

Preliminary Study: Needs Analysis for Developing A Phenomenon-Based Learning Model Centered on Local Social Issues for Social Studies Instruction in Elementary School

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aims to describe the actual conditions of social studies learning in elementary schools as an empirical foundation for the development of the Phenomenon-Based Learning Model Based on Local Social Issues (PhBL-ISL), particularly with regard to students' conceptual understanding and social empathy. **Method:** This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach, with data collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a classroom teacher who teaches social studies at an elementary school, using a questionnaire consisting of 33 items covering six dimensions of study. The data were analyzed using a thematic qualitative approach. **Results:** The research findings indicate that social studies instruction is still dominated by a teacher-centered approach, with students' conceptual understanding being teacher-dependent, while the integration of local social issues remains incidental. On the other hand, students' social empathy is fairly well-developed but remains reactive and situational; it has not yet been systematically fostered through the learning process. Teachers hope for learning that is more grounded in real-life situations to boost students' self-confidence, critical thinking skills, and social awareness. **Novelty:** This study is the first to specifically examine the relationship between local social issues, conceptual understanding, and social empathy in elementary school social studies education an aspect that has not been extensively explored in previous research on Phenomenon-Based Learning, which has tended to focus on natural phenomena and science.

INTRODUCTION

Elementary school education plays a vital role in developing students' cognitive and social skills from an early age [1]. However, the reality on the ground reveals a gap between educational goals and students' actual achievements, particularly in two fundamental areas: conceptual understanding and social empathy. Students tend to get stuck in rote-learning patterns without deeply comprehending the material, so their critical thinking and problem-solving skills do not develop as they should [2], [3], [4]. This situation is exacerbated by the prevalence of teacher-centered instruction with an approach that lacks contextual relevance, which has been shown to be the root cause of students' poor conceptual understanding [5], [6], [7]. Students also have difficulty connecting the subject matter to social issues in their local communities, making social studies feel abstract and less relevant to their daily lives [8].

On the other hand, students' level of social empathy is also a cause for concern; interaction patterns at school still tend to be individualistic and do not yet reflect genuine concern for others [9], [10], [11], [12]. Weak conceptual understanding and low social

empathy are not two separate issues; rather, they are interrelated and stem from learning approaches that have not meaningfully bridged the gap between the curriculum and students' real life experience the most pressing challenge in social studies education in elementary school [3], [13], [14]. Conceptual understanding is a construct that has long been a focus of attention among education experts. Wiggins and McTighe (2005), within the framework of Understanding by Design (UbD), explain that true understanding is not merely the recall of information, but rather the ability to transfer knowledge to new situations through the six facets of understanding: explaining, interpreting, applying, taking perspectives, empathizing, and self-reflection [15]. In social studies classes, students are expected to be able to establish meaningful connections between core concepts such as justice, social inequality, and social change and the concrete realities in their surrounding environment [16].

In addition to conceptual understanding, social empathy is an important dimension that is often overlooked. Unlike interpersonal empathy, social empathy encompasses the ability to understand the living conditions of other social groups, recognize structural injustices, understand social inequalities within historical and cultural contexts, and the drive to act in the interest of justice and social inclusion [17]. Unfortunately, programs specifically designed to foster empathy in students are still limited and not sustainable [18], [19].

This phenomenon cannot be separated from the teaching approach used. The predominance of lecture-based and rote-learning methods has proven ineffective in fostering deep understanding [6], [7]. Therefore, there is a need for innovative learning models that simultaneously foster conceptual understanding and cultivate social empathy through authentic contexts. Phenomenon-Based Learning (PhBL) offers a relevant solution: a holistic approach centered on real-world phenomena, with the following steps: Anchoring the Phenomenon, Eliciting Prior Understanding, Investigation & Inquiry, Sense-Making & Modeling, Cross-disciplinary Synthesis, and Reflection & Generalization [20], [21], [22]. Various empirical studies have demonstrated the superiority of PhBL over conventional approaches in fostering deep understanding and higher-order thinking skills [23], [21], [24], [25].

However, PhBL research to date has almost exclusively focused on natural phenomena and science, rather than on real-world social issues experienced by students in their communities. A systematic review by Walker and Nouri (2025) confirms that PhBL research at the elementary school level remains very rare, and none of the studies use local social issues as their primary context [21]. This urgency is reinforced by Ministry of Education and Culture Regulation No. 13 of 2025, which incorporates Deep Learning into the foundational framework of the national curriculum, calling for conscious, meaningful learning that holistically integrates the experiences of understanding, applying, and reflecting [26].

