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Improving social skills and learning outcomes of fifth-grade students through contextual learning

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Abstract

This study employs an action research method consisting of planning, implementation, observation, and reflection to enhance elementary students' social skills and learning outcomes at Private Elementary School SYPPK Salib Suci Agats. The research follows a classroom action research model as outlined by Kemmis and McTaggart. Fifth-grade students (20 in total) at Private Elementary School YPPK Salib Suci Agats served as the subjects. Data was collected through both test and non-test techniques. Various assessment instruments, such as descriptive problem-solving tests, attitude rating scales, and learning implementation observation sheets, were used to gather data. The initial findings showed that only 5 out of 20 students (25%) achieved scores above the Minimum Mastery Criterion (MMC), indicating they met the required competency. After the first action cycle, the number of students scoring above the MMC increased to 11 students (55%), while 9 students (45%) remained below the MMC, necessitating a second cycle. Following reflections on the first cycle, certain shortcomings were identified (particularly the less-than-optimal use of learning media), which were addressed in the second cycle by incorporating concrete learning media. As a result, by the end of the second cycle, 17 students (85%) scored above the MMC. This improvement demonstrates the effectiveness of contextual learning in raising both the social skills and academic performance of the students.

Keywords: Contextual learning; social skills; learning outcomes; elementary school

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INTRODUCTION

Human beings are inherently social, and strong social skills are crucial for effective interaction and healthy relationships from an early age (Elliott & Gresham, 1993; Seprie et al., 2025). In the elementary school context, developing social abilities —such as communication, cooperation, and empathy—is increasingly recognized as vital for children's overall success and well-being. Research has consistently shown that students with strong social competence tend to have better classroom engagement and higher academic performance (Vh & Ashok, 2024) and long-term success in later life (Durlak et al., 2011; Jones et al., 2015). In fact, comprehensive reviews of school-based social-emotional learning (SEL) programs have found significant, wide-ranging benefits: well-implemented SEL interventions lead to medium-to-large improvements in students' social skills, behavior, and academic outcomes across all grade levels. Conversely,

lacking social skills can impede a child's ability to participate in class and connect with peers, which in turn can undermine academic achievement. Thus, alongside cognitive development, social skill development is now understood as a key component of a well-rounded primary education program.

The level of learning outcomes attained by students serves as a gauge of how well teachers, who serve as the hub of learning for elementary school students, have organized the learning process. These outcomes indicate how well students perform in their individual learning activities. A change in attitude influenced by students' cognitive and psychomotor development can also indicate successful learning (Darmuki & Saddhono, 2018). The learning achievement of students is typically measured against the minimum mastery criterion (MMC), which represents the minimum competency standards set for a given subject. According to Pohan (2020), a student is considered academically "mastered" or complete in a subject if they can grasp the instructional material in accordance with the required level of thinking and the type of content—be it conceptual, factual, procedural, or metacognitive.

Prior to this study, observations in a fifth-grade class of twenty students (12 female and 8 male) at Private Elementary School YPPK Salib Suci Agats indicated significant academic and social challenges. Only 5 students (25%) scored above the MMC, while 15 students (75%) fell below it, highlighting a serious issue with both academic attainment and social skills development. Many students displayed inadequate social skills, struggling with group collaboration and showing a lack of empathy, largely due to low self-confidence and difficulty concentrating on lessons. Participation levels were low; students hesitated to ask or answer questions and rarely engaged during group discussions, with many remaining silent or joking rather than presenting their understanding of the material. The teacher's reliance on conventional teaching methods further exacerbated the problem, resulting in a passive learning environment that stifled student engagement and critical thinking, contributing to a monotonous classroom atmosphere.

In contrast, the contextual learning model posits that students will retain information better if they can apply what they learn to real-life situations (Brown et al., 1989; Mahmuti et al., 2025). This model is based on the idea that learning is most effective when students are actively engaged in the process. Students will remember more of what they learn and be more capable of applying their knowledge in the real world if they can form connections between what is taught in class and their everyday lives. Teachers also benefit from the contextual learning approach, as it helps students link classroom material to real-world contexts, thereby improving understanding and retention of the material. Students, in turn, benefit because this approach enables them to comprehend subject matter more deeply and remember more of what they have learned. Therefore, the role of the teacher is very important in the success of any educational endeavour (Seknun, 2012).

