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Controversial Issue Learning Model: Social Studies Learning Outcomes at Elementary School

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ABSTRACT

Innovative learning strategies are needed to help elementary school students understand complicated social studies topics like ethnic and religious diversity. This report is based on Nuruwe Christian Elementary School fourth graders' dismal learning outcomes. This study examines whether the controversial issue learning paradigm improves social studies learning in Nuruwe Christian Elementary School fourth graders. Two cycles of Classroom Action Research (CAR) were used. Each cycle includes planning, action, observation, and reflection. The study included 12 Nuruwe Christian Elementary School fourth graders. Testing, observation, and documentation using test and observation sheets acquired data. Data analysis was carried out using individual assessment techniques and calculating the average value of learning outcomes. The results of the study indicate that the application of the controversial issue learning model to the material about ethnic and religious diversity in my country can significantly improve student learning outcomes. This model has been proven to help teachers in presenting more dynamic and effective learning variations in the classroom. This study provides innovative learning strategies that assist teachers in creating meaningful and beneficial learning activities. In addition, this study enriches references regarding the use of controversial issues as educational media to increase student engagement and academic achievement at the elementary school level.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education is a conscious and planned effort to create a learning ecosystem that enables students to actively actualize their potential (Koul & Nayar, 2021). As mandated by Law No. 20 of 2003, national education aims to develop individuals with religious spirituality, intelligence, and noble morals to meet the challenges of the times (Noor, 2018). More broadly, Rani (2025) emphasizes that education is a vital aspect of development that fosters personal growth and political awareness, while Habsy et al. (2024) views it as a humanization process that shapes critical individuals who contribute to society.

To achieve these goals, the Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) presents a significant transformation in Indonesia (Zainudin et al., 2025). This curriculum shifts the paradigm from teacher-centered to student-centered to equip students with 21st-century competencies (Azmi et al., 2023; Siahaya et al., 2025). Hunaepi and Suharta (2024) emphasize that this curriculum integrates thematic learning and life values to create an inclusive environment. The essence of this process is behavioral change—cognitive, affective, and psychomotor—as an indicator of learning success (Fisabilillah et al., 2025; Ningrum et al., 2024; Yuliana et al., 2025).

Social Studies plays a crucial role in the elementary school curriculum as an instrument for building a successful society sensitive to social issues (Rahmadani et al., 2023; Nasution et al., 2023; Shih, 2024). However, the reality on the ground shows discrepancies. Social studies learning is often perceived as boring and less relevant to students due to the dominance of conventional, one-way models (Pratiwi et al., 2023; Windasari et al., 2024). This phenomenon was confirmed through observations at Nuruwe Christian Elementary School on March 17, 2025, where learning activities were still limited to lectures and passive question-and-answer methods. Students' low interest, lack of self-confidence, and weak critical thinking skills directly impact suboptimal learning outcomes.

The novelty of this research resides in the incorporation of the Controversial Issues Learning Model as a pioneering solution within the Merdeka Curriculum framework in elementary education. While many studies still rely on the use of simple visual media (Baso et al., 2024; Susanto et al., 2020; Syamsidar et al., 2025), this research offers a contextual approach that addresses current and real-world issues in students' environments. Unlike traditional discussion methods, the Controversial Issues model challenges students to analyze problems from various perspectives and trains them to solve issues independently (Hermann, 2008; Kauppi & Drerup, 2021; Nasrikin et al., 2021; Solihatin et al., 2023). The application of this model to the subject of ethnic and religious diversity is expected to improve learning outcomes quantitatively and develop students' critical literacy in navigating social complexities from an early age.

Building upon the identified problems, this study specifically aims to (1) describe the process of implementing the Controversial Issues learning model in the Social Studies subject, focusing on Ethnic and Religious Diversity for grade IV students at Nuruwe Christian Elementary School. (2) Analyze the improvement in learning outcomes of grade IV students of Nuruwe Christian Elementary School after the implementation of the Controversial Issues learning model. (3) Identify changes in student activities and responses in dealing with contextual social issues through critical discussions during the learning process.

2. METHOD

This research employs the Classroom Action Research (CAR) method, adopting the design model developed by Kemmis and McTaggart. We chose this model for its systematic and sustainable characteristics, conducting the research process cyclically through a series of interconnected cycles. In its implementation, this research was

conducted in two cycles to ensure the effectiveness of the intervention in improving student learning outcomes.

