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Integrating Social Justice Values into Project-Based Social Studies Learning to Foster Empathy and Civic Awareness

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Abstract

This study examined how social justice values were integrated into project-based social studies learning and compared students' posttest social empathy and civic awareness scores between two instructional conditions. A sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach combined a posttest-only quasi-experimental comparison of two intact Grade VIII classes (N = 60; 30 students per class) with eight classroom observations, interviews with 12 intervention-class students, and an interview with one teacher at SMPN 2 Dawuan, Subang, Indonesia. The experimental class participated in resource-sharing and environmental projects incorporating equity, inclusion, fairness deliberation, community engagement, and guided reflection. Students in the experimental class reported higher posttest scores in social empathy (M = 35.17 vs. 28.63) and civic awareness (M = 35.47 vs. 25.83). Conventional individual-level tests indicated statistically significant differences ($t(58) = -19.76$ and -33.11, respectively; both $p < .001$), with exceptionally large standardized differences ($d = 5.10$ and 8.55). Interview and observation evidence illustrated students' understanding of unequal opportunities, reported responsibility, collaborative participation, and the challenges of project implementation. The findings offer a literature-informed framework for connecting social justice values with authentic projects and reflective learning. However, one intact class per condition, absence of a pretest, and reliance on self-report measures preclude definitive causal conclusions and broad generalization.

Keywords: Civic Awareness; Mixed Methods; Project-Based Learning; Social Empathy; Social Justice Values

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INTRODUCTION

Social studies education plays an important role in preparing students to understand social inequalities, appreciate diverse perspectives, and participate responsibly in democratic life. Beyond transmitting factual knowledge, education should provide opportunities to examine social problems, consider the consequences of injustice, and develop responsibility toward others. Contemporary concerns about inequality, intolerance, and weakened solidarity reinforce the need to connect education with equity and democratic participation (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2021). Equity-oriented educational practice emphasizes recognizing social inequalities and connecting instruction with students' opportunities for socially responsible action (Banks, 2017; Curtis, 2020). Empathy and civic awareness contribute to these goals by supporting understanding of others' experiences, recognition of civic responsibilities, and public participation

(Campbell, 2019; Segal, 2011). These competencies are particularly relevant during early adolescence, when students develop their identities, moral understanding, and social relationships (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). The National Council for the Social Studies (2013) likewise connects social studies knowledge with informed civic participation.

Achieving these goals requires opportunities to connect social concepts with authentic experiences. Recent studies in Indonesia have explored how Minangkabau indigenous knowledge can inform social studies learning and how project-oriented activities under Kurikulum Merdeka can provide opportunities for contextualized citizenship education (Rahayu et al., 2026; Utami et al., 2025). When fairness, solidarity, and civic responsibility are presented primarily as abstract principles, learners may have limited opportunities to apply them to their relationships and communities. Reviews of project-based learning emphasize authentic problems, inquiry, collaboration, and the importance of instructional implementation (Condliffe et al., 2017; Thomas, 2000). Research on learning and development similarly emphasizes supportive relationships and meaningful educational experiences (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

Social justice values are defined in this study as equity, inclusion, recognition of diversity, and awareness of social inequalities that guide responsible, participatory action (Banks, 2017; Curtis, 2020). These principles orient project planning, fair allocation of resources, inclusive decisions, and reflection. Social empathy involves understanding others within their wider social circumstances; Segal (2011) identifies individual empathy, contextual understanding, and social responsibility as its central theoretical components. The present questionnaire instead operationalizes cognitive perspective-taking, affective concern, and self-reported behavioral or prosocial dispositions. A recent school-based intervention study also examined cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions of empathy (Çoban Sural & Yaşar Sağlık, 2026). The behavioral items in this study assess reported prosocial dispositions, and the three operational dimensions should not be regarded as direct measures of Segal's framework (Segal, 2011, 2018).

Civic awareness is operationalized through reported civic knowledge-related awareness, civic values and responsibility, and participation-related dispositions (Campbell, 2019; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). These dimensions are informed by civic education literature but are not direct reproductions of Westheimer and Kahne's categories of personally responsible, participatory, and justice-oriented citizenship. Youth civic engagement research underscores opportunities for discussing public issues and participating meaningfully in community life (Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Kahne & Sporte, 2008).

Studies of project-based and experiential civic learning have explored justice-oriented project design, perspective-taking, and participation in community activities (Chong, 2020; de la Tierra, 2025; Lau et al., 2026). These investigations were conducted in different subjects and educational settings, and therefore provide complementary rather than directly equivalent evidence. Zhou and Li (2022) described how high school students serving visually impaired people considered others' needs and social responsibility, while Wartenweiler (2018) examined a secondary school program combining social justice education, serious play, and service-learning. Civic and social justice projects have also been examined among college students, elementary pupils, and Indonesian university learners (Akirav, 2023; Setyowati et al., 2025; Witherell,

2025). These differing contexts suggest opportunities for justice-oriented learning without establishing uniform results across age groups.

