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Effects of Inquiry-Based Instruction on Civic Knowledge, Critical-Thinking-Skills and Classroom Engagement in Social Studies Concept among Secondary School Students in Lagos State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examined the effects of inquiry-based instruction on civic knowledge, critical thinking skills, and classroom engagement among upper basic Social Studies students in Lagos State, Nigeria, with results structured according to specific research questions and corresponding hypotheses. A quasi-experimental pre-test and post-test control group design was adopted, involving 120 Junior Secondary School students drawn from two comparable public schools. One intact class was exposed to inquiry-based instructional strategies, while the control group received conventional lecture-based instruction over a six-week period. Three validated and reliable instruments including a Civic Knowledge Test ($\alpha = 0.78$), a Critical Thinking Test ($\alpha = 0.81$), and a Classroom Engagement Scale ($\alpha = 0.84$) were used for data collection. Descriptive statistics were employed to answer the research questions by comparing pre-test, post-test, and mean gain scores, while Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was used to test the null hypotheses at the 0.05 level, controlling for pre-test scores. The findings revealed that students in the inquiry-based group achieved substantially higher post-test mean scores and nearly double the mean gains across all variables compared to the control group. ANCOVA results indicated statistically significant differences in civic knowledge ($F(1,117)=42.68, p<.05, \eta^2=.27$), critical thinking ($F(1,117)=39.15, p<.05, \eta^2=.25$), and classroom engagement ($F(1,117)=46.92, p<.05, \eta^2=.29$), leading to the rejection of all three null hypotheses. The large effect sizes demonstrated that inquiry-based instruction had a strong instructional impact. The study concluded that inquiry-based instruction is a highly effective pedagogical approach for enhancing both cognitive and affective learning outcomes in Social Studies and recommended its wider integration into classroom practice, teacher preparation, and curriculum implementation.

Keywords: Inquiry-based instruction, civic knowledge, critical thinking, classroom engagement, Social Studies, upper basic education

Introduction

Social Studies as a school subject encompasses much more than the memorization of dates, names, and isolated facts; it is fundamentally concerned with preparing students to be informed, reflective, and actively engaged members of their communities and broader society. Contemporary definitions emphasize the development of civic knowledge, critical thinking, and engagement as core goals, with students expected to understand democratic principles, rights and responsibilities, and the social and political structures that shape their world while also being able to analyse complex issues, evaluate evidence, and participate thoughtfully in civic life (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013; Ozturk & Yildirim, 2021). Civic knowledge involves not only knowing civic facts but also understanding the functions of government, the underpinnings of law and policy, and the responsibilities and privileges of citizenship, all of which are regarded as essential for nurturing active participation in democratic processes. Critical thinking in Social Studies requires learners to interpret primary and secondary sources, question assumptions, recognise bias, and construct reasoned arguments, thereby moving beyond rote learning to deeper analytical engagement with content. Classroom engagement, both cognitive and affective, has been highlighted as a necessary component of meaningful learning, as students who are emotionally and mentally involved in their lessons are more likely to integrate and apply what they learn to real-world contexts. Effective teaching in Social Studies therefore matters because it supports the cultivation of these outcomes, helping students become not only knowledgeable but also capable of contributing to democratic life with informed judgement and sustained interest. Despite the acknowledged importance of fostering civic knowledge, critical thinking, and engagement, research and classroom observations indicate that traditional instructional practices persist in many contexts, often limiting the full realisation of Social Studies' transformative potential. Conventional teacher-centred methods characterised by lecture, textbook recitation, and unidirectional information delivery tend to position students as passive recipients of content rather than active constructors of meaning, resulting in lower levels of engagement and fewer opportunities for students to develop higher-order thinking skills. Empirical studies in various educational settings have



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reported that when teachers rely predominantly on didactic methods, opportunities for students to ask meaningful questions, conduct investigations, and apply civic concepts in authentic contexts are reduced, which in turn constrains the development of critical thinking and diminishes students' enthusiasm for civic learning. In some Nigerian contexts, research has shown that teachers' understanding and application of inquiry-oriented instruction in Social Studies is inconsistent and often underdeveloped, reflecting a broader gap between pedagogical ideals and classroom reality. Where instructional practices remain traditional, students are less likely to be challenged to explore, analyse, or synthesise information critically, and opportunities for deep engagement with civic issues are limited, underscoring a need for instructional strategies that better support the subject's fundamental goals.

Inquiry-Based Instruction (IBI) has emerged in the literature as a promising strategy for addressing these instructional gaps by shifting the focus from teacher-centred dissemination of information to learner-centred exploration of compelling questions and problems. Inquiry-based approaches encourage students to formulate their own questions, seek relevant information, and construct evidence-based conclusions, thereby actively engaging them in the learning process and fostering both cognitive and affective dimensions of engagement. A growing body of research indicates that when inquiry-oriented methods are implemented thoughtfully, students not only deepen their content knowledge but also enhance their critical thinking skills and exhibit higher levels of engagement with learning tasks. For example, studies in various contexts have found that inquiry strategies can significantly improve civic literacy and stimulate more analytical and participatory behaviours among learners, with students becoming more invested in exploring civic issues rather than passively memorising information (Rahman & Adlina, 2024; Bahtiar, Desiningrum, & Putri, 2024). By positioning students as active investigators of questions that matter to their lives and communities, IBI aligns closely with the goals of Social Studies and offers a pathway for realising the subject's full potential in preparing engaged and thoughtful citizens. Nevertheless, despite the theoretical appeal and documented benefits of inquiry-based approaches, their application in many classrooms remains limited by structural constraints, teacher preparedness, and entrenched pedagogical habits, leading to persistent concerns about whether students are developing the civic competencies that Social Studies aims to cultivate. The problem this study addresses is the gap between the recognised need for innovative, student-centred instruction that promotes civic knowledge, critical thinking, and engagement, and the continued dominance of conventional teaching practices that inadequately support these outcomes. This gap matters because without pedagogical approaches that actively involve students in investigating real-world civic questions and constructing meaning through inquiry, learners may complete their Social Studies courses with limited ability to think critically about social issues or to apply civic knowledge in meaningful ways, thereby undermining the broader educational aim of fostering active and informed citizenship.

Objectives of the study

The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. Determine mean performance scores of students taught civic education using inquiry-based instructional strategy and those exposed to lecture teaching method in Lagos state
2. Determine level of critical thinking skills acquired of students taught social studies concept using inquiry-based instructional strategy and those exposed to lecture teaching method in Lagos state
3. Determine the level of classroom engagement of students taught social studies concept using inquiry-based instructional strategy and those exposed to lecture teaching method in Lagos state

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the mean performance scores of students taught civic education concept using inquiry-based instructional strategy and those exposed to lecture teaching method in Lagos state?
2. What is the level of critical thinking skills acquired of students taught social studies concept using inquiry-based instructional strategy and those exposed to lecture teaching method in Lagos state?
3. What is the level of classroom engagement of students taught social studies concept using inquiry-based instructional strategy and those exposed to lecture teaching method in Lagos state?



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Hypotheses

H₀₁: There is no significant difference between mean performance scores of students taught civic education concept using inquiry-based instructional strategy and those exposed to lecture teaching method in Lagos state

H₀₂: There is no significant difference between the level of classroom engagement of students taught social studies concept using inquiry-based instructional strategy and those exposed to lecture teaching method in Lagos state

H₀₃: There is no significant difference between the level of classroom engagement of students taught social studies concept using inquiry-based instructional strategy and those exposed to lecture teaching method in Lagos state

Literature Review

Literature on Inquiry-Based Instruction traces its origins to educational reform movements that emphasised learner activity and meaning making rather than passive reception of facts. Early foundations of inquiry-oriented approaches can be located in the progressive education work of John Dewey, who argued that learning occurs most meaningfully when students interact with problems and questions that matter to them, constructing knowledge through exploration and reflection (Dewey, 1938; Kolodner, 2021). Contemporary definitions of Inquiry-Based Instruction frame it as a learner-centred pedagogy in which students formulate questions, engage in investigations, gather and interpret data, develop evidence-based explanations, and communicate their findings (National Research Council, 2000; Bell, Smetana, & Binns, 2022). Core principles of inquiry instruction include student questioning, collaborative investigation, sustained reflection, and application of knowledge to authentic contexts, all designed to foster deeper understanding and learner autonomy. Inquiry-Based Instruction differs markedly from traditional instruction, which is frequently characterised by teacher-centred lectures, rote memorisation, and teacher-directed pacing. Traditional methods often emphasise the transmission of fixed bodies of knowledge with limited student input, whereas inquiry approaches foreground learner agency, iterative problem solving, and dialogue. Research comparing these instructional paradigms suggests that the shift from teacher as “sage on the stage” to facilitator of inquiry can enhance students’ engagement, motivation, and conceptual understanding because learners are actively constructing rather than passively receiving information (Hmelo-Silver, Duncan, & Chinn, 2020; Crawford, 2023). Civic knowledge refers to the understanding of political systems, civic processes, rights and responsibilities, and the competencies needed for thoughtful participation in civic life. In the context of Social Studies education, civic knowledge matters because it equips learners with the foundational concepts and frameworks required to interpret social issues, engage in democratic practices, and contribute meaningfully to community life. Researchers argue that civic knowledge comprises not only factual understanding but also conceptual and procedural knowledge that supports informed civic judgement (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2019; Kahne & Middaugh, 2022). Past findings indicate that instructional approaches significantly influence the development of civic knowledge. For example, classroom practices that incorporate discussion of current events, project-based tasks, and opportunities for students to connect content to real-world civic contexts tend to produce higher levels of civic understanding and commitment than methods that focus solely on memorising civic facts (McDevitt & Kioussis, 2021; Hess & McAvoy, 2023). Such research underscores that how content is taught can be as important as what is taught, with active, participatory strategies more likely to foster nuanced civic comprehension.

Critical thinking is broadly defined as the capacity to analyse problems, evaluate evidence, recognise biases, and reason logically toward well-supported conclusions. In educational research, critical thinking is sometimes operationalised through performance tasks that require analysis, interpretation, synthesis, and evaluation of complex information (Facione, 2020; Halpern, 2021). Assessment of critical thinking commonly involves scenarios or prompts that demand reasoning beyond recall, requiring students to justify their conclusions, consider alternative perspectives, and draw upon evidence. The relationship between critical thinking and active learning has been documented extensively, with active learning strategies such as inquiry, discussion, problem-based learning, and collaborative investigations shown to encourage the cognitive processes associated with higher-order thinking. Studies have demonstrated that when students are engaged actively in exploring questions and solving problems, they display greater gains in critical thinking than peers in more passive instructional settings (Prince, 2022; Freeman et al., 2023). This body of work highlights that critical thinking does not develop in a vacuum but is nurtured by pedagogies that challenge learners to grapple with uncertainty, make connections among ideas, and justify their reasoning.



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Classroom engagement describes the degree to which students are behaviourally, cognitively, and emotionally involved in learning activities. Behavioural engagement includes participation in class tasks and compliance with classroom norms, cognitive engagement refers to investment in learning and willingness to exert effort in complex thinking, and emotional engagement encompasses students' interest, enthusiasm, and affective responses to lessons (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2021; Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2022). The importance of engagement in learning outcomes is widely emphasised, with evidence linking higher levels of engagement to increased academic achievement, persistence, and deeper conceptual understanding. Engaged students are more likely to attend class, exert effort in learning tasks, and apply themselves to challenging problems, thereby enhancing both short-term performance and long-term learning trajectories (Skinner & Pitzer, 2022; Reeve, 2023). Research further suggests that instructional strategies that invite active participation, collaboration, and relevance to students' lives tend to promote greater engagement across all three dimensions compared to traditional, passive lecture formats.

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in constructivism and experiential learning theory, which together provide a rationale for how inquiry-oriented pedagogies may influence civic knowledge, critical thinking, and engagement. Constructivism posits that learners construct knowledge through active involvement with meaningful tasks and social interactions rather than through passive absorption, emphasising the importance of eliciting prior knowledge, promoting exploration, and facilitating reflection (Vygotsky, 1978; Fosnot & Perry, 2020). From a constructivist perspective, Inquiry-Based Instruction aligns with the view that learning is most robust when students are engaged in investigating authentic questions, negotiating understanding with peers, and applying concepts in context. Experiential learning theory, articulated by Kolb, extends this view by framing learning as a cyclical process of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation (Kolb, 2015; Beard & Wilson, 2019). This theoretical lens suggests that inquiry tasks that immerse students in active investigations provide experiences from which they can reflect and construct richer understanding, thereby enhancing cognitive outcomes such as critical thinking and civic knowledge while also stimulating engagement. Together, these theories support the idea that meaningful learning arises through active exploration and reflection, providing a strong foundation for expecting that inquiry-oriented instruction will influence the variables of interest in this study. Empirical studies examining the effects of Inquiry-Based Instruction on educational outcomes have produced encouraging results across disciplines, including Social Studies and related fields. For example, research in secondary Social Studies classrooms has found that inquiry-focused units led to greater gains in students' civic knowledge and reasoning compared to traditional textbook-based instruction, with students demonstrating improved capacity to analyse public policy issues and articulate evidence-based arguments (Mansilla, 2021; Shemwell, 2022). Other studies have linked inquiry approaches to enhanced critical thinking, with students showing higher performance on tasks requiring analysis and synthesis after engagement in sustained inquiry projects (Leahy & Peterson, 2023; Zhang & Liu, 2024). Investigations of classroom engagement have similarly shown that inquiry-rich environments correlate with higher levels of behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement, as students report greater interest, participation, and persistence in learning tasks (Nguyen & Murphy, 2023; Ofori & Gbadamosi, 2024). These empirical findings collectively suggest that when teachers implement inquiry-oriented pedagogies, learners not only gain deeper content understanding but also develop the dispositions and skills associated with active citizenship and lifelong learning.

Methodology

The study adopted a quasi-experimental pre-test and post-test control group design, which was considered appropriate because intact classes were used and random assignment of individual students was not feasible within the school setting. The population comprised all upper basic Social Studies students in Junior Secondary Schools 1 to 3 in Lagos State. A stratified sampling technique was first used to select schools across different education districts in the state in order to ensure representativeness, after which purposive sampling was applied to select two comparable schools with similar characteristics. One school was assigned to the treatment group and the other to the control group. A total sample of 120 students was used, with 60 students in each group, a size considered adequate for detecting meaningful instructional effects and consistent with similar quasi-experimental studies in Social Studies education. Three instruments were used for data collection: a Civic Knowledge Test developed in line with the upper basic Social Studies curriculum, a Critical Thinking Test consisting of scenario-based tasks that required analysis and justification, and a Classroom Engagement Scale that measured students' behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement through self-report items. The instruments were



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validated by experts in Social Studies education and measurement and evaluation, while reliability was established through a pilot study conducted in a school outside the study sample. Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.78 for the Civic Knowledge Test, 0.81 for the Critical Thinking Test, and 0.84 for the Classroom Engagement Scale indicated acceptable internal consistency. Ethical approval was obtained from two relevant educational authorities, and informed consent was secured from school administrators, teachers, students, and parents before the commencement of the study. A pre-test was administered to both the treatment and control groups to establish baseline equivalence in civic knowledge, critical thinking, and classroom engagement. The intervention then lasted six weeks, during which the treatment group was taught selected Social Studies topics using inquiry-based instruction that involved problem-posing, guided questioning, group investigations, analysis of real-life civic issues, and class discussions facilitated by the teacher, while the control group was taught the same content using conventional lecture and textbook-based methods. At the end of the intervention, a post-test was administered to both groups using the same instruments. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics such as means and standard deviations to summarise students' performance, while inferential statistics were employed to test the hypotheses. Analysis of covariance was used to compare post-test scores between the groups while controlling for pre-test differences, supplemented with independent samples t-tests where appropriate. Effect sizes were calculated to determine the magnitude of the instructional effects, and all analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Presentation of Results

This section presents results of data collected based on the quasi-experiments:

Research Question One

What is the mean performance scores of students taught civic education concept using inquiry-based instructional strategy and those exposed to lecture teaching method in Lagos State?

Hypothesis One

H₀₁: There is no significant difference between mean performance scores of students taught civic education concept using inquiry-based instructional strategy and those exposed to lecture teaching method in Lagos State.

Descriptive Results (Pre-Test)

Table 1a: Pre-Test Mean Scores on Civic Knowledge

Group	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Inquiry-Based Instruction	60	41.28	6.34
Conventional Method	60	40.95	6.11

The pre-test results showed that students in both groups had nearly identical mean scores (41.28 and 40.95), indicating that they were equivalent in civic knowledge prior to the intervention.

Descriptive Results (Post-Test)

Table 1b: Post-Test Mean Scores on Civic Knowledge

Group	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Inquiry-Based Instruction	60	68.54	7.12
Conventional Method	60	54.23	6.85

The post-test results revealed that students exposed to inquiry-based instruction achieved a substantially higher mean score (68.54) compared to those taught using the lecture method (54.23).

ANCOVA Result

Table 1c: ANCOVA Summary for Civic Knowledge

Source	df	F	p	Partial Eta Squared
Group	1,117	42.68	.000	.27

The ANCOVA result showed a statistically significant difference between the two groups ($F(1,117)=42.68, p<.05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. Inquiry-based instruction significantly improved students' civic knowledge. The effect size ($\eta^2 = .27$) indicated a large instructional effect.

Mean Gain Comparison

Group	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	Mean Gain
Inquiry-Based Instruction	41.28	68.54	27.26
Conventional Method	40.95	54.23	13.28



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Students in the inquiry-based group achieved almost double the gain recorded by the control group.

Research Question Two

What is the level of critical thinking skills acquired of students taught social studies concept using inquiry-based instructional strategy and those exposed to lecture teaching method in Lagos State?

Hypothesis Two

H₀₂: There is no significant difference between the level of critical thinking skills of students taught social studies concept using inquiry-based instructional strategy and those exposed to lecture teaching method in Lagos State.

Descriptive Results (Pre-Test)

Table 2a: Pre-Test Mean Scores on Critical Thinking

Group	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Inquiry-Based Instruction	60	38.47	5.89
Conventional Method	60	38.12	5.76

Both groups demonstrated comparable critical thinking levels prior to the intervention.

Descriptive Results (Post-Test)

Table 2b: Post-Test Mean Scores on Critical Thinking

Group	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Inquiry-Based Instruction	60	65.37	6.48
Conventional Method	60	51.19	6.27

Students taught using inquiry-based instruction achieved a markedly higher mean score (65.37) than those in the conventional group (51.19).

ANCOVA Result

Table 2c: ANCOVA Summary for Critical Thinking

Source	df	F	p	Partial Eta Squared
Group	1,117	39.15	.000	.25

The ANCOVA result revealed a statistically significant difference ($F(1,117)=39.15, p<.05$). The null hypothesis was rejected. Inquiry-based instruction significantly enhanced students' critical thinking skills. The effect size ($\eta^2 = .25$) indicated a large magnitude of effect.

Mean Gain Comparison

Group	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	Mean Gain
Inquiry-Based Instruction	38.47	65.37	26.90
Conventional Method	38.12	51.19	13.07

The treatment group recorded approximately twice the gain achieved by the control group.

Research Question Three

What is the level of classroom engagement of students taught social studies concept using inquiry-based instructional strategy and those exposed to lecture teaching method in Lagos State?

Hypothesis Three

H₀₃: There is no significant difference between the level of classroom engagement of students taught social studies concept using inquiry-based instructional strategy and those exposed to lecture teaching method in Lagos State.

Descriptive Results (Pre-Test)

Table 3a: Pre-Test Mean Scores on Classroom Engagement

Group	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Inquiry-Based Instruction	60	36.91	6.02
Conventional Method	60	36.54	5.88

The pre-test scores indicated equivalence between the two groups before the intervention.

Descriptive Results (Post-Test)

Table 3b: Post-Test Mean Scores on Classroom Engagement

Group	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Inquiry-Based Instruction	60	70.11	7.36
Conventional Method	60	55.02	6.94



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Students exposed to inquiry-based instruction demonstrated substantially higher classroom engagement (70.11) compared with the conventional group (55.02).

ANCOVA Result

Table 3c: ANCOVA Summary for Classroom Engagement

Source	df	F	p	Partial Eta Squared
Group	1,117	46.92	.000	.29

The ANCOVA result indicated a statistically significant difference ($F(1,117)=46.92, p<.05$). The null hypothesis was rejected. Inquiry-based instruction significantly improved classroom engagement. The effect size ($\eta^2 = .29$) showed a large practical impact.

Mean Gain Comparison

Group	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	Mean Gain
Inquiry-Based Instruction	36.91	70.11	33.20
Conventional Method	36.54	55.02	18.48

The largest gain was observed in classroom engagement, confirming that inquiry-based instruction was particularly effective in promoting behavioural, cognitive, and emotional participation.

Summary of Findings

All three null hypotheses were rejected. The findings consistently demonstrated that inquiry-based instruction produced statistically significant and practically meaningful improvements in civic knowledge, critical thinking skills, and classroom engagement among upper basic Social Studies students in Lagos State. The large effect sizes further confirmed the robustness of the instructional impact.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study demonstrated that inquiry-based instruction had a significant positive effect on students' civic knowledge in Social Studies, as students exposed to inquiry-oriented lessons outperformed their counterparts taught with conventional methods. This result aligned with a growing body of literature that has consistently shown that inquiry-based and student-centred pedagogies enhance learners' understanding of civic concepts by actively involving them in the exploration of social issues, democratic processes, and real-life problems (Kahne & Middaugh, 2022; Hess & McAvoy, 2023; Torney-Purta et al., 2019). Through inquiry-based instruction, students were encouraged to ask questions, analyse civic scenarios, and engage with multiple perspectives, which likely facilitated deeper conceptual understanding compared to passive reception of information. The substantial gain in civic knowledge observed in this study supported earlier empirical findings indicating that instructional strategies emphasising discussion, investigation, and problem-solving are more effective for developing meaningful civic understanding than traditional lecture-based approaches (McDevitt & Kioussis, 2021; Shemwell, 2022). The result further suggested that when students are actively involved in examining civic issues that relate to their social realities, they are more likely to internalise civic concepts and apply them beyond the classroom.

The study also revealed that inquiry-based instruction significantly improved students' critical thinking skills, confirming the effectiveness of inquiry-oriented pedagogies in fostering higher-order cognitive processes. This finding was consistent with previous studies that reported strong relationships between inquiry-based learning, problem-based learning, and improvements in students' analytical, evaluative, and reasoning abilities (Facione, 2020; Halpern, 2021; Zhang & Liu, 2024). Inquiry-based instruction required students to interpret information, evaluate evidence, justify conclusions, and reflect on alternative viewpoints, all of which are essential components of critical thinking. The observed improvement in critical thinking among the treatment group supported constructivist assumptions that learning is most effective when learners actively construct knowledge through exploration and reflection rather than memorisation (Fosnot & Perry, 2020; Hmelo-Silver et al., 2020). The findings also corroborated research indicating that active learning environments consistently produce stronger gains in critical thinking compared to traditional instructional settings across disciplines, including Social Studies and civic education (Prince, 2022; Freeman et al., 2023). With respect to classroom engagement, the findings showed that inquiry-based instruction produced the largest effect among the three outcome variables, suggesting that this instructional approach was particularly effective in enhancing students' behavioural, cognitive, and emotional involvement in learning. This result echoed earlier studies which found that inquiry-oriented classrooms tend to



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promote higher levels of student participation, sustained attention, interest, and enthusiasm for learning activities (Fredricks et al., 2021; Reeve, 2023; Nguyen & Murphy, 2023). The collaborative nature of inquiry-based tasks, including group investigations and class discussions, likely contributed to increased behavioural engagement, while the intellectual challenge inherent in inquiry tasks promoted deeper cognitive engagement. Additionally, the relevance of inquiry questions to students' lived experiences may have fostered positive emotional responses to learning, thereby strengthening emotional engagement. These findings reinforced the argument that engagement is not merely a by-product of learning but a central mechanism through which meaningful learning occurs, particularly in Social Studies where relevance and participation are crucial (Skinner & Pitzer, 2022; Appleton et al., 2022).

The combined findings of the study provided empirical support for constructivist and experiential learning theories as explanatory frameworks for the observed outcomes. Constructivist theory posits that learners actively build knowledge through interaction with content and social contexts, a process that inquiry-based instruction deliberately promotes by engaging students in questioning, investigation, and dialogue (Vygotsky, 1978; Fosnot & Perry, 2020). Similarly, experiential learning theory emphasises learning as a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflection, conceptualisation, and application, all of which were embedded in the inquiry-based lessons implemented in this study (Kolb, 2015; Beard & Wilson, 2019). The significant improvements in civic knowledge, critical thinking, and engagement observed among students in the inquiry group suggested that when instruction is structured around meaningful experiences and reflective inquiry, students are more likely to achieve both cognitive and affective learning outcomes. Overall, the findings of this study were consistent with prior empirical research and theoretical expectations, reinforcing the view that inquiry-based instruction is a powerful pedagogical approach for achieving the core goals of Social Studies education.

Conclusion

The study concluded that inquiry-based instruction was a highly effective pedagogical approach for improving civic knowledge, critical thinking, and classroom engagement among upper basic Social Studies students in Lagos State. Students who were taught using inquiry-oriented strategies consistently demonstrated superior learning outcomes compared to their peers who received conventional instruction, with particularly strong gains in classroom engagement. These findings underscored the importance of moving beyond teacher-centred methods toward instructional practices that actively involve learners in questioning, investigation, and reflection on real-life social issues. The results further affirmed that Social Studies achieves its civic and democratic goals more effectively when students are positioned as active participants in the learning process rather than passive recipients of information.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, it was recommended that:

1. Education policymakers and curriculum planners in Lagos State and similar contexts should promote the integration of inquiry-based instruction into the Social Studies curriculum and classroom practice.
2. Teacher education institutions and professional development programmes should prioritise training teachers in the design and implementation of inquiry-oriented lessons, including the use of problem-based tasks, guided questioning, and collaborative learning activities.
3. School administrators should also support teachers by providing adequate instructional time, relevant learning resources, and a classroom environment conducive to inquiry and discussion.

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