As illustrated in Figure 1, each cycle in this research procedure integrates four crucial stages that form a logical whole:

1. Planning: Developing an action plan and learning instruments based on initial problem identification.
2. Action: Putting the Controversial Issues learning model into practice in the classroom.
3. Observation: Conducting comprehensive monitoring of student activities and learning dynamics using validated instruments.
4. Reflection: Analyzing the results of observations and evaluations to determine the success of the actions and formulating improvements for the next cycle.

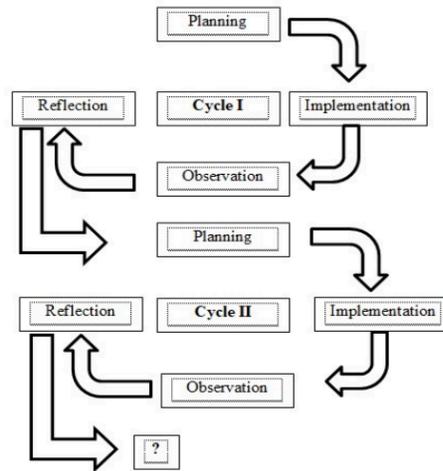


Figure 1. Classroom Action Research Procedure

This research was conducted at Nuruwe Christian Elementary School, West Kairatu District, West Seram Regency. The subjects involved were 12 Grade IV-B students in the current academic year, consisting of 5 boys and 7 girls. The choice of these subjects was predicated on the preliminary observation of diminished student engagement and academic performance in social studies within that class.

To obtain accurate and comprehensive data, this study employed triangulation in data collection techniques, including:

1. Tests: Used to measure cognitive mastery and student learning outcomes after the implementation of the intervention.

2. Observations: Systematically recorded student activities and teacher performance during the learning process.

3. Documentation: In the form of grade archives, activity photos, and learning materials (teaching modules) as authentic evidence of the research implementation.

The instruments used consisted of validated evaluation sheets (tests) and observation sheets compiled based on indicators of the intervention's success.

The collected data were analyzed descriptively and comparatively to compare pre-cycle conditions with achievements in each cycle. Data analysis includes individual assessments, the calculation of the average (mean) value of classical learning outcomes, and the percentage of student learning completion. Analysis of student learning success levels is calculated using the following formula:

$$Value = \frac{\text{score obtained}}{\text{maximum score}} \times 100$$

Average Score Formula

$$x = \frac{\sum x}{\sum n}$$

Explanation:

X : Average Score

$\sum x$: Total Student Score

$\sum n$: Number of Students

Table 1. Student Average Grade Success Rates

Final Score	Success Criteria
90-100	Very Good
80-89	Good
65-79	Fair
55-64	Poor
<55	Very Poor

Percentage of Learning Completion

$$P = \frac{f}{n} \times 100\%$$

Explanation:

P : Percentage of students who have

F : Completed their studies

N : Total number of students

Table 2. Criteria for Student Learning Completion

Final Score	Qualifications
90% - 100%	Very Good
80% - 89%	Good
65% - 79%	Fair
55% - 64%	Poor
0% - 55%	Very Poor

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Pretest Results

During the initial observation phase, the social studies learning process for the topic "Ethnic and Religious Diversity in My Country" was still dominated by a conventional approach. The teacher employed a monologue lecture method, which placed students in a passive role as recipients of information. This phenomenon resulted in low student learning readiness. It was observed that before the instructional process began, no students took the initiative to prepare learning materials such as textbooks, notebooks, or stationery. These activities only began after receiving direct instructions from the teacher at the start of the lesson.

This passive condition persisted throughout the Q&A session. Students showed resistance to active participation, characterized by reluctance or embarrassment to express opinions or answer the teacher's stimulating questions. After the presentation of the material, an initial evaluation was conducted using a five-item test to measure students' cognitive understanding.

Simultaneously, researchers conducted structured observations using observation sheets to measure students' learning independence. The collected data were subsequently transformed into a scoring scale to assess the degree of learning completion. The data analysis showed that the average index of students' learning independence remained in the low category, confirming the need for intervention through a more participatory and challenging learning model.