Participation in a project, however, does not automatically establish a justice-oriented learning process. Critical service-learning research distinguishes helping or charity from reciprocity and structural awareness (Arinze et al., 2022; Iyer et al., 2018). Empathy-related reactions to perceived injustice may be associated with advocacy intentions (Bringle et al., 2018), while student voice and meaningful participation are important features of civic learning (Wong et al., 2022). Environmental justice education provides additional evidence that community concerns can connect environmental awareness with civic engagement (Schneller et al., 2022). Yet findings vary: Moller et al. (2025) reported no significant overall changes in some secondary school empathy and civic engagement outcomes despite qualitative learning experiences.

A context-specific gap therefore remains in understanding how explicit justice values guide project-based social studies activities and how lower secondary students experience these activities in Indonesia. Moreover, social empathy and civic awareness should be examined as distinct but related outcomes rather than assumed to develop identically. The present study contributes an operational mapping of social justice values to project activities and proposed learning processes, and examines the corresponding outcomes through complementary quantitative and qualitative evidence.

The intervention framework draws on social empathy theory and empirical work on justice-oriented projects, inclusive participation, and critical reflection (Iyer et al., 2018; Segal, 2011; Wartenweiler, 2018; Zhou & Li, 2022). Across one semester, the Resource Sharing Project and environmental initiatives incorporated unequal access, equity, inclusion, shared responsibility, community participation, and guided reflection. Table 1 maps the values to students' activities, literature-informed pedagogical propositions, evidence sources, and socio-civic dimensions. Citations in the proposed-mechanism column identify the conceptual and empirical basis for each proposition.

Table 1. Mechanism Mapping of Social Justice Values within Social Project-Based Learning

Social Justice Value	Activity Feature	Proposed Mechanism	Evidence Type	Dimension	Civic Awareness
Awareness of Social Inequality	Students identified groups affected by unequal access to resources and analyzed cases of economic inequality during the Resource Sharing Project.	Examining unequal social conditions may encourage contextual understanding, perspective-taking, and recognition of others' needs (Segal, 2011; Zhou & Li, 2022).	Student reflections, interviews, project reports	Cognitive empathy	Awareness of social inequality

Social Justice Value	Activity Feature	Proposed Mechanism	Evidence Type	Dimension	Civic Awareness
Equity	Students discussed fairness criteria, selected aid recipients, and distributed resources to individuals with limited access to resources.	Deliberation about fairness and resource distribution may provide opportunities to examine unequal social relationships, reciprocity, and responsibility toward others (Arinze et al., 2022; Iyer et al., 2018).	Observation notes, project artifacts, interviews	Cognitive and behavioral empathy	Civic responsibility
Inclusion	Students worked collaboratively in heterogeneous groups, shared responsibilities, and ensured equal participation in project activities.	Inclusive collaboration may encourage respect for different perspectives, meaningful student voice, and participatory decision-making (Iyer et al., 2018; Wong et al., 2022).	Classroom observations, group documentation	Affective empathy	Democratic participation
Community Engagement	Students implemented resource-sharing initiatives and participated in community-oriented social actions.	Participation in community-oriented activities may connect awareness of social needs with opportunities to practice civic involvement and shared responsibility (Wong et al.,	Project products, observation records	Behavioral empathy	Civic participation

Social Justice Value	Activity Feature	Proposed Mechanism	Evidence Type	Dimension	Civic Awareness
		2022; Wren, 2021).			
Environmental Justice and Social Responsibility	Students examined the social consequences of environmental problems and designed cleanliness campaigns promoting shared responsibility for public spaces.	Community-oriented environmental learning may connect awareness of environmental injustice and collective well-being with civic responsibility and participation (Schneller et al., 2022).	Campaign materials, reflective journals, interviews	Affective and behavioral empathy	Community-oriented civic awareness
Critical Reflection on Justice	Students completed reflective journals and participated in guided discussions about fairness, empathy, and citizenship throughout both project cycles.	Structured reflection and dialogue may help students critically interpret their experiences, examine assumptions about justice, and connect learning with socio-civic responsibility (Arinze et al., 2022; Wren, 2021).	Reflection journals, interview excerpts	Cognitive, affective, and behavioral empathy	Civic values and democratic commitment

As shown in Table 1, the intervention connected social justice principles with specific learning opportunities rather than presenting the principles only as abstract concepts. The references grounding these proposed mechanisms should not be interpreted as proof that each mechanism occurred or caused changes in the present study. Figure 1 visualizes the overall framework: social justice values inform resource-sharing and environmental projects, which create opportunities for perspective-taking, fairness deliberation, inclusive participation, and guided reflection. The proposed processes are conceptually connected to the study's two separately measured socio-civic outcomes.

