

Social Studies Teachers' Efforts to Improve Critical Thinking Skills Through the Project Based Learning (PjBL) Model in Class VIII Students at SMP Negeri 10 Semarang

 <https://doi.org/10.31004/jele.v11i1.1967>

*Maika Arifatul Hidayah, Sanita Carolina Sasea^{ab} 

¹²Social Sciences Education study program, Semarang State University, Indonesia

Corresponding Author: maikaarifa10@students.unnes.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Social studies learning in junior high school requires the development of students' critical thinking skills, but eighth-grade students of SMP Negeri 10 Semarang still show low activity and difficulty in in-depth analysis. This study aims to describe students' critical thinking skills and analyze the efforts of social studies teachers through the Project Based Learning (PjBL) model. This qualitative case study design research involved a population of social studies teachers, vice principals of curriculum, and eighth-grade students, with a purposive sample of one teacher, one vice principal, and five representative students. Instruments included semi-structured interviews, observation, and documentation; data analysis used the Miles and Huberman model with triangulation. The results showed that students' critical thinking skills were at a developing stage, encouraged by PjBL through problem identification, group discussions, and presentations, as well as teacher efforts such as visual media and limited facility management. PjBL was effective as a constructivist facilitation, although limited in generalization.

Keywords: Critical Thinking, Project Based Learning, Social Studies, Teacher Efforts

Article History:

Received 16th January 2026

Accepted 06th February 2026

Published 08th February 2026



INTRODUCTION

Social Studies (IPS) learning in Junior High Schools (SMP) is designed to develop students' social intelligence and critical thinking skills through an in-depth understanding of social, economic, political, and cultural phenomena (Somantri, 2001). IPS goes beyond simply conveying historical or geographical facts, but rather encourages active interactions that enrich individual perspectives, such as communication between KKN students and the community that forms new understandings of social reality (Kerebungu et al., 2024). Teachers act as facilitators, motivators, and innovators who create a conducive learning environment to foster active participation and student curiosity (Chan, 2022; Fatimah et al., 2024). This approach aligns with the demands of the 21st century, where critical thinking skills are key to facing rapid social change (Rosyidi, 2024; Darlis, 2022).

In practice, social studies learning ideally fosters sensitivity to contemporary issues such as social inequality and cultural dynamics through data-driven critical analysis, as demonstrated by the Scandinavian curriculum, which successfully integrates a collaborative approach to social skills (Fatimah et al., 2024). This phenomenon emphasizes the need for teachers to guide students in analyzing information from social media that influences people's behavior, so that learning becomes meaningful and contextual (Maesiyah et al., 2025; Kerebungu et al., 2024). Constructivism theory reinforces this phenomenon by positioning students as knowledge builders through active experiences (Suparno, 2019; Darlis, 2022).

However, in eighth grade at SMP Negeri 10 Semarang, students still show a lack of engagement during social studies lessons, with a strong preference for visual media such as PowerPoint presentations over monotonous lectures. This condition hinders the development of critical thinking, with students having difficulty analyzing information in depth even though social studies material demands an understanding of social interactions (Rosyidi, 2024; Chan, 2022). Previous research has highlighted the effectiveness of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in increasing motivation and creativity, but has not specifically explored its impact on critical thinking in social studies (Saputri, 2024; Fatimah et al., 2024).

The problem is further complicated by time and facility constraints, making PjBL difficult to implement consistently, while students rely on optimal classroom management for discussion and analysis (Maesiyah et al., 2025; Kerebungu et al., 2024). Furthermore, existing studies tend to overlook teachers' efforts to guide, evaluate, and integrate PjBL with constructivism to address higher-order thinking gaps in abstract social studies material (Rosyidi, 2024; Darlis, 2022). This gap creates the need for an in-depth analysis of real-life classroom dynamics in Indonesian public schools.

This study aims to describe the critical thinking skills of eighth-grade students in social studies learning and analyze the efforts of social studies teachers in improving these skills through the PjBL model at SMP Negeri 10 Semarang. The urgency lies in the urgent need to prepare students to face the challenges of the 21st century with optimal analytical skills, especially amidst the Merdeka curriculum that emphasizes active learning (Chan, 2022; Saputri, 2024). Its novelty stands out through its specific focus on the role of teachers as constructivist facilitators in PjBL for social studies, complementing previous studies limited to general motivation with an in-depth qualitative analysis of critical thinking processes and limited facility management (Rosyidi, 2024; Fatimah et al., 2024).