Table 3. Pretest Results

No	Students Name	Score	Completion Criteria	
			Complete	Incomplete
1	A.R	70	√	
2	A.Z.M	30		√
3	A.W.L	20		√
4	A.L	70	√	
5	A.A.R	35		√
6	A.A.E	30		√
7	A.D	70	√	
8	A.N	60		√
9	A.F.A	55		√
10	A.G.M	80	√	
11	A.A.A	50		√
12	B.G.M.R	30		√
	Total	600	4	8
	Average Score/Percentage	50	33%	67%

Building upon the data presented in Table 3, it can be identified that students' mastery of the material at the initial stage was still relatively low and had not yet reached the established completion criteria. Of the 12 respondents, only 33% (4 students) were able to achieve the completion category, while the majority, 67% (8

students), were deemed incomplete.

This percentage disparity indicates that the implementation of the conventional (traditional) learning model in fourth grade at Nuruwe Christian Elementary School has not been able to provide effective stimulation for improving social studies learning outcomes. The dominance of one-way methods in the instructional process is suspected to be the main factor in students' low absorption of the material, necessitating a transformation of learning strategies through a more participatory model to optimize student academic achievement.

Results of Cycle I Research

Planning

The implementation of the action in Cycle I was the researcher's initial intervention through the application of the Controversial Issues (CI) learning model. This action was designed as a strategic effort to overcome learning barriers and improve mastery of the material on "Ethnic and Religious Diversity in My Country" among fourth-grade students at Nuruwe Christian Elementary School.

The pre-action phase began with intensive coordination between the researcher and the fourth-grade teacher to formulate solutions to the low learning outcomes identified in the initial evaluation (pre-cycle). This collaborative process included in-depth discussions on the mechanisms of the Controversial Issues model and the development of relevant learning materials, including a lesson plan contextualized with the material on social diversity. The teacher not only prepared instructional materials but also student worksheets and evaluation instruments for the first meeting of Cycle I.

To measure the success of this experiment, the researcher and teacher collectively established completion criteria. Actions in Cycle I are declared successful if they meet the research performance indicators, namely that at least 60% of the total number of students can achieve a minimum standard score of 65. Determining this threshold serves as a reference in conducting reflection to determine the sustainability of actions in the next cycle.

Implementation of Action

At this stage, the implementation of actions is in accordance with the learning plan that was prepared during the planning stage. Cycle I consists of two meetings with material on ethnic and religious diversity in my country.

Table 4. Cycle I Learning Outcomes

No	Students Name	Score	Completion Criteria	
			Complete	Incomplete
1	A.R	75	√	
2	A.Z.M	50		√
3	A.W.L	45		√
4	A.L	70	√	
5	A.A.R	45		√
6	A.A.E	50		√
7	A.D	75	√	

No	Students Name	Score	Completion Criteria	
			Complete	Incomplete
8	A.N	70	√	
9	A.F.A	50		√
10	A.G.M	55		√
11	A.A.A	70	√	
12	B.G.M.R	60		√
	Total	715	5	7
	Score Average/Percentage	59	58%	67%

The data presented in Table 4 demonstrates a positive improvement in students' social studies learning outcomes after implementing the Controversial Issues (CI) learning model. Based on the evaluation results in Cycle I, 5 students (42%) achieved the completion criteria, while the number of students in the incomplete category decreased to 7 students (58%).

Although not all students reached the required completion threshold, this shift in numbers indicates that the Controversial Issues model was quite effective in stimulating students' cognitive understanding compared to conventional methods in the pre-cycle stage. This improvement demonstrates that presenting material through challenging and contextual issues can increase student engagement in the learning process. However, these results also serve as a basis for researchers to reflect and improve certain aspects to optimize the completion percentage in Cycle II.

Observation

Teacher Activities

From what was seen in Cycle I, several key problems were found in using the Controversial Issues (CI) learning model, which made it hard to reach the learning goals. Overall, these problems can be broadly speaking, these obstacles can be classified into three main aspects. Teachers have not fully succeeded in building students' attention and interest in the issues raised. The material presented is somewhat irrelevant to students' real lives and lacks context. As a result, the classroom atmosphere becomes static, and students' curiosity is not optimally stimulated from the beginning of the lesson, which then impacts low active student participation in subsequent stages. Facilitation of Learning Resources and Critical Thinking Development

The information-seeking process has not been adequately facilitated; students remain trapped in dependence on a single explanation from the teacher without independent exploration. The absence of additional reading materials or guidance limits students' perspectives on controversial issues. Furthermore, teachers tend to focus on a single narrative and do not encourage students to explore different perspectives. As a result, students fail to properly internalize the essence of the CI model, which involves training in critical thinking and an appreciation of diverse perspectives.

