

4. Moral interpretation and written reflection as integrated literacy practices

Another important finding is that PBL connected moral interpretation with written reflection. Students were not only asked to discuss the character's struggle orally, but were also guided to organize their ideas into written responses. Peer discussion helped students generate and clarify ideas, while teacher scaffolding helped them arrange words and construct sentences. This shows that PBL connected reading, speaking, reasoning, and writing within one learning sequence.

This finding is supported by research on writing instruction. [Graham et al. \(2012\)](#) show that elementary students' writing can be improved through guided practices, including strategy instruction, peer assistance, and feedback. [Graham and Hebert \(2011\)](#) also argue that writing about what students read can support reading comprehension. In the present study, written reflection became a continuation of moral discussion. Students first discussed the character's struggle, then identified values, and finally expressed their reflection in written form.

This finding is significant because it shows that writing development in PBL does not occur as an isolated skill. Instead, it emerges from oral reasoning and collaborative interpretation. For students who initially felt confused about what to write, discussion became a bridge for developing ideas. Therefore, PBL supported written expression by providing a meaningful context, peer interaction, and teacher guidance. In inspirational story text learning, this integration is important because students need to express not only what the text says, but also what the text means for their own values and learning experiences.

5. PBL as a mechanism for integrating literacy and character formation

The most important theoretical contribution of this study is the identification of an empathy-based PBL mechanism for integrating literacy learning and character formation. The findings show that contextual problems stimulated students' empathy, empathy encouraged collaborative discussion, discussion supported moral interpretation, moral interpretation strengthened written reflection, and written reflection contributed to character formation. This sequence suggests that character formation was not treated as an additional outcome outside literacy learning. Instead, it was embedded within the process of reading, discussing, interpreting, and writing.

This finding is relevant to character education theory. [Lickona \(1996\)](#) argues that character education involves moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. In the present study, inspirational story text learning through PBL engaged these three dimensions. Students developed moral knowing by identifying values in the story, moral feeling through empathy toward the character's struggle, and the initial orientation toward moral action through personal reflection about perseverance, gratitude, responsibility, and motivation. This interpretation is also consistent with [Berkowitz and Bier \(2007\)](#), who emphasize that character education becomes stronger when moral values are embedded in meaningful learning experiences rather than presented as isolated moral messages.

The finding also resonates with social and emotional learning research. [Durlak et al. \(2011\)](#) show that social and emotional learning can support students' attitudes, behavior, and academic outcomes. In this study, emotional engagement was not separated from academic literacy. Instead, empathy became the foundation for deeper interpretation of texts. This suggests that Indonesian language learning can become a space for developing literacy competence and moral awareness simultaneously when the learning process is designed around meaningful problems and guided reflection.

6. Implementation challenges and pedagogical implications

Although the findings show the pedagogical potential of PBL, the study also reveals several implementation challenges. The teacher identified time management and students' reading ability as key challenges. This is understandable because PBL requires time for problem orientation, group discussion, scaffolding, and reflection. In Grade VI, the challenge became more complex because students were also preparing for examinations.

This finding supports [Ertmer and Simons \(2006\)](#), who explain that teachers often face practical barriers when implementing PBL in K-12 classrooms, including time constraints, classroom management, and the need to support student inquiry. The present study confirms that successful PBL implementation depends not only on the model itself, but also on teacher adaptation. Teachers need to select texts that are simple but meaningful, use visual media to support comprehension, manage group activities efficiently, and provide focused guiding questions.

The pedagogical implication is that PBL for inspirational story texts should be designed as a flexible and scaffolded learning model. Teachers should begin with a contextual problem that is emotionally meaningful for students, guide discussion toward moral interpretation, and support students in transforming oral ideas into written reflection. In addition, teachers should provide differentiated support for students with different reading abilities. Without such adaptation, PBL may only benefit students who are already confident and active, while students with lower reading ability may remain dependent on peers or the teacher.

7. Contribution of the study

This study contributes to the literature in three main ways. First, it conceptualizes PBL as an empathy-based pedagogical mechanism in elementary Indonesian language learning. Second, it shows that inspirational story texts can function as resources for integrating literacy, empathy, moral interpretation, writing, and character formation. Third, it highlights the importance of differentiated scaffolding in ensuring that students with different reading abilities can participate meaningfully in PBL.

Overall, the discussion confirms that PBL should not be understood only as a strategy for active learning. In the context of inspirational story text learning, PBL functions as an integrative pedagogical approach that connects emotional engagement, collaborative reasoning, moral interpretation, written reflection, and character-oriented literacy development. This is the central novelty of the study and the main basis for its contribution to elementary language education.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Problem-Based Learning transformed the teaching of inspirational story texts in elementary Indonesian language learning from a conventional reading activity into an empathy-based, collaborative, and character-oriented literacy process. Through contextual problem orientation, students were encouraged to engage emotionally with the character's struggle before analyzing the text. Collaborative discussion then enabled students to reason about the causes of the character's success, interpret moral values, express opinions, and organize their ideas into written reflections. These findings show that PBL supports not only text comprehension, but also the integration of empathy, critical reasoning, moral interpretation, writing development, and character formation.

The main contribution of this study lies in identifying an empathy-based PBL mechanism in inspirational story text learning. This mechanism shows that contextual problems stimulate empathy, empathy encourages collaborative critical discussion, discussion supports moral interpretation, moral interpretation strengthens written reflection, and written reflection contributes to character formation. Pedagogically, Indonesian language teachers should design inspirational story learning by using meaningful problems, accessible texts, guided discussion, differentiated scaffolding, and reflective writing tasks. However, this study was limited to one Grade VI classroom; therefore, future studies should involve multiple schools, broader classroom contexts, and more extensive student documents to examine how empathy-based PBL works across different elementary learning environments.

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