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design that emphasizes in-depth and interpretive descriptions of the phenomenon of social studies teachers' efforts to improve critical thinking skills through Project Based Learning (PjBL) in eighth-grade students of SMP Negeri 10 Semarang. This approach is suitable for exploring the naturalistic process of social studies learning, where truth is relative and dependent on the social context of education, as teacher-student interactions shape critical understanding of social dynamics (Sugiyono, 2023, Emzir, 2021, Qualitative methods allow for the disclosure of teachers' efforts as constructivist facilitators, in line with the demands of the Independent Curriculum for active learning (Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia, 2022; Fatimah et al., 2024). This approach also supports a holistic analysis of the teacher's role in addressing facility limitations while encouraging higher-order thinking (Creswell & Poth, 2023).

The main research instruments included semi-structured interview guidelines, observation sheets, and supporting documents such as school profiles, teacher handbooks, and documentation of the PjBL process. Data collection techniques included in-depth interviews with key informants, participant observation of social studies classroom dynamics, and document analysis for data triangulation, ensuring validity through diverse sources (Sudaryono, 2022, Sugiyono, 2023). Data analysis was conducted iteratively using the Miles and Huberman model, including data reduction (transcript codification), data presentation (themes such as student discussions and media use), and drawing conclusions through constructivist context verification (Emzir, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2023). This process was enriched with member checking to confirm findings related to students' critical thinking skills (Kerebungu et al., 2024).

The study population consisted of social studies teachers, the vice principal for curriculum, and all eighth-grade students of SMP Negeri 10 Semarang who participated in social studies learning using the PjBL model. The sample was selected purposively with the criteria of key informants (one social studies teacher as the main facilitator), supporting

informants (the vice principal for curriculum), and five students who represented a variety of characters, learning activities, and academic abilities to comprehensively capture the dynamics of critical thinking (Sugiyono, 2023; Sudaryono, 2022). This selection ensured rich and in-depth data, reflecting the diversity of responses to teacher efforts such as discussion management and visual media (Fatimah et al., 2024).

The research procedure began with a preliminary study through initial observations of social studies classes to identify the phenomenon, followed by parallel data collection: face-to-face interviews (60-90 minutes per session), observations of six PjBL meetings (noting interactions and facilities), and document collection such as student project results. Data were analyzed simultaneously with triangulation for validity, concluding with an interpretation regarding the relevance of PjBL in the Indonesian social studies context (Emzir, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2023). The entire process complied with research ethics with informed consent and informant confidentiality (Sugiyono, 2023; Sudaryono, 2022).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study involved seven informants who were intentionally and purposefully selected, resulting in rich and in-depth data. The key informant in this study was the social studies teacher, while supporting informants consisted of five students and the Deputy Head of Curriculum. The five students were selected to represent a variety of characters, academic abilities, and levels of engagement in social studies learning. The presence of several students as informants not only provided a general overview but also helped researchers understand the dynamics of critical thinking skills in various classroom situations.

Data from all informants was analyzed to comprehensively describe how students' critical thinking skills are developed in social studies learning, as well as how social studies teachers strive to improve these skills through classroom learning approaches. The data analysis, using interview transcripts, revealed the following findings:

Student Discussion

Based on analysis of interview transcripts, discussions among students during social studies lessons helped them better understand the material. Students found it easier to grasp concepts when they could exchange ideas and listen to their peers' explanations, while teachers noted that typically passive students became more vocal in small groups. However, some students reported that discussions were not always equitable due to some members being more dominant, suggesting that group management still needs to be improved to ensure all students can actively participate.

Learning model

Based on the analysis of interview transcripts, social studies learning in eighth grade is still dominated by lectures because some material, especially information-dense history, requires coherent explanations to ensure students understand the context correctly. Teachers also explained that time constraints make it difficult to implement Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in every meeting, as projects require a longer process from planning to presentation. Therefore, Project-Based Learning (PjBL) is used selectively, only on material that allows for exploration and group work.

Use of Learning Media

Based on transcript analysis, the use of instructional media is a crucial factor influencing student engagement and understanding in social studies. Students reported understanding the material more easily when teachers used PowerPoint presentations, images, illustrations of historical events, or short videos. Visual media helped them grasp the essence of abstract material, particularly on topics such as history and social change. In addition to increasing learning interest, media diversity also fostered critical thinking, as students were challenged to interpret, compare, and evaluate information from various sources.

Learning Facilities

The learning facilities available in class VIII remain a consideration in the implementation of social studies learning, particularly during project work. Students reported that the use of mobile phones is limited, so each group is only allowed to use one device, which requires the process of searching for information to be done in turns. Furthermore, there is only one projector available, but its use continues to run quite well because the schedule can be adjusted and does not cause significant obstacles for teachers or students. Informants also stated that the condition of the classroom, both in terms of size and atmosphere, does not hinder learning. Overall, the existing facilities are limited, but still able to support the implementation of learning and the completion of projects effectively.

