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ENHANCING LEARNING OUTCOMES THROUGH PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING IN IPAS

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Abstract

This study explores the effectiveness of the problem-based learning (PBL) model in improving learning outcomes in the Natural and Social Sciences (IPAS) subject for fourth-grade students at SD Negeri 04 Bungku. The research was motivated by the relatively low percentage of students (57.57%) achieving the minimum mastery criteria, which signaled the need for an alternative learning approach. PBL emphasizes critical thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving through structured inquiry. Using a qualitative descriptive method, the study involved 18 students and employed various instruments, including cognitive tests, attitude questionnaires, and skill observation sheets, complemented by observations, interviews, and documentation. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and N-Gain calculations. The results indicate that the PBL model was effectively implemented across its five stages: problem orientation, student organization, investigation, result presentation, and reflection. Cognitive outcomes showed moderate improvement (N-Gain = 0.30), as did affective outcomes, particularly in environmental responsibility and appreciation for local identity. However, skill outcomes improved only at a low level (N-Gain = 0.17), suggesting that collaborative practices require further strengthening. The study highlights PBL as a promising approach to foster active learning and student engagement, while also pointing to the need for more targeted strategies to enhance psychomotor skills.

Keywords: Problem-based Learning, IPAS Education, cognitive, affective, psychomotor, Kurikulum Merdeka

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Introduction

Education plays a crucial role in shaping individuals who are capable of critical thinking, problem-solving, and active participation in society. The 21st-century educational landscape demands that students not only acquire knowledge but also develop competencies such as collaboration, creativity, and adaptability. In Indonesia, the government has initiated numerous educational reforms, including the Kurikulum Merdeka, which emphasizes student-centered learning and the development of higher-order thinking skills. Despite these reforms, many primary schools still adopt teacher-centered approaches that rely heavily on rote memorization and textbook-driven instruction. As a result, students often struggle to engage with the learning material meaningfully, leading to suboptimal learning outcomes.

A case in point is SD Negeri 04 Bungku, where only 57.57% of fourth-grade students reached the minimum completeness criteria in the subject of Natural and Social Sciences (IPAS). This subject, which integrates natural and social sciences, is vital for developing students' understanding of their environment and their roles as responsible citizens. The low achievement rates in IPAS suggest a disconnect between instructional practices and the learning needs of students. Conventional methods may not sufficiently stimulate inquiry or encourage the application of knowledge to real-life contexts. This situation calls for innovative teaching models that can foster deeper engagement and improve learning outcomes.

Problem-based learning (PBL) is one such model. PBL is a student-centered pedagogy that uses complex, real-world problems as the starting point for learning. Instead of passively receiving information, students in a PBL setting are encouraged to explore, discuss, and resolve problems collaboratively. This process nurtures not only cognitive development but also interpersonal and affective skills. PBL has been extensively researched and applied in higher education, particularly in medical and engineering fields, where it has been shown to enhance critical thinking and knowledge retention (Hmelo *et al*., 2018). More recently, scholars such as Wardani, (2023) and Ilmi *et al*., (2022) have advocated for the adaptation of PBL in elementary and secondary education, citing its potential to transform learning into a more active and meaningful process.

The relevance of PBL to IPAS is particularly noteworthy. As an interdisciplinary subject, IPAS lends itself well to problem-solving approaches that integrate science and social studies. For example, local environmental issues can serve as rich learning contexts that require students to apply both scientific knowledge

and social reasoning. However, the implementation of PBL in IPAS classrooms, especially at the primary level, remains limited. Teachers may lack the training or confidence to facilitate open-ended inquiry, and curriculum constraints may discourage experimentation with alternative methods.

Research by Pinontoan *et al*., (2023) found that applying PBL in social science classes led to improvements in students' analytical skills and classroom participation. Similarly, Hastiwi *et al*., (2023) reported that PBL increased student engagement and environmental awareness in IPAS topics. These studies highlight the model's potential benefits, yet they also underscore the need for further investigation, particularly in diverse educational settings and with younger learners. Understanding how PBL can be effectively implemented in the context of rural Indonesian schools, where resources may be limited and pedagogical support is often lacking, is crucial for broader educational reform.

