

LEVERAGING THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT AS A LEARNING MEDIUM TO CULTIVATE STUDENTS SOCIAL AWARENESS

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to describe social studies learning strategies based on Project-Based Learning utilizing the school's surrounding environment to foster students' social awareness. This study employed a qualitative case study design at SMPN 1 Wajak, involving the vice principal of curriculum, social studies teachers, the eight grade students from Class VIII G as informants. Data were collected through observations, interviews, and documentation, and analyzed using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña interactive model. The results indicate that the use of the surrounding environment is not limited to observational activities, but is systematically integrated into three stages of learning (preparation, implementation, and follow-up), creating a contextual learning experience. This integration fosters students' social care character, as reflected in their active participation in school-based social activities, such as distributing aid, their ability to build social interactions through interviews with community members, and the development of empathy toward social conditions in their environment. This process demonstrates that social care character develops through the integration of direct experience, reflective processes, and students' social participation in real-life contexts. The novelty of this study lies in emphasizing that environment-based learning through Project-Based Learning not only provides contextual experiences but also shapes character through a structured experiential pattern. These findings further reinforce the relevance of social constructivism proposed by Lev Vygotsky in social studies learning, particularly in explaining the formation of students' social care character through interaction and direct experience.

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INTRODUCTION

The environment is an integral part of students' lives and also holds the potentials to serve as a contextual learning resource. In the learning process, the environment functions not only as a backdrop but also as a medium enabling students to interact directly with social phenomena. Utilizing the environment as a learning medium can

enhance conceptual understanding while fostering a more meaningful learning experience compared to abstract learning (Latif Nawawi et al., 2024).

In an educational context, learning media are no longer limited to textbooks or conventional teaching materials but encompass experiences, social interactions, and students' surrounding environment. This approach aligns with the constructivist theory, emphasizing that knowledge is constructed through direct experience and active student engagement (Hasibuan et al., 2025). Thus, leveraging the school's surrounding environment is imperative for creating learning that is not only outcome-oriented but also process-oriented (Hasiana et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, the instruction of Social Studies (IPS) within educational institutions continues to exhibit a predominance of theoretical and teacher-centered methodologies. Students predominantly receive information without being afforded the opportunity to engage directly with the social phenomena under examination (Lubis et al., 2023). This pedagogical approach results in a reduction of meaningful learning experiences, subsequently leading to diminished student engagement and hindering the comprehensive development of critical thinking skills as well as social awareness (Apriastuti & Utomo, 2023).

Moreover, the values of social concern embedded within the instruction have yet to be thoroughly internalized. This lack of integration is inconsistent with the expectations set forth by the Merdeka Curriculum, underscoring the significance of character development through the Pancasila Student Profile, especially in relation to social concern. The disconnection between educational materials and real-world contexts inhibits students from effectively cultivating empathy and a sense of social responsibility in their daily lives (Nawawi et al., 2024).

An effective approach to mitigating this issue involves leveraging the school's surrounding environment through the Project-Based Learning (PjBL) model to enhance students' social awareness. This educational framework affords students the opportunity to actively engage in addressing real-world challenges within their community (Deva & Putri, 2022). Through the participation in project-based activities, students not only attain cognitive understanding of concepts but also cultivate their critical thinking skills, collaborative activities, and heightened social awareness.

However, the implementation of environment-based learning through PjBL encounters several challenges in practice. Key limitations include inadequate facilities and infrastructure, varying levels of preparedness among teachers to design contextually relevant learning experiences, and suboptimal utilization of the surrounding environment as an educational resource. This situation suggests that the integration of the environment as a medium for learning has not yet been thoroughly established within social studies instructional practices. On the other hand, the school's surrounding environment possesses considerable potential as a valuable resource for enhancing the quality of educational experiences.

A considerable body of research has previously investigated the use of the environment as a medium for learning, alongside the application of the Project-Based Learning model in educational contexts. Nonetheless, the existing literature predominantly concentrates on the overarching implementation of this model or the enhancement of students' cognitive learning outcomes, while failing to thoroughly investigate the strategies employed by teachers to incorporate the surrounding environment of the school as a contextual medium for learning. Additionally, the character traits explored have largely focused on aspects such as discipline and responsibility, with limited emphasis on fostering socially conscious character through experiential learning opportunities in the environment. Thus, the primary focus of this research innovation centers on the strategies utilized by social studies teachers in leveraging the school's surrounding environment through a Project-Based Learning framework, aiming to cultivate students' socially conscious character.

METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative approach, employing a descriptive research design focused on gathering and analyzing data derived from the experiences and perspectives of participants in the field. The purpose of this approach was to provide an in-depth account of the process by which the surrounding environment of the school is utilized as a medium for social studies learning through the Project-Based Learning (PjBL) model, with particular emphasis on students' interactions with their social environment.

The research was conducted at SMPN 1 Wajak, involving subjects that included the vice principal of curriculum, social studies teachers, and eighth-grade students from Class VIII G, who were purposefully selected based on their engagement in environment-oriented learning initiatives. Data collection methods incorporated observation, interviews, and documentation. Observational activities allowed for direct scrutiny of the learning processes and student engagements, while interviews were utilized to extract in-depth insights from informants, and documentation served to provide supplementary data. The validity of the data was ensured through a triangulation process involving multiple sources and techniques. Furthermore, data analysis was conducted following the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña model, progressing through stages of data condensation, presentation, and iterative conclusion drawing until consistent findings were achieved (Fajri et al., 2025).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

SMPN 1 Wajak is situated in a locale abundant with local potentials, including rice fields, vibrant market activities, and accessible tourist attractions. The exploitation of the surrounding environment as a medium for social studies instruction at SMPN 1 Wajak is conducted through the integration of the physical environment and the social dynamics of the community into a structured framework of project-based learning stages. This pedagogical approach emphasizes that the environment surrounding the school, when systematically organized, can serve as a contextual and dynamic medium for student learning (Agustina et al., 2025).

The findings revealed that the employed social studies learning strategies effectively demonstrate a synergy between the utilization of the environment as a learning medium and the Project-Based Learning (PjBL) model. This intergration encourages active student participation in the educational process. Moreover, support from the school environment facilitated by the Adiwiyata program further enhances the implementation of environment-based learning, allowing students to engage directly with the social phenomena present in their immediate surroundings. This scenario illustrates that learning transcends mere theoretical understanding, evolving toward a more pertinent and contextual educational experience. This aligns with contextual learning theory, underscoring the significance of connecting learning materials with students' real-life experiences encountered in their daily lives.

Physical Environment

The physical environment represents a pivotal component of the educational landscape, encompassing tangible elements within students' surroundings that can be effectively utilized as instructional media. This pedagogical strategy emphasizes the integration of local features such as rice fields, markets, and tourist attractions. The focus on social studies for Class VIII G not only serves as an auxiliary learning medium but also constitutes a vital aspect of the contextual learning strategy cultivated by the teacher. This process exemplifies a systematic endeavor to relate the content of Social Studies to the social and ecological contexts that students inhabit, thus ensuring that learning transcends the realm of abstraction (Ali & Julaihah, 2023).

Furthermore, this application of the physical environment illustrates the deliberate employment of a pedagogical strategy structured methodically. Such an approach adheres to the principles of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL), underscoring the significance of the relationship between educational materials and the lived experiences of students (Ramadhan, 2024). Insights gathered from interviews with the teacher indicated that correlating content with real-world contexts substantially enhances student engagement and educational outcomes within the sphere of social studies at the junior high school level. The contextual approach does not merely regard the environment as a passive backdrop for learning; rather, it positions it as a vital source of knowledge empowering students to actively construct understanding through direct experiential engagement (Amelia & Rusman, 2022).

Implementation at the physical environment level is exemplified by the transition from a teacher-centered pedagogical model to a student-centered one. Observations conducted by the researchers revealed that the integration of the physical environment in social studies education becomes apparent when students engage in direct observation. For example, in a rice field context, students can witness the activities of farmers and discern the relationships between

geographical conditions and the community's economic pursuits. Similarly, in market settings, students can observe the processes of buying and selling, social interactions among vendors and consumers, and the dynamics of the local economy. At tourist attractions, they assess the environment's potential as an economic resource, while also considering the associated social impacts.

Through these activities, students are transformed from passive recipients of information to active participants in their learning, constructing knowledge through systematic observation, documentation, and analysis of real-world phenomena (Yuliani et al., 2023). This experiential process aligns conceptually with the theory of experiential learning, emphasizing that direct experience serves as the essential foundation for the development of meaningful knowledge (Pangastutik & Effendi, 2022).

The Social Environment of the Community

The strategy for integrating the community's social environment into social studies instruction is executed through observation and direct interviews with local residents. This approach broadens the students' learning experience beyond the confines of the classroom, engaging them in real-world social contexts and rendering learning more relevant and substantive rather than solely theoretical (Afrilyanti & Sujarwo, 2024). The current context illustrates that the community functions not merely as an entity of observation but as an educational medium influencing contextual experiences. This is in accordance with the principles of social constructivism, emphasizing that knowledge is constructed through social interaction and experiential engagement (Rika Aprilia Sari et al., 2023).