Given the initial issues observed and the potential of contextual learning to address them, this study was undertaken to apply a contextual learning approach in the classroom. The primary aim was to improve the social skills and learning outcomes of the fifth-grade students at Private Elementary School YPPK Salib Suci Agats through a structured classroom action research intervention.

METHODS

This research was conducted as a classroom action research project using the model developed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988). The action research design consists of four phases that repeat in cycles: (1) planning, (2) implementation of the action, (3) observation of the results, and (4) reflection on the process. These four phases were carried out in sequence and formed the structure of each cycle of the study.

The participants of the study were 20 fifth-grade students (12 girls and 8 boys) from Private Elementary School YPPK Salib Suci Agats. The research was carried out at Private

Elementary School YPPK Salib Suci Agats, located in Agats (Asmat Regency, Papua Selatan Province, Indonesia). The intervention took place over the period of March to April 2025, corresponding to the second semester of the 2024–2025 academic year.

Multiple methods were utilized to collect data, including both test and non-test techniques. Test instruments were used to gather data on students' social skills and academic learning outcomes. Non-test methods (such as observations and questionnaires) were employed to assess how well students internalized the material and to gauge their feelings about their own learning process. Specific data collection instruments in this study included descriptive problem-solving test questions (to measure learning outcomes), attitude rating scales (to evaluate students' social attitudes and interactions), and learning implementation checklists or rating scales (to observe and rate the enactment of the contextual learning process in the classroom).

For this classroom action research, success was determined based on a predefined criterion related to both academic performance and social skill development. The key indicator of success was the achievement of the MMC in students' academic scores alongside a high level of social skills. In practical terms, the action research would be considered successful if at least 80% of the students in the class attained scores at or above the MMC and if their observed social skills could be categorized as "high." These criteria guided the interventions across cycles and the decision of whether additional action cycles were needed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The classroom action research was executed in two cycles (Cycle 1 and Cycle 2), following an initial pre-action observation stage. Each cycle comprised the four action research phases: planning, action implementation, observation, and reflection. Using the contextual learning approach, the teacher and researchers worked to identify and systematically address the learning problems observed in the class to improve students' social skills and academic performance.

Pre-Action (Initial Observation) Before implementing any interventions, the researchers observed the baseline conditions in the class. In this pre-action stage, 20 students of the fifth grade were assessed. The initial data showed that only 5 students (25% of the class) had scores above the MMC (indicating they met the minimum mastery criterion), whereas 15 students (75%) had scores below the MMC. These results were alarming, as they highlighted the fact that most students were not meeting the expected competency levels. The observations also confirmed significant social skill deficiencies among the students, which manifested as classroom challenges. Notably, many students struggled with teamwork and lacked empathy and concern for their peers, reflecting poor social interaction skills. These issues were compounded by low student self-confidence and difficulty maintaining concentration when others (teachers or classmates) were speaking. Furthermore, participation in class discussions was minimal: only a handful of students actively presented and spoke about group discussion results, while the rest remained silent or disengaged. Some students even appeared unserious and prone to joking during lessons. The teaching method in use was largely conventional, which tended to render students' passive, hinder critical thinking, and reduce their interest in the subject matter. A traditional instructional approach contributed to a dull classroom atmosphere and provided little incentive for active student interaction. Figure 1 illustrates a diagram of the pre-action stage, summarizing the initial student performance distribution and the identified social challenges.

