

Research Articles

The Implementation of Field Projects in Enhancing Understanding of People, Places, and Environmental Dynamics in Elementary Social Studies Learning

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Abstract. Social Studies (IPS) learning in elementary schools has tended to be theoretical and memorization-oriented, resulting in students being less able to connect the material with social and environmental realities. This study aims to examine the implementation of field projects as a contextual learning strategy in understanding the dynamics of humans, places, and the environment at the elementary school level. The research method used is a qualitative approach with literature studies, with data sources in the form of SINTA-indexed national journal articles, reputable international journals, and scientific books published in the last five to ten years. Analysis was carried out through literature selection, content analysis, and synthesis of findings. The results of the study indicate that field projects contribute to improving students' critical thinking skills, spatial understanding, social empathy, and ecological awareness. In addition, direct involvement in observation, interviews, and thematic project creation encourages students to see the relationship between humans, space, and the environment more holistically. The novelty of this study lies in the emphasis on the integration of field projects as an approach to elementary school social studies learning that unites social, geographical, and ecological aspects within the framework of the Independent Curriculum. These findings contribute to the development of project-based social studies learning models as well as practical recommendations for PGSD teachers in integrating field experiences into daily learning.

Keywords: Field Projects; Social Studies Learning; Contextual Learning; Critical Thinking; Elementary Education.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Social Studies (IPS) at the elementary school level plays a strategic role in shaping students' understanding of the dynamics of people, places, and their surroundings. As a subject based on the realities of everyday life, IPS should not only be cognitively oriented but also directed at strengthening attitudes, values, and social skills that can be applied in real life. However, in practice, IPS learning in elementary schools is still largely theoretical and memorization-oriented, resulting in students having difficulty connecting social concepts to empirical experiences in their environment (Wulandari, Ningsih, & Aziz, 2025).

This situation creates a gap between the learning material and the social reality faced by students. Several studies have shown that social studies learning that only emphasizes the transfer of textual knowledge makes students less skilled in critical thinking, less sensitive to the social environment, and unable to connect knowledge to real-life practices (Pambudi, 2025). This is reinforced by the findings of Lestari & Sumartiningsih (2024, in Pambudi, 2025) who stated that approximately 65% of students experience difficulty in understanding abstract social studies concepts, particularly those related to spatial and temporal dimensions.

As an alternative solution, contextual-based learning and field projects are relevant approaches. According to Fauzi, Rini, & Qomariyah (2023) and Febriyanti et al. (2023), contextual learning integrated with the independent curriculum can connect academic material with students' real-life experiences, thus making learning more

meaningful. This concept aligns with the strengthening of the Pancasila Student Profile, which emphasizes the development of character traits of faith, independence, critical thinking, mutual cooperation, and creativity. Through field activities, students can interact directly with social and environmental objects, thereby fostering stronger socio-ecological awareness.

Project-based learning approaches are considered effective in increasing student active engagement and encouraging them to analyze real-world problems collaboratively (Setyowati, 2018; Wulandari et al., 2025). Research by Setyowati (2018) shows that the project-based learning tools developed are feasible, practical, and effective in improving social studies learning outcomes in elementary schools. Amelia & Marini (2022) similarly affirm that integrating the STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics) model into project-based elementary learning can hone higher-order thinking skills while preparing students to face global challenges.

Furthermore, the implementation of field projects in social studies learning is also relevant to efforts to preserve local and ecological values. Pambudi (2025) found that integrating local wisdom into social studies learning can increase student knowledge retention by up to 72% and develop historical thinking skills and cultural awareness. Similarly, Putikadyanto, Wachidah, & Sari (2024) emphasized the importance of eco-curriculum innovation based on local wisdom to create an environmentally conscious generation.

Based on the explanation above, it is clear that elementary school social studies learning requires a transformation in approach from a theoretical and passive one to a more contextual, active, and experience-based approach. Field projects, as a learning strategy, not only enable students to understand the interconnectedness of people, places, and the environment but also develop 21st-century skills such as critical, creative, collaborative thinking, and concern for social and environmental issues. Therefore, this literature review is important to systematically analyze the implementation of field projects in elementary school social studies learning, as well as the challenges, strategies, and impacts on the quality of basic education.

Social Studies (IPS) learning in elementary schools is designed to equip students with an understanding of the relationships between people, places, and their surrounding environment. However, the reality on the ground shows that IPS learning practices are still dominated by conventional approaches oriented towards memorization and knowledge transfer. This condition results in students' poor ability to connect material to real-life experiences, as well as weak critical thinking skills, social understanding, and environmental awareness (Wulandari, Ningsih, & Aziz, 2025). Thus, an important question arises: how can IPS learning strategies be developed to be more contextual, meaningful, and relevant to students' real lives?