Research indicates that the implementation of a learning approach rooted in the social environment is enhanced by the school's role in facilitating more contextualized learning experiences. The vice principal of curriculum is instrumental in offering guidance and support to teachers through internal school forums, ensuring that learning transcends theoretical boundaries. At this stage, social studies teachers are assigned with capitalizing on the resources available in their surroundings, such as rice fields, markets, and tourist

attractions, enabling students to choose relevant learning objects flexibly. This initiative is further strengthened by fostering student involvement in selecting study topics and engaging with the community. In the context of the rice field environment, students gain insights into how factors such as weather and irrigation significantly impact agricultural yields. Interactions with vendors in the market setting enhance students' self-confidence through exposure to new social interactions. Additionally, experiences in tourist attractions instill a sense of responsibility towards environmental stewardship, cleanliness, and an appreciation for the community's role in resource management.

The researchers also discovered that community responses to student engagement revealed a reciprocal interaction characteristic of environment-based learning. In rice-farming communities, for example, farmers willingly provided explanations regarding agricultural practices. Similarly, at market venues, vendors engaged with students by answering inquiries related to economic activities. Furthermore, at tourism sites, both the community members and site managers demonstrated cooperation by facilitating students' observational endeavors. This evidence indicates that the community functions not solely as a subject of study but also as an active partner in the educational process.

This implementation exemplifies a student-centered learning approach, wherein students are afforded the opportunity to select topics of inquiry and actively participate in the data-gathering process (Wahyuning Tias et al., 2026). Despite variations in students' readiness to interact with community members, the learning process necessitates the guidance of teachers to optimize the exploration experience. This highlights that direct engagement with the community not only enhances cognitive understanding but also promotes the development of students' social sensitivity (Yusnaldi et al., 2024).

Stages of Environment-Based Learning

The implementation of environment-based learning within Class VIII G was executed through three distinct phases: preparation, implementation, and follow-up, aligning with the structured PjBL framework. This approach emphasizes the creation of a systematic, interactive, and meaningful educational experience for the students. The model underscores that learning transcends mere activity; it is meticulously constructed, beginning with planning and

culminating in the assessment of student learning outcomes (Landani & Lingga, 2025).

The preparatory stage serves as the essential cornerstone of project-based learning, establishing the trajectory, objectives, and pedagogical strategies. This stage encompasses the identification of content, the values intended to be integrated, and the selection of suitable project types that facilitate the comprehension of the content and the development of values through targeted learning activities (Ichsan, 2021).

This process is consistent with the guidance provided by the vice principal of curriculum at the school, emphasizing the importance of contextual learning. Insights gathered from interviews with social studies teachers at SMPN 1 Wajak revealed that these teachers played a pivotal role in offering preliminary guidance. They organized students into groups and selected a learning theme centered on the exploitation of natural resources relevant to the local environment. This initiative took place during the initial meeting to offer students a comprehensive overview of the observations and interviews they were expected to undertake, ensuring clarity regarding their fieldwork objectives. The findings indicated that students were actively engaged in collaborative discussions aimed at identifying suitable locations and preparing relevant materials, such as interview questions. This preparatory stage illustrates the strategic function of teachers in facilitating the transition from traditional classroom instruction to experiential learning. In this paradigm, teachers transition from being the primary source of information to acting as facilitators equipping students with the cognitive and social competencies required for real-world engagement. In this context, the effectiveness of learning outcomes is influenced not merely by the field activities themselves, but significantly by the quality of initial planning that fosters students' preparedness to comprehend and engage with their learning experiences. The presence of foundational scaffolding is evident, as it aids students in grasping the sequence of activities and the learning objectives. This aligns with the principles underlying PjBL, emphasizing the establishment of structured workflows, collaboration among participants, and clarity concerning the end products to be achieved (Ernawati & Saputro, 2023).



Figure 1. Students conducting observations in the market

The implementation stage constitutes a significant learning process that prioritizes students' active involvement in project-based activities, wherein they serve as the primary agents in acquiring knowledge through direct experience, subsequently leading to the attainment of learning outcomes (Halim et al., 2023). The researchers' findings illustrated in the accompanying image depict students engaging in observations, interviews, and data collection within their local environments, including markets, rice fields, and tourist attractions. These activities validate the transition toward contextual, hands-on experiences, highlighting that students are no longer mere recipients of information, but actively participate in the comprehension of social phenomena.