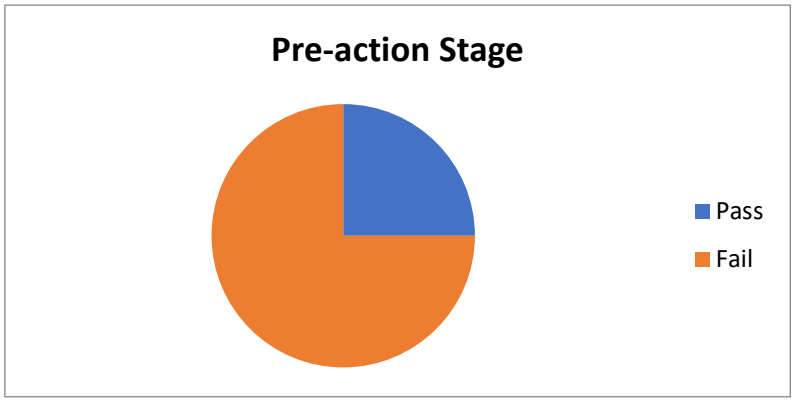

Figure 1. Pre-action Stage

Cycle 1: In the first cycle, the researchers implemented contextual learning strategies to address the problems observed in the pre-action stage. Figure 2 shows the outcome of Cycle 1 in diagram form. After the contextual learning approach was applied in Cycle 1, there was a notable improvement in student performance. The post-test results from Cycle 1 indicated that an additional 6 students achieved scores above the MMC. This brought the total number of students meeting or exceeding the MMC to 11, which corresponds to 55% of the class. However, despite this improvement, 9 students (45%) were still scoring below the MMC after the first cycle. Because the proportion of students reaching the mastery criterion (55%) had not yet met the success threshold (which was set at 75% or more of the class, based on the initial target for action success), the decision was made to proceed to a second cycle of intervention.

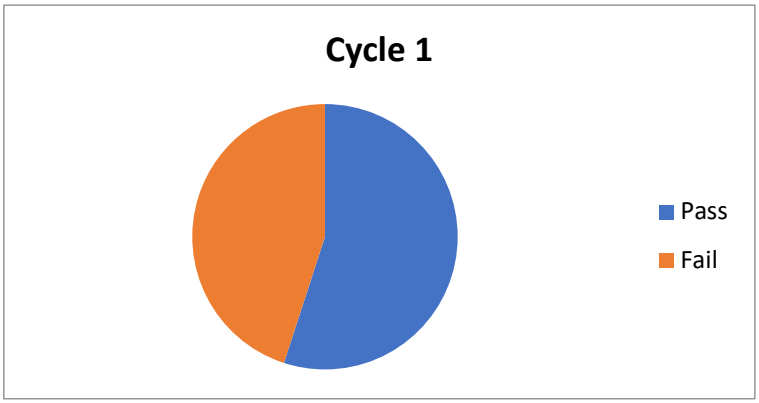

Figure 2. Picture of Cycle 1

Reflecting on Cycle 1, the research team noted both progress and areas needing improvement. On the positive side, some students had begun to show increased engagement: they were more willing to ask and answer questions, and an emerging awareness of the importance of active participation in the learning process was observed. This indicated that the contextual learning approach was starting to have a beneficial effect on students' social behaviors in class. However, the reflection also pointed out a significant shortcoming in the first cycle—namely, the use of learning media was not yet optimal. The learning activities in Cycle 1 did not fully leverage concrete or visual aids that could have enhanced understanding and engagement for the students. This may have limited the effectiveness of the contextual learning implementation in the first cycle.

Cycle 2: Based on the lessons learned from Cycle 1, the second cycle was planned with adjustments to address the remaining issues. In Cycle 2, the contextual learning approach was continued, and importantly, concrete instructional media and real objects were introduced as

part of the learning process. The goal of using concrete learning media was to provide tangible context and examples that would help students better understand the material and remain engaged, thereby further improving their social interaction and learning outcomes. Figure 3 provides a diagram of the Cycle 2 results.