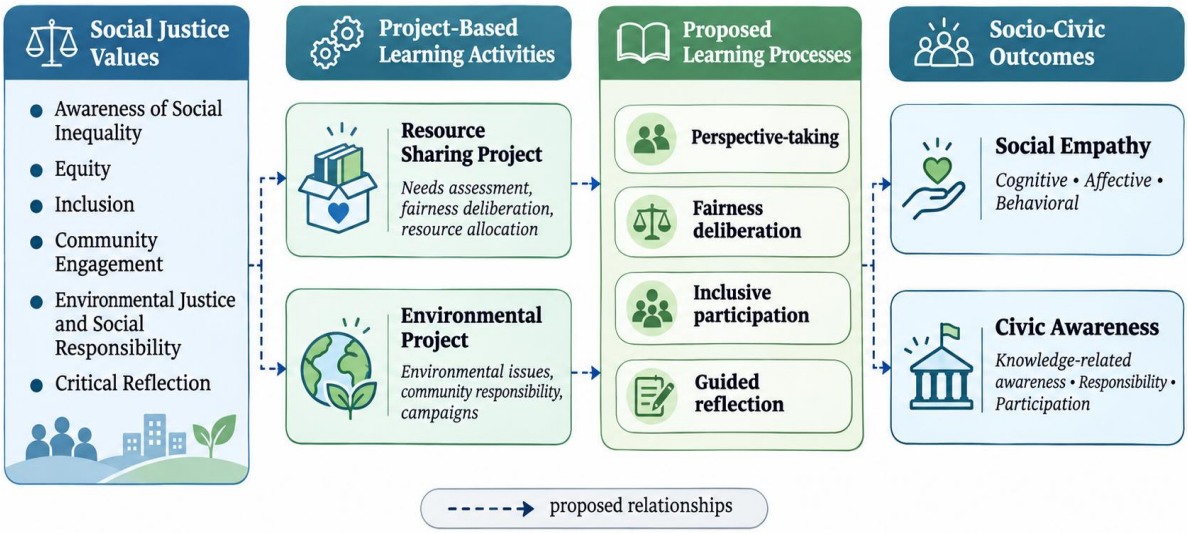


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Social Justice-Oriented Project-Based Learning

This study aimed (1) to describe how social justice values were incorporated into social project design and implementation; (2) to explore students' experiences of fairness, empathy, responsibility, and civic participation; and (3) to compare posttest social empathy and civic awareness scores between justice-oriented project-based and conventional social studies classes. A sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach connected posttest comparisons with qualitative accounts of the learning experience (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The study involved two intact Grade VIII classes in one school. Accordingly, it provides context-specific evidence and explanatory insights rather than definitive causal conclusions.

METHOD

Research Design

This study used a sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach combining a posttest-only quasi-experimental comparison with qualitative observations and interviews (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Ivankova et al., 2006). The quantitative component compared social empathy and civic awareness scores between two intact classes. Posttest findings informed the selection of interview participants, while observations recorded learning processes during the intervention. Integration occurred through sampling, thematic interpretation, and a joint display that linked quantitative patterns with contextual explanations (Fetters et al., 2013; Guetterman et al., 2015).

The design included one class per instructional condition and no pretest. Consequently, the instructional condition could not be separated from possible pre-existing class-level differences, and the comparisons do not establish a causal intervention effect. Figure 2 depicts the instructional conditions, observation timing, posttest assessment, subsequent interviews, and mixed-methods integration.

Participants and Sampling

The research involved 60 Grade VIII students aged 13–15 years at SMPN 2 Dawuan, Subang, Indonesia. Two intact classes served as the experimental (n = 30) and control (n = 30) conditions. The school was selected because of readiness to implement project-based learning. The original study described class selection as cluster random sampling; however, the available methodological records do not

specify how classes were selected or assigned to conditions. The term should not be taken to demonstrate randomized instructional assignment. Early adolescence is a relevant period for examining developing moral understanding and social relationships (Eccles & Roeser, 2011).

