

Building Critical Thinking Skills of Elementary School Students through Contextual Social Studies Learning

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Abstract: The aims of this study is to investigate students critical thinking skills thorough contextual social studies learning. Critical thinking is an essential skill that students need to develop from an early age, especially at the elementary school level. One subject with significant potential to foster critical thinking skills is Social Studies. Contextual Social Studies learning, which connects the lesson material to real-life situations around students, can increase student engagement and encourage them to think more critically and analytically. The research method used is a Systematic Literature Review (SLR), encompassing article relevant and recent references from national and international journals published since 2020 until 2025, focusing on the development of critical thinking skills in elementary school students through contextual social studies learning. Based on the review results of recent literature, this article identifies various strategies that can be applied in the classroom, such as problem-based learning, project-based learning, and the use of discussions and debates. Furthermore, this article also discusses the challenges that may arise in implementing this approach, including limited resources and teacher readiness. The research concluded are expected to find connections between theory and recent practices in social studies education, demonstrating how contextual learning can contribute to improving students' critical thinking skills.

Keywords: contextual learning, critical thinking skills, elementary school students, social studies learning, systematic literature review

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Introduction

Critical thinking skills in the context of the 21st century have become one of the key competencies that students must possess. These skills are crucial in addressing the complex challenges of a continuously evolving global society (González-Pérez & Ramírez-Montoya, 2022; Kuloğlu & Karabekmez, 2022; Purwanto et al., 2023). Social Studies plays a strategic role in developing these critical thinking abilities. The Sasmita et al. (2022) and Pandeeka & Maneekul (2019) studies explain that social studies encompasses various aspects of social life aimed at helping students prepare for social life, develop critical thinking skills, decision-making abilities, and social participation, as well as understand their rights and obligations (Gedik, 2013). According to Leinhardt (1992), the role of social studies is to integrate various topics from the social sciences, enabling students to develop a more holistic, connected, and in-depth understanding of the social world around them (Parris, 2015). To achieve this goal, it is essential to use a learning approach that is relevant to the students' life context (Mulyani et al., 2023). Contextual social studies is an appropriate choice because it links the lesson material with students' real-life experiences, encouraging them to think critically about social issues in their surroundings. This is supported by research (Abbas et al., 2022), shows that social studies plays a significant role in developing contextual social studies learning. However, experts in social studies express concern over the narrowing of the curriculum, which often leads to the marginalization of social studies in primary education (Parker & Beck, 2022).

This study was conducted to respond to the current condition of teaching and learning in social studies across several countries, particularly in Indonesia. According to the research by (Pratiwi et al., 2023), Social Studies is often perceived as a dull subject that primarily focuses on lower-level aspects of intellectual development. Contextual learning, theoretically, emphasizes the importance of linking lesson material to the real-life context of students. The study by Sarwari & Kakar (2023) explains that the contextual approach in education helps students foster a comfortable classroom environment, enhance self-confidence, alleviate stress and anxiety, and cultivate a culture of mutual understanding and respect (Sarwari & Kakar, 2023). In addition, it can enhance academic abilities, help understand the concepts taught through direct experience, and make those concepts relevant to their daily lives (Ningrum & Murti, 2023; Ramadansur et al., 2023).

In the context of social studies, this means linking the subject matter with social issues present in society. This approach not only enhances students' understanding but also encourages them to think critically about the social phenomena occurring around them. A study by Ernawati et al. (2023) shows that the implementation of the Problem-Based Learning (PBL) model in social studies education can improve students' critical thinking abilities (Ernawati et al., 2024). The PBL model emphasizes providing authentic problems that students must solve, thereby training them to think critically and analytically in finding solutions (Maksum et al., 2021; Fauziyyah et al., 2023). In Social Studies education, applying this model can help students to understand and analyze social issues in-depth (Susanto et al., 2020; Mohammed & Kinyo, 2020b).

