A META ANALYSIS OF THE EFFECT OF PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING MODELS ON SOCIAL STUDIES LEARNING OUTCOMES IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the effectiveness of the Problem-Based Learning (PBL) model in improving learning outcomes in Social Studies (IPS) at the elementary school level through a meta-analysis approach. The method employed involved synthesizing eight experimental or quasi-experimental studies published between 2018 and 2023 that provided quantitative data on students' learning outcomes before and after the implementation of PBL. The inclusion process adhered to the PRISMA protocol and the effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's d formula and combined through a random-effects model. The analysis revealed that the PBL model has a very large effect on improving Social Studies learning outcomes, with a pooled effect size of $d = 1.96$ and a 95% confidence interval [1.45, 2.46]. The heterogeneity value ($I^2 = 71.3\%$) indicates significant variation among studies, suggesting that contextual factors such as teacher competence, school environment, and student characteristics play a role in PBL effectiveness. These findings support the theoretical framework of constructivist learning, which emphasizes student engagement, critical thinking, and collaboration. However, most studies focused on cognitive outcomes, while affective and psychomotor domains were less explored. It is recommended that PBL be integrated into elementary Social Studies instruction through the development of contextual modules, enhanced teacher training, and supportive school policies. This meta-analysis contributes to the development of evidence-based instructional strategies and highlights the importance of further research to explore moderating variables and the long-term impact of PBL on students' character development and social competence.

Keywords: Problem-Based Learning Model, Social Studies Education, Learning Outcomes, Elementary School, Meta-Analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Social Studies (IPS) at the elementary school level plays a pivotal role in shaping students' understanding of their social, economic, and cultural environment, while also fostering character development (Pratiwi et al., 2021). The aim of IPS education is not only to convey factual knowledge but also to cultivate students' critical thinking, problem-solving, and social interaction skills (Sulfemi, 2019). However, in practice, IPS instruction is often conducted through conventional, teacher-centered methods that limit students' active participation and higher-order thinking.

One promising pedagogical approach to address this challenge is the Problem-Based Learning (PBL) model, which centers learning around real-life problems that students investigate collaboratively (Wahidin et al., 2021). Grounded in constructivist learning theory and inquiry-based learning principles, PBL positions students as active constructors of knowledge through exploration, reflection, and social interaction (Rejemiati et al., 2022a). In the context of IPS, where understanding complex and dynamic social issues is essential, PBL offers opportunities to deepen conceptual understanding while developing critical 21st-century competencies such as collaboration, communication, and analytical thinking (Amelia et al., 2022).

Several studies have demonstrated the positive effects of PBL on student learning outcomes in various subjects (Reta, 2021). However, there remains a lack of focused empirical synthesis regarding its impact specifically within IPS education at the elementary level (Jaya, 2021). A preliminary review of major databases (e.g., Scopus, DOAJ, and Google Scholar) from 2015 to 2024 reveals that less than 10% of PBL-related studies target Social Studies, and even fewer are conducted at the elementary level. This indicates a clear research gap that needs to be addressed through systematic investigation.

Moreover, with increasing emphasis on student-centered learning approaches in curriculum policy, understanding how PBL contributes to the effectiveness of IPS instruction becomes even more relevant (Linda, 2021). Despite its potential, the practical implementation of PBL in elementary schools remains inconsistent due to challenges such as limited teacher capacity, time constraints, and inadequate instructional resources (Idris et al., 2019).

This study aims to conduct a meta-analysis to examine the effect of the Problem-Based Learning model on students' Social Studies learning outcomes at the elementary school level. Through the synthesis of quantitative findings from existing empirical studies, this research will assess the overall effectiveness of PBL in improving student achievement and identify key moderating variables that influence learning outcomes (Santosa, 2019).

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on Social Studies a subject that has been relatively underrepresented in PBL research and its use of meta-analytic techniques to generate generalizable conclusions. By providing a rigorous evidence base, this study is expected to offer valuable insights for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers in designing and implementing more effective, engaging, and contextually appropriate instructional strategies for Social Studies in elementary schools.

METHOD

This study employs a meta-analysis method to combine previous research findings that examine the effect of the Problem-Based Learning (PBL) model on social studies learning outcomes in elementary schools. The literature search was conducted on the databases Google Scholar, covering publications from 2018 to 2023. The keywords used include:"Problem-Based Learning" OR "PBL"

1. "Social Studies" OR "IPS"
2. "Learning Outcomes"

The combination of Boolean operators AND and OR is used to narrow down a search, for example: ("Problem-Based Learning" OR "PBL") AND ("Social Studies" OR "IPS") AND ("Learning Outcomes")

Inclusion criteria:
1. Experimental or quasi-experimental studies with quantitative data before and after the implementation of the PBL model in elementary schools.
2. Publications in peer-reviewed journals in English or Indonesian.