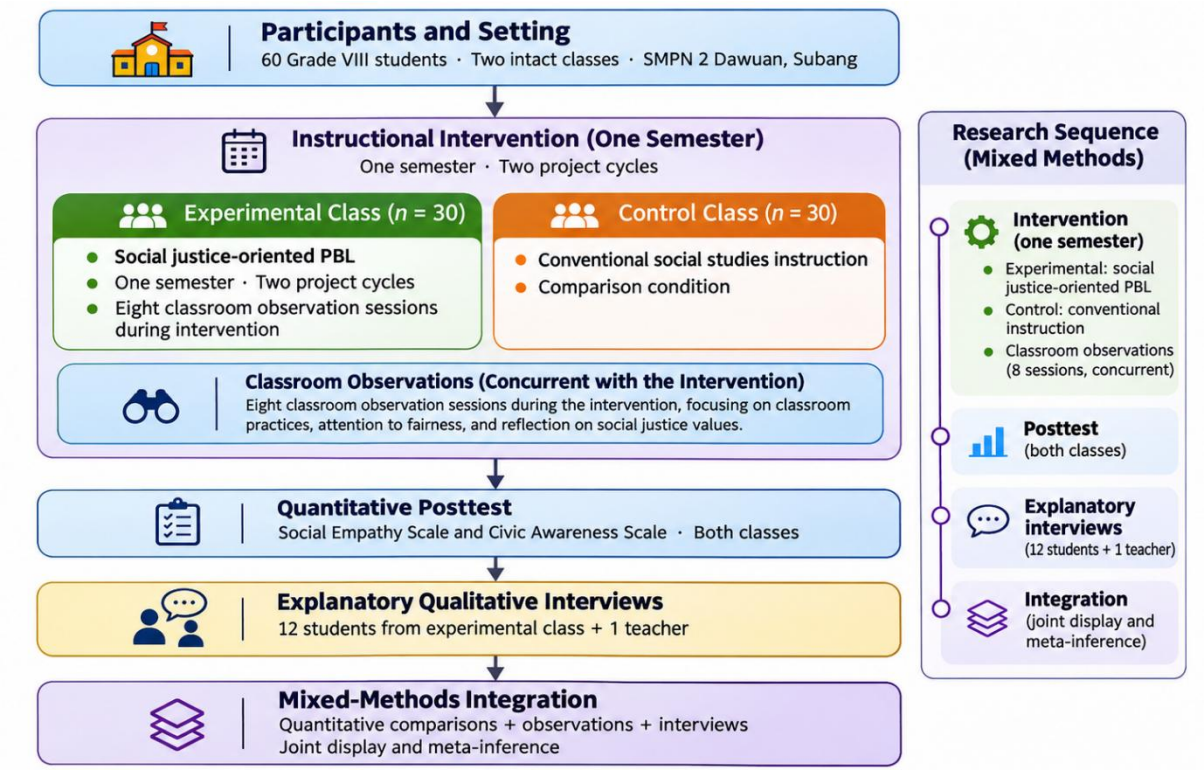


Figure 2. Research Design, Data Collection Sequence, and Mixed-Methods Integration

For explanatory interviews, 12 experimental-class students were selected purposively to represent high, medium, and low posttest score profiles and varied project participation. One social studies teacher who facilitated the intervention was also interviewed. Interview participants were selected after the posttest, linking the qualitative phase to the quantitative results. Their accounts provide contextual information about the intervention rather than an independent comparison with the control class.

Quantitative Instruments and Measurement

The Social Empathy Scale was informed by Segal (2011), and the Civic Awareness Scale was informed by Westheimer and Kahne (2004). Each instrument comprised 10 self-report statements rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree), giving possible total scores of 10–40. The social empathy dimensions were cognitive (perspective-taking), affective (concern), and behavioral (reported prosocial dispositions). Civic awareness dimensions were civic knowledge-related awareness, civic values and responsibility, and civic participation. Neither instrument was represented as a direct reproduction of the theoretical framework cited.

Three social studies education experts reviewed content relevance. Item–total correlations exceeded the reported r > .30 threshold. Cronbach's alpha was .87 for social empathy and .89 for civic awareness, indicating satisfactory internal consistency (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). These results provide evidence of content review and reliability, not comprehensive construct validation. Table 2 summarizes the instruments and their measured domains.

Table 2. Summary of Research Instruments

Variable	Instrument	Dimensions	Items	Item–Total Correlation	Cronbach's α	Source
Social empathy	Adapted self-report scale	Cognitive (perspective-taking); affective (emotional concern); behavioral (prosocial disposition)	10	r > .30	.87	Segal (2011)
Civic awareness	Adapted self-report scale	Knowledge-related awareness; civic values and responsibility; civic participation	10	r > .30	.89	Westheimer and Kahne (2004)

Qualitative Instruments and Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews addressed fairness, inequality, empathy, social responsibility, civic actions, participation, and implementation challenges. Twelve students and one teacher were interviewed for approximately 30–45 minutes per session. Eight classroom observation sessions documented awareness of social injustice, project participation, collaboration and fairness, and reflection on social justice values. The observations occurred throughout the intervention, rather than exclusively after the posttest.

Intervention and Research Procedures

The experimental class participated in social justice-oriented project-based social studies instruction across one semester; the control class received conventional instruction. The experimental activities comprised a Resource Sharing Project, in which students considered unequal resource access and fairness in allocation, and environmental initiatives addressing collective responsibility for shared spaces. Students worked collaboratively, considered different needs, participated in social actions, and completed guided reflection. The relationship between values and activities is detailed in Table 1 and synthesized visually in Figure 1.

Observations were recorded during eight intervention sessions. At the end of the semester, both classes completed the two questionnaires as posttests. The resulting score profiles and project participation informed selection for follow-up student interviews. The teacher provided a further instructional perspective. Table 6 presents the rubric used to summarize the observed engagement and implementation-related processes.

Quantitative Analysis

IBM SPSS Statistics 26 was used to calculate descriptive statistics and conventional independent-samples t-tests for each posttest measure. Levene's test was

reported for homogeneity of variance. Standardized mean differences were calculated using Cohen's d and a pooled within-group standard deviation (Lakens, 2013). Tables 4 and 5 provide the descriptive and inferential results. Although normality testing was mentioned in the original account, diagnostic values were not available and are not reported here.