During this stage, the researchers conducted observations and interviews with the curriculum coordinator, who noted that while the use of a specific learning model is not obligatory, the implementation of a PjBL model is recommended in this educational context. Such an approach is conducive to promoting active student engagement

through activities rooted in context and the surrounding environment.

These guidelines were subsequently enacted by the social studies teacher, who facilitated observations, interviews, and data collection in the surrounding locality. In light of these engagements, the teacher allowed students the autonomy to execute activities in accordance with the pre-established plan and to determine the format of the final learning product, which could take the form of a portfolio, video, or presentation.

Throughout the duration of the project, students engaged actively with the local community, systematically documented data, and analyzed their findings during collaborative group discussions. This engagement was particularly evident through interviews conducted with market vendors, discussions held with farmers in the rice fields, and dialogues with managers of tourism attractions aimed at collecting information regarding the community's social activities.

These experiences exemplify the principles of PjBL, wherein students are not passive recipients of information but rather active contributors to their own learning outcomes (Ruhmawati et al., 2024). Furthermore, the findings underscored the significance of field activities that foster students' direct participation in the data collection process, thereby enhancing their communication and collaboration skills.



Figure 2. Students presenting the results

The subsequent stage, as illustrated in Figure 2, involves the presentation of results and contemplative activities that constitute part of the evaluative learning process. In this stage, the teacher emphasizes the necessity of deriving conclusions from the outcomes of the activities undertaken. This process underscores reflection as a pivotal element of the learning experience, wherein students not only present their findings but also engage in processing the insights gained throughout the project.

This reflective activity is recognized as an essential component of experiential learning, as it enables students to transform concrete experiences into a more profound understanding (Syarif et al., 2026). This exercise connects field experiences with concepts learned in the classroom, thereby reinforcing comprehension. Students have reported that these activities enhanced their understanding of real-world conditions within their communities, particularly after engaging in direct interviews with local residents. This finding emphasizes that the follow-up stage functions not merely as an evaluation but also as a means to internalize learning experiences.

Promoting a Sense of Social Responsibility

The cultivation of a sense of social responsibility within the school environment is achieved through the implementation of structured and sustained learning strategies. Both students and teachers exemplify the application of social concern values in environment-based social studies instruction, thereby enhancing students' social awareness. According to the guidelines set forth by the Ministry of National Education, a sense of social responsibility can be assessed through various indicators, including participation in social activities, the quality of social relationships, and the demonstration of empathetic attitudes by students.



Figure 3. Students distributing the zakat

Student participation in social initiatives, such as the distribution of essential food supplies and zakat, as illustrated in Figure 3, exemplifies the internalization of social responsibility through experiential learning. These initiatives are integral to a habit-forming process actively promoted by the school, as stated by the vice principal of curriculum:

“At our institution, we really focus on social initiatives. We’re involved in distributing vital food supplies to the local community, and our students are engaged in giving zakat. It’s all about fostering a sense of compassion and generosity among everyone here.”

The execution of these initiatives is further substantiated by feedback from a social studies teacher who directly engages students in these activities. The teacher emphasized that student participation is intended to provide them with firsthand experience of the value of community engagement:

“Alongside our classroom lessons, the school really encourages students to get involved in social activities, like food distribution and sacrificial offerings. It’s a great way for them to not just learn the theories but also to really connect with the community through sharing.”

Reports from students support their active involvement in these initiatives, enabling them to gain firsthand insight into the social dynamics present in their local environment:

“Definitely! Whenever there’s something like food distribution, we’re all in. It gives us a chance to see everything firsthand and play an active role.”

The conclusion indicates that students are not merely passive recipients of information but rather active participants in social interactions. Consequently, social activities function as more than auxiliary components; they serve as effective avenues for contextual learning, fostering a sense of social responsibility among students.



Figure 4. Students conducting an interview at tourist attractions

Students’ social relationships in environment-based learning are exemplified through collaborative activities

occurring throughout the learning process. The aforementioned Figure 4 illustrates students engaging in face-to-face interviews; this specific activity not only aligns with the principles of environment-based learning but also enhances social interaction among students during group tasks. The collaborative nature of these activities promotes mutual assistance, discussion, and a respect for the perspectives of peers. The teacher observed that within group settings, students began to exhibit an increased capacity for cooperation and mutual support in completing assigned tasks. This observation is consistent with Lickona's theory, highlighting that character education is more effectively cultivated through habitual practices and modeling in real-world environments, rather than relying exclusively on verbal instruction in traditional classroom settings. Consequently, environment-based learning not only influences academic outcomes but also plays a significant role in the gradual development of students' social responsibility (Agustina et al., 2025).