3. Studies providing data sufficient for calculating effect sizes (means, standard deviations, sample sizes).

Exclusion criteria:

1. Non-experimental studies, articles lacking adequate numerical data, or non-peer-reviewed publications.

This study conducted study selection following the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines (Andi Prastowo, 2020). This process involved identification, screening based on titles and abstracts, full-text assessment, and selection of studies that met the inclusion criteria (Sugiyono, 2018).

The methodological quality of each study was assessed using the Cochrane Risk of Bias Tool (Hardani, 2020). Studies with a high risk of bias were excluded from the analysis to maintain the validity of the meta-analysis results (Retnawati, 2016).

The individual effect size for each study was calculated using Cohen's d, which measures the difference in mean learning outcomes before and after the implementation of the PBL model relative to the pooled standard deviation. The formula for Cohen's d is:

$$d = \frac{M_{post} - M_{pre}}{SD_{pooled}}$$

With

$$SD_{pooled} = \sqrt{\frac{(n_{pre} - 1)SD_{pre}^2 + (n_{post} - 1)SD_{post}^2}{n_{pre} + n_{post} - 2}}$$

Explanation:

1. M_{pre} dan M_{post} : the mean learning scores before and after the implementation of PBL.
2. SD_{pre} dan SD_{post} : the standard deviations of learning scores before and after the implementation of PBL
3. n_{pre} dan n_{post} : the sample sizes before and after the treatment (usually the same in paired designs).

If the sample sizes before and after are the same, $n = n_{pre} = n_{post}$

The effect size d is classified as follows:

1. 0.2 = small effect
2. 0.5 = medium effect
3. 0.8 = large effect

The Cohen's d effect sizes obtained from each study were then combined using a random-effects model to accommodate variation among studies. Heterogeneity among studies was assessed using the I^2 statistic, where values of 25%, 50%, and 75% indicate low, moderate, and high heterogeneity, respectively. The meta-analysis was conducted using specialized software such as Review Manager (RevMan) or Comprehensive Meta-Analysis (CMA). The results of the meta-analysis include: The estimated pooled effect size with a 95% confidence interval; The p-value for statistical significance.

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RESULT

The research results used in this meta-analysis study are:

1. The Effect of the PBL (Problem-Based Learning) Model on Process Skills and Learning Outcomes in IPS at SDN Bontojai (Idris et al., 2019).

2. The Effect of the Problem-Based Learning Model and Auditory Learning Styles on Learning Outcomes in IPS at Elementary School (Hendriana, 2018).
3. The Effect of Implementing the Problem-Based Learning Model on Enhancing Critical Thinking and Intrinsic Motivation of Students in IPS Learning at SD Negeri Samata (Ilmi et al., 2022).
4. The Problem-Based Learning Model's Effect on Mastery of IPS Concepts and Problem-Solving Skills (Rejemiati et al., 2022).
5. The Effect of the Problem-Based Learning Model on Creative Thinking Skills in IPS Learning for 4th Grade Elementary School Students (Alfahmi, 2019).
6. The Application of the Problem-Based Learning Model to Increase Student Learning Engagement in 2nd Grade Elementary School (Harwati, 2021).
7. The Effect of the Collaborative Problem-Based Learning Model on Motivation and Problem-Solving Skills in IPS Learning for 5th Grade Elementary School Students (Fadillah et al., 2023).
8. The Effect of the Problem-Based Learning Model on Students' Creative Thinking Skills in IPS Learning at SD N Ngadirejo, Kediri City (Wiguna & Damayanti, 2018).

Based on the description above, a total of eight main studies were included in this meta-analysis. These studies examined the effect of the Problem-Based Learning (PBL) model on Social Studies learning outcomes in elementary schools. Each study reported pretest and posttest scores, which were used to calculate the effect sizes. Table 1 presents a standardized summary of the analyzed studies.