The analysis had an important design limitation. Student-level t-tests assume independent observations, yet students were nested within two intact classes. With only one class in each condition, the study could not estimate classroom-level variation or statistically adjust for class confounding. Accordingly, the p values and effect sizes are presented as exploratory between-class comparisons rather than causal estimates; methodological guidance on clustered trials highlights the need to distinguish individual- and cluster-level analysis (Campbell et al., 2012).

Qualitative Analysis and Trustworthiness

Interview transcripts and observation records were examined using thematic analysis, with data reduction, initial coding, category development, and theme construction supported by NVivo 12 Plus (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Codes addressed value understanding, perceived empathy, civic responsibility, participation, project collaboration, and implementation challenges. Table 7 documents representative excerpts and their progression from initial codes to broader themes.

Trustworthiness procedures included comparing interviews with classroom observations and project artifacts, returning summaries and preliminary interpretations to selected participants, peer review of coding decisions, an audit trail, and researcher reflexivity. Table 3 provides the original study's checklist of procedures and documentary evidence. These measures support transparent interpretation but do not eliminate self-report or researcher-interpretation bias.

Table 3. Trustworthiness Checklist

Strategy	What Was Done (Specific)	When	Evidence/Log
Data Triangulation	Findings from student interviews were compared with classroom observation records and project artifacts to verify consistency across data sources.	During qualitative analysis	Observation notes, interview transcripts, and project documentation
Member Checking	Interview summaries and preliminary interpretations were returned to selected participants for confirmation and clarification.	After interview transcription and initial coding	Participant confirmation records
Peer Debriefing	Coding decisions, category development, and thematic interpretations were discussed with a colleague experienced in qualitative research to reduce subjective bias.	During coding and theme development	Debriefing notes and coding review records

Strategy	What Was Done (Specific)	When	Evidence/Log
Audit Trail	A systematic record of data collection procedures, coding processes, theme revisions, and analytical decisions was maintained throughout the study.	Throughout the research process	Coding logs, NVivo files, and analytic memos
Researcher Reflexivity	Researchers maintained reflective notes to identify assumptions, monitor potential biases, and document interpretive decisions during analysis.	During data analysis and interpretation	Reflective journals and researcher notes

Mixed-Methods Integration

Integration linked posttest score profiles to qualitative participant selection and, subsequently, compared quantitative outcomes with interview themes, observations, and project evidence in a joint display (Fetters et al., 2013; Guetterman et al., 2015). Table 8 presents the integrated evidence. Meta-inferences focused on how students experienced the projects and how these accounts related to posttest patterns. Because qualitative interviews came from the experimental class only, integration could not independently determine why the two classes differed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Quantitative Findings

The two posttest instruments had possible total scores of 10–40. Table 4 combines descriptive statistics for social empathy and civic awareness. On social empathy, the experimental class scored M = 35.17 (SD = 1.367), compared with M = 28.63 (SD = 1.189) in the control class. Observed ranges were 32–38 and 26–30, respectively. Civic awareness scores were likewise higher in the experimental class (M = 35.47, SD = 1.1366) than the control class (M = 25.83, SD = 1.1167), with observed ranges of 34–37 and 25–29. The ranges did not overlap for either outcome. These are between-class posttest patterns, not measured changes within individual students.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of Students' Social Empathy and Civic Awareness

Outcome	Class	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Social empathy	Control	30	26	30	28.63	1.189
	Experimental	30	32	38	35.17	1.367
Civic awareness	Control	30	25	29	25.83	1.1167
	Experimental	30	34	37	35.47	1.1366

Inferential Analysis and Effect Sizes

Table 5 consolidates the conventional independent-samples t-test statistics. Levene's tests were not significant for social empathy ($F = 0.144$, $p = .705$) or civic awareness ($F = 1.686$, $p = .199$). Social empathy differed between classes, $t(58) = -19.76$, $p < .001$, with a control-minus-experimental mean difference of −6.533 and $d = 5.10$. Civic awareness also differed, $t(58) = -33.11$, $p < .001$, with a mean difference of −9.63333 and 8.55.

Table 5. Independent-Samples t-Test Results for Social Empathy and Civic Awareness

Outcome	Levene F	Levene p	t	df	p	Mean diff.	SE diff.	Cohen's d
Social empathy	0.144	.705	−19.76	58	< .001	−6.533	0.33068	5.10
Civic awareness	1.686	.199	−33.11	58	< .001	−9.63333	0.29092	8.55

Note. Mean differences = control minus experimental; negative values indicate higher experimental-class scores.

Both standardized differences were exceptionally large; however, the t-tests treat students as independent despite class nesting. One intact class per instructional condition and the absence of a pretest prevent the reported differences from being attributed conclusively to instruction. Figure 3 visualizes the observed posttest means on the common 10–40 scale, with the exact values retained in Tables 4 and 5.