Based on this study, four research gaps were identified: (1) research on PhBL at the elementary school level remains very limited; (2) there has been no PhBL research

that specifically uses local social issues as a basis for inquiry; (3) social empathy has never been studied as a learning outcome in the PhBL model; and (4) there is no learning model that simultaneously develops conceptual understanding and social empathy through PhBL based on local social issues for elementary schools [21], [17], [27], [28]. As a first step toward addressing this gap, this research conducted a preliminary study through in-depth interviews with classroom teachers to gain a realistic picture of the dynamics of social studies learning, the integration of local social issues, students' conceptual understanding, students' social empathy, the learning models already in use, and teachers' expectations all of which serve as an empirical foundation for the development of the PhBL-ISL (Phenomenon-Based Learning Based on Local Social Issues) Model.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach, which aims to provide an in-depth description of the actual conditions of social studies learning as directly experienced and interpreted by teachers as practitioners of learning, while also identifying problems, needs, and potential in the field as an empirical basis for the development of the PhBL-ISL Model.

The research subject was selected through purposive sampling. The selection of a single informant was consistent with the objective of the preliminary study, which was to obtain an in-depth initial portrait of the state of social studies learning in the field, and was not intended to allow for generalizations. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews using a questionnaire consisting of 33 items covering six dimensions of the study, namely: (A) opening activities and student engagement in learning, (B) the context of space, time, and local social issues, (C) students' conceptual understanding, (D) students' social empathy, (E) learning models and approaches already implemented, and (F) teachers' hopes and aspirations for the future. The instrument was developed based on indicators of conceptual understanding and social empathy [15], [17].

The interview data were analyzed using a qualitative thematic analysis approach: the main themes in each teacher's responses were identified, grouped according to the six dimensions of the study, and then interpreted to produce a comprehensive picture of the state of social studies learning, which served as the basis for the development of the PhBL-ISL Model.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The interview data were analyzed through the stages of data reduction, categorization of themes based on the six dimensions of the instrument, and drawing of conclusions (Miles & Huberman, in qualitative thematic analysis). The findings in this section are presented descriptively by research dimension, in accordance with the order in the interview instrument, with an emphasis on how the context of local social issues

experienced by students relates to their conceptual understanding and social empathy in social studies learning.

The teacher stated that social studies lessons in the classroom took place in a relatively enjoyable atmosphere; students were enthusiastic when discussing historical and social content, particularly when the teacher used video as a tool for presenting the material. In this context, video serves as a visual stimulus that brings abstract historical events and social phenomena to life, making them more concrete and easier for students to follow. Enthusiasm was also evident during the group discussions, which were organized with mixed-gender groups of male and female students; according to the teacher, this provided students with an opportunity to exchange perspectives in a more interactive learning environment.

Teachers identified two factors that reduce students' interest in learning: first, during question-and-answer sessions, some students became confused because they did not fully understand the flow of the questions asked, which, according to the teachers, indicated that the questions were not fully tailored to the students' way of thinking; second, when given paper-based worksheets, students quickly lose interest a situation the teacher attributes to the nature of the worksheets, which tend to be monotonous and fail to actively engage students. The teacher added that the typical learning pattern begins with the teacher's explanation, followed by the students listening a sequence that positions the teacher as the primary source of information at the start of each session.

Teachers identified the issue of reducing plastic waste as a local social phenomenon relevant to the school's surrounding environment and have addressed it in their lessons by encouraging students to use plates when eating so as not to rely on single-use plastics. This practice demonstrates that the local issue is not merely discussed in theory but has been translated into concrete habits that students can observe daily in the school environment. The teacher believes that students find it easier to understand social studies concepts when linked to direct experiences and assesses that students are already sufficiently familiar with the social environment around their school and homes, indicating that students actually possess contextual knowledge that can serve as a foundation for learning.

Teachers stated that the integration of local issues into learning is still done on an ad hoc basis and has not yet been explored systematically; as a result, the use of local social issues has so far been more incidental than a planned component of lesson design. Teachers also noted that the relatively small number of students requires them to be more personalized and detailed in designing learning experiences a classroom setting that, according to the teachers, actually allows for an approach that is more attuned to the needs and contexts of each student.

