

Karang Taruna as a Means for Strengthening Civic Engagement of Young Citizens

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Abstract

Karang Taruna is a community-based youth organization. Karang Taruna plays a strategic role in strengthening the character of young citizens at the village or sub-district level. As a vehicle for character education, Karang Taruna provides a social learning space through community service activities, creativity development, and leadership. This study aims to describe how Karang Taruna functions as a non-formal character education environment that supports the strengthening of civic engagement of young citizens. The method used is descriptive qualitative with data collection through observation, interviews, and documentation of Karang Taruna activities in Ngijo Village, Gunungpati, Semarang. The results show that Karang Taruna activities are able to facilitate the internalization of character values through direct experience, cross-age social interactions, and community-based leadership practices. In addition, Karang Taruna serves as a space for the actualization of the younger generation in solving local social problems, thereby fostering civic skills. This study confirms that Karang Taruna is an important instrument in national character education because it is able to integrate Pancasila values and the principles of civic engagement in the daily lives of young people.

Keywords: karang taruna, civic engagement, character building

INTRODUCTION

Strengthening the character of young citizens is a strategic agenda for the government in national development, particularly amidst global challenges such as moral decadence, declining social awareness, and weakening community cohesion at the local level. Rapid social change, digital penetration, and increasing individualism mean that strengthening youth character cannot be achieved solely through formal education; it must also be strengthened through non-formal and community-based education. In this context, community-based youth organizations such as Karang Taruna (Youth Organization) play a crucial role in realizing direct and sustainable character education within the community. Karang Taruna serves not only as a forum for youth activities but also as a social learning space that allows young people to directly experience the internalization of Pancasila values through practices of cooperation, leadership, collaboration, and community service.

Youth involvement in community activities is part of civic engagement, namely the active involvement of citizens in solving social problems, participating in public activities, and strengthening democratic life at the grassroots level. This concept emphasizes that civic character is not merely understood as a body of knowledge but must be realized through concrete, participatory, and reflective actions. International studies confirm that community-based organizations significantly contribute to developing prosocial attitudes, a sense of social responsibility, and the participatory abilities of young people. Angwaomaodoko (2024), for example, demonstrated that student-led initiatives led directly by youth can enhance their social capacity, leadership skills, and awareness of public issues. This finding

aligns with Martini et al. (2023), who revealed that social intervention-based education can increase critical awareness and youth involvement in advocacy and social justice.

Furthermore, research by Muzik et al. (2025) shows that civic engagement has a consistent positive effect on the psychological, social, and mental well-being of young people. Civic engagement not only shapes character but also strengthens young people's sense of self-esteem, relationship skills, and perceptions of the meaning of life. Similar findings were presented by Balcazar et al. (2024), who confirmed that community-based civics training can enhance youth's understanding of their rights and responsibilities as citizens, including those with special needs. Even longitudinal research by an international team (2025) highlighted that adolescence and early adulthood are crucial periods for civic identity formation, so involvement in community organizations during this age range significantly determines the quality of civic identity in adulthood.

National studies also demonstrate important dynamics in the development of civic engagement among Indonesian youth. Azizah and Sari (2023) found that more than 80% of Indonesian Generation Z are highly inclined to engage in social activities, especially when they have a relevant community platform that provides a space for self-actualization. Indriyani et al. (2023) also showed that student civic engagement can be enhanced through community-based activities oriented toward preserving local culture and community social activities. These results reinforce the findings of Tarsidi (2023), who revealed that social media helps expand youth access to civic discussions and encourages them to participate more actively in community activities. Research by Pradana et al. (2025) further states that community empowerment is an effective strategy for developing civic participation among young people because it provides a learning space that is authentic, responsive, and relevant to local needs. In fact, a study by Azzahra et al. (2025) showed that formal youth organizations such as the National Committee for Youth Affairs (KNPI) can increase the active role of youth in social, economic, and political matters at the regional level.

In the Indonesian context, Karang Taruna is a youth organization with a unique character: it is based on local potential, rooted in the values of cooperation, and run independently by the community. Karang Taruna provides a social learning space that allows youth to practice managing activities, interacting across age groups, making collective decisions, and solving social problems collaboratively. Activities such as community service, youth entrepreneurship development, environmental programs, community service, sports activities, and cultural activities serve as learning platforms for the values of responsibility, caring, solidarity, independence, cooperation, and other social virtues that align with the character of citizens from the perspective of Pancasila. Through this process, Karang Taruna.