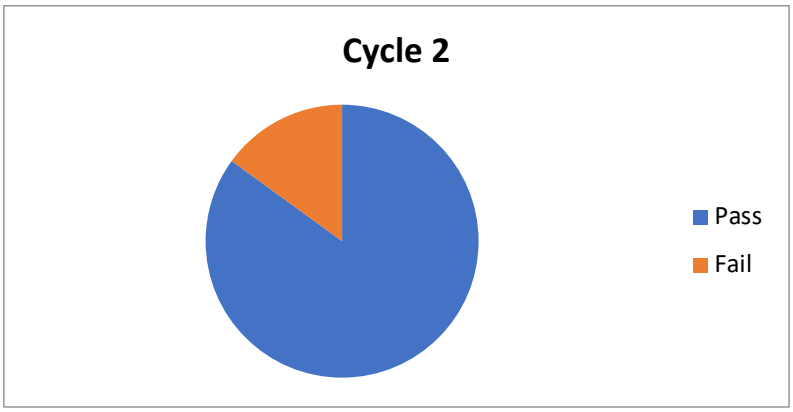

Figure 3. Picture of Cycle 2

The results from Cycle 2 showed further improvement. The post-test outcomes in Cycle 2 revealed that 5 additional students moved into the passing category. Consequently, the number of students achieving scores above the MMC rose to 17, which represents 85% of the class. This result signifies a substantial gain from the beginning of the study, and it indicates that most of the class had now reached the minimum mastery criteria after the interventions. With 85% of students now meeting or exceeding the MMC, the class surpassed the initially targeted success criterion. Figure 4 compares the percentage of students who met the MMC in each stage (pre-action, after Cycle 1, and after Cycle 2), clearly illustrating the upward trend in mastery and the overall success of the intervention.

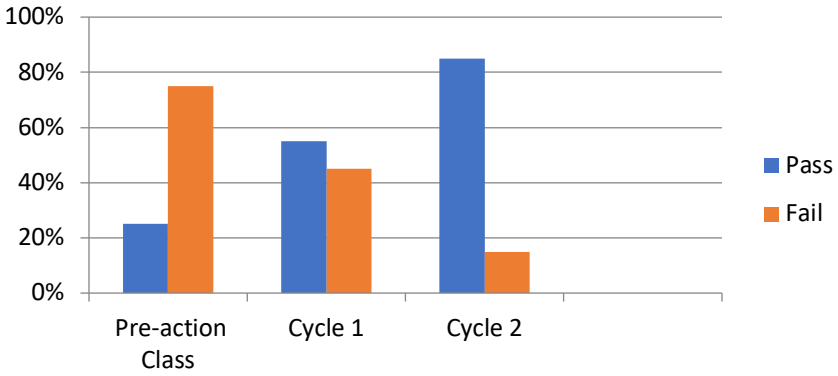

Figure 4. Student achievement diagram for each cycle

By the end of the second cycle, the study had effectively met the predetermined success criteria. At least 80% of the students were achieving the minimum mastery standard, and there was also observable improvement in their social skills (many of which could be categorized as high). Thus, the classroom action research intervention using contextual learning was successful in improving both the social competencies and academic performance of the students.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that applying a contextual learning approach had a positive impact on both the social skills and academic performance of the students. These results are in line with educational theories that stress the importance of an engaging and meaningful learning environment for effective learning. In this study, when the teacher created a more interactive and context-rich classroom atmosphere, students became more active

participants in their education. They found it easier to understand the lesson content and were more enthusiastic about learning when they could relate the material to real-world examples. This observation is consistent with the principle that students gain a deeper understanding of subject matter when they are actively involved in learning activities that connect to their everyday lives (Brown et al., 1989; Kunandar, 2007). It echoes the views of Simeru et al. (2023), who explain that contextual learning strategies help educators link classroom concepts with real-life situations, thereby making lessons more relevant and interesting for students. In our study, as students engaged in contextual learning tasks, they not only grasped academic concepts more readily but also demonstrated improved classroom behavior – a shift attributable to the more student-centered and stimulating approach. The role of the teacher was pivotal in this transformation; by moving away from a purely lecture-based mode to that of a facilitator, the teacher encouraged greater interaction, question-asking, and collaboration among students. This change underscores how crucial teacher facilitation is in implementing learner-centered approaches and how it can influence student engagement and success (Seknun, 2012). Overall, the improved learning environment fostered by contextual teaching contributed significantly to addressing the initial challenges of low participation and poor social interaction.