Furthermore, during the discussion and debate stages, classroom management is not yet systematic. Unclear role assignments and group organization led to unfocused discussions dominated by a small number of students. Furthermore, the reflection phase of learning was often neglected, resulting in students losing the momentum to construct the values or attitudes they had learned. Teachers also failed to encourage students to design concrete actions (action plans), even though this step is crucial for connecting theoretical material with everyday practice. Overall, these challenges show that the learning in Cycle I did not fully follow the key ideas of the Controversial Issues model, especially regarding active participation, developing critical thinking, and promoting tolerance. These findings provided a crucial foundation for researchers to make significant improvements to the action plan in Cycle II.

Students Activities

Building upon observations, it was found that students' responses to the issues presented by the teacher were still very limited. The majority of students showed a tendency to be passive and lacked enthusiasm in following the learning process. This phenomenon is suspected to be due to the selection of issues that were less relevant or did not directly relate to students' real-life experiences. This lack of interest resulted in minimal student initiative to explore further information, either through available teaching materials or group discussions. Students tended to adopt a passive learning pattern, simply awaiting explanations from the teacher without any exploratory efforts or asking critical questions.

This situation had a direct impact on the quality of interactions during class discussion sessions. Student participation was recorded as very low, with the discussion dynamics dominated by only a handful of individuals, while the majority of students remained passive and did not contribute ideas. When given the opportunity to express their opinions, students struggled to construct coherent and systematic arguments. This indicates a limited understanding of the material and a lack of practice in communicating opinions openly. The arguments that emerged were often superficial and unsupported by strong data or logic. This finding confirms that students' critical thinking skills and communication abilities still require more intensive stimulation and training through action modifications in the next cycle.

Reflection

The analysis of the entire series of actions in Cycle I yielded several crucial reflection points, as follows:

1. Internalization of Learning Experiences: The implementation of the Controversial Issues (CI) learning model has successfully provided meaningful educational experiences for both students and teachers. This model has begun to shift the learning paradigm to a more dynamic one and provides a new perspective for understanding social studies material in a more contextual way.
2. Escalation of Academic Achievement: There has been an improvement in students' social studies learning outcomes through the implementation of the

Controversial Issues model. However, this growth in achievement is considered insignificant and has not yet reached the classical mastery target set in the research success indicators.

3. Sustainability of Action: Based on the fact that the minimum mastery criteria have not been optimally met, it was decided to continue the research to Cycle II. This follow-up cycle will focus on addressing weaknesses in Cycle I and strengthening intervention strategies to maximize student learning outcomes and mastery.

Results of Cycle II Research

Planning

Reflections on Cycle I indicated suboptimal learning outcomes, leading to further interventions in Cycle II. This phase was designed as a comprehensive effort to validate the effectiveness of the Controversial Issues (CI) learning model in addressing learning barriers in the topic "Ethnic and Religious Diversity in My Country" for fourth-grade students at Nuruwe Christian Elementary School.

The implementation procedure in Cycle II began with intensive coordination between the researcher and the class teacher to formulate improvement strategies based on the findings from the previous cycle. Collaborative discussions focused on optimizing the steps of the Controversial Issues model to make them more relevant in improving student learning outcomes. As a concrete step, the researcher and teacher jointly developed a revised Learning Implementation Plan to address the shortcomings identified in Cycle I.

Next, the teacher prepared supporting instruments in the form of a more applicable student worksheet and compiled practice questions and a final evaluation for Cycle II. The success parameters at this stage remain consistent with the previously established criteria, namely that the action is categorized as successful if at least 60% of the total students can achieve the Minimum Completion Criteria score of 65. Cycle II is expected to be the final stage in achieving the classical learning completion target.

Implementation of Action

At this stage, the implementation of actions is in accordance with the learning plan that was prepared during the planning stage. Cycle II consists of one meeting on 12 August 2025, and the subject taught is social studies with material on ethnic and religious diversity in my country.