The teacher explained that students' ability to understand abstract social studies concepts such as justice, diversity, and solidarity depends on the clarity of the teacher's presentation. In other words, to the extent that the teacher is able to present these concepts in a coherent and clear manner, students are generally able to follow along well.

Teachers stated that students are able to rephrase the concepts they have learned in their own words and relate them to everyday events, but they struggle with material that has not been adequately explained, indicating that students' ability to interpret concepts independently is still limited to what the teacher has previously explained. This trend aligns with the teachers' views regarding the context of local social issues, as they assess that students find it easier to understand social studies concepts when these are linked to their direct experiences in their immediate surroundings.

Teachers reported that students showed concern for classmates from different backgrounds or those facing difficulties, and attributed this to the reinforcement of values through religious education in the SDIT system, which, according to the teachers, helps shape students' sensitivity toward others as part of the values instilled daily at school. Teachers cited examples of moments when students spontaneously helped one another, and when discussing issues such as poverty, disasters, or injustice, students actively considered solutions demonstrating that their concern goes beyond mere sympathy and is accompanied by efforts to think through follow-up actions.

Teachers stated that such expressions of concern generally arise when there is a direct trigger, such as a friend facing difficulties or a discussion about a specific social issue, indicating that students' concern currently manifests more as a response to ongoing events rather than as a consistently ingrained attitude. Teachers assessed that the current social studies curriculum is sufficient for fostering students' social concern. The trigger for discussions on social issues aligns with the issue of plastic waste, which teachers have identified as a local social issue in the school environment, although its use to foster empathy has not yet been implemented intentionally or systematically.

The teacher explained that the approach used is differentiation within the framework of deep learning, which, according to the teacher, is intended to accommodate differences in students' abilities and learning needs in the classroom. The teacher explained that the learning steps are adapted to the methods and strategies used in each session, without a fixed, standardized format, so that the application of this approach is more flexible and tailored to the situation from one session to the next. The teacher also mentioned the practice of encouraging students to learn from real-life events around them as part of their teaching practice, although this practice has not yet been structured into standardized stages and is not consistently applied in every session.

Teachers stated that learning from real-life events is more than sufficient as an ideal approach to social studies instruction a view that reinforces their belief that the relevance of the material to students' real lives is the key to meaningful learning. Teachers hope to see improvements in three dimensions of student capacity self-confidence, critical thinking skills, and social awareness which indicates that their expectations extend beyond mere mastery of the subject matter to the more comprehensive development of students' character and competencies. Teachers cited the need for a stronger connection between learning and the immediate context of students' lives as the most pressing need

a hope that consistently emerged throughout the interviews as a common thread linking the various dimensions of the study.

Overall, the six dimensions of the findings above reveal a common thread linking the context of local social issues, conceptual understanding, and students' social empathy. The local social issue identified by the teacher reducing plastic waste served as a starting point that, according to the teacher, helped students understand social studies concepts when linked to direct experience, while also providing a context for discussion that sparked students' concern and prompted them to think of solutions. However, as the teachers noted, the connection between these three aspects still occurs incidentally and has not been deliberately and systematically explored through instructional design; consequently, the potential of local social issues to simultaneously serve as a bridge for strengthening students' conceptual understanding and social empathy has not yet been fully utilized.

Discussion

Students' declining interest in question-and-answer sessions and conventional practice problems indicates a gap between the delivery of material and students' ability to actively and critically process information, and underscores the persistence of a teacher-centered approach to learning. These findings reinforce the arguments of Indraswati et al. and Madale et al. that a teacher-centered and insufficiently contextual approach is the root cause of students' low conceptual understanding. Conversely, students' increased enthusiasm for using video media and heterogeneous discussions demonstrates the potential for high engagement when learning is more concrete and collaborative a relevant foundation for the implementation of Phenomenon-Based Learning, which positions real-world phenomena as the entry point for learning rather than one-way information delivery [20], [22].

The emergence of the plastic waste issue as a form of integration of local social issues though still incidental in nature and not yet systematically explored confirms the gap identified by Walker and Nouri: PhBL research and practice to date have almost exclusively focused on natural and scientific phenomena, while local social issues closely related to students' daily lives have not been systematically addressed as a learning context [16]. The small class sizes reported by teachers indicate that the barrier to integration does not lie in a lack of local issues, but rather in the absence of a framework capable of channeling that potential in a systematic and differentiated manner.