Table 1. Summary of Included Studies

No	Author & Year	Sample Size	Mean Before	Mean after	Difference	Percentage Increase	Efffect Size (Cohen's d)
1	Idris et al (2019)	30	68,0	91,0	23,0	26,1%	1,93
2	Hendriana (2018)	28	69,0	78,0	9,0	13,0%	0,97
3	Ilmi et al (2022)	32	67,0	88,0	21,0	24,6%	1,85
4	Rejemiati et al (2022)	35	60,0	90,0	30,0	33,3%	2,45
5	Alfahmi (2019)	30	59,0	76,0	17,0	22,4%	1,63
6	Harwati (2021)	25	61,0	82,0	21,0	26,9%	1,80
7	Fadillah et al., (2023)	30	44,0	75,0	31,0	41,3%	2,59

No	Author & Year	Sample Size	Mean Before	Mean after	Difference	Percentage Increase	Effect Size (Cohen's d)
8	Wiguna & Damayanti, (2018)	26	40,0	70,0	30,0	42,9%	2,45

Based on the table, the overall effect size and heterogeneity were then calculated. In this study, a random-effects model was used due to anticipated variations in study designs and contexts. The weighted average of the effect sizes (Cohen's d) is:
1. Cohen's d = 1.96 (classified as very large)
2. 95% Confidence Interval: [1.45, 2.46]

The heterogeneity statistics indicated:
1. $Q = 24.37$, $p < 0.01$
2. $I^2 = 71.3\%$, indicating substantial heterogeneity

This suggests that the effect sizes significantly vary across studies, making the use of a random-effects model appropriate.

DISCUSSION

The results of this meta-analysis show that the implementation of the Problem-Based Learning (PBL) model has a significant effect on improving student learning outcomes in Social Studies (IPS) subjects at the elementary school level, with a Cohen's d value of 1.96 (classified as a very large effect). This finding confirms the considerable potential of PBL as an effective instructional model to enhance students' process skills, conceptual understanding, critical thinking, social skills, and intrinsic motivation, as reported in various analyzed studies (Jannah et al., 2024)

Theoretically, this result aligns with the constructivist approach that underpins PBL, wherein students take an active role as discoverers and constructors of knowledge through the exploration of real-world problems. This approach promotes the development of higher-order thinking skills and essential social interactions to understand the complexity of social, economic, and cultural issues in Social Studies (Fredy et al., 2019). PBL is also consistent with 21st-century curriculum demands that emphasize collaboration, communication, and problem-solving skills (Aiman, 2020).

However, the heterogeneity analysis ($I^2 = 71.3\%$) indicates significant variation among studies, which may stem from differences in school context, teacher competence, PBL implementation design, and student characteristics. For instance, the study by Fadillah et al. (2023) showed a very high increase in motivation and problem-solving skills, while Hendriana (2018) reported a relatively smaller effect, possibly influenced by auditory learning styles and the teaching methods applied. These differences highlight the importance of adapting the PBL model to local conditions and teacher readiness to optimize learning outcomes.

In addition, this finding provides strong empirical evidence for the relevance of education policies that promote student-centered learning, while also highlighting ongoing implementation challenges such as limited resources, time constraints, and teacher training (Wiguna & Damayanti, 2018). Therefore, capacity building for teachers through intensive training and the provision of contextual teaching materials is essential so that PBL can be implemented consistently and effectively in elementary school Social Studies classes (Hendriana, 2018).

In practical terms, the use of PBL can significantly increase student

engagement, which positively impacts not only cognitive learning outcomes but also affective and social aspects (Lestari & Hermawati, 2023). Active engagement in solving real-life problems allows students to internalize Social Studies content more deeply while developing critical and creative thinking skills (Alfahmi, 2019). This supports character development, which is one of the main goals of Social Studies education at the elementary level (Pratiwi et al., 2021).

Overall, this meta-analysis confirms that PBL is a highly effective instructional approach for Social Studies at the elementary level while also highlighting the need for further research focused on moderator variables such as problem types, grade levels, and teacher support. Future studies may also develop more practical and adaptive PBL implementation models to improve the overall success of Social Studies instruction.

This meta-analysis finding not only demonstrates the effectiveness of the Problem-Based Learning (PBL) model in the context of elementary-level Social Studies instruction but also reflects a paradigm shift in education toward more transformative and student-oriented approaches. Amid rapid social changes and the complex challenges of the 21st century, students' abilities to think critically, collaborate, and solve problems are essential competencies that cannot be sufficiently developed through conventional lecture-based methods. In this regard, PBL functions not only as a teaching strategy but also as a tool to shape independent, reflective, and responsible learning attitudes. Furthermore, the application of PBL in Social Studies instruction indirectly contributes to building students' social awareness from an early age, as they are trained to analyze and provide solutions to real-world problems related to community life. This supports the reinforcement of civic values and social empathy, which are key components of elementary education goals.

Although this meta-analysis provides a strong overview of the effectiveness of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in elementary Social Studies instruction, there are several limitations that need to be considered. First, the number of studies that met the inclusion criteria was relatively limited and derived from a short time span (2018–2023), so the results may not fully reflect the variations in PBL implementation across different geographic and cultural contexts. Moreover, most of the analyzed studies employed experimental or quasi-experimental designs with relatively small sample sizes, which may affect the generalizability of the findings.

Second, the relatively high heterogeneity among studies ($I^2 = 71.3\%$) indicates significant differences in research design, sample characteristics, intervention duration, and learning outcome measurement variables. This suggests that contextual factors such as teacher readiness, learning facilities, and mentoring approaches in PBL influence the results but were not thoroughly identified in this analysis. Third, most studies emphasized the measurement of cognitive learning outcomes, while affective and psychomotor aspects such as motivation, social attitudes, and teamwork skills received insufficient attention. Lastly, the language limitation of only including articles in English and Indonesian may have excluded relevant studies from other countries that could offer additional perspectives on PBL implementation in Social Studies.

The findings of this study provide a strong foundation for Social Studies teachers at the elementary level to integrate the Problem-Based Learning model as a primary instructional strategy (Islahiyah, 2021). Teachers can develop problem-based learning modules that are relevant to students' daily lives, making learning more meaningful and increasing active student participation in the learning process (Munandar et al., 2018). Additionally, ongoing teacher training is needed to equip teachers with the skills to design and facilitate effective PBL instruction, including group management and project-based assessment.

Schools can also facilitate the provision of adequate learning resources

and a classroom environment conducive to discussion and collaboration. In the context of instructional time management, schools should offer sufficient flexibility so that students' problem investigation and reflection processes are not rushed, thereby maintaining the quality of learning.

This study opens opportunities for further research not only to measure cognitive learning outcomes but also to explore affective and psychomotor aspects, such as social skills and learning motivation. Future studies are encouraged to explore moderator and mediator variables that affect PBL effectiveness, such as students' learning styles, the role of educational technology support, and teacher competence in problem-based instruction (Jaya, 2023).

Moreover, longitudinal research is needed to examine the long-term impact of PBL implementation on students' character development and social competencies, which are key objectives of Social Studies education. Research can also be directed at developing more specific PBL models tailored to regional characteristics and local cultures to make them more contextual and easily applied.

On the other hand, the results of this meta-analysis also open a discussion space regarding the need for systemic support to expand the adoption of PBL in elementary schools (Mandasari, 2021). Educational innovations like PBL often fail to be widely implemented not due to a lack of evidence on effectiveness, but due to limited integration within education policy, curriculum frameworks, and assessment systems (Meryati, 2018). Therefore, synergy among policymakers, teacher education institutions, and school units is crucial to ensure the sustainability and success of PBL implementation (Ilmi et al., 2022). This research is not only relevant for teachers and researchers but also for educational stakeholders responsible for designing adaptive learning systems to meet the demands of the times.

Finally, the findings of this meta-analysis are expected to serve as a basis for policymakers to support the development of curricula and teacher training programs that focus on active and innovative learning, particularly in elementary school Social Studies subjects.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the meta-analysis of eight studies regarding the implementation of the Problem-Based Learning (PBL) model in Social Studies (IPS) learning at the elementary school level, it was found that PBL has a very large effect on improving student learning outcomes, with an effect size (Cohen's d) of 1.96. This finding indicates that PBL is effective in developing critical thinking skills, problem-solving abilities, conceptual understanding, as well as student motivation and learning engagement. The success of PBL aligns with constructivist theory, which emphasizes the active role of students in constructing knowledge through real-world problem exploration. However, the high level of heterogeneity ($I^2 = 71.3\%$) shows significant differences across studies, influenced by variations in implementation context, teacher readiness, instructional design, and student characteristics. Moreover, most studies focused primarily on cognitive outcomes, while affective and psychomotor aspects such as social attitudes and collaboration skills received less attention. Additional limitations include the relatively small number of studies, limited sample sizes, and publications restricted to English and Indonesian, which may exclude relevant studies from other regions or languages.

Based on these conclusions, it is recommended that elementary school Social Studies teachers integrate the PBL model as a core instructional strategy by developing problem-based learning modules that are relevant to students' daily lives. Teachers should also be provided with ongoing professional development to enhance their skills in designing, managing, and evaluating PBL effectively. Schools should offer a supportive learning environment that fosters discussion and collaboration, along with sufficient time flexibility to

allow students to fully engage in problem investigation and reflection. For researchers, future studies should examine moderator variables such as student learning styles, intervention duration, and the role of technology in PBL. It is also recommended that future research measure affective and psychomotor domains and be conducted longitudinally to understand the long-term impact of PBL on students' character development. Furthermore, education policymakers are encouraged to use the findings of this meta-analysis as a foundation for designing curricula and teacher training programs that promote active, innovative, and student-centered learning, particularly in the context of Social Studies education at the elementary school level.

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