The research findings of Salamah et al. (2023) and Utaminingsih et al. (2023) reveal that the inquiry-based learning model and group investigation model are also effective in enhancing students' critical thinking skills in Social Studies. The inquiry model encourages students to ask questions, investigate, and discover answers to their questions, which is the essence of critical thinking (Salamah et al., 2023; Utaminingsih et al., 2023). Therefore, this model can be applied in social studies learning to develop students' critical thinking abilities.

Although the contextual approach has been proven effective in enhancing critical thinking skills, its implementation in social studies education in schools still faces various challenges. The research findings indicate that the implementation of contextual learning in social studies is considered fairly good (Widiani, 2023). However, there are still factors affecting its effectiveness, such as teacher preparedness, facilities and infrastructure, as well as student readiness. This shows a gap between theory and practice in the application of contextual learning in the classroom (Widiani, 2023). However, the others provide an illustration that contextual learning is suitable for implementation in social studies learning activities, as it is stimulated through the use of appropriate learning media (Kristanti & Sujana, 2022).

This study aims to examine how the application of contextual social studies learning can enhance students' critical thinking skills. The research will focus on strategies that can be implemented by teachers in applying contextual learning and identifying factors that influence its effectiveness. Thus, this study is expected to contribute to the development of an effective and relevant social studies learning model that aligns with students' life contexts. The urgency of this research is high, considering the importance of critical thinking skills in facing future social challenges. By understanding and implementing contextual social studies learning, it is expected that students can develop critical thinking skills that can be applied in everyday life. Additionally, the findings of this study can serve as a reference for the development of curriculum and social studies teaching strategies that are more effective and in line with students' needs in this era of globalization.

Methods

This study employs the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method to analyze, evaluate, and interpreting existing research findings in the literature in a systematic and structured manner (Irfiani et al., 2023). This article is compiled by analyzing approximately 45 sources from leading academic databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and ERIC. The sources used were selected based on their relevance to the research topic, the quality of the methodology employed, and the publication period from 2020 to 2025. The most recent literature was chosen to ensure that the research findings are valid and aligned with the latest developments in the field of critical thinking skill development through contextual learning in Social Studies education at the elementary school level. The process of article selection involved evaluating the credibility of each article by considering the reputation of the journal, the quality of the methodology, relevance to the topic, and the availability of in-depth data. The stages of the Systematic Literature Review according to Anisah et al. (2024) can be outlined as Figure 1.

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) to investigate the conceptualization of critical thinking skills and the instructional strategies that foster these skills in elementary Social Studies education. The review was guided by two research questions: (1) how critical thinking skills are defined in the context of elementary Social Studies learning, and (2) which contextual teaching strategies or methods effectively

promote the development of these skills. These questions provided a structured framework for identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing relevant literature. The literature search was conducted according to predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure the relevance, rigor, and quality of the selected studies. Criteria included publication year, study design, thematic relevance, and methodological soundness (Rodríguez, 2023). Articles that met these standards were systematically analyzed, ensuring that the findings were based on credible and contextually appropriate evidence.

Data analysis involved a thorough and systematic examination of the selected studies. Key findings were extracted, compared, and interpreted in relation to existing theoretical frameworks. This process enabled a comprehensive understanding of how critical thinking is conceptualized and operationalized in Social Studies education at the elementary level. The synthesis of results was then organized into a coherent narrative, highlighting trends, instructional strategies, and theoretical implications. The presentation of findings prioritized clarity, logical flow, and evidence-based discussion, facilitating the identification of gaps and opportunities for future research. Finally, the outcomes of this review were disseminated through scholarly publications and conference presentations to contribute to the broader discourse on educational practice and critical thinking development. This step ensures that the findings inform both research and pedagogical practice, fostering knowledge exchange within the academic community.