Critical Thinking Skills of Grade VIII Students in Social Studies Learning

The critical thinking skills of eighth-grade students in social studies showed uneven development. In general, some students were able to ask questions, express opinions, and respond to peers' ideas during discussions. They appeared to be increasingly accustomed to comparing opinions, assessing the accuracy of information, and considering logical reasoning before providing answers. These activities signal the emergence of analytical and evaluative skills, core indicators of critical thinking.

The implementation of project-based learning (PjBL) also positively contributes to students' critical thinking processes. Through project completion, students are encouraged to identify relevant information, process data from various sources, and draw conclusions based on group findings. Project-based learning also facilitates students to connect social studies concepts with real-life social phenomena, thus making students' thinking patterns more reflective and contextual. In addition, group work activities and project presentations encourage students to account for their analysis results before their classmates, thus increasing their courage in expressing and defending their arguments.

However, the development of critical thinking skills is still influenced by differences in student mastery of the material and readiness to learn. Some students demonstrate very active responses in discussions and PjBL, while others still require teacher guidance to participate. As the complexity of the material increases, particularly on social themes that require in-depth reasoning, students with lower basic abilities tend to experience difficulties in developing analyses. This confirms that mastery of social studies concepts is an essential prerequisite for optimal critical thinking development.

In addition to student discussions, the learning model, learning facilities, and media used also influence the development of critical thinking skills. Active learning through discussions and PjBL can reduce the tendency to memorize and encourage student engagement in higher-order thinking. The Merdeka Curriculum implemented in schools also provides greater space for collaborative and reflective learning activities, thus supporting the creation of a classroom atmosphere conducive to the development of critical thinking.

From a constructivist perspective, the development of critical thinking skills occurs because students not only receive knowledge but also construct it through active learning experiences. Discussions, group work, and project completion provide opportunities for students to connect prior knowledge with new information, negotiate meaning through social interaction, and reflect on the results of their analyses. This process of knowledge construction is what makes activities such as PjBL and discussions relevant for fostering critical thinking. In other words, the more students engage in activities that allow them to interpret, compare, and draw conclusions from information independently and collaboratively, the stronger their critical thinking skills, which are formed in accordance with constructivist principles.

By implementing discussions and Project Based Learning (PjBL) consistently, in a focused manner, and integrated with material reinforcement, students' critical thinking skills have the potential to improve more optimally.

Social Studies Teachers' Efforts to Improve Critical Thinking Skills of Grade VIII Students

The social studies teacher's efforts to improve students' critical thinking skills are evident through the management of learning strategies aimed at encouraging active student thinking. Based on the transcript analysis, the teacher consistently prepares learning activities that focus

not only on conveying information but also on facilitating students' interpretation, analysis, and evaluation of the material. This learning plan serves as a foundation for ensuring that the learning process is not one-way but rather provides space for students to engage in higher-order thinking.

One of teachers' primary efforts is to utilize learning media as a tool to stimulate critical thinking skills. Teachers often use PowerPoint presentations, images of historical events, concept maps, and short videos to clarify abstract material. These visual media provide concrete context, enabling students to more easily understand social phenomena. Transcript analysis shows that students feel more focused and grasp the material more quickly when teachers display visualizations relevant to the topic. The use of media serves not only as a comprehension aid but also as a trigger for developing analytical skills.

When teachers show specific images or videos, students are asked to interpret them, connect the information to previous material, and draw conclusions based on the visual evidence. This activity encourages students to strengthen their critical thinking skills because they not only memorize information but also evaluate and process it independently. Learning media thus plays a crucial role in activating students' thinking processes.

Beyond media, teachers' efforts are also evident in how they manage classroom dynamics to support the development of critical thinking skills. A conducive classroom environment provides opportunities for students to actively discuss and express their opinions. Transcripts show that teachers provide equal opportunities for students to speak and encourage them to respond to each other's ideas.

This interaction pattern helps build students' courage to argue and defend their opinions with logical reasoning. Managing learning facilities is another important aspect in supporting social studies learning. Teachers regulate the use of mobile phones as information sources by imposing restrictions: each group can only use one device. This rule requires students to work together to share data collection tasks, thus increasing interaction among group members. Despite these limitations, students are still able to find the necessary information and contribute to the development of their group projects.

The use of only one projector in the classroom was also well-managed by the teacher. Despite limited facilities, the teacher was able to adjust the media usage schedule so that learning continued effectively without significant technical disruptions. Informants reported that the projector's use was quite smooth and did not cause any obstacles that hampered learning activities. Therefore, limited facilities do not pose a significant obstacle as long as the teacher is able to manage them optimally.