The core problem addressed in this study is the persistently low student achievement in IPAS at SD Negeri 04 Bungku. Traditional teaching methods have not sufficiently supported students in achieving the expected learning outcomes. Without an intervention that aligns with the Kurikulum Merdeka's emphasis on active learning, this trend may continue, potentially widening educational disparities and limiting students' future opportunities. There is an urgent need to evaluate alternative instructional strategies that are feasible, scalable, and effective in real classroom settings.

In response to this problem, the present study investigates the use of problem-based learning as a pedagogical intervention to improve student learning outcomes in IPAS. The novelty of this research lies in its application of PBL at the primary school level in an integrated subject and rural context. Most existing literature focuses on secondary or tertiary education and treats subjects in isolation. By contrast, this study explores how PBL can simultaneously enhance cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains in an interdisciplinary framework. Furthermore, the study provides empirical data using instruments such as pre-test and post-test, attitude questionnaires, and skill observations to measure learning gains across these domains.

This study contributes to the growing body of research on instructional innovation in elementary education. It seeks to provide practical insights for teachers, school leaders, and policymakers who are interested in adopting PBL to meet the learning needs of diverse student populations. Through a rigorous evaluation of PBL implementation in the IPAS curriculum, the study aims to demonstrate how problem-based approaches can bridge the gap between educational policy and classroom practice. Ultimately, it advocates for a more dynamic, inclusive, and contextually relevant approach to teaching and learning in Indonesian primary schools.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach, selected for its ability to thoroughly explore the naturalistic teaching and learning environment within the classroom. The objective was to examine how the problem-based learning (PBL) model was implemented and to assess its influence on students' learning outcomes across cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. This design enabled the researcher to capture rich, contextualized insights into classroom dynamics, student interactions, and pedagogical practices as they occurred in real time. Such an approach is particularly effective in uncovering nuanced learning patterns that might be overlooked by strictly quantitative methods.

Participants in this study consisted of 18 fourth-grade students from SD Negeri 04 Bungku, located in Morowali District, Central Sulawesi, Indonesia. A purposive sampling technique was employed to reflect a representative profile of rural public elementary school students. The class included an equal number of male and female students with a wide range of academic abilities. In addition to student participants, the homeroom and subject teachers contributed as key informants. Their involvement through interviews and observation provided essential contextual perspectives that enriched the interpretation of student data.

Multiple data collection techniques were utilized to ensure the credibility, dependability, and triangulation of findings. Classroom observations were conducted to assess the fidelity and authenticity of the PBL implementation. Structured interviews were held with both students and teachers to explore their experiences, perceptions, and reflections regarding the learning process. Cognitive learning outcomes were measured using pre-tests and post-tests to assess quantitative changes attributable to the instructional intervention.

Several purpose-designed instruments were deployed to measure the targeted learning outcomes. Cognitive achievement was evaluated through a 20-item multiple-choice test constructed in alignment with IPAS curriculum indicators, particularly focusing on the theme "my region and its natural wealth." To assess affective aspects, a Likert-scale questionnaire was administered comprising items related to students' pride in their local culture, environmental awareness, and personal responsibility. Psychomotor skills were observed using a structured observation checklist that examined students' active engagement in discussions, ability to articulate arguments, and collaboration within group settings. Complementary observation and interview protocols were also developed to

ensure methodological consistency throughout the data collection phase.

The analysis integrated both quantitative and qualitative methods. For the quantitative dimension, pre-test and post-test scores were analyzed using the Normalized Gain (N-Gain) formula to determine the extent of learning improvement. The N-Gain was computed using the formula (1).

$$N - Gain = \frac{Post\ Test - Pre\ Test}{100 - Pre\ Test} \quad (1)$$

The N-Gain results were then classified into three interpretative categories: scores exceeding 0.7 were categorized as high improvement, those between 0.3 and 0.7 as moderate, and those equal to or below 0.3 as low improvement. These classifications facilitated a clearer understanding of the quantitative impact of the PBL model on student achievement.