Table 5. Cycle II Learning Outcomes

No	Students Name	Score	Completion Criteria	
			Complete	Incomplete
1	A.R	80	√	
2	A.Z.M	80	√	
3	A.W.L	75	√	
4	A.L	80	√	
5	A.A.R	75	√	
6	A.A.E	75	√	

No	Students Name	Score	Completion Criteria	
			Complete	Incomplete
7	A.D	70	√	
8	A.N	80	√	
9	A.F.A	70	√	
10	A.G.M	75	√	
11	A.A.A	75	√	
12	B.G.M.R	60	√	
	Total	895	12	
	Score			
	Average/Percentage	75	100%	

Table 5 shows that there was a very significant increase in student learning outcomes through the application of the controversial issue learning model in social studies lessons on the subject of ethnic and religious diversity in my country. The average score exceeded the minimum passing grade of 65.

Observation

During the implementation of the activities, the students' and teachers' activities were observed using a prepared observation sheet for assessment. The results of the observation are as follows:

Teacher Activities

In the observed learning process, the teacher demonstrated excellent performance in presenting relevant and current controversial issues. The issues raised were directly related to the students' daily lives, thereby building their interest and curiosity from the outset of the lesson. The teacher also successfully facilitated information seeking by providing various learning resources, both printed and digital, and guiding students in accessing and analysing accurate information. This encouraged students to be more active and critical in understanding the context of the issues being discussed.

During the core activities, the teacher was able to encourage students to see different points of view through group work and case studies. Discussions and debates were conducted in an orderly manner, with the teacher guiding the discussion ethics and ensuring that all students had the opportunity to express their opinions. Teachers also guided students in constructing data-based arguments and rewarded different opinions. Learning reflection was carried out well, where students were invited to reflect on the values of tolerance and the importance of respecting diversity. Teachers also guided students in drawing conclusions together, which reflected their collective understanding of the issues discussed.

In conclusion, the teacher encouraged students to apply what they had learned in the form of concrete actions, such as a simple campaign on tolerance among ethnic groups. All students were actively involved in every stage of learning, including discussions, information gathering, and solution formulation. The teacher also used a

variety of relevant learning media, such as videos, infographics, and news articles, which helped reinforce students' understanding of the material. Overall, all aspects of the Controversial Issues model were implemented well and had a positive impact on student engagement and attitudes towards diversity.

Students Activities

During the lesson, students responded positively to the issues raised by the teacher. They appeared enthusiastic, interested, and actively asked questions to deepen their understanding of the issues. The students' ability to explore information was also evident, as demonstrated by their active search for sources in books, the internet, and materials provided by the teacher. The information gathered was used as a basis for developing their understanding and opinions on the issues discussed.

In discussion activities, student engagement was very high. They actively expressed their opinions and were brave enough to present logical and data-based arguments. Not only that, students also demonstrated the ability to accept different views by listening actively and responding politely to the arguments of their groupmates and other groups. Discussion ethics were well maintained, with students not interrupting each other and respecting the differences of opinion that arose during the debate.

After the discussion, students were able to reflect on the learning process and realise the importance of tolerance and ethnic diversity in Indonesia. In group work, they demonstrated good collaboration, shared tasks, and supported each other in forming opinions. In addition, students also took the initiative to design concrete actions, such as ideas for diversity campaigns or creating educational content about tolerance. Throughout the learning process, it was evident that students maintained a consistent attitude of tolerance in every interaction, both within groups and in general class discussions. This shows that learning using the Controversial Issues model has been implemented effectively and has had a positive impact on students' attitudes and critical thinking skills.

Reflection

The results of reflection in this learning process are as follows:

1. Learning using the Controversial Issues model has provided meaningful experiences for both students and teachers.
2. Using current issues relevant to students' lives, learning has become more contextual, challenging, and able to stimulate curiosity.
3. Students appear to be more emotionally and intellectually engaged because they feel that the issues discussed touch on realities that are close to their daily lives. This shows that the controversial issues-based approach can be an effective way to foster interest in learning and critical thinking.