Figure 1. Systematic Literature Review Design

Result and Discussion

Critical Thinking Skills in the Context of Social Studies Learning in Elementary Education

Critical thinking skills are one of the most important competencies in education, especially at the elementary level, as they help students process information analytically and objectively. The following article, based on a review through the stages of compare, contrast, criticize, synthesize, and summarize, aims to describe the first research problem statement.

Table 1. Representation of articles related to Critical Thinking skills Social Studies Learning at the Elementary Education Level

Article Title, and Author	Critical Thinking Skills Social Studies learning at the Elementary Education
Teaching Critical Thinking Skills: Literature Review (Delamain & Spring, 2020)	Conceptually, critical thinking involves a set of cognitive skills used to make better decisions, solve problems, and draw logical conclusions. Teaching methods for critical thinking, such as PBL, class discussions, and writing, have proven effective in developing students' critical thinking skills. The use of questioning techniques (Socratic questioning) and the implementation of collaborative activities in learning are also highly recommended. Additionally, evaluating critical thinking skills requires a specific rubric, assessing the thinking ability from simple to complex levels.
The Role Of Constructivism In The Enhancement Of Social Studies Education (Mohammed & Kinyo, 2020a)	The Importance of the Constructivist Approach in Social Studies Education: The constructivist approach provides an important theoretical foundation for developing effective social education. This approach emphasizes students' experiences in constructing their own knowledge through social interaction and active

Article Title, and Author	Critical Thinking Skills Social Studies learning at the Elementary Education
	exploration, rather than merely receiving information passively. Cognitive constructivism, pioneered by Piaget, focuses on the transformation of an individual's internal knowledge, while social constructivism, developed by Vygotsky, emphasizes the importance of social interaction in the formation of knowledge..
Creativity, Critical Thinking, Communication, and Collaboration: Assessment, Certification, and Promotion of 21st Century Skills for the Future of Work and Education (Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023)	Critical thinking skills are crucial in social studies learning. However, many students' critical thinking skills are still not optimal, leading to unsatisfactory academic results. This study shows that Problem-Based Learning (PBL) is effective in improving social studies learning outcomes and students' critical thinking skills compared to traditional teaching methods.
The Impact of Problem-based Learning Models on Social Studies Learning Outcomes and Critical Thinking Skills for Fifth Grade Elementary School Students (Dharma & Lestari, 2022)	The research shows that the problem-based learning model has a significant impact on social studies learning outcomes and students' critical thinking skills, including the ability to analyze, synthesize, evaluate, and draw conclusions from information.
Critical Thinking on Social Studies Learning for Elementary School Students (Sasmita et al., 2022)	Critical thinking skills are essential for students, especially in the 21st century, to face global challenges. These skills are highly relevant in Social Studies learning at the elementary school level. Critical thinking skills are closely related to the ability to solve social problems that students encounter in their daily lives. Social Studies learning that is connected to the real world can strengthen students' social competencies, enabling them to contribute to solving social problems in their communities.
21st-Century Skills and Social Studies Education (Aslamiah et al., 2021)	This study emphasizes the importance of social studies education in developing 21st-century skills, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, collaboration, as well as creativity and innovation. These skills are essential in facing global challenges marked by technological advancements and social changes. Social studies should employ relevant learning models, such as problem-based learning and collaborative learning. These models can help students develop critical thinking skills and the ability to work effectively in groups.
Integrating critical thinking into the classroom: A teacher's perspective (Cáceres et al., 2020)	This article emphasizes various strategies for teaching critical thinking, such as the general, infusion, and immersion approaches. The general approach suggests explicitly teaching critical thinking as a cross-curricular skill. The infusion approach integrates critical thinking into specific subjects, while the immersion approach focuses on deep engagement with subject content to naturally develop critical thinking. Although there is much literature supporting the explicit teaching of critical thinking, this study shows that in practice, critical thinking is often integrated into specific subjects. This highlights a gap between theoretical recommendations and actual teaching strategies in the classroom
Critical Thinking as a Twenty First Century Skill (Hukamdad & Akbar, 2023)	The Importance of Critical Thinking as a 21st Century Skill: This study emphasizes that critical thinking is one of the most essential skills to face the challenges of the 21st century. This skill is highly relevant in a fast-paced, information-rich world, where the ability to critically evaluate information is crucial. The study offers various approaches to develop critical thinking in the classroom, such as asking thought-provoking questions, encouraging decision-making, introducing diverse perspectives, and involving students in discussion and brainstorming activities.

