

Exploring the Role of Problem-Based Learning in Fostering Social Literacy, Critical Thinking, and Religiosity in Social Studies Education

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Abstract: This study aims to examine in depth the implementation of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in social studies education and its impact on the development of social literacy, critical thinking, and religiosity among junior high school students. The study employed a qualitative case study design conducted over a three-month period. Participants were selected through purposive sampling and consisted of social studies teachers and eighth-grade students. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. The data were analyzed using thematic coding to identify recurring patterns and core themes. The analysis revealed four major themes: (1) the implementation of student-centered learning through group discussions, case studies, and reflective activities; (2) the integration of social care and responsibility values within real-life social contexts; (3) positive learning outcomes reflected in improved social literacy and critical thinking skills; and (4) learning constraints, particularly limited instructional time and uneven student participation. The findings indicate that contextual learning media such as presentations, videos, and authentic social issues effectively enhance students' cognitive engagement and strengthen their religiosity in both affective and behavioral dimensions. However, structural limitations, including restricted technological access and limited instructional time, remain significant challenges. This study contributes to the growing discourse on integrative social studies pedagogy by demonstrating that PBL can simultaneously foster social literacy, critical thinking, and religiosity within a unified instructional framework. It also offers practical implications for curriculum adaptation, systematic teacher training, and the development of collaborative learning environments to optimize students' holistic development.

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Introduction

Social Studies education in Indonesia faces complex challenges in developing students' holistic competencies. Social Studies learning is not only required to equip students with factual knowledge about social phenomena, but also to develop critical thinking skills, social literacy, and strong character values (Dwi & El, 2021). This is in line with the mandate of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes the development of the Pancasila Student Profile through student-centered learning and contextual problem-solving (Yuliana, Rustan, Wisran, 2025).

Problem-Based Learning (PBL) has been widely recognized as an effective pedagogical approach for developing 21st-century skills (Cinthia et al., 2025). Gaber et al (2025) emphasize that PBL places students as active learners who construct knowledge through the process of solving authentic problems. In the context of social studies learning,

PBL has great potential to integrate various dimensions of student competence, including social literacy, critical thinking, and character values that include religiosity (Sultan et al., 2025).

Social literacy refers to an individual's ability to understand, analyze, and respond to social issues critically and responsibly (Skills & Skills, 2023). In an information age marked by the spread of fake news and social polarization, social literacy has become an essential competency for citizens of a democracy (J. Lee et al., 2025). Research shows that junior high school students in Indonesia still have difficulty critically analyzing social information and distinguishing facts from opinions (Safitri et al., 2025). This condition calls for a learning approach that can facilitate the systematic and sustainable development of social literacy.

Critical thinking, as defined by Saiz & Rivas (2023), is reflective, reasonable thinking that focuses on making decisions about what to believe or do. Irhasyurna & Fajeriadi (2025) identify six core cognitive skills in critical thinking: interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation. The development of critical thinking skills at the junior high school level is crucial because this period is a cognitive transition from concrete to formal operational thinking (Tiatri et al., 2024). PBL provides an ideal context for the development of critical thinking through the processes of inquiry, problem analysis, and solution evaluation (Calosa et al., 2025; Sari, 2025).

Religiousness in the context of Indonesian education cannot be separated from the goal of character education. Nisa' & Ma'arif (2025); (Amriani et al., 2023), define religiousness as the internalization of religious values reflected in attitudes, behavior, and social interactions. The importance of religiosity in social studies learning lies in its function as a moral foundation for understanding and responding to social phenomena (Falikah et al., 2024). The integration of religious values, such as social awareness and responsibility, in problem-based learning can strengthen students' character while improving their understanding of the moral dimensions of social issues (Falikah et al., 2024).

Although social literacy, critical thinking, and religiosity have been extensively studied separately, all three need to be integrated into the learning process. An emphasis on critical thinking without a moral foundation can lead to value relativism and social polarization, while social literacy without critical thinking results in students only understanding issues superficially (Cao Cu Giac et al., 2025). On the other hand, religiosity taught without a real social context tends to be ritualistic and fails to serve as a moral guide in social life (Katende, 2023).

Several previous studies have explored the implementation of PBL in social studies learning. Research by Yupeni et al (2025) found that PBL improves junior high school students' social problem-solving skills. Meanwhile, Agustina et al (2025) identified an increase in critical thinking skills through PBL in the context of environmental issues. However, comprehensive research examining how PBL can simultaneously develop social literacy, critical thinking, and religiosity is still limited, especially in the context of Indonesia's unique and diverse culture (Rachmawati et al., 2024; Sari & Liu, 2023). This gap encourages the need for in-depth research to understand the mechanisms of integrating these three dimensions of competence in problem-based social studies learning.

The integration of social literacy, critical thinking, and religiosity is essential in social studies education. Social literacy requires critical thinking so that students can analyze issues in depth, while religiosity serves as a moral foundation for responding to social phenomena (Rivera-royero & Jaller, 2025). Within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum and the Pancasila Student Profile, students need to possess critical thinking skills, understand social realities, and act in accordance with religious values. PBL is an appropriate approach because

it integrates these three dimensions through contextual and meaningful problem-based learning (Julianto et al., 2025).

This study aims to examine in depth the implementation of PBL in social studies learning and its impact on the development of social literacy, critical thinking, and religiosity of junior high school students. This study contributes to the development of research on social studies learning based on Problem-Based Learning (PBL) through the integration of social literacy, critical thinking, and religiosity within a single integrated learning framework. In addition to strengthening theoretical research, this study also provides practical contributions for teachers and schools in implementing contextual, student-centered social studies instruction, as well as supporting the strengthening of the Pancasila Student Profile in accordance with the objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum (Burhan, 2026).

Research Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with an instrumental case study design (Li, 2023). Case studies were chosen because they allow researchers to explore the phenomenon of PBL implementation in depth in its natural context (Fanani & Na, 2024). The research paradigm used is constructivist-interpretive, which views reality as a social construct shaped by individual interactions and interpretations (Kouam et al., 2024). The focus of the research is to understand the experiences of teachers and students in the implementation of PBL and the meanings they construct from those experiences.

The research was conducted at SMP Negeri 10 Palopo, South Sulawesi, which has implemented the Merdeka Curriculum and has experience in implementing PBL in social studies learning. The location was selected using purposive sampling with the following criteria: (1) the school has implemented PBL for at least two years, (2) has adequate learning facilities and infrastructure, (3) is willing to be the locus of research. The research participants consisted of three social studies teachers (two female and one male) with 5-15 years of teaching experience, as well as five eighth-grade students (three male and two female) who were selected based on their activeness and diversity of academic abilities.

The research was conducted over a period of three months (October-December 2025) using three main data collection techniques to achieve triangulation. First, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with social studies teachers to explore PBL implementation strategies, value integration, and challenges faced. Interviews were conducted individually with a duration of 60-90 minutes per session. Interviews with students were conducted through focus group discussions (FGD) to understand their learning experiences, attitude changes, and behavior (Souza et al., 2024). Second, participatory observation was conducted on 12 PBL-based social studies learning sessions using a structured observation protocol that covered PBL stages, learning strategies, media use, and teacher-student interactions (Mutanga, 2024). Third, document analysis was conducted on the Lesson Plan (RPP), student worksheets, student work results, and teacher reflection notes (Yusnidar et al., 2023).

The data were analyzed using Christou's (2023) thematic analysis method, which consists of six stages: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading and verbatim transcription, (2) inductive and deductive formation of initial codes, (3) search for themes by grouping codes with similar patterns, (4) reviewing themes to ensure internal and external consistency, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) writing reports with direct quotation illustrations. The coding process was carried out manually with the help of NVivo 14 software for data management and organization. The results of the thematic coding analysis identified four main themes with various sub-themes and indicators, as presented in Table 2.

The credibility of the research is ensured through triangulation of data sources (teachers and students), triangulation of methods (interviews, observations, and document analysis), member checking with participants to validate interpretations, and peer debriefing with social studies learning experts. Transferability is achieved through a rich description of the research context (thick description) that allows readers to assess the applicability of the findings in other contexts. Dependability is maintained through an audit trail that documents the entire research process, from data collection to interpretation of findings. Confirmability is achieved through researcher reflexivity and documentation of analytical decision-making (Ahmed, 2024). Ethical considerations include informed consent, participant anonymity through coding, data confidentiality, and the right of participants to withdraw at any time without consequences (Salim & Habsi, 2024).

Results and Discussion

Research findings indicate that students' religiosity in PBL learning is reflected not only in social concern and responsibility but also in the internalization of spiritual values such as empathy, honesty, trustworthiness, and mutual aid. Teachers link social issues to religious values so that students view discussion, cooperation, and the resolution of social problems as part of the practice of religious values and moral responsibility. Thus, religiosity is understood as a moral-spiritual awareness that shapes how students understand and respond to social phenomena in a more humane and responsible manner (Lilik Nur Kholidah, 2022).

Data analysis produced four main themes with eight sub-themes that describe the implementation of PBL in social studies learning at SMP Negeri 10 Palopo. Table 2 presents the results of thematic coding that form the framework for discussing the research results.

Table 1. Thematic Coding of Learning Implementation and Character Building

Theme	Subthemes	code	Findings Indicators	Data Sources	Analytical Meaning
Learning Implementation	Learning Strategies	SP	Use of group discussions, case studies, and reflection	Teacher Interviews	Student-centered learning
Learning Implementation	Learning Media	MP	Use of PPT, videos, and real social contexts	Classroom Observations	Media supports contextual understanding
Instilling Values	Social Awareness	KS	Students are engaged in social activities, reflective discussions, and the analysis of real-world social issues reflection	Student Interviews	According to Jack Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory, reflective learning experiences encourage students to transform their perspectives on the value of social responsibility, leading to a more critical, conscious, and meaningful internalization of that value
Value Integration	Responsibility Values	TJ	Assignment of responsibilities and collaborative tasks	RPS Documents	Learning encourages independence
Learning	Attitude	PS	Increased	Student	Transformation of affective



Impact	Change		sensitivity to social issues	Interviews	attitudes
Learning Impact	Real Behavior	PN	Active participation in social activities	Field Observations	Values are manifested in actions
Learning Obstacles	Time Constraints	KW	Insufficient class time for practice	Teacher Interviews	Structural barriers to learning
Learning Obstacles	Variation in Participation	VP	Not all students are active	Observations	The need to strengthen learning motivation

Implementation of Problem-Based Learning

Observations and interviews showed that the implementation of PBL in social studies learning at SMP Negeri 10 Palopo adopted a student-centered approach that emphasized student activity and knowledge construction. Teachers used three main strategies: group discussion, case studies, and reflection. Group discussions facilitate students to collaborate in analyzing social issues, sharing perspectives, and constructing solutions together. One teacher explained:

“In PBL, I begin by presenting social issues that are relevant to students' lives, such as waste problems in the school environment or conflicts between student groups. Then the students work in groups to discuss the causes, impacts, and solutions. My role is to facilitate and guide them with probing questions, not to provide direct answers.” (MBH, interview on October 15, 2025).

Case study strategies are used to provide real-world contexts that enrich students' understanding of social phenomena. Teachers present actual cases that occur in society, either through news, documentary videos, or field trips. This approach is in line with the PBL principle, which emphasizes the use of authentic problems as learning stimuli (Kesha & Rasyidah, 2025). Reflection is conducted at the end of each learning session to encourage students to evaluate their thinking processes, identify what they have learned, and relate it to relevant values.

The use of contextual learning media has proven effective in supporting student understanding. Teachers utilize PowerPoint presentations to display statistical data and infographics on social issues, documentary videos to provide rich visual descriptions, and real social cases as material for analysis. Observations show that visual media, especially videos, successfully attract students' attention and spark in-depth discussions. One student stated:

“When the teacher showed a video about the impact of flooding in Jakarta, I understood better why flooding occurs. It's not only because of rain, but also because of the large amount of trash in the rivers and unregulated development. The video made me think, what can I do to prevent something similar from happening in my neighborhood?” (NPR, FGD November 8, 2025).

This finding reinforces the argument made by Rima et al (2025) regarding the effectiveness of multimedia in learning, which states that a combination of text, images, and audio can improve conceptual understanding through dual-coding. In the context of PBL, contextual media not only serve as a source of information, but also as a stimulus to trigger questions, critical analysis, and value reflection (Yu & Zin, 2023).

Integration of Social Awareness and Responsibility Values

One of the important findings of this study is the integration of character values, particularly social awareness and responsibility, in the PBL process. This integration is not done separately or additionally, but is naturally embedded in the learning process. Analysis of the lesson plans shows that teachers explicitly designed learning outcomes that integrated

cognitive (understanding social issues), affective (concern and empathy), and behavioral (concrete actions) dimensions.

Social awareness is developed through student involvement in social activities and reflection on values. When studying poverty, for example, students not only analyze the causes and effects theoretically, but are also encouraged to empathize with the affected groups and think about the real contributions they can make. One teacher explained their strategy:

"After the students analyzed the problem of poverty around the school, I asked them to reflect: How do you feel when you see these conditions? What can we do as students? From this reflection, the idea arose to collect donations of books and stationery for children in orphanages. This was a meaningful learning experience because students not only learned about the problem, but also did something to help." (SNR, interview on November 22, 2025).

Responsibility is developed through the assignment of responsibilities and collaborative tasks within groups. Each student is assigned a specific role in the group (leader, secretary, researcher, presenter) with clear responsibilities. Teachers facilitate students in evaluating their own contributions and those of other group members, encouraging individual and collective accountability. Observations show that this division of roles not only increases the effectiveness of group work, but also develops students' awareness of the importance of carrying out their responsibilities well.

The integration of values in PBL is in line with the concept of character-integrated PBL proposed by Ramadani et al (2025), which emphasizes that character education is most effective when integrated into the academic curriculum through meaningful learning. In this context, values are not taught abstractly, but are experienced and practiced by students in the context of authentic social problem solving. This facilitates a deeper internalization of values compared to indoctrination or lecture-based approaches (Agussalim et al., 2025).

Impact on Changes in Student Attitudes and Behavior

The implementation of PBL has shown a significant impact on changes in student attitudes and behavior, which are manifested in two dimensions: changes in affective attitudes and actual behavior. From the affective dimension, interviews with students revealed an increase in sensitivity to social issues around them. Students became more sensitive and critical of social phenomena that were previously considered normal or ignored. One student explained the change in his perspective:

"Previously, I didn't really care about social issues. For example, if I saw people littering, I didn't think anything of it. But after learning about the impact of waste on the environment and health, now I feel uncomfortable when I see things like that. I even sometimes reprimand friends who litter." (MNY, FGD October 8, 2025)

This transformation in attitude reflects the development of social literacy that involves not only cognitive understanding, but also affective dimensions such as empathy and concern (Jiajun et al., 2025). In transformative learning theory, this kind of change in perspective is an indication of a more fundamental transformation in the frame of reference, whereby students begin to see and interpret social reality in a different way.

From a behavioral perspective, field observations show that this change in attitude has been translated into concrete actions. Students are actively participating in social activities, both those facilitated by the school and their own initiatives. For example, some students have formed an environmental group that regularly cleans up the school grounds every

Friday. Others are involved in anti-bullying campaigns on social media. MDN teachers explain:

“The most rewarding thing is seeing students apply what they have learned outside the classroom. They don't just talk about the importance of social awareness, they actually do something about it. This shows that the values we instill in them have been internalized and become part of their character.” (MDN, interview on December 5, 2025)

These findings support the theory of S. Lee et al (2024) which states that attitudes and behavioral intentions are strong predictors of actual behavior. In the context of character education, actual behavior is the most valid indicator of value internalization, because it shows that these values are not only understood cognitively or felt affectively, but have become dispositions that guide actions.

Challenges and Development Strategies

Although the implementation of PBL showed positive results, this study also identified several challenges faced by teachers. The main challenge was limited learning time. PBL requires more time allocation than conventional learning for the investigation, discussion, and presentation stages. With limited time allocation (3 hours per week for social studies), teachers find it difficult to implement all stages of PBL optimally. One teacher stated:

“The biggest challenge is time. Ideally, PBL requires at least 3-4 meetings for one project, but with limited class hours and material targets that must be completed, sometimes I have to cut some stages. For example, the student independent investigation stage is reduced, or the group presentation is limited in time.” (MBH, interview on October 15, 2025)

The second challenge is the variation in student participation in learning. Observations show that not all students are active in group discussions. Some students tend to be passive or rely on more active group members. This indicates the need for more intensive differentiation and scaffolding strategies to ensure the participation of all students. SNR teachers explained the efforts made:

“To address passive students, I implement a role system in groups where each student must contribute according to their role. I also ask passive students direct questions to encourage them to speak up. In addition, I use the think-pair-share technique so that students who lack confidence can discuss with their partners first before speaking in class.” (SNR, interview on November 22, 2025)

The constraints of time limitations and variations in participation are consistent with the findings of previous PBL studies (Le, 2024). To overcome these constraints, several strategies are needed: (1) a more compact PBL project design with a focus on the most essential issues, (2) integration of learning outside the classroom through independent assignments or online collaboration, (3) developing a professional learning community for teachers to share good practices, and (4) advocating to policymakers for more flexible time allocation (Elia et al., 2025).

The findings of this study indicate that PBL in social studies instruction supports the development of the Pancasila Student Profile, particularly in the areas of critical thinking, cooperation, and faith and noble character. PBL not only enhances students' social understanding but also shapes their attitudes, character, and moral awareness through contextual and reflective learning. These findings reinforce Jack Mezirow's theory of reflective learning and Lev Vygotsky's theory regarding the importance of social interaction in learning. Therefore, the implementation of PBL must be supported through teacher



capacity building, curriculum flexibility, and a collaborative learning environment to ensure that the development of students' social literacy, critical thinking, and religious values can proceed optimally and sustainably.(Indah & Muhson, 2025).

Conclusion

This study shows that Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in social studies instruction is effective in developing students' social literacy, critical thinking, and religiosity through student-centered learning, group discussions, case studies, and reflection. The use of contextual media such as PowerPoint presentations, videos, and authentic social cases increases student engagement and reinforces the values of social awareness and responsibility. The impact is evident in students' increased sensitivity to social issues and active participation in social activities. However, the implementation of PBL still faces challenges in the form of time constraints, variations in student participation, and technological support. Therefore, strengthening teacher capacity, curriculum flexibility, and a collaborative learning environment are necessary to support holistic and sustainable social studies learning.

Recommendation

Teachers are advised to continue developing contextual, interactive, and student-centered problem-based learning (PBL) so that students' social literacy, critical thinking, and religiosity can develop optimally. School principals need to support the implementation of PBL by providing learning facilities, teacher training, and strengthening a culture of collaborative learning in accordance with the Pancasila Student Profile. Future researchers are advised to conduct studies with a broader scope of schools and employ more diverse approaches to examine the long-term impact of PBL on students' character and social skills.

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