Simultaneously, qualitative data derived from interviews and observations, were analyzed using thematic analysis. Recurring patterns and categories were coded to identify themes related to student engagement, behavioral changes, and collaborative practices. Data triangulation across multiple instruments and informants reinforced the validity of the interpretations and supported the robustness of the study's conclusions.

Results and Discussion

The findings of this study are presented across three key domains of student learning outcomes as cognitive, affective, and psychomotor, as observed and measured during the implementation of the problem-based learning (PBL) model in IPAS instruction. The third learning outcome is visualized in Figure 1.

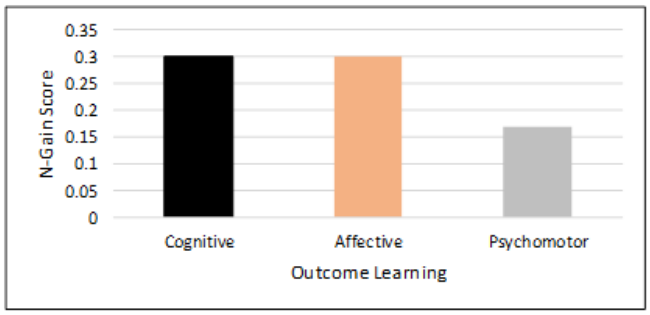

Figure 1. Average N-Gain scores across cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains.

The results depicted in Figure 1 highlight moderate gains in cognitive and affective learning, while psychomotor improvements remain minimal. This visualization supports the quantitative findings and underscores the need for further instructional scaffolding in skill development.

Cognitive learning outcomes

The analysis of cognitive performance revealed a notable increase in student achievement from pre-test to post-test. The average N-Gain score was 0.30, which falls within the moderate category as show in Figure 2. This suggests that the PBL model contributed meaningfully to the enhancement of students' understanding of the thematic unit "my region and its natural wealth." Students demonstrated improved abilities in identifying natural resources, explaining their functions, and articulating their importance to regional development. Compared to traditional methods, the use of real-world problems enabled students to contextualize abstract concepts, thus deepening comprehension.

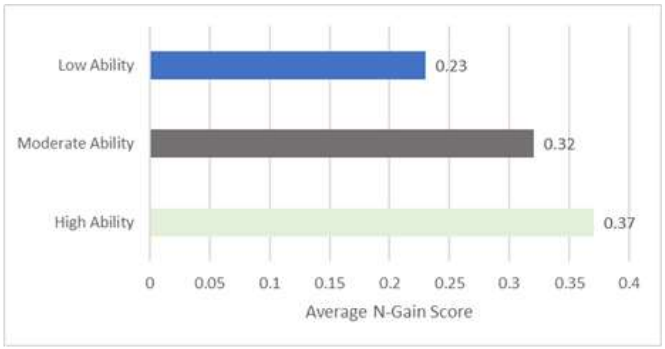

Figure 2. Average N-Gain Scores of cognitive domains based on student' ability.

Affective learning outcomes

Students also exhibited growth in affective dimensions, with an average N-Gain score of 0.30, again in the moderate range. The Likert-scale questionnaire responses revealed increased pride in local identity, a stronger sense of environmental stewardship, and greater responsibility in group discussions. This development aligns with the objectives of *Kurikulum Merdeka*, which emphasizes character education alongside academic achievement.