Students' strong conceptual understanding when teachers explain well, yet weak understanding when material is conveyed less clearly, indicates a teacher-dependent pattern of understanding that stems from the transmission of knowledge by the teacher, rather than from students' active construction and independent inquiry. This situation aligns with the concerns raised by Latifah and Herlina et al. regarding social studies conceptual understanding that is not supported by students' active construction processes, and contradicts the core idea of Wiggins and McTighe within the Understanding by Design framework that true understanding is formed through

students' ability to explain, interpret, and apply concepts to new situations. These findings underscore the urgency of PhBL-ISL in shifting students' roles from passive recipients of information to active investigators who construct understanding through the observation and analysis of real-world phenomena [21], [23].

Students' social empathy, which is fairly good but still reactive and situational, provides a more specific illustration of what Segal described: social empathy demands more than just an emotional response to immediate triggers; it also requires the ability to understand structural injustice on an ongoing basis and the drive to take deliberate action. The empathy that has already developed is supported by Islamic values within the SDIT system, consistent with findings that a value-based environment helps shape students' compassion (Afifah 2024); however, without systematic integration into the learning process, this empathy risks remaining at a reactive level, as noted by Samuels and Jackson and Koslouski, who suggest that non-sustained empathy-building programs tend not to bring about long-term change.

The use of a differentiated approach within the framework of deep learning reflects teachers' awareness of the diversity of students' abilities; however, the absence of a standardized and measurable syntax indicates that phenomenon-based learning has not been consistently implemented in daily practice. This situation underscores the need for a learning model with clear, replicable stages, as offered by the PhBL syntax: Anchoring Phenomenon, Eliciting Prior Understanding, Investigation & Inquiry, Sense-Making & Modeling, Cross-disciplinary Synthesis, and Reflection & Generalization [22], [23].

Teachers' belief that learning from real-world events is a sufficient approach, coupled with their desire to strengthen students' self-confidence, critical thinking skills, and social awareness, is philosophically and operationally aligned with the fundamental principles of Phenomenon-Based Learning and with the direction of Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education Regulation No. 13 of 2025 on Deep Learning, which calls for conscious, meaningful, and reflective learning (Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education, 2025).

Overall, the findings across the six dimensions provide empirical justification for the five design requirements of the PhBL-ISL Model: (1) a structured phase for exploring local phenomena; (2) a shift in the teacher's role from transmitter to inquiry facilitator; (3) worksheets based on authentic problems, rather than conventional practice exercises; (4) components that explicitly foster active-transformative social empathy; and (5) a design that accommodates small classes with planned differentiation and leverages ingrained values as the foundation for social concern.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding: This article presents six main conclusions that describe the current state of social studies learning and serve as a foundation for the development of the PhBL-ISL Model. First, social studies learning is currently still dominated by a

teacher-centered approach; while the use of audiovisual media and group discussions is already in practice, there is no model that consistently encourages active inquiry. Second, local social issues such as plastic waste have been recognized by teachers as potential learning resources, but their integration remains incidental and has not been systematized. Third, students' conceptual understanding remains teacher-dependent rather than the result of active construction through real-world phenomena. Fourth, students' social empathy is fairly strong, supported by Islamic values from the SDIT system, but it remains situational and has not been consistently integrated into learning. Fifth, there is a gap between students' potential for empathy and their ability to connect concepts to real life, and the instructional design has not yet optimally activated this potential. Sixth, teachers' expectations are oriented toward reality-based learning, which is philosophically and operationally aligned with the PhBL-ISL Model. **Implication:** These findings underscore the need for the Phenomenon-Based Learning Model Based on Local Social Issues (PhBL-ISL) as a learning model that systematically integrates local social issues into the learning syntax, in order to foster conceptual understanding actively constructed by students and to cultivate social empathy, moving from a reactive level toward an active-transformative one. **Limitation:** Given that the data for this study were sourced from a single teacher informant at one elementary school, these findings serve as a contextual preliminary insight. **Future Research:** Further research is needed to expand the scope of informants and school settings, as well as to examine in greater depth how the PhBL-ISL Model can be formulated and applied in the practice of social studies instruction in elementary schools.

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