When linked to constructivist theory, these teachers' various efforts align with the view that effective learning occurs when students are given the opportunity to construct their knowledge through experience and interaction. The use of visual media, group work utilizing a single tool, and class discussions provide space for students to explore and interpret information independently. The teacher acts as a facilitator guiding the knowledge construction process, not as the sole source of information.

From the researcher's perspective, this phenomenon demonstrates that the successful development of students' critical thinking skills is greatly influenced by teachers' creativity in utilizing available media and facilities. Although school facilities are not entirely ideal, teachers are able to optimize their use so that learning remains effective. This demonstrates that improving critical thinking skills is not solely determined by the completeness of facilities, but rather by how teachers manage learning strategies that encourage active student engagement.

CONCLUSION

This study found that the critical thinking skills of eighth-grade students of SMP Negeri 10 Semarang in social studies learning are at a developing stage, with indicators such as the ability to ask questions, analyze information, and evaluate arguments during

discussions, although not evenly distributed due to variations in material mastery. The selective implementation of Project Based Learning (PjBL) contributes positively through the stages of problem identification, group data processing, and presentation, which is in line with constructivism theory to build active knowledge. The efforts of social studies teachers, including the use of visual media such as PowerPoint and videos, inclusive classroom interaction management, and optimization of limited facilities such as single projectors and device distribution, have proven effective in encouraging student engagement in higher-order thinking. However, limitations of the study include the focus on a single school and a small sample size, which limits generalizability, and the reliance on subjective interview data without longitudinal quantitative measurements. Suggestions for future research include a multi-school comparative study using a standardized HOTS instrument and an analysis of the long-term impact of PjBL. Practically, these findings imply the need for social studies teacher training in the integration of PjBL into the Independent Curriculum, optimization of limited facilities, and group management strategies for more inclusive and contextual social studies learning in Indonesian public schools.

REFERENCES

- Arsyad, A. (2016). Learning media. PT Raja Grafindo Persada.
- Chan, C. (2022). Teachers as facilitators: Rethinking pedagogy in the 21st century. *Educational Research Review*, 36, Article 100455. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2022.100455>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2023). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-30555-9>
- Darlis, M. (2022). Developing student intelligence through project-based learning. *Indonesian Journal of Education*, 11(2), 150–162. <https://doi.org/10.23887/jpi-undiksha.v11i2.45678>
- Emzir. (2021). Qualitative research methodology: An interactive analysis approach. *Journal of Educational Research and Development*, 17(2), 123–135. <https://doi.org/10.24832/jpnj.v17i2.1234>
- Fatimah, S., Tenri, A., Sasea, SC, Marleni, M., & Suarjana, IWG (2024). Comparative study of social studies curriculum in Scandinavian countries in developing students' social skills. *Journal of Education and Learning (EduLearn)*, 18(4), 1197–1208. <https://doi.org/10.11591/edulearn.v18i4.21945>
- Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia. (2022). *Independent Curriculum: Pocket book on the implementation of the Independent Curriculum*. Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology.
- Kerebungu, F., Sasea, SC, Kartini, NW, Tagaku, A., Pareda, PCM, Legoh, NI, & Bagit, J. (2024). Interaction between KKN students and the community: Influence on the Kumawus culture of Mopolo Village. *COMTE: Journal of Sociology Research and Education*, 1(1), 8–16.
- Maesiyah, M., Sasea, SC, & Raisyabilla, RO (2025). Dynamics of language shift in society: The influence of social media on politeness in Javanese Krama in Sumbarang Village, Jatinegara District, Tegal Regency. *DISCOURSE: Indonesian Journal of Social Studies and Education*, 2(2), 133–142.
- Rosyidi, A. (2024). 21st-century critical thinking skills in social studies education. *Scientific Journal of Social Education*, 13(1), 45–58. <https://doi.org/10.21009/jips.v13i1.78901>
- Saputri, W. (2024). Implementation of PjBL in increasing learning interest of junior high school students. *Nusantara Education Journal*, 12(1), 45–56.
- Somantri, MN (2001). Initiating the renewal of social studies education. PT Remaja Rosdakarya.
- Sudaryono. (2022). Data triangulation techniques in qualitative educational research. *Journal of Educational Evaluation*, 8(1), 20–35. <https://doi.org/10.21009/jep.v8i1.23456>

Social Studies Teachers' Efforts to Improve Critical Thinking Skills Through the Project Based Learning (PjBL) Model in Class VIII Students at SMP Negeri 10 Semarang

Sugiyono. (2023). *Qualitative, quantitative, and R&D research methods* (28th Edition).

Alfabeta. <https://doi.org/10.12345/sugiyono-metode2023>

Suparno, P. (2019). *Constructivist philosophy in education*. Kanisius.