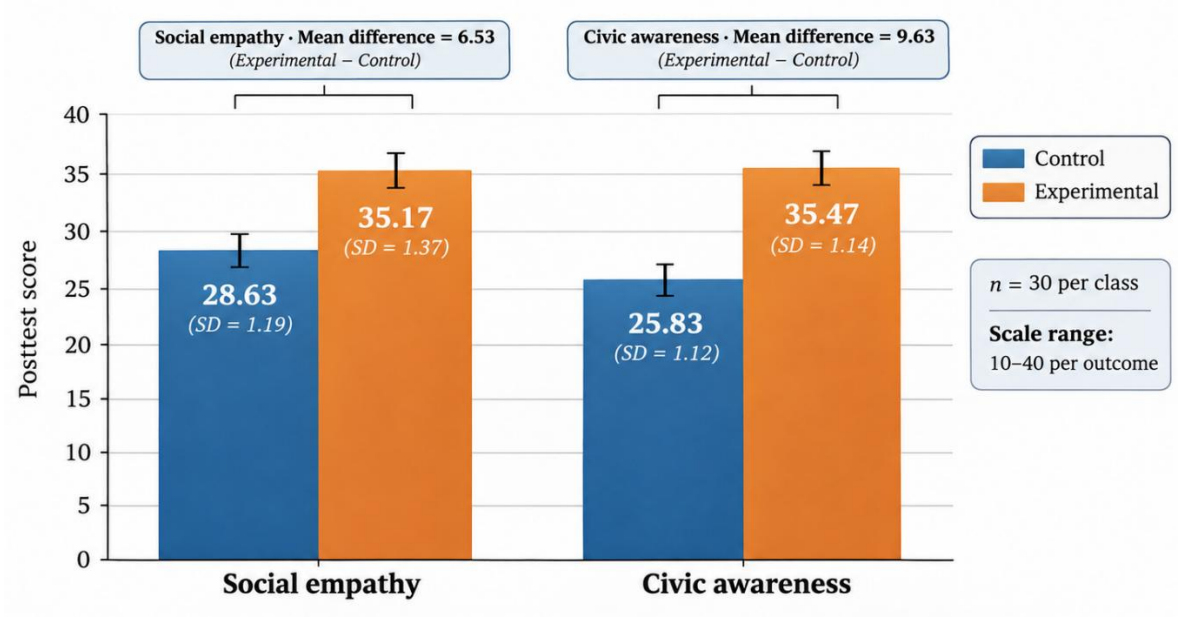


Figure 3. Comparison of Posttest Social Empathy and Civic Awareness Scores Between the Experimental and Control Classes

Classroom Observation and Implementation

Classroom observations across eight intervention sessions assessed awareness of social injustice, participation, collaboration and fairness, and reflection on social justice values. Table 6 reports each aspect as Very Good and gives an overall score of 3.67 on a four-point scale. These observations indicate favorable engagement in the intended activities. Because the aggregation procedure and aspect-specific numerical ratings are not documented, the overall score should not be treated as a separate, fully established measure of intervention fidelity or as causal evidence.

Table 6. Observation Rubric and Implementation Fidelity Results

Observed aspect	Operational indicator	Rating scale	Overall result
Awareness of social injustice	Students demonstrated concern toward issues of inequality and unfairness discussed during project activities.	1–4	Very Good

Observed aspect	Operational indicator	Rating scale	Overall result
Participation in project activities	Students actively participated in project planning, implementation, and social action activities.	1–4	Very Good
Collaboration and fairness in groups	Students collaborated effectively and shared responsibilities fairly during project implementation.	1–4	Very Good
Reflection on social justice values	Students connected project experiences with justice, empathy, and civic responsibility through reflective activities.	1–4	Very Good
Overall reported observation score	Reported aggregate for the four observed aspects.	1–4	3.67 (Very Good)

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative analysis yielded three themes: (1) integration of social justice values into instructional practices, (2) transformation of students' social empathy and civic awareness, and (3) dynamics and challenges of project implementation. The second theme preserves the original coding label; findings are interpreted as participants' accounts and perceived changes rather than verified longitudinal transformation.

Integration of Social Justice Values into Instructional Practices

Projects contextualized fairness, unequal access, and responsibility through resource-sharing and environmental activities. Guided discussion encouraged students to consider those affected by decisions and the fairness of proposed actions. Student S1 expressed an interpersonal understanding of justice:

> *"I started to understand that fairness is not just about rules, but also about how we treat others in real life."*

Student S2 similarly connected project participation with social responsibility:

> *"Through the project, I realized that helping others is part of being responsible as a member of society."*

These statements illustrate how students interpreted justice and responsibility in connection with their experiences, without independently establishing enduring changes in values. Classroom observations also documented participation and collaboration, consistent with the rubric reported in Table 6.