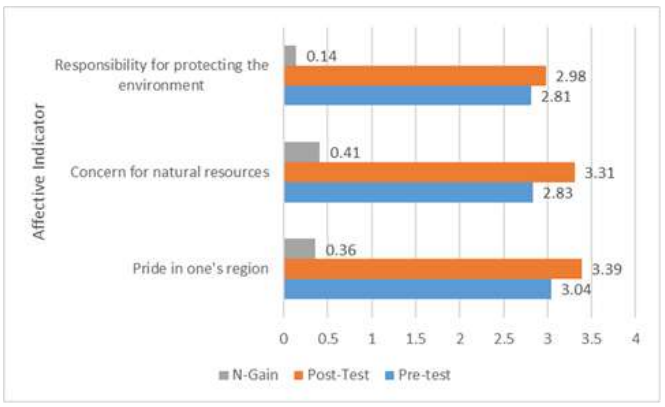

Figure 3. Average N-Gain scores of affective domains.

Psychomotor learning outcomes

In the psychomotor domain, the results showed only a slight improvement, with an N-Gain score of 0.17, categorized as low, as shown in Figure 4. While students showed some enhancement in group collaboration, idea sharing, and argumentation, these skills require more sustained practice and scaffolding. Limited time allocation for group discussion, coupled with students' initial unfamiliarity with PBL routines, may have constrained skill development.

Thematic analysis of observations and interviews identified several recurring themes. Firstly, students were more enthusiastic when learning was framed around real-life problems, which promoted curiosity and participation. Secondly, teachers reported that PBL encouraged more equitable participation among students of varying abilities. Thirdly, classroom dynamics shifted toward collaborative problem-solving rather than passive note-taking. However, both students and teachers acknowledged the need for more structured guidance in navigating open-ended tasks.

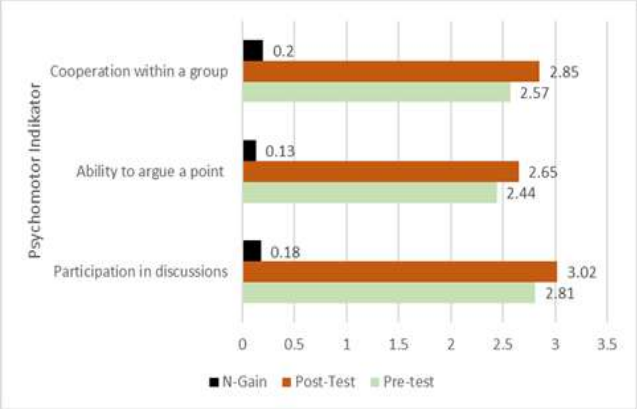

Figure 4. Average N-Gain scores of psychomotor domains

An intriguing insight emerged from student reflections: several learners expressed interest in taking action beyond the classroom by creating campaigns or community posters related to environmental conservation. This points to the potential for future PBL activities to include service-learning components. Integrating IPAS with civic engagement can not only deepen academic understanding but also empower students to become proactive citizens.

The findings from this study offer significant insights into the multifaceted impact of problem-based learning (PBL) on student outcomes in the subject of IPAS, particularly in the theme "my region and its natural wealth." Each domain as cognitive, affective, and psychomotor presents a unique pattern of progress and challenges. The moderate N-Gain score (0.30) in the cognitive domain suggests meaningful learning. Students demonstrated improved conceptual understanding of local natural wealth, as evidenced by their ability to identify and explain types of natural resources in Bungku and their socio-economic importance. This aligns with (Hmelo *et al*, 2018), who emphasized PBL's strength in fostering conceptual depth and contextual reasoning. The specific indicators, such as recognizing renewable vs. non-renewable resources and explaining conservation practices, showed noticeable gains. Ilmi *et al*., (2022) also support this finding, noting that PBL enables students to organize information meaningfully when learning is rooted in relevant contexts. However, compared to the findings of Pinontoan *et al*., (2023), who reported high cognitive gains in PBL-based social studies lessons (N-Gain > 0.50), the moderate outcome in this study may reflect the novelty of PBL for these students and limited prior exposure.

The affective gains (N-Gain = 0.30) were distributed across three indicators: (1) pride in regional identity, (2) concern for natural wealth, and (3) responsibility in group work. Students exhibited increased enthusiasm and emotional connection when discussing local resources, especially marine life and forests unique to their area. These outcomes are consistent with the goals of Kurikulum Merdeka and supported by Rachman *et al*., (2020), who found that PBL raises awareness of environmental and cultural heritage.