Through the iterative cycles of this classroom action research, there was a marked improvement in student outcomes. In the pre-intervention observation (prior to applying contextual learning), only 25% of the students had achieved the MMC in their academic results, reflecting the widespread difficulties in understanding the material. After the first cycle of implementing contextual learning, students' performance began to improve: the number of students scoring above the MMC roughly doubled (from 5 students to 11 students, i.e. 55% of the class). Even though nearly half of the class still had not met the mastery benchmark by the end of Cycle 1, there were clear signs of progress in their social behavior – for instance, more students dared to ask and answer questions, and they showed a greater awareness of the need to participate actively in class. These initial improvements pointed to the effectiveness of the CTL approach, but the reflection stage of Cycle 1 also revealed certain shortcomings. It became apparent that the learning experience could be further optimized by incorporating more concrete learning media and materials, as some students were still struggling with abstract concepts. In response, the second cycle of the intervention introduced concrete instructional media and hands-on materials to support the contextual learning activities. This adjustment proved successful: by the end of Cycle 2, a total of 17 students (85% of the class) achieved scores at or above the MMC, surpassing the 80% success criterion that had been set for the action research. In addition to higher test scores, students exhibited enhanced social skills by the conclusion of the second cycle – they were more confident in working together, more empathetic toward their peers, and more willing to engage in class discussions and presentations. The dramatic increase in mastery of the subject matter, along with the observed behavioral changes, strongly suggests that the contextual learning approach effectively addressed the problems identified at the outset of the study. This outcome is consistent with findings from other educational research. For example, Pangemanan (2020) reported that students taught using a CTL approach showed significantly better learning outcomes in mathematics compared to those taught with conventional methods. Likewise, interventions that emphasize active student engagement and real-world context have been shown to improve not only academic achievement but also students' social and personal skills (Gaspar et al., 2018). In the present study, the use of contextual learning strategies made learning more meaningful and enjoyable for the students, which in turn led to greater motivation and participation. Students began to take more initiative in their learning – they asked questions, expressed their ideas, and collaborated more freely – indicating a positive shift in classroom dynamics. These improvements in social interaction are particularly important, as they create a more supportive learning community in which students learn from each other and build confidence. This aligns with the broader evidence on social-emotional learning programs, which finds that when students develop better social skills and feel more connected in the classroom, their academic performance tends to improve as well (Durlak

et al., 2011; Gaspar et al., 2018).

In summary, the implementation of contextual learning in this fifth-grade classroom led to a significant enhancement of both student learning outcomes and social competencies. By contextualizing lessons and actively involving students in the learning process, the teacher was able to transform previously passive learners into active, engaged participants. The students not only achieved higher academic scores by the end of the intervention but also demonstrated improved teamwork, empathy, and confidence in classroom activities. These findings reinforce the notion that a meaningful, student-centered learning environment can simultaneously foster academic success and vital social skills. In practical terms, the success of this classroom action research suggests that educators facing similar challenges might consider integrating contextual learning approaches into their teaching. By doing so, they can create a more dynamic learning experience that motivates students, caters to their real-life understanding, and ultimately helps students become both better learners and more socially adept individuals.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of contextual learning in the fifth-grade class of Private Elementary School YPPK Salib Suci Agats resulted in significant improvements in both students' social skills and their learning outcomes. Throughout the intervention, students progressively became more confident and actively engaged in the learning process. They developed a greater willingness to collaborate in groups and showed increased empathy towards their classmates. Improvements were also observed in students' confidence and concentration when either teachers or peers were presenting information, and students became more inclined to ask questions, answer questions, and participate earnestly in class discussions.

Quantitatively, the study recorded a substantial rise in student achievement. Initially, only 5 students (25%) had scores above the MMC. After the first cycle of contextual learning, 11 students (55%) were able to achieve scores above the MMC. By the end of the second cycle—after addressing the shortcomings identified in Cycle 1 (for example, by incorporating concrete learning media in Cycle 2)—the number of students scoring above the MMC reached 17, equivalent to 85% of the class. In other words, most of the students met the academic competency benchmark as a result of the interventions. This result exceeds the successful criteria set for the classroom action research, which required at least 80% of students to achieve MMC and demonstrate high social skill levels.

In summary, the contextual learning approach proved to be highly effective in this classroom setting. It not only raised students' academic performance to the desired level of competency but also significantly enhanced their social skills, such as cooperation, confidence, and active participation. These findings suggest that contextual learning, especially when supplemented with appropriate concrete learning media and iterative refinement through cycles of action research, can be a powerful method for improving both the cognitive and social aspects of student learning in elementary schools.

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