Figure 5. Students conducting an interview at the rice field

Students' empathetic attitudes have begun to emerge as evidenced by the researchers' findings presented in Figure 5, illustrating empathetic behavior exhibited by students during their direct interactions with the community in field activities. Moreover, the integration of character education that encompasses community service alongside field activities has significantly bolstered students' empathy and sense of social responsibility (Faelasup & Handayani, 2025).

This assertion is supported by insights gathered from student interviews with community members, indicating that these interactions provided them with a deeper understanding of real-world social conditions and fostered a sense of awareness towards their environment. These findings underscore the importance of environment-based learning experiences in nurturing students' social sensitivity through direct experiential processes, as opposed to relying solely on traditional classroom instruction.

Challenges in Implementing Environment-Based Social Studies Instruction

The execution of environment-based social studies instruction in Class VIII G encounters several challenges that hinder its effectiveness. These challenges stem from various factors, including time constraints, the diverse characteristics of students, and the adequacy of supportive facilities as well as the coordination of activities conducted outside the classroom.

In addition, the heterogeneity of student characteristics presents a distinctive challenge in the implementation of group-based learning strategies. The teacher has observed that certain students exhibit lower levels of engagement or inconsistent participation in collaborative tasks, which adversely affects the overall efficiency of group interactions. This phenomenon suggests that variations in student motivation and discipline have a direct correlation with the quality

of the project-based learning experience. A parallel observation is reflected in student feedback, wherein some members express concerns regarding the lack of sufficient commitment from peers, contributing to suboptimal functioning of group activities.

From a project-based learning perspective, the effectiveness of collaborative work is significantly influenced by factors such as motivation, clarity of roles, and equitable participation among students. Numerous studies reveal that uneven participation, insufficient cooperation, and inadequate contributions from certain group members can diminish learning engagement. Consequently, it is imperative for teachers to provide active facilitation, appropriate grouping, and clear role definitions to promote a more balanced collaboration (Sutarto, 2023).

Conversely, limitations in facilities and infrastructure, along with the coordination of activities beyond the classroom, also represent considerable obstacles. Research findings indicate that the implementation of environment-based learning activities necessitates complex authorization and organizational processes, especially given that these activities occur outside the traditional school environment. Moreover, students are required to prepare basic devices such as smartphones for documenting their activities, underscoring that the efficacy of this learning approach is also contingent upon the students' technical preparedness.

These diverse challenges emphasize that environment-based learning constitutes a multifaceted teaching model, as it encompasses numerous variables from the perspectives of teachers, learners, and educational institutions. In the absence of effective time management, consistent student readiness, and efficient coordination, this learning approach risks devolving into a merely formal activity, failing to achieve optimal learning outcomes (Syidah & Julaihah, 2025).

Environment-based learning can be recognized as a student-centered and inquiry-driven approach necessitating a meticulously crafted implementation design (Prasetyo & Kurniawan, 2024). A systematic review of project-based learning asserts that the efficacy of this pedagogical strategy is significantly influenced by the quality of structural design, the level of facilitation support, and the consistency of implementation at both classroom and institutional levels.

Nevertheless, the challenges associated with environment-based social studies instruction highlight its considerable potential for further enhancement. Through improved planning, student mentoring, and supportive school policies, this approach could emerge as an effective means of elevating the quality of social studies instruction while more effectively fostering the social character of students.

CONCLUSION

The educational approach employed at SMPN 1 Wajak illustrates the systematic strategies adopted by social studies teachers in harnessing the surrounding environment through Project-Based Learning (PjBL). This process is executed methodically through distinct phases: preparation, implementation, and follow-up, leveraging both the physical and social contexts as pedagogical resources. Such an approach renders the learning experience more relevant and fosters active student engagement throughout the educational process. The direct participation of students in these activities also promotes the cultivation of a socially responsible character, as reflected in their demonstration of empathy, collaboration, and a heightened awareness of their environmental responsibilities. Nonetheless, several challenges persist in the implementation of this approach, including time limitations, diverse levels of student engagement, and insufficient resources and coordination for activities extending beyond the classroom context.

Therefore, there is a clear need for enhanced time management and learning strategies that effectively address the varying levels of student engagement. It is imperative that schools provide substantial support, both through the provision of appropriate facilities and the implementation of policies that foster the sustainable integration of environment-based learning.

The findings of this study are anticipated to significantly contribute to the advancement of social studies instruction, particularly through the utilization of the environment as a medium for learning aimed at enhancing students' social awareness. Additionally, this research paves the way for future inquiries into the more nuanced development of social character, as well as the potential expansion of its application across diverse educational contexts and subjects.

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