METHOD

The method used in this study is descriptive qualitative by describing words (Moleong, 1989). The approach used is an ethnographic approach. Data were obtained from observations conducted in the Green Village housing complex located in Ngijo, Gunungpati, Semarang. Further data were obtained from interviews with "Karang Taruna Green Village" mentors, Karang Taruna group members, and the Green Village community. This research was conducted from January 2025 to December 2025. To maintain the validity of the data obtained, source triangulation was carried out by comparing data from each informant and conducting broader observations. Data obtained from the three data collection techniques were then reduced because not all of them were needed by the researcher. The results were then summarized and conclusions were drawn.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The research results show that Karang Taruna (Youth Organization) in Ngijo Village, Gunungpati District, Semarang City, functions as an educational environment that fosters character through a youth-based community. As a youth organization developed from, by, and for the community, Karang Taruna provides a learning space that is not tied to a formal curriculum, but rather based on experiences and civic practice. Character education within the community context occurs through the instillation of values, habits, and skills, which are taught through direct involvement. This finding aligns with the view that

character education occurs not only in schools but also in the community, including youth organizations (Nucci, Narvaez, & Krettenauer, 2014).

This community-based education has the advantage of enabling students to directly experience real-world situations, enabling young people not only to master theoretical concepts but also to directly implement them. Karang Taruna, in this context, functions as a learning community that facilitates character learning and mastery of work competencies through direct experience. In Ngijo Village, Karang Taruna serves not only as a gathering place for young people but also as an arena for learning and developing responsibility, social awareness, and solidarity. Activities such as entrepreneurship, empowerment, and community service increase the frequency of collaborative engagement between youth and parents within a community. This reinforces the finding that experiential character education is more effective than purely instructional approaches (Berkowitz & Bier, 2015). As a non-formal educational environment, Karang Taruna also plays a role in bridging the gap between the values taught in schools and the social realities faced by youth. Within this community space, youth learn to manage differences, build cooperation, and resolve conflicts through dialogue. Thus, Karang Taruna contributes to the development of adaptive and responsible young citizens. Thus, the research findings confirm that Karang Taruna is a form of non-formal character education that is relevant to the needs of the younger generation, especially in the context of villages/sub-districts with their unique social dynamics. Its existence strengthens the argument that national character education cannot rely solely on schools but requires a vibrant social learning ecosystem at the community level. Research results show that youth actively involved in Karang Taruna (Youth Organization) exhibit high levels of social participation. This participation extends beyond attendance at activities, including involvement in decision-making, role allocation, and collective responsibility for program success. This aligns with civic engagement theory, which emphasizes that citizen involvement must be active, voluntary, and oriented toward the public interest (Murtiningsih and Wijaya, 2024). Strong civic engagement plays a role in building communities that are responsive to citizens' needs and strengthen shared values and shared responsibility. Putnam (2000) argues that civic engagement builds "social capital" that strengthens bonds between citizens, enabling society to function more harmoniously and democratically. Putnam emphasizes that social engagement and trust between individuals are essential elements for maintaining social stability.

In the context of Karang Taruna, this active participation is evident in community service activities, managing social activities, youth entrepreneurship programs, and involvement in cultural and sporting activities. Through these activities, youth learn that participation is not simply about being present but also about making a real contribution to their community. Theoretically, this condition reflects civic engagement as a social practice that fosters civic agency, namely the awareness and ability of individuals to act as agents of social change (Gumilar et al., 2025). Youth no longer position themselves as objects of policy or beneficiaries, but as active subjects of social development at the local level.

Research results indicate that the internalization of character values in Karang Taruna (Youth Organization) occurs primarily through direct social experiences. Youth are not positioned as objects of development, but rather as active subjects in designing and implementing social activities. This process allows for in-depth moral reflection, as youth are directly confronted with the social consequences of their actions. This approach aligns with experiential learning theory, which emphasizes that learning values and attitudes occurs optimally when individuals engage directly in concrete experiences and reflect on them (Kolb, 2015). In Karang Taruna, these concrete experiences manifest themselves in community service activities, leadership activities, and cross-age social interactions.

Karang Taruna's social activities in Ngijo Village, such as community outreach and environmental awareness activities, serve as a vehicle for learning empathy and social responsibility. Youth learn to understand the plight of their fellow citizens, feel the hardships they face, and respond through collective action. This process strengthens empathy and caring, essential elements of character and citizenship education (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Knafo-Noam, 2015).