Discussion

Learning outcomes essentially represent a fundamental transformation within an individual, encompassing the transition from ignorance to understanding and from

incompetence to competence. These changes are not only measured quantitatively through numbers on paper but also qualitatively through improved discussion skills and changes in attitude. In line with Faizah's (2017) thinking, learning is a fundamental activity carried out through practice and experience to produce holistic behavioral changes, encompassing cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects. Therefore, to achieve optimal learning outcomes, the instructional process must be implemented systematically by applying learning approaches or models that stimulate students' interest in learning (Khalil & Elkhider, 2016; Spatioti et al., 2023). This conclusion is reinforced by Marheni et al. (2025), who state that effective learning is a process that facilitates students' learning in an easy and enjoyable way to achieve desired educational goals.

The implementation of classroom action research conducted over two cycles at Nuruwe Christian Elementary School demonstrated a significant improvement in social studies learning outcomes, particularly in the topic of ethnic and religious diversity. Empirical data shows a very impressive rise in the levels of students' learning achievement. In Cycle I, the classical completion rate only reached 42% (5 out of 12 students). However, after corrective actions were implemented, this achievement increased dramatically in Cycle II to 100%, with all students successfully exceeding the minimum completion criteria. This finding confirms the highly effective Controversial Issues (CI) learning model in improving the academic achievement of fourth-grade students in the elementary education context (Bintoro et al., 2021; Hung, 2020).

This success stems from the characteristics of the Controversial Issues model, which encourages students to actively engage in discussing current issues in their environment (Cahyo & Kodariyati, 2018). Through this model, students understand the material theoretically and learn to navigate sensitive issues related to ethnic and religious diversity democratically. This is in line with what Nurhidayah et al. (2023) say about the CI model, which presents controversial issues to help students learn how to solve problems together in a democratic society, where they learn how to accept or reject opinions in a logical way. Furthermore, the implementation of this model in schools serves as a means for teachers to foster students' courage in expressing their opinions without fear (Noddings & Brooks, 2016; Nur et al., 2025). Thus, the Controversial Issues model has proven to be capable of creating a classroom that is both inclusive and intellectually competitive.

This research makes an important contribution to the development of learning quality at the elementary school level. This research strengthens the theory regarding the effectiveness of the Controversial Issues (CI) learning model in social studies in elementary schools. It demonstrates that transforming controversial issues into effective learning media can foster students' critical thinking from an early age. This study provides a new theoretical foundation on how the material on ethnic and religious diversity can be taught not simply as rote learning, but through democratic dialogue that supports the formation of inclusive character. It offers practical and innovative guidance on various teaching methods to steer clear of conventional

teaching patterns (lecturing). This model is a concrete solution for teachers to increase active student engagement in heterogeneous classes. It provides space for students to develop communication skills, courage to express opinions, and critical thinking skills. Students achieve better academic learning outcomes and develop social sensitivity to the diversity around them. Furthermore, school policies can use the results of this study as a reference to enhance the quality of social studies learning. Furthermore, this report serves as an authentic document for Nuruwe Christian Elementary School in supporting the implementation of the Independent Curriculum, which emphasizes project-based learning and problem-solving.

4. CONCLUSION

The application of the Controversial Issues (CI) learning model has proven highly effective in improving social studies learning outcomes in the topic of Ethnic and Religious Diversity. This assertion is confirmed by the significant increase in classical mastery from Cycle I to Cycle II. In Cycle I, the mastery rate only reached 42% (5 students completed the course and 7 students did not complete it), but in Cycle II, the mastery rate reached 100% (all students exceeded the minimum mastery criteria). This data confirms that the CI model can optimize students' overall mastery of the material. The Controversial Issues (CI) model makes a significant contribution to creating various instructional activities that are more meaningful and applicable for both teachers and students. Through this model, the learning process shifts from a passive pattern to a more dynamic one, with students demonstrating increased activeness, collaborative effectiveness, and creativity in constructing solution-oriented ideas when facing social problems during discussion sessions.

As a suggestion, teachers are expected to adopt the Controversial Issues learning model sustainably, especially for contextual materials with broad social dimensions, to maintain students' enthusiasm and critical thinking. Teachers should act as neutral and skilled facilitators in managing classroom debates, ensuring each student has a safe space to express their opinions, and providing diverse literacy resources to enhance student arguments. Given that this study was limited to cognitive learning outcomes and activeness, further researchers are advised to measure the impact of the Controversial Issues model on other variables, such as students' tolerance, empathy, or digital literacy. Furthermore, further research is recommended to test the effectiveness of this model on research subjects with a broader scope or on other relevant subject matter to strengthen the validity of the findings at a macro level.

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