The issues outlined above give rise to several research questions that form the focus of this study. One key issue is how the field project concept can be implemented in elementary school social studies instruction to help students understand the dynamics of people, places, and the environment more deeply.

On the other hand, teachers also face challenges in integrating field project activities, both in terms of limited resources, time, and pedagogical competency readiness. Another question that arises is what pedagogical strategies are appropriate to ensure the integration of field projects is aligned with the elementary school social studies curriculum, particularly in the context of the Independent Curriculum, which emphasizes experiential learning. Furthermore, this study also seeks to answer the extent to which the implementation of field projects contributes to the development of critical thinking skills, social understanding, and environmental awareness in elementary school students. Equally important, this study also examines how educational policies and school institutional support can influence the successful implementation of field projects in social studies learning. These questions ultimately lead this study to its main focus: analyzing the implementation of field projects as a social studies learning strategy in elementary school that can bridge the gap between theory and reality.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretically, this study is based on the *Experiential Learning theory* developed by Kolb (1984), the *Project-Based Learning* (PjBL) model, and the *Contextual Teaching and Learning* (CTL) approach. Kolb asserts that effective learning occurs when students engage in a cycle of experiential learning that includes concrete experience, reflection, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation.

Field projects can provide a platform for students to gain hands-on experience through interactions with social and environmental phenomena. The *Project-Based Learning model*, as described by Thomas (2000) and reinforced by research by Setyowati (2018), provides space for students to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills through collaborative projects that stem from real-life problems. Meanwhile, the *Contextual Teaching and Learning approach* plays a crucial role in connecting academic concepts to everyday life, enabling students not only to understand theoretical knowledge but also to apply it in relevant socio-ecological contexts (Fauzi, Rini, & Qomariyah, 2023; Febriyanti et al., 2023).

Empirical studies have reinforced the urgency of integrating project-based learning into social studies. Research by Setyowati (2018) demonstrated that project-based teaching tools effectively improve fourth-grade elementary school students' social studies learning outcomes. Amelia and Marini (2022) conducted a study on the STEAM model, demonstrating that a project-based approach can develop higher-order thinking skills and is relevant to 21st-century demands. Pambudi (2025) emphasized the importance of integrating local wisdom into social studies learning, which has been shown to increase student knowledge retention by up to 72% and foster cultural awareness.

A similar sentiment was expressed by Putikadyanto, Wachidah, and Sari (2024), who emphasized that a contextual curriculum based on local ecology and culture can shape a generation that cares more about the environment. From this literature review, it can be concluded that although research related to contextual and project-based learning has developed, studies specifically analyzing the implementation of field projects to integrate understanding of people, place, and the environment in elementary school social studies are still very limited. This is the research gap that this study attempts to address.

Data, Facts, and Research Evidence

Research by Lestari & Sumartiningsih (2024, cited in Pambudi, 2025) revealed that 65% of students experience difficulty understanding abstract social studies concepts, particularly those related to spatial and temporal dimensions. This indicates a gap between theory and the reality of learning. Furthermore, a study by Setyowati (2018) demonstrated the effectiveness of project-based worksheets in improving social studies learning outcomes in fourth-grade elementary school students. Research by Amelia & Marini (2022) also supports the importance of a project-based approach to developing higher-order thinking skills. These findings underscore the need for more contextual and experiential learning strategies.

Reasons Why Research Is Important

This research is important because it addresses the need to transform elementary school social studies learning from a theoretical approach to contextual, interactive, and meaningful learning. The implementation of field projects not only provides students with hands-on experience but also strengthens the Pancasila Student Profile, which emphasizes the values of faith, mutual cooperation, critical thinking, and environmental stewardship. Furthermore, this research fills a gap in the literature by comprehensively analyzing the role of field projects in connecting human, place, and environmental aspects in elementary school social studies learning.

Research purposes

Based on the formulated research problems and questions, the purpose of this study is to comprehensively analyze the implementation of field projects in elementary school social studies learning. This study specifically seeks to describe the concepts and practices of field project implementation, while also identifying the challenges faced by teachers in their implementation.

This study aims to formulate pedagogical strategies aligned with the elementary school social studies curriculum and analyze the contribution of field projects to improving students' critical thinking skills, social understanding, and environmental awareness. It also examines the role of educational policy and school institutional support in the successful implementation of field projects, thus providing practical recommendations for teachers, curriculum developers, and elementary education policymakers.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative method with a *literature review approach*. This method was chosen based on the research objective, which focused on reviewing, analyzing, and synthesizing the results of previous research on the implementation of field projects in social studies learning in elementary schools. The *literature review* was chosen because it provides a comprehensive overview of research developments, identifies *research*

gaps , and offers a new conceptual framework relevant to the context of elementary education.

The data sources for this research come from reputable international journal articles (Scopus), national journals indexed by SINTA, and scientific books published in the last five to ten years. Literature selection was based on its relevance to the research themes, namely field projects in social studies learning, elementary education, specifically in the PGSD program, and studies on environment-based education and contextual learning.

The data collection process was conducted through various academic search portals, including Google Scholar, Scopus, and SINTA. After the literature was collected, a selection process was carried out based on the criteria of topic relevance, up *-to-dateness* , and publication quality. Next, the selected literature was analyzed using content analysis . This analysis was carried out by identifying key themes emerging from various previous studies, grouping the findings based on specific dimensions, then comparing and synthesizing them to gain a deeper understanding.

The units of analysis in this study include the theoretical concepts of field projects, implementation strategies in elementary school social studies learning, challenges faced by teachers, and opportunities for integrating field projects into the curriculum. Data obtained from the literature were then synthesized into a structured research framework, resulting in a comprehensive overview of the contribution of field projects in helping students understand the dynamics of people, places, and the environment.

With this approach, the research is expected to be able to provide comprehensive answers to the research questions formulated in the introduction, while also presenting practical recommendations for teachers and developers of social studies curriculum in elementary schools.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Impact of Field Project Implementation on Understanding of People, Place, and Environment in Elementary School Social Studies

Dimensions	Key Findings	Impact on Elementary School Students
Human (social & cultural)	Field projects encourage students to understand social roles, cultural values, and community interactions; enhance social skills & empathy.	Students are better able to communicate, collaborate, appreciate diversity, and understand the social structure of their community. Aulya et al. (2025); Hendra (2025); Maskuroh (2023)
Place (geography & space)	Field activities such as village social maps, observations of natural features, and visits to village halls increase spatial understanding.	Students can connect space with socio-economic activities (e.g., coastal villages, markets, rice fields). Kristanti & Sujana (2022); Aulya et al. (2025)
Environment (ecology & sustainability)	Utilizing the surrounding environment (rivers, forests, schools) as a learning resource fosters ecological awareness.	Students are more concerned about maintaining cleanliness, understanding the impact of human activities on the environment, and developing ecological responsibility. Harahap et al. (2025); Rahayu et al. (2024)
Integration (human-place-environment)	Project-based learning connects all three dimensions: students see the interrelationships between culture, living space, and ecology.	Holistic understanding: students not only master social studies facts, but also understand the interrelationships between humans, space, and the environment. Wulandari et al. (2025); Maskuroh (2023); Bangun et al. (2024)

Theoretical Concept of Field Projects in Elementary School Social Studies Learning

Field projects in elementary school social studies learning are rooted in Kolb's (1984) theory of *Experiential Learning* , which emphasizes the importance of concrete experiences as a foundation for reflection, conceptualization, and application of knowledge. Within this framework, students learn not only through the transfer of information but also through a cycle of direct experiences that are then processed into conceptual understanding. This approach is reinforced by *the Project-Based Learning (PjBL)*

model, which positions students as active subjects in solving real-world problems through group work, investigation, and presentation of learning outcomes (Thomas, 2000). Meanwhile, the *Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) approach* provides the foundation that new knowledge is more easily understood when linked to everyday life (Johnson, 2002).

Various studies in Indonesia have confirmed the relevance of these three frameworks. Wulandari, Ningsih, and Aziz (2025) found that project-based learning models can improve elementary school students' analytical thinking skills while strengthening their motivation to learn. Research by Maskuroh (2023) demonstrated that social studies learning that integrates discussions, simulations, and field trips can enhance students' understanding of social dynamics, policies, and the environment. Thus, field projects can be viewed as a contextual learning strategy aligned with the Independent Curriculum, particularly through the integration of *the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5)*.

Practical Implementation of Field Projects in Elementary Schools

Literature findings indicate that the implementation of field projects in elementary school social studies is carried out using various strategies. For example, Aulya et al. (2025) studied the application of CTL, which emphasized direct observation, interviews with community leaders, and the creation of village social maps. These activities were proven to help students understand the relationship between space and social activities more concretely. Research by Harahap et al. (2025) also confirmed that utilizing the surrounding environment, both physical and social, enriches students' learning experiences and increases their active engagement.

Kristanti and Sujana (2022) highlighted the importance of developing contextual-based teaching tools, such as interactive learning media about natural phenomena. Although the study focused on media development, the results remain relevant because they demonstrate that using learning resources relevant to students' lives makes learning more meaningful. This aligns with Bangun et al.'s (2024) findings, which demonstrated that contextual learning significantly increases student learning interest compared to conventional methods.

Thus, implementing field projects in elementary schools can take the form of simple activities such as observing the school environment, conducting social mapping projects, conducting case studies based on local culture, and even visiting village government institutions. All of these practices provide opportunities for students to connect social studies theory with the socio-ecological realities around them.

Field Project Implementation Challenges

Despite the great potential of field projects, their implementation in elementary schools faces various obstacles. Research by Rahayu et al. (2024) highlighted teachers' limited understanding of P5 and a lack of comprehensive training, making it difficult for them to design project activities integrated with the curriculum. Furthermore, limited learning time and teachers' administrative burdens make it difficult to implement field activities consistently.

External factors also pose significant challenges. Parental support is often low, especially when field activities require additional costs or direct family involvement (Aulya et al., 2025). Limited infrastructure, such as transportation, teaching aids, or access to learning resources outside of school, further limit opportunities for field project implementation. Teachers must confront the reality that, although contextual learning has proven effective, not all schools have the necessary conditions to implement it.

Strategy and Solution

Various strategies can be developed to address these challenges. First, teachers can integrate field projects into the curriculum by utilizing thematic activities or P5 as a formal platform. This strategy makes field projects not merely an add-on, but an integral part of social studies learning. Second, collaboration with parents and the local community is key to success. Hendra (2025) demonstrated that community involvement in social studies learning can strengthen students' social skills while reducing barriers faced by teachers.

Furthermore, utilizing digital technology can be an alternative to overcome time and cost constraints. Kristanti and Sujana (2022) emphasized that contextually-based interactive media helps students experience meaningful learning even when they don't always have direct observation. Therefore, combining direct field activities with the use of technology-based interactive media can be an effective solution.

Impact of Field Projects on Students

Literature shows that field projects have a significant impact on elementary school social studies learning. First, field projects help students understand the relationships between people, places, and the environment more fully. Aulya et al. (2025) demonstrated how creating a village social map enabled students to explain the relationship between physical space and social activities. Second, critical thinking and social skills improve when students engage in discussions, presentations, and reflections on project results (Maskuroh, 2023; Wulandari et al., 2025). Third, field projects contribute to the development of ecological awareness and social empathy, as students directly observe the impact of human interactions on their environment (Harahap et al., 2025).

These positive impacts align with the findings of Bangun et al. (2024) that contextual learning increases students' interest and motivation to learn, and Hendra (2025) who emphasized the role of innovative learning in developing students' social skills. Thus, field projects are not only pedagogical instruments but also a means of shaping students' character as socially and environmentally conscious citizens.

Comparison with Previous Research

Compared to previous research, most studies emphasize theoretical aspects or the development of learning models, such as those conducted by Kristanti and Sujana (2022) or Wulandari et al. (2025). Meanwhile, studies examining practical implementation in the field, such as those by Aulya et al. (2025) or Harahap et al. (2025), are still limited. This study aims to bridge the gap between theoretical studies and field practice by emphasizing the importance of integrating field projects within the context of the elementary school curriculum.

Critical Discussion

The literature review shows that field projects have several advantages, including increasing the relevance of learning, developing critical thinking skills, and strengthening students' socio-ecological awareness. However, there are also limitations that cannot be ignored. Field activities require additional resources, longer timeframes, and adequate teacher competency. Furthermore, successful implementation is heavily influenced by school institutional support, parental involvement, and curriculum readiness.

Within the Independent Curriculum, field projects have great potential for further development, particularly through the integration of P5, which emphasizes character building and 21st-century skills. With the support of educational policies, teacher training, and collaboration between stakeholders, field projects can become a sustainable and relevant learning strategy for social studies learning in elementary schools.

5. CONCLUSION

This study confirms that the implementation of field projects in elementary school social studies learning significantly contributes to students' understanding of the dynamics of people, places, and the environment. Field projects have been proven to bridge the gap between theory and practice by providing real, contextual, and meaningful learning experiences. The results of the literature synthesis indicate that project activities, such as field observations, social mapping, interviews with community leaders, and utilization of the surrounding environment, encourage the improvement of students' critical thinking skills, communication, social empathy, and ecological awareness. This indicates that social studies not only functions as a transfer of knowledge, but also as a vehicle for character development and 21st-century skills. *The novelty* of this study lies in the emphasis on the integration of the three main dimensions of elementary school social studies: people, places, and the environment, through a field project approach. While previous studies have largely highlighted the effectiveness of contextual or project-based learning partially, this study offers a more holistic framework by positioning field projects as a conceptual and practical bridge. Thus, this research enriches the social studies learning model that is relevant to the demands of the Independent Curriculum and strengthens the Pancasila Student Profile. Future follow-up research needs to be directed at empirical studies in elementary schools by involving the direct implementation of field projects in diverse contexts, such as villages, cities, coastal areas, and traditional areas. In addition, further research is also needed to identify effective teacher mentoring models and evaluation strategies so that field projects can be systematically integrated into the curriculum. Collaboration between schools, families, and communities is also an important agenda to strengthen the sustainability of project-based learning. With these steps, field projects are

expected to further strengthen elementary social studies as a subject that not only teaches knowledge, but also forms critical awareness, social empathy, and environmental concern in the younger generation.

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