Article Title, and Author	Critical Thinking Skills Social Studies learning at the Elementary Education
High-Order Questions Improve Students' Critical Thinking Skills In Elementary Schools (Achmad & Utami, 2023)	Critical thinking can enhance one's ability to make better decisions, solve problems effectively, think creatively, and communicate more clearly and persuasively. The results of this study indicate that the development of critical thinking skills can be achieved by applying higher-order questions in learning. Therefore, teachers need to implement teaching techniques that involve questions that stimulate students to think more deeply and critically.

The studies reviewed in the provided articles collectively emphasize the critical importance of teaching critical thinking skills within the context of Social Studies education, particularly in elementary schools. The core theme across all studies is the integration of critical thinking into educational practices, especially in response to the rapidly changing world and complex societal challenges that students will face in the future. The Role of Critical Thinking in Social Studies: The articles consistently highlight that critical thinking is essential for students, particularly in Social Studies, as it aids in analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating complex social, political, and cultural issues. Social Studies requires students not only to acquire knowledge but also to apply it in real-world contexts, making critical thinking a crucial skill for understanding and addressing real-life challenges (Delamain & Spring, 2020; Sasmita et al., 2022).

Methodologies to Foster Critical Thinking: Various teaching methods such as Problem-Based Learning, inquiry-based learning, and reflective dialogues, are proven to be effective in enhancing critical thinking skills. For example, PBL encourages students to engage with real-world problems, analyze issues deeply, and collaborate with peers, which boosts their critical thinking abilities (Dharma & Lestari, 2022). Similarly, using higher-order questioning techniques and creating classroom environments that stimulate discussion and debate are key strategies to develop critical thinking (Achmad & Utami, 2023).

Constructivism as a Foundation for Critical Thinking: Several studies emphasize the role of constructivist teaching strategies in Social Studies education. Constructivism, as outlined by Piaget and Vygotsky, encourages students to build knowledge through social interactions and hands-on learning experiences. This approach supports critical thinking by making learning more relevant to students' lives and helping them internalize and apply concepts actively (Mohammed & Kinyo, 2020a; Mohammed & Kinyo, 2020b).

Challenges in Critical Thinking Instruction: Despite the identified benefits, some challenges remain in the implementation of critical thinking instruction. Issues such as limited student language skills, inadequate teacher preparation, and insufficient time for instruction often hinder the effective development of critical thinking in students (Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023; Cáceres et al., 2020). Overcoming these challenges requires more targeted teacher training, a shift from traditional lecture-based methods, and enhanced support from parents and the community.

The Need for 21st-Century Skills: In the context of 21st-century education, critical thinking is increasingly recognized as an essential skill for students. The ability to think critically enables students to navigate the complexities of the modern world, make informed decisions, and contribute to society in meaningful ways. As highlighted in the research, integrating critical thinking into Social Studies not only improves academic performance but also prepares students for future challenges in a globalized world (Aslamiah et al., 2021).

The integration of critical thinking into Social Studies education, particularly through methods like PBL, inquiry-based learning, and constructivist strategies, is crucial for developing students' ability to engage with complex issues and contribute to society. However, addressing challenges such as language barriers and providing adequate teacher training will be essential to fully realizing the potential of these methods. With the right approaches and support, critical thinking can be effectively nurtured, equipping students with the skills they need to thrive in the 21st century.

Strategies or methods of contextual teaching and learning to develop students' critical thinking skills

The increasing demand for 21st-century competencies has positioned critical thinking as an essential skill that must be intentionally developed through effective instructional approaches. Within this context, the Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) strategy has gained growing attention due to its emphasis on connecting learning materials with real-life situations, promoting active engagement, and encouraging students to construct meaningful understanding. Previous research has shown that CTL can enhance students' analytical abilities, problem-solving skills, and reflective thinking by situating knowledge within authentic and relevant contexts. Consequently, studies exploring the implementation of CTL strategies continue to evolve, aiming to identify effective practices, challenges, and outcomes related to fostering students' critical thinking skills

across various educational settings. This sub-section reviews the body of research that highlights how CTL contributes to the development of learners' critical thinking skills and provides insights into its pedagogical implications.

Table 2. Related Research of Contextual Teaching and Learning Strategies to Develop Students' Critical Thinking Skills.

Article Title, and Author	Strategies of contextual teaching and learning to develop students' critical thinking skills.
Implementation of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) to Improve the Concept and Practice of Love for Faith-Learning Integration (Hyun et al., 2020)	This study suggests that teachers should not only use lecture-based methods but also employ approaches that allow students to experience and practice faith concepts in real-life situations. The application of CTL is expected to be further improved by involving parents more actively and providing more supportive facilities.
Understanding Learning Strategies: A Comparison Between Contextual Learning and Problem-Based Learning (Maftuh, 2023)	This study suggests that although PBL and CL have different benefits, integrating both can create a more comprehensive learning experience for students. By combining problem-solving with real-life application, students can be better prepared to face complex challenges. The study emphasizes the importance of choosing the right learning strategy based on the educational context and learning objectives. Educators are advised to carefully consider the strengths of each strategy and how they can be applied to enhance student learning. PBL is effective in developing critical thinking and collaboration skills, while CL helps students connect abstract concepts with real-world experiences. The integration of these two methods can provide a holistic approach to learning that prepares students for future challenges.
Contextual Learning Models in Improving Elementary School Critical Thinking Skills (Ningrum & Murti, 2023)	This study concludes that the contextual learning model has a positive impact on developing students' critical thinking skills, particularly in helping them connect the material being learned with real-life situations. This suggests that learning that is relevant and focused on students' experiences can enhance their ability to analyze, evaluate, and make decisions, which are essential for critical thinking.
Effects of Game-Based Learning on Students' Critical Thinking: A Meta-Analysis (Mao et al., 2022)	This study emphasizes the importance of integrating game-based learning into education to develop critical thinking skills, with particular attention to the role of game types, culture, and the contextual construction of critical thinking.
Ethno-Stem Project-Based Learning: Its Impact To Critical And Creative Thinking Skills (Sumarni & Kadarwati, 2020)	This study concludes that project-based ethno-STEM learning can significantly enhance students' critical and creative thinking skills, while connecting learning to relevant and contextual local culture.

The analysis (**Table 2**) of the articles shows that various learning strategies, such as Contextual Learning (CL), Problem-Based Learning (PBL), Game-Based Learning, and Ethno-STEM Project-Based Learning, have proven to be effective in enhancing students' critical thinking skills. The application of CTL (Hyun et al., 2020), which connects learning concepts to students' real-life experiences, enables them to better understand and apply knowledge, while also deepening their understanding of faith values in learning. Research by Maftuh (2023) highlights that integrating Cooperative Learning and PBL can provide a more comprehensive learning experience, helping students face real-world challenges with improved critical thinking and collaboration skills. Furthermore, Ningrum & Murti (2023) emphasize that the contextual learning model has a positive impact on developing students' analysis, evaluation, and decision-making skills. Game-Based Learning, as found in the research by Mao et al. (2022), also significantly influences the improvement of students' critical thinking skills, as it provides challenges that motivate them to think creatively and analytically. Finally, Sumarni & Kadarwati (2020) demonstrate that Ethno-STEM Project-Based Learning not only improves critical thinking skills but also enhances creativity by integrating local culture into the learning process, making it more relevant and contextual. The integration of these various learning methods can enrich students' learning experiences, deepen

their understanding, and prepare them to face future challenges. tantangan di masa depan, terutama dalam hal berpikir kritis dan pemecahan masalah.

The Implications of the Contextual Teaching and Learning Strategy in Social Studies Education to Enhance Critical Thinking Skills

Based on the analysis of the articles, contextual social studies learning has been shown to have significant implications in enhancing students' critical thinking skills. The application of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL), which connects learning concepts with students' real-life situations, allows them to understand the material more deeply and apply it in everyday life (Hyun et al., 2020). This approach enables students to think more critically by evaluating and connecting the information they learn with their social realities.

Problem-Based Learning (PBL), as explained by Maftuh (2023), is highly effective in enhancing critical thinking skills because it encourages students to engage in solving real-world problems. PBL prompts students to think analytically and collaboratively, enriching their learning experience. When PBL is combined with CTL, this approach can provide a more comprehensive learning experience and prepare students to face real-world challenges. Furthermore, according to Ningrum & Murti (2023), the contextual learning model is highly effective in connecting the material learned with students' real-life situations. This improves their ability to analyze, evaluate, and make decisions, which are crucial in critical thinking. This model of learning provides space for students to learn in a way that is more relevant and focused on their experiences, directly influencing their critical thinking skills.

Mao et al. (2022) also show that Game-Based Learning (GBL) can strengthen critical thinking skills by providing challenges that encourage students to think creatively and analytically. Contextual game-based learning, integrated with local culture, offers students the opportunity to engage in more realistic and relevant situations. Additionally, Sumarni & Kadarwati (2020) add that the project-based ethno-STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) approach can significantly enhance students' critical and creative thinking skills. This approach combines scientific aspects with contextual local culture, which not only enhances critical thinking skills but also enriches students' creativity by introducing them to their own culture. The application of various contextual learning models, such as CTL, PBL, GBL, and ethno-STEM, can provide an effective approach in developing students' critical thinking skills. Learning that is relevant to real-life situations and local culture helps students think more critically and creatively, preparing them to face future challenges with better skills in analysis, problem-solving, and decision-making.

The research by Sasmita et al. (2025) explains that Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky emphasize that Social Studies learning enhances students' critical thinking by promoting active knowledge construction through experiences and social interactions (Sasmita et al., 2025). Approaches like Problem-Based Learning, which involve analyzing social issues and fostering collaboration, are key to developing critical thinking. Social studies also encourages analytical and reflective thinking by helping students evaluate information and connect it to real-world issues, such as human rights and globalization, making it an effective tool for addressing social challenges.

Conclusion

Implementing the contextual teaching model in social studies learning is strongly grounded in constructivist theory and problem-based learning, which greatly support the development of students' critical thinking skills. Empirically, various studies have shown that Contextual Teaching and Learning can enhance students' critical thinking abilities by linking learning to real-world situations, increasing student engagement, and encouraging reflection and problem-solving. Therefore, the implementation of the contextual teaching model is highly relevant and effective for developing students' critical thinking skills, which are essential in this era of globalization. In the context of Social Studies education, critical thinking skills play a crucial role because social studies involves the analysis of various complex social, political, economic, and cultural issues that require a deep understanding. Therefore, understanding how critical thinking skills are defined and applied in social studies at the elementary education level becomes highly relevant, as it equips students with the ability to face future social challenges. This study has several limitations that affect the scope and findings. The literature is limited to articles published since 2020, which restricts the understanding of long-term developments in Social Studies education and critical thinking skills. Additionally, although strict selection criteria have been applied, some relevant literature may not have been included or may not meet the criteria, thus affecting the diversity of perspectives in this review. The focus on Social Studies education at the elementary school level also limits the generalizability of the findings to other educational levels.

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