Moreover, the affective development observed is in agreement with Elvani *et al*., (2024), Karan & Brown (2022) where PBL not only strengthened students' motivation but also cultivated reflective and responsible behaviour, particularly in the context of community and environment. This shows that PBL is not only suitable for enhancing academic mastery but also character values, which are central to *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Interestingly, the indicator of responsibility scored lower (N-Gain = 0.14), suggesting the need for more structured reflective activities. This may mirror the findings of (Napitupulu *et al*., 2020; Napitupulu, 2022), who warned that affective outcomes are not automatically cultivated in PBL unless accompanied by intentional value-building practices. Embedding storytelling, student journaling, or reflection sheets might enhance affective internalization.

The psychomotor domain showed the least progress (N-Gain = 0.17), especially on indicators like oral argumentation and collaboration. Despite structured group tasks, some students were still reluctant to express ideas. Limited PBL familiarity and possible cultural norms around group speaking may have played a role. As noted by Aslan, (2021); Napitupulu, (2022); Salsabila & Muqowim, (2024), active skills development requires not just group tasks but explicit scaffolding, such as modelling,

feedback loops, and communication strategy training. One possible enhancement is integrating local fieldwork such visits to traditional markets or forests, to allow learners to apply knowledge hands-on. This approach echoes eco-pedagogical principles (Kahn, 2010), encouraging students to learn through critical engagement with their environment (Amaliati *et al*., 2024; Napitupulu *et al*., 2020; Rymbai & Sungoh, 2021). This opens new opportunities for integrating service-learning in primary education. Therefore, training for teachers in managing and facilitating group work becomes essential.

The contextual richness of "my region and its natural wealth" makes it an ideal theme for PBL. Learners engaged more deeply when exploring real issues like deforestation or water pollution in their own community. Several students proposed creative projects, including conservation campaigns and educational posters, which indicates the potential for integrating service-learning. This aligns with Kahn's (2010) vision of education that empowers learners as agents of local ecological change (Mittal & Bansal, 2024).

This theme also opens pathways for transdisciplinary learning that connecting IPAS with citizenship education, art (poster design), and even mathematics as resource estimation (Husnah *et al*., 2023; Napitupulu, *et al*., 2025; Rohmaniyah *et al*., 2024; Viqri *et al*., 2024). Future implementation of PBL in IPAS should explore these intersections to enrich learning experiences further.

While the results are consistent with numerous studies supporting PBL (Hasibuan *et al*., 2022; Maryam *et al*., 2024; Rachman *et al*., 2020; Sihaloho *et al*., 2017; Wulansari *et al*., 2024), they diverge from findings in more urban or digitally-rich settings where gains in all domains, especially psychomotor, tend to be higher. Resource limitations, teacher readiness, and classroom culture in rural schools like SDN 04 Bungku might moderate these effects. Nevertheless, this study contributes by illustrating how PBL can still yield a meaningful impact even in under-resourced settings. The key lies in contextualization, scaffolded facilitation, and tapping into the reality life of students.

Conclusions

This study has demonstrated that the Problem-Based Learning (PBL) model is an effective instructional approach for enhancing IPAS learning outcomes among fourth-grade students at SD Negeri 04 Bungku. Through the integration of real-life problems and collaborative learning activities, students showed meaningful improvements in cognitive and affective domains. The moderate N-Gain scores in these areas reflect a successful shift from passive to active learning. However, the psychomotor domain experienced only marginal gains, indicating a need for more targeted strategies that promote hands-on engagement and skill application.

The results affirm that PBL can foster deeper understanding, increase student motivation, and encourage character development—attributes aligned with the goals of *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Furthermore, students' enthusiasm for community-based action projects suggests that PBL has the potential to cultivate not only academic growth but also civic awareness and social responsibility. Future research should explore longitudinal impacts of PBL and its integration with eco-pedagogical and digital learning tools.

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Conflicts of Interest

No conflicts interest.

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