Transformation of Students' Social Empathy and Civic Awareness

Interview accounts indicated awareness of unequal opportunities, motivation to help, and perceived responsibility toward community concerns. Student S3 explained:

> *"After joining the project, I became more aware that not everyone has the same opportunities, and I feel more motivated to help."*

Another student (S4) described a perceived change in willingness to act:

> *"I used to ignore problems around me, but now I feel responsible to take action, even in small ways."*

Student S5 related the learning experience to confidence in participation:

"Now I am more confident to share my ideas and work together with my friends to solve problems."

These accounts connect perspective-taking and social responsibility with reported participation and confidence. They contextualize the experimental-class posttest pattern but do not independently verify behavioral change or explain the between-class difference causally.

Dynamics and Challenges of Implementing Project-Based Learning

Some students initially struggled with autonomy and collaborative decision-making. Student S6 reported:

"At first, I was confused because we had to think and decide things by ourselves, and I was afraid of making mistakes."

The teacher identified curriculum time and reflection as implementation challenges:

"Project-based learning requires more time, especially for discussion and reflection, but the outcomes are more meaningful for students."

Student S7 described perceived adaptation to group participation:

"After some time, I became more comfortable working in a group and sharing my ideas with others."

These accounts indicate both initial difficulties and reported improvements in comfort with collaboration, highlighting the importance of instructional guidance and sufficient time for reflection.

Coding Transparency

Table 7 traces selected interview statements from initial codes through axial categories to the three reported themes. The examples illustrate an analytical pathway but should not be taken as evidence of how often each theme occurred in the full dataset.

Table 7. Coding Transparency

Source	Initial Code	Code Definition	Axial Category	Theme	Representative Excerpt
S1	Understanding fairness	Recognition that justice extends beyond formal rules to interpersonal treatment	Internalization of social justice values	Integration of Social Justice Values into Instructional Practices	"I started to understand that fairness is not just about rules, but also about how we treat others in real life."
S2	Social responsibility	Awareness of helping others as a civic obligation	Value internalization through project experience	Integration of Social Justice Values into Instructional Practices	"Through the project, I realized that helping others is part of being responsible as a member of society."

Source	Initial Code	Code Definition	Axial Category	Theme	Representative Excerpt
S3	Awareness of unequal opportunities	Recognition of social inequality and motivation to help others	Empathy development	Transformation of Students' Social Empathy and Civic Awareness	"I became more aware that not everyone has the same opportunities, and I feel more motivated to help."
S4	Sense of responsibility	Increased willingness to respond to social problems	Civic responsibility	Transformation of Students' Social Empathy and Civic Awareness	"I feel responsible to take action, even in small ways."
S5	Confidence in participation	Increased confidence in expressing opinions and collaborating with peers	Civic engagement and participation	Transformation of Students' Social Empathy and Civic Awareness	"I am more confident to share my ideas and work together with my friends to solve problems."
S6	Adaptation difficulties	Initial uncertainty in student-centered learning environments	Adjustment to project-based learning	Dynamics and Challenges of Implementing Social Project-Based Learning	"I was confused because we had to think and decide things by ourselves."
T1	Time demands of PBL	Recognition that project-based learning requires additional time and reflection	Instructional constraints	Dynamics and Challenges of Implementing Social Project-Based Learning	"Project-based learning requires more time, especially for discussion and reflection."
S7	Growth in collaboration	Increased comfort in teamwork and idea sharing	Positive adaptation to project learning	Dynamics and Challenges of Implementing Social Project-Based Learning	"I became more comfortable working in a group and sharing my ideas with others."

Mixed-Methods Integration

Table 8 brings together the posttest comparisons, explanatory sampling, interview themes, and observation evidence. Students' accounts of fairness, unequal opportunities, responsibility, and collaboration are consistent with the higher experimental-class scores. The qualitative findings are complementary to, rather than independent verification of, the statistical comparisons; the interviews were limited to the experimental class and cannot establish the causes of between-class differences.

Table 8. Joint Display of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Quantitative result	**Qualitative sampling / evidence**	**Related theme and representative evidence**	**Integrated meta-inference**
Social empathy: experimental M = 35.17; control M = 28.63; t(58) = −19.76; p < .001; d = 5.10.	Experimental-class student interviews (variation in score and participation), classroom observations.	Justice values and social empathy. S1: "I started to understand that fairness is not just about rules, but also about how we treat others in real life." S3: "After joining the project, I became more aware that not everyone has the same opportunities, and I feel more motivated to help."	Accounts of fairness and concern for unequal opportunity are consistent with the higher posttest scores. They contextualize the result but do not establish the cause of the class difference.
Civic awareness: experimental M = 35.47; control M = 25.83; t(58) = −33.11; p < .001; d = 8.55.	Experimental-class interviews about social responsibility, collaboration, and participation.	Civic awareness and participation. S4: "I used to ignore problems around me, but now I feel responsible to take action, even in small ways." S5: "Now I am more confident to share my ideas and work together with my friends to solve problems."	Reported responsibility and participation provide contextual information about the higher civic awareness score; they do not demonstrate causal treatment effects.
Exceptionally large standardized differences for both outcomes.	Eight observation sessions and a teacher interview about implementation.	Challenges and implementation: observation score = 3.67 (Very Good). T1: "Project-based learning requires more time, especially for discussion and reflection, but the outcomes are more meaningful for students."	Favorable engagement coexisted with time demands. One intact class per condition, self-report measures, and lack of a pretest remain limitations.

Discussion

Interpretation of the Quantitative and Integrated Findings

Students in the justice-oriented project-based learning class reported higher posttest social empathy and civic awareness than students in the conventional class. Both differences were statistically significant under conventional independent-samples analysis, with extremely large standardized mean differences. These

estimates describe the two observed classes rather than individual improvements or causal instructional effects. The absence of pretest evidence, the separation of instructional condition from only one class per condition, and the very small within-class variation all require cautious interpretation.

As shown in Table 8, interviewees described greater attention to unequal opportunities, social responsibility, and confidence in working with others. Classroom observations recorded favorable engagement. Taken together, the evidence suggests that students encountered meaningful socio-civic learning opportunities. However, interviews were conducted with intervention participants only, and thus cannot independently confirm why their class obtained higher scores. Because the questionnaires were self-reported, social desirability and restricted response variability are also plausible considerations.

Justice Values as an Instructional Framework

The principal pedagogical contribution is the deliberate incorporation of justice values into project selection, allocation decisions, group participation, and reflection, mapped in Table 1 and Figure 1. The Resource Sharing Project invited students to examine unequal access and deliberate about fairness, while environmental activities connected shared spaces with community responsibility. The ethical rationale is consistent with Rawls' (1971) concept of justice as fairness, and the emphasis on meaningful experience and reflection echoes Dewey (1938). These philosophical frameworks are interpretive foundations, not hypotheses directly tested by the research.

Critical service-learning research distinguishes charity-centered helping from reciprocity and the critical consideration of unequal relationships (Arinze et al., 2022; Iyer et al., 2018). The present design accordingly framed community projects as opportunities to consider underlying conditions, inclusion, and fair decisions, rather than merely to complete a helpful activity. These mechanisms remain pedagogical propositions rather than independently established causal pathways.

Social Empathy, Perspective-Taking, and Civic Awareness

Segal's (2011, 2018) social empathy framework emphasizes individual empathy, contextual understanding, and responsibility. The experimental activities provided opportunities to examine other people's social conditions. For example, S3 reported increased recognition of unequal opportunities and a greater motivation to help, while S1 discussed fairness as interpersonal treatment rather than rules alone. These accounts are compatible with contextual empathy but are not measurements of longitudinal development or direct tests of Segal's theoretical components.

Civic awareness concerned reported knowledge-related awareness, civic values, responsibility, and participation. Student S5 described greater confidence in expressing ideas and collaborating with peers. This interpretation resonates with research on student voice and experiential civic education (Akirav, 2023; Wong et al., 2022). Bringle et al. (2018) also links responses to injustice with advocacy-oriented dispositions. Nevertheless, empathy and civic participation are distinct constructs; perspective-taking does not automatically entail public engagement, and teamwork does not independently demonstrate critical understanding of structural injustice.

Comparison with Supporting and Contrasting Studies

The present findings are broadly compatible with Zhou and Li's (2022) high school project serving visually impaired students, Wartenweiler's (2018) exploratory

justice-oriented program, and Schneller et al.'s (2022) urban ecojustice education study. Studies conducted in secondary-school civic education have also examined empathy and active citizenship through community-engaged learning (Chong, 2020), as well as civic awareness and related skills in service-learning contexts (Lau et al., 2026). However, the present study specifies six justice values and the activities through which they were intentionally addressed; it does not establish superiority over earlier project-based learning designs.

Studies from other age groups and disciplinary settings illustrate the range of project-based and service-learning activities. Chen et al. (2025) evaluated projects addressing students' perceptions of homelessness; Ruiz-Montero et al. (2025) examined prosocial outcomes of an intergenerational service-learning program; and Ersoy and Pehlivan Yılmaz (2018) studied mock trials as an experiential response to classroom problems. Although the contexts are not directly comparable, they emphasize the importance of specifying instructional activities and outcome measures.

Contrasting findings strengthen the need for caution. Compare and Albanesi (2024) reported no statistically significant group-by-time changes in several civic psychosocial outcomes, despite more favorable service-learning participation experiences. Moller et al. (2025) found no significant overall changes in empathy and civic engagement among secondary students, although some subgroups improved. Tran et al. (2024) found no significant change in social justice responsibility in a digital service-learning project, and Meade et al. (2026) reported no significant overall survey changes in a middle-school environmental justice initiative, despite encouraging patterns in selected measures. Positive experiences therefore do not imply uniform measurable changes, and the unusually large posttest differences in the present study cannot be taken as evidence of greater effectiveness than those reported elsewhere.

Implementation Conditions and Qualitative Insights

The qualitative findings highlight the instructional demands of justice-oriented project work. S6 described initial uncertainty with independent decisions, while the teacