



Project-Based Learning in Elementary Social Studies: A Literature Review on Effectiveness and Learning Outcomes

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Abstract

This article examines the impact of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) on elementary students' learning outcomes in social studies through a literature review. The objective of this study is to identify how PjBL influences cognitive, affective, and psychomotor development, as well as creativity, motivation, collaboration, and communication skills. The method employed is a systematic analysis of 16 studies that investigate the implementation of PjBL in elementary classrooms. The findings indicate that PjBL enhances students' understanding, retention, and application of material, promotes active engagement, and fosters 21st-century skills such as creativity and teamwork. The integration of interactive and visual learning media further strengthens learning effectiveness. However, challenges such as time constraints, large class sizes, and unequal group contributions may limit PjBL's effectiveness if not properly addressed. Therefore, careful project planning, teacher guidance, and appropriate instructional media are essential to maximize PjBL's benefits and support the holistic development of elementary students.

Keywords: Project-Based Learning (PjBL); Elementary Social Studies; Student Learning Outcomes

Introduction

Elementary education is a crucial stage that shapes the foundation of students' knowledge, attitudes, and skills. At this level, learners are introduced to a wide range of subjects that not only develop their academic competence but also their character. One of the key subjects in elementary education is Social Studies (LeTendre & Gray, 2024). Social Studies plays a strategic role in equipping students with an understanding of social, cultural, economic, and political aspects of life. More importantly, it is intended to instill national values, democratic attitudes, and relevant life skills. In other words, Social Studies is designed to

prepare students to understand themselves, their environment, and their relationship with society.

In practice, however, Social Studies learning at the elementary level is often carried out in a conventional manner. Teachers still rely heavily on lectures and rote memorization, which tends to position students as passive recipients of information. This condition leads to low motivation, limited engagement, and a lack of higher-order thinking skills among students (Kjällander et al., 2021). Consequently, many students find it difficult to connect Social Studies materials with real-life contexts. Ideally, Social Studies should help students understand and apply social concepts to address everyday challenges, yet this goal is not fully realized in classroom practice. This gap indicates the urgent need for innovation in teaching strategies.

In line with the paradigm shift in 21st-century education, teachers are required to implement more interactive, collaborative, and contextual learning approaches. One approach that has gained significant attention is *Project Based Learning* (PjBL). This model emphasizes project-oriented activities where students are actively involved from the planning stage through implementation and product creation (Revelle, 2019). By engaging in PjBL, students are encouraged to develop critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration skills. These competencies are directly aligned with the demands of 21st-century learning.

The application of PjBL in Social Studies is particularly relevant, as it allows students to connect classroom materials with real-world social issues. For example, students may design projects related to local environmental problems, community economic activities, or cultural preservation efforts. Such projects make learning more meaningful and applicable to their daily lives (Carvalho & Santos, 2021). Furthermore, PjBL helps students not only to understand theoretical concepts but also to develop responsibility, initiative, and teamwork skills.

This article aims to review the effectiveness of *Project Based Learning* in elementary Social Studies and to analyze its impact on student learning outcomes (Wong et al., 2021). In addition, it seeks to identify supporting and inhibiting factors that influence the successful implementation of PjBL. Through this review, a more comprehensive understanding of the strengths and limitations of the model can be achieved.

The significance of this article lies in both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it enriches the body of literature on PjBL effectiveness in Social Studies at the elementary level. Practically, it provides valuable insights for teachers, researchers, and education practitioners in designing more innovative and contextual learning strategies. Ultimately, PjBL is expected to bridge the gap between the ideal goals of Social Studies education and the reality of its classroom implementation, thus fostering more engaging and effective learning experiences for students.

Literature Review

Previous studies have shown that PjBL can bring positive impacts on student learning outcomes. Research indicates improvements in conceptual understanding, motivation, critical thinking, and social skills. Nevertheless, findings remain varied. While some studies report significant improvements across cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains, others highlight challenges in implementation (Cai et al., 2023). Common barriers include limited instructional time, insufficient facilities, and teachers' readiness to implement a relatively complex instructional model. These mixed results suggest the importance of reviewing the

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effectiveness of PjBL, particularly within the context of Social Studies learning at the elementary level.

Article advocates for transforming the teaching of History and Social Sciences by emphasizing critical and reflective thinking through the historical method and discourse. It identifies various pedagogical strategies, such as structured debates and collaborative analysis, to foster a critical and socially engaged citizenry, while highlighting the need for teacher training and further research in diverse educational settings (Witarsa & Muhammad, 2023).

The study describes the implementation of a Project-based Learning (PjBL) model using a STREAM-based approach in three elementary schools, focusing on enhancing student creativity and learning activities. The results indicated a significant improvement in student learning outcomes and creativity, with students producing four innovative projects, including drip irrigation and a religious-based picture story booklet. The research suggests that this approach can effectively increase students' interest and social attitudes in learning (Azizah et al., 2020).

Research Method

This study employed a literature review method aimed at examining the effectiveness of Project Based Learning (PjBL) in Social Studies at the elementary level and its impact on student learning outcomes. The data sources were obtained through Google Scholar with a publication range from 2020 to 2025. A total of 16 articles were selected based on inclusion criteria: focusing on the implementation of PjBL in elementary Social Studies, addressing aspects of effectiveness or learning outcomes, published in indexed and credible academic journals, and written in either Indonesian or English. The selected articles were then reviewed in depth to identify the main findings, analyze similarities and differences across studies, and provide a comprehensive overview of PjBL implementation in elementary Social Studies learning.

Results and Discussion

After conducting a literature review of 16 articles focusing on the implementation of Project Based Learning (PjBL) in Social Studies at the elementary level, several significant findings were identified regarding its effectiveness and impact on student learning outcomes. The articles, published between 2020 and 2025, provide a comprehensive overview of how PjBL enhances student engagement, strengthens conceptual understanding, and develops 21st-century skills. At the same time, the review also highlights challenges in its implementation, such as time constraints, teacher readiness, and limited supporting facilities. Overall, the reviewed literature indicates that PjBL holds great potential to improve the quality of Social Studies learning at the elementary level, although its effectiveness is strongly influenced by contextual factors.

Table 1. Literature Source Analysis

No.	Source	Research Findings
1	(Ansya, Y.A., Salsabila, 2023). The Relationship of Using Project Based Learning Model on IPAS Learning Outcomes of 4th Grade Elementary Students. Jurnal Handayani.	PjBL improved cognitive, affective, and psychomotor outcomes, as well as social skills. Limitations: time constraints, large classes, and

No.	Source	Research Findings
		unbalanced student contributions. Recommendations: structured projects, technology integration, and teacher guidance for passive students.
2	(Nata & Sujana, 2021). Effectiveness of Tri Kaya Parisudha-Based Project Based Learning Model in Improving Social Studies Knowledge Competence. Thinking Skills and Creativity Journal.	Tri Kaya Parisudha-based PjBL enhanced concentration, self-control, and value integration with a small positive effect (Cohen's $d=0.152$). Limitations: literature-based, secondary data. Recommendations: empirical research with mixed approaches.
3	(Made Bagiada et al., 2024). The Effect of Project Based Learning Model on Social Studies Learning Outcomes. Jurnal Ilmiah Pendidikan Profesi Guru.	PjBL had a significant effect on improving social studies learning outcomes. Limitations: small sample, focus on cognitive outcomes only. Recommendations: broader studies including affective and psychomotor aspects.
4	(Rahmawati et al., 2022). The Effect of PjBL Model on Student Creativity. Jurnal Ilmiah Aquinas.	PjBL significantly enhanced creativity (N-Gain 0.70, high category). Limitations: quasi-experimental design, instrument validation issues. Recommendations: further research with stronger control designs.
5	(Wulanda et al., 2025) Ferdina Hayuning Wulanda, Aan Widiyono & Muhammad Alie Muzakki. The Effect of PjBL with Kasfanda Media on IPAS Learning Outcomes. Jurnal Pendidikan Matematika dan IPA.	PjBL with Kasfanda media improved learning outcomes significantly (t-test results). Limitations: long implementation time, active class dynamics. Recommendations: use of interactive media in classrooms.
6	Nur Fariha Maulidia & Dewi Ayu Istiqomah (2023). Social Studies Learning Design Based on Project Based Learning in Elementary School. Jurnal Pendidikan IPS.	PjBL design increased student activity, creativity, and outcomes. Limitations: small sample, limited instrument use. Recommendations: larger-scale research needed.
7	Warsiti, Agustini & Handayani (2024). Effectiveness of PjBL on IPAS Learning Outcomes of 4th Grade Students. International Journal of Elementary Studies.	PjBL improved pretest (55.45) to posttest (83.18) with N-Gain 0.65 (medium). Limitations: small sample (11 students), no control group. Recommendations: larger sample studies with control groups.
8	(Nata & Sujana, 2021). Application of PjBL with Visual Media in 5th Grade Social Studies at SDN 1 Penatih. Jurnal Pendidikan Dasar.	Mastery learning increased from 30% to 85% across cycles. Limitations: single class study, limited instruments. Recommendations: broader and multi-class applications.
9	(Nikmatul et al., 2023). The Effect of PjBL on Social Studies Outcomes in 5th Grade. Jurnal Ilmiah PGSD FKIP.	PjBL significantly improved outcomes (sig. $0.000 < 0.05$). Limitations: no control group, small sample. Recommendations: research with stronger design and replication.

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No.	Source	Research Findings
10	(Ardiansyah et al., 2023). PjBL in IPAS Learning for 4th Grade Students. Jurnal Ilmiah PGSD STKIP Subang.	Literature review showed PjBL provides contextual and varied learning in line with Merdeka Curriculum. Limitations: no empirical data. Recommendations: field studies in real classrooms.
11	(Retnowati et al., 2023). Application of PjBL with Lapbook Media in Social Studies of 4th Grade Students. Jurnal Ilmiah Multidisiplin.	Learning mastery increased from 28% to 84% in cycle II. Limitations: short duration, small sample. Recommendations: extend research duration and include larger population.
12	(Dari et al., 2021). Effectiveness of PjBL in Improving Social Studies Outcomes of 4th Grade Students. Journal of Social Science Research.	Control class average posttest = 81.66, experimental = 88.66; significant differences confirmed. Limitations: two classes only, focus on cognitive skills. Recommendations: extend to affective/psychomotor domains.
13	Nurina Asri Fitriani, Seilla Julya Marlita Khaerunisa & Tin Rustini (2023). Literature Review on PjBL Application in Elementary Social Studies. Jurnal Pendidikan Tambusai.	From 16 journals, PjBL improved learning outcomes (56.3%), activeness (25%), creativity (12.5%). Limitations: literature-based, no primary data. Recommendations: empirical research needed.
14	Ananda Pratiwi, Endie Riyoko & Kabib Sholeh (2023). Implementation of PjBL in 21st Century Social Studies in Elementary Schools. Journal of Social Science Research.	PjBL improved collaboration and communication among students. Limitations: time-consuming, material adaptation challenges. Recommendations: provide diverse project themes.
15	(Prabaningrat et al., 2023). Application of PjBL with Concrete Media in Social Studies. Jurnal Ilmiah Kependidikan.	Learning mastery improved significantly: cycle I = 88.63%, cycle III = 95.45%. Limitations: classroom management issues. Recommendations: better time and class management strategies.
16	(Penulis et al., 2025). Integration of Constructivism through PjBL in Elementary Social Studies. Educational Journal.	Average scores increased from 66.2 to 82.5; students became more motivated and collaborative. Limitations: small sample size. Recommendations: teacher training and project-based teaching materials development.

Student learning outcomes in elementary social studies are influenced by several interrelated factors, including teaching models, learning media, student motivation, classroom management, and the learning environment. Based on the analysis of 16 studies examining the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL), several key findings and implications emerge that highlight the multidimensional benefits of this instructional approach.

The Influence of PjBL on Learning Outcomes

The analysis of the 16 reviewed studies indicates that PjBL significantly enhances students' cognitive, affective, and psychomotor outcomes. For instance, Yusron Abda'u Ansya & Tania Salsabilla (2023) reported improvements not only in academic performance but also in social skills among 4th-grade students. Similarly, I Made Bagiada et al. (2023) found that PjBL positively affected social studies outcomes, suggesting that students are better able to understand, retain, and apply material when engaged in project-based activities. These results emphasize that PjBL encourages active participation, critical thinking, and the application of knowledge in real-world contexts, thereby fostering deeper and more meaningful learning experiences. Moreover, PjBL allows students to take ownership of their learning, promoting self-directed study and problem-solving skills. By working on projects relevant to their daily experiences, students can connect theoretical concepts to practical applications, which strengthens long-term retention and comprehension.

Enhancing Creativity and Motivation

Several studies underline that PjBL promotes both creativity and intrinsic motivation. Nanda Rahmawati et al. (2025) reported high creativity gains ($N\text{-Gain} = 0.70$), highlighting the potential of PjBL to stimulate innovative thinking and problem-solving. Ahmad Ahmad et al. (2025) also noted that integrating constructivist principles through PjBL led to increased student motivation, engagement, and collaboration. These findings indicate that PjBL is not merely a method for improving academic performance but also a vehicle for nurturing curiosity, initiative, and a positive learning mindset, all of which are essential skills for lifelong learning. In addition, providing students with the autonomy to make decisions within projects enhances their confidence and intrinsic motivation, encouraging a mindset of experimentation and resilience when facing challenges.

Role of Learning Media and Tools

The effectiveness of PjBL is further enhanced by the use of diverse learning media. Ferdina Hayuning Wulanda et al. (2025) demonstrated that using Kasfanda media significantly improved IPAS learning outcomes, while Endah Retnowati et al. (2023) found that lapbook media increased mastery of social studies concepts. I Wayan Darmayog & I Ketut Suparya (2021) also highlighted that visual media facilitated understanding of complex topics. These findings suggest that interactive, visual, and hands-on media can support students' active engagement, reinforce conceptual understanding, and make learning more tangible and memorable. Furthermore, media tools can cater to different learning styles, providing visual, auditory, and kinesthetic opportunities that enhance student comprehension and retention, particularly in subjects that combine abstract and practical knowledge.

Collaboration and Communication Skills

PjBL inherently fosters collaborative learning and communication skills, which are critical competencies in the 21st century. Ananda Pratiwi et al. (2023) observed significant improvements in teamwork and communication, while Ahmad Ahmad et al. (2025) reported higher levels of cooperative learning. By engaging students in group projects, PjBL cultivates not only academic knowledge but also interpersonal skills, conflict resolution, and shared responsibility, preparing students for future collaborative environments both in school and beyond. Additionally, collaborative projects help students develop leadership and negotiation skills as they plan, execute, and present their work, which is essential for personal growth and professional readiness in modern society.

Challenges and Limitations

Despite its numerous benefits, PjBL implementation presents challenges. Common obstacles include time constraints, large class sizes, unequal contribution among group members, and classroom management difficulties (Yusron Abda'u Ansya & Tania Salsabilla, 2023; Fonda Hidayah Prabaningrat et al., 2023). Additionally, small sample sizes, limited research duration, and insufficient empirical data were reported in several studies (Warsiti et al., 2024; Ahmad Ahmad et al., 2025). These limitations underscore the importance of careful planning, teacher training, structured project design, and adequate support mechanisms to optimize the effectiveness of PjBL in diverse classroom contexts. Schools must also consider the readiness of students for independent and group-based learning, as insufficient guidance or scaffolding may reduce the potential benefits of PjBL, especially for younger learners who are still developing self-regulation skills.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on the evidence, it is recommended that teachers design structured and contextually relevant projects with clear objectives and measurable outcomes to maximize the effectiveness of Project-Based Learning (PjBL). The use of interactive and visual learning media should be emphasized, as these tools can enhance students' understanding, creativity, and overall engagement. Continuous guidance and support from teachers are crucial to ensure that all students participate equitably and that group dynamics function effectively. In addition, careful planning of classroom management and project timelines is necessary to address potential logistical challenges and optimize learning. Furthermore, future research should incorporate larger and more diverse samples, involve multiple classes, and explore different educational contexts to provide stronger empirical evidence for the effectiveness of PjBL. Teachers are encouraged to integrate regular reflection sessions, peer assessments, and feedback mechanisms to further strengthen learning outcomes and ensure students develop both academic and soft skills.

Implications for Elementary Social Studies Learning

The collective findings suggest that PjBL is a highly effective instructional approach for elementary social studies. By fostering collaboration, creativity, motivation, and active engagement, PjBL aligns closely with 21st-century learning goals and curriculum demands. Schools are encouraged to support teachers through professional development, resource provision, and structured project frameworks to fully leverage PjBL's potential. Ultimately, this approach not only enhances academic performance but also develops students' social, cognitive, and problem-solving skills, preparing them for lifelong learning and responsible citizenship. Moreover, incorporating PjBL into the standard curriculum can create a more dynamic, student-centered learning environment that promotes inquiry, innovation, and critical thinking from an early age.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of 16 studies on the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in elementary social studies, it can be concluded that PjBL significantly enhances students' cognitive, affective, and psychomotor outcomes while fostering creativity, motivation, collaboration, and communication skills. The integration of interactive, visual, and hands-on learning media supports active engagement and deeper conceptual understanding. Despite challenges such as time constraints, large class sizes, and unequal group contributions,

PjBL proves effective when supported by careful planning, continuous teacher guidance, and appropriate use of learning media. Therefore, PjBL is a highly effective instructional approach for developing 21st-century competencies and preparing students to become lifelong learners and responsible citizens.

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