Furthermore, the cross-generational interactions within Karang Taruna enrich the process of internalizing values. Youth interact with community leaders and senior citizens who serve as moral models. The exemplary behavior demonstrated by these figures reinforces implicit value learning. Previous research has shown that social role models have a significant influence on the character formation of youth within a community (Arthur et al., 2017).

From a civic engagement perspective, Karang Taruna (Youth Organization) in Ngijo Village serves as an arena for local-level civic participation. Research shows that youth involvement in Karang Taruna fosters a growing awareness of participation in social and community life. The growing civic engagement is not limited to formal political participation, but rather predominantly takes the form of social participation, community service, and involvement in local decision-making. Civic engagement is understood as individual involvement in activities aimed at improving the quality of communal life and strengthening democracy (Ehrlich, 2000). In the context of Karang Taruna, youth involvement in community deliberations, village activity planning, and social action reflects a substantive form of civic engagement. Youth learn that being a citizen means not only having rights but also exercising social responsibilities.

This research finding aligns with Putnam's (2000) findings, which emphasize that participation in community organizations strengthens social capital and improves the quality of citizenship. Karang Taruna functions as a social capital generator that connects youth in networks of trust, norms, and cooperation. Through sustained involvement, youth develop a sense of community ownership and a commitment to contributing to the common good. Furthermore, Karang Taruna serves as a learning space for local democracy. The decision-making process is conducted through deliberation, involving members in a participatory manner. This practice trains youth to respect differences of opinion, build consensus, and take responsibility for collective decisions. This finding strengthens the argument that effective civic education must involve direct democratic experiences in everyday life (Torney-Purta et al., 2015).

This study also found that Karang Taruna contributes significantly to the development of youth civic skills, such as communication, cooperation, leadership, and social problem-solving. These civic skills develop through youth's active involvement in managing activities and responding to social issues in their communities. Karang Taruna youth are trained to identify social problems, design solutions, and implement programs collectively. This process fosters critical thinking and public interest-based decision-making. This aligns with the view that civic skills develop through real-life practice in a social context, not just theoretical learning (Checkoway & Aldana, 2013).

The leadership developed within Karang Taruna is participatory and service-based. Leaders not only direct but also listen to and facilitate member participation. This leadership style reflects democratic values and aligns with the leadership principles of Pancasila. Through these experiences, youth learn that leadership is a moral and social responsibility, not simply a structural position.

CONCLUSION

The research findings reveal three main findings. First, "Karang Taruna Green Village" serves as a space for the actualization of direct civic engagement among youth, where they are actively involved in planning, implementing, and evaluating social activities. Second, this involvement has an impact on strengthening civic character, encompassing social responsibility, caring, solidarity, leadership, and commitment to the common good. Third, the civic engagement practices within Karang Taruna contribute to the formation of youth civic identity, which is how youth perceive themselves as part of the broader citizenry and social community. This finding supports the theoretical assumption that civic engagement does not develop instantly through knowledge transfer, but rather through meaningful, repeated, and reflective social experiences in people's everyday lives.

The research results show that Karang Taruna serves as a medium for the contextual implementation of Pancasila values. The values of humanity, unity, democracy, and social justice are internalized through the daily lives of young people. These values are not taught dogmatically, but are brought to life through social experiences and collective work.

This finding reinforces the view that effective Pancasila education must be practical and contextual, so that the values of the nation's ideology can be meaningfully internalized by the younger generation (Suyato & Wantoro, 2021). Karang Taruna, as a community-based organization, has great potential to become a strategic partner in civic education and national character building.

Furthermore, One of the research's key findings is the strong practice of mutual cooperation (gotong royong) within Karang Taruna activities. Gotong royong is not understood merely as collective physical

work, but as a social value that animates relationships between members and with the community. Young people learn that the common good must be placed above personal interests, and that the success of the community is a collective responsibility.

In civic engagement theory, values such as solidarity, caring, and cooperation are civic virtues that form the foundation of civic character. The practice of mutual cooperation (gotong royong) within the Karang Taruna (Youth Organization) serves as a natural and contextual medium for internalizing these civic virtues.

The research findings show that youth who actively participate in mutual cooperation activities have higher levels of social empathy and concern for the environment than those who are not actively involved. This strengthens the argument that civic engagement based on concrete social practices is more effective in shaping character than a purely normative approach.

This study also found that youth involvement in the Karang Taruna leadership structure encourages the development of participatory leadership. Youth learn to lead not through formal authority, but through role models, communication, and the ability to organize member participation.

Within the framework of civic engagement theory, participatory leadership is a manifestation of civic responsibility and civic commitment. Community leaders are responsible not only for the organization but also for the social welfare of the community they serve.

These findings demonstrate that Karang Taruna serves as a learning space for civic leadership that is relevant to the local context, while also contributing to strengthening the social capacity of youth as future leaders.

Overall, the results of this study confirm that Karang Taruna (Youth Organization) is a crucial instrument in character education and strengthening the civic engagement of young citizens. Its existence complements the role of formal education by providing an authentic and sustainable social learning space. Therefore, strengthening the role of Karang Taruna through policy support and cross-sector collaboration is a strategic step in building national character.

Strengthening character education and work competency in the younger generation increasingly demands a contextual approach based on direct experience. Education that solely emphasizes cognitive aspects and knowledge transfer has proven insufficient to develop individuals with strong character and employability skills relevant to social and professional needs. In this context, direct youth involvement in social and community activities is an effective learning strategy because it allows for the simultaneous internalization of values and competency development. Character education and work competency are no longer understood as separate domains, but rather as a mutually reinforcing unity in real-life practice.

Character learning through direct involvement positions individuals as active subjects learning from concrete experiences. Character traits such as responsibility, discipline, honesty, cooperation, and empathy cannot be developed instantly through lectures or normative instruction, but require a process of habituation in real-life situations that demand moral decision-making and action. This approach aligns with the view that effective character education must involve direct experiences that enable students to reflect on values in the context of everyday life (Berkowitz & Bier, 2015). When young people are directly involved in social activities, they learn to understand the impact of their actions on others and the environment, so that character values are not only understood but also internalized and practiced.

Direct involvement also plays a crucial role in strengthening work competencies, particularly non-technical competencies or soft skills, which are increasingly needed in the workplace. Competencies such as communication, teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, and conflict management develop optimally when individuals are exposed to real-world situations that require interaction and collaboration. Research shows that community-based work experiences and social participation significantly contribute to the work readiness of young people by training them to navigate the complexities of social and professional situations (Jackson, 2016). In this context, direct involvement serves as a bridge between learning and the real world of work.

Social experiences gained through direct involvement enable the integration of character values and work competencies. For example, when young people are involved in managing social activities or community projects, they not only learn to organize work and manage time, but also internalize the values of responsibility and commitment. This process demonstrates that work competencies are not morally neutral but are always linked to the values and attitudes that underlie them. Thus, character strengthening

provides an ethical foundation for the development of sustainable and integrated work competencies.

Learning based on direct experience also encourages the growth of reflective awareness in young people. Reflection is a key element in character learning because it allows individuals to evaluate the actions, values, and attitudes adopted during an experience. Through reflection, experiences become more than mere activities but also sources of meaningful learning. Kolb (2015) emphasizes that effective learning occurs when concrete experiences are followed by reflection, conceptualization, and reapplication in new situations. In the context of strengthening character and work competencies, reflection helps young people understand their strengths and weaknesses and develop a lifelong learning attitude.

Direct involvement in social activities also strengthens the dimensions of empathy and caring, which are important aspects of character and social competence in the workplace. Empathy enables individuals to understand others' perspectives, build healthy relationships, and work collaboratively. In increasingly diverse and complex work environments, empathy is a key competency supporting effective teamwork and humanistic leadership. Research by Eisenberg et al. (2015) shows that prosocial experiences contribute to the development of empathy and cooperative behavior, which positively impact interpersonal relationships and individual social performance.

Furthermore, direct involvement provides a space for youth to develop experiential leadership. Leadership is not learned in the abstract, but through the practice of leading, making decisions, and taking responsibility for collective outcomes. In this process, youth learn that leadership is not simply a structural position, but rather the ability to influence, serve, and mobilize others toward a common goal. Leadership models developed through direct involvement tend to be participatory and collaborative, in line with the needs of the modern workplace, which demands adaptive and inclusive leadership (Day et al., 2014).

Strengthening character and work competency learning through direct involvement also contributes to the formation of the youth's civic and professional identities. This identity is formed when individuals see themselves as part of a broader community and feel a sense of social responsibility and responsibility. Direct involvement helps youth understand that their work competencies are not solely for personal gain, but also for social contribution. This perspective is crucial in developing a work ethic oriented toward usefulness and sustainability, rather than solely material achievement.

In the context of education and human resource development, these findings suggest that strengthening character and work competency should be designed in an integrative and experiential manner. Learning programs that provide space for direct involvement, whether through social activities, community projects, or real-life work experiences, have great potential to produce graduates who are not only technically competent but also possess strong character. This aligns with 21st-century demands that emphasize a balance between hard and soft skills in the workplace (OECD, 2019).

Furthermore, direct involvement also serves as an inclusive and contextual learning mechanism. Youth learn from the social realities they encounter, rather than from simulations detached from the context of life. This type of learning enables a more effective transfer of values and competencies because it is rooted in real-life experiences. Therefore, strengthening character and work competencies through direct involvement is not only pedagogically relevant but also strategic in addressing social and employment challenges.

Overall, strengthening character and work competency learning through direct involvement emphasizes the importance of a holistic, experiential approach to education. Direct involvement allows for the integration of values, attitudes, and skills within a unified learning process. Through real-life experiences, reflection, and social interaction, young people learn not only to become competent individuals but also to become citizens and workers with character, empathy, and responsibility. This approach provides a strong foundation for sustainable and competitive human resource development, while also being rooted in humanitarian and shared values.

In Karang Taruna (Youth Organization), learning about work competencies is inseparable from the character values that underpin them. When young people are given the responsibility to manage activities or lead social programs, they learn that work success is determined not only by technical skills, but also by integrity, commitment, and the ability to work ethically with others. This integration demonstrates that character and work competencies are two interrelated and inseparable dimensions. An OECD study (2023) emphasized that developing 21st-century competencies must be accompanied by strengthening values and character to produce sustainable and competitive human resources.

Direct involvement in Karang Taruna also encourages the growth of reflective awareness in young people. Reflecting on social experiences allows young people to evaluate their actions and decisions and understand the moral and social implications of each activity. This reflective process deepens character learning because young people not only act but also think critically about the values they practice. Recent research in character education confirms that reflection is a key component in the internalization of values and the formation of young people's moral identity (Arthur et al., 2022).

Furthermore, Karang Taruna provides a space for experiential leadership learning relevant to the needs of the modern workplace. The leadership developed within Karang Taruna tends to be participatory and collaborative, as the success of its activities depends heavily on the cooperation and involvement of its members. Youth learn to lead by serving, listening, and accommodating differences of opinion. This leadership model aligns with the demands of 21st-century leadership, which emphasizes empathy, adaptability, and the ability to build relationships (Day & Dragoni, 2024).

In the context of human resource development, Karang Taruna's role as a vehicle for character development and job competency development is becoming increasingly relevant amidst social and employment challenges. The gap between graduate competencies and the needs of the workforce is often caused by a lack of real-world experience in managing social and professional issues. Karang Taruna, with its community-based character, is able to bridge this gap by providing authentic and contextual learning experiences. Research in Indonesia shows that youth involvement in community organizations like Karang Taruna contributes to increased job readiness, self-confidence, and prosocial orientation (Rahmawati & Hidayat, 2024).

Furthermore, direct involvement in Karang Taruna (Youth Organization) helps shape youth's civic and professional identity. Youth see themselves not only as individual job seekers, but as part of a community with social responsibilities. This perspective is crucial for developing a work ethic oriented toward social benefit and contribution. Recent studies in civic education confirm that experiences with community participation strengthen the civic identity and civic competence of young people, positively impacting the quality of their participation in the workforce and society (Hoskins & Janmaat, 2023).

Thus, strengthening character education and work competency through direct involvement in Karang Taruna demonstrates that community-based youth organizations play a strategic role in non-formal education. Karang Taruna serves not only as a space for youth self-actualization but also as a social laboratory where character values and work competencies are learned in an integrated manner. This approach provides a relevant alternative for developing a young generation with character, competence, and readiness to contribute to social life and the workplace.

Overall, direct involvement-based learning in Karang Taruna emphasizes the importance of synergy between character education and work competency development. Through real-life experiences, reflection, and social interaction, young people learn to become individuals who are not only professionally competent but also possess integrity and care for their social environment. These findings reinforce the argument that strengthening the role of Karang Taruna (Youth Organization) is a strategic step in building national character and improving the quality of Indonesia's human resources in the contemporary era.

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