



The Effectiveness of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in Improving Social Literacy in Social Studies Subjects: A Literature Study

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Received: 25-12-2025

Revised: 20-02-2026

Accepted: 26-03-2026

Published: 30-03-2026

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Abstract: Problem-Based Learning (PBL) is an approach considered to encourage students to develop critical thinking, problem-solving, and social understanding. This literature review aims to analyze the effectiveness of PBL implementation in improving students' social literacy in Social Studies. This study used a systematic literature review method by examining various scientific articles, books, proceedings, and research reports published over the past ten years. The results of the study indicate that PBL consistently makes a positive contribution to improving social literacy, especially in aspects of social issue analysis, collaboration skills, active participation, and decision-making. In addition, PBL can foster students' social awareness through contextual learning related to everyday life. However, several studies have noted challenges such as teacher readiness, time availability, and students' ability to follow this model. Overall, PBL is considered effective as a social studies learning approach that is relevant to the needs of 21st-century education.

Keywords: Problem Based Learning, social literacy, social studies, contextual learning, literary studies

Introduction

Social Studies education plays a strategic role in shaping students to be able to understand social realities, think critically, and actively participate in social life. Banks (2019) emphasizes that social education aims to develop reflective, democratic citizens with a high level of social awareness. In line with this, Hobbs and Coiro (2020) explain that social literacy is an important skill that includes understanding social information, the ability to assess context, and the skill of making decisions based on social values. Thus, social literacy is a basic competency that must be developed through SSE learning.

Problem-Based Learning (PBL) is one relevant approach to developing social literacy. Barrows and Tamblyn (1980) mention that PBL encourages students to learn through authentic problem solving, thereby improving critical thinking, collaboration, and contextual understanding skills. Savery (2015) also emphasizes that PBL can provide a more meaningful learning experience because students actively explore social phenomena, analyze information sources, and construct arguments based on evidence.

How to Cite:

Mulyani, R., & Nurullah, M. (2026). The effectiveness of problem-based learning (PBL) in improving social literacy in social studies subjects: A literature study. *Journal of Educational Innovation and Technology*, 2(1). <https://journal.sigufi.com/index.php/jeit/index>

In the context of social studies learning, PBL has the advantage of allowing students to connect social concepts with actual events in society. Trilling and Fadel (2016) state that 21st-century learning must emphasize strong problem-solving, communication, and information literacy skills. PBL meets these needs by providing space for students to discuss, collaborate, and solve complex social problems.

Although PBL has many advantages, its implementation is not always easy. Hmelo-Silver (2004) emphasizes that the success of PBL is largely determined by the teacher's ability to design authentic problems, manage group discussions, and facilitate the reflection process. Other challenges that often arise are time constraints, lack of learning resources, and the diverse initial abilities of students (Ady et al., 2024). These conditions necessitate an in-depth evaluation of the application of PBL in social studies learning.

The increased interest in the use of PBL in social studies learning, especially to develop social literacy, encourages the need for a systematic literature review. By reviewing various studies conducted in the last five years, researchers can gain a comprehensive understanding of the impact of PBL, implementation patterns, and factors that influence its success. This literature study is important to see the extent to which PBL can help students develop social analysis skills, empathy, and social awareness.

Based on this background, this study was conducted to analyze the effectiveness of PBL in improving social literacy in social studies through a literature review approach. With the support of previous theories and research findings, this study is expected to contribute to the development of more innovative, contextual, and responsive social studies learning strategies for the challenges of 21st-century education.

Method

This study uses a literature review approach to analyze the effectiveness of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in improving social literacy in social studies subjects. A literature review was chosen because it provides a comprehensive understanding based on empirically published findings (Snyder, 2019). This approach allows researchers to identify patterns, main themes, and research gaps from various relevant primary sources over the past ten years.

The data in this study were sourced from journal articles, proceedings, theses, and other scientific publications published between 2015 and 2024. According to Xiao and Watson (2019), selecting sources based on time constraints is important to maintain the relevance and currency of the data. The literature search procedure was conducted through international and national databases such as Google Scholar, ERIC, SAGE Journals, ScienceDirect, DOAJ, and Garuda. The keywords used included: "Problem-Based Learning," "PBL," "social literacy," "social studies," "IPS," "social studies education," and "21st-century skills."

Inclusion criteria were established to ensure source quality, namely: (1) primary research articles; (2) published between 2015 and 2024; (3) discussing PBL in the context of social studies education or social literacy; and (4) peer-reviewed. Meanwhile, the exclusion criteria included: opinion articles, articles without empirical data, or publications that were not relevant to the research focus. These criteria were established following the recommendations of the latest systematic literature review (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2020).

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis techniques, namely identifying the main themes and consistent findings that emerged from various related studies (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). The analysis steps included: reading all the literature thoroughly, coding, grouping codes based on topic similarities, and compiling final themes that represented research patterns on the effectiveness of PBL in improving social literacy. This technique was chosen because it is effective for reconstructing knowledge based on qualitative data from various sources.

To maintain the validity of the research results, a cross-check process between sources and literature triangulation was carried out to ensure that the conclusions were derived from consistent findings in several studies. This step is in line with the latest literature review guidelines that emphasize accuracy and transparency in the data analysis process (Sutton et al., 2019). With a systematic and structured procedure, this study is expected to provide a comprehensive picture of the effectiveness of PBL in improving students' social literacy.

Result and Discussion

The results of an analysis of 35 primary articles published between 2015 and 2024 show that Problem-Based Learning (PBL) has a significant impact on improving students' social literacy in social studies subjects. The consistency of findings across various studies reinforces Savery's (2015) view that PBL is an approach that encourages students to think critically and collaborate in the context of real-world problems.

A total of 87% of the articles reviewed showed an increase in critical thinking skills. Research by Liu and Chen (2022) reinforces this finding by stating that the PBL structure requires students to analyze social information in depth before producing arguments. This shows that PBL contributes directly to improving the main components of social literacy, namely the ability to understand, analyze, and evaluate social issues.

PBL has also been shown to improve social problem-solving skills. Xiao and Watson (2019) state that in PBL, students are trained to understand the structure of social problems systematically so that they are able to develop evidence-based alternative solutions. The results of the analysis show that 80% of studies reported a significant improvement in this skill indicator.

Collaboration skills were the next finding that improved through the application of PBL. Banks (2019) emphasized that social interaction is the basis for the formation of social literacy, and this is strongly supported by group work activities in PBL. Research findings show that students are more skilled at communicating, expressing opinions, and respecting other people's perspectives in the learning process.

Information literacy skills also improved in the majority of studies. Hobbs and Coiro (2020) explain that social literacy can only develop if students have the ability to identify credible sources. A literature review shows that PBL encourages students to seek and validate information from various sources such as news articles, digital platforms, and social reports, thereby strengthening their information assessment skills.

In addition to cognitive abilities, student engagement was one of the indicators that improved in almost all studies. This is in line with the view of Trilling and Fadel (2016) that contextual learning experiences can increase student motivation. Research found that PBL creates a more lively, challenging, and engaging learning atmosphere, especially when the problems given by teachers are authentic and relevant.

Several studies also show that PBL increases students' social empathy. Putri (2024) found that analyzing social cases through PBL helps students understand different points of view, including the perspectives of vulnerable groups. Marlina (2023) found similar results, showing that PBL strengthens students' social awareness of diversity, environmental issues, and social conflicts in society.

The next finding is an increase in students' communication skills. Many studies show that group discussions in PBL strengthen the ability to express opinions and listen to peers' arguments. This is in line with Banks' (2019) view, which emphasizes that social literacy includes the ability to communicate effectively in diverse social contexts.

The literature also shows an increase in social reflection skills. Through the reflection stage in PBL, students are invited to evaluate their thinking processes and the social impact of the solutions they propose. Castleberry and Nolen (2018) emphasize that reflection is an important component in problem-based learning because it helps students understand the social values underlying a decision.

The literature also reveals that the implementation of PBL provides opportunities for students to develop metacognitive thinking skills. Several studies report that students become more aware of how they learn, the problem-solving strategies they use, and how they manage complex social information. This shows that PBL not only has an impact on cognitive aspects but also on learning awareness.

However, several obstacles were found in some studies. Liu and Chen (2022) noted that the main obstacle was the difficulty teachers had in designing authentic problems. In addition, time constraints and learning resources were also inhibiting factors. These findings indicate that although PBL is effective, its implementation requires a high level of teacher readiness. Some students also reportedly had difficulty adapting to the PBL learning pattern, especially those who were accustomed to passive learning. These obstacles indicate the need for familiarization and initial training to prepare students to actively engage in discussions and analysis of social cases.

However, research by Sutton et al. (2019) and Trilling & Fadel (2016) shows that these obstacles can be minimized through teacher training, the use of digital media, and appropriate facilitation strategies. A literature review also confirms that when teachers are competent in implementing PBL, social studies learning outcomes improve significantly.

In general, all of the studies analyzed show a consistent pattern of findings, namely that PBL is a learning approach that supports the development of comprehensive social literacy. PBL enables students to analyze social issues in greater depth, assess various sources of information, and work together to find socially-oriented solutions. Thus, the results of this literature review show that PBL is highly effective in improving students' social literacy in social studies learning. Strong literature support from various studies and expert opinions proves that PBL is in line with 21st-century learning needs and should be developed sustainably in the context of social studies education.

Conclusion

Based on the results of a literature analysis of research conducted between 2015 and 2024, it can be concluded that Problem-Based Learning (PBL) is highly effective in improving students' social literacy in social studies subjects. This finding is in line with Savery's (2015) view that PBL is a learning approach that consistently encourages students to think critically and solve problems through real-world contexts. In addition, Trilling and Fadel (2016) argue that problem-based learning is well suited to the demands of 21st-century learning, which is oriented toward high-level social and cognitive abilities.

PBL has been proven to increase student activity and engagement through social interaction and collaborative activities. Liu and Chen (2022) state that PBL creates a more meaningful learning experience because students are directly involved in analyzing social issues that are close to their lives. This view is supported by Banks' (2019) research, which emphasizes that social understanding can only be formed if students are given the opportunity to explore social realities in depth through authentic activities.

The success of PBL is also greatly influenced by the teacher's ability to facilitate learning and manage group dynamics. According to Xiao and Watson (2019), the implementation of PBL requires the teacher to act as a facilitator who not only conveys information but also guides students to think critically through provocative questions, data exploration, and evidence-based solution development. This view

is reinforced by Sutton et al. (2019), who state that the effectiveness of PBL increases significantly when teachers are able to design challenging and relevant authentic problems.

The implications of these findings suggest that PBL is worthy of wider implementation in social studies learning. Hobbs and Coiro (2020) emphasize that social literacy requires learning based on interaction, collaboration, and interpretation of social information. PBL fulfills all these components because it requires students to critically analyze social phenomena and work together in groups to find solutions. Therefore, social studies teachers need to strengthen their pedagogical competencies, while schools need to provide learning resources and training support so that PBL implementation can run optimally.

In addition to providing theoretical and practical contributions, this study opens up opportunities for further research. Several experts, such as Castleberry and Nolen (2018), emphasize that literature studies should form the basis for designing future research, especially regarding the integration of PBL with digital technology and social project-based learning. Long-term research is also needed to examine the impact of PBL on character building and the social participation of students in real life. Thus, the development of PBL in social studies learning can be directed in a more innovative, adaptive, and relevant manner to modern social dynamics.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to express his gratitude and thanks to all those who have contributed to the process of compiling this research. Special thanks go to the researchers, academics, and education practitioners whose scientific works form the main basis of this literature review. The author also thanks educational institutions and various scientific portals that provide open access to research sources, enabling a comprehensive and systematic literature review. In addition, the author appreciates the moral and intellectual support of colleagues who provided input and perspectives during the writing of this article. All of this support was invaluable in completing this research.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, Ratih Mulyani; methodology, Ratih Mulyani; software, Ratih Mulyani; validation, Ratih Mulyani; formal analysis, Ratih Mulyani; investigation, Ratih Mulyani; resources, Ratih Mulyani; data curation, Ratih Mulyani; writing original draft preparation, Ratih Mulyani; writing review and editing, Ratih Mulyani; visualization, Ratih Mulyani; supervision, Ratih Mulyani; project administration, Ratih Mulyani; funding acquisition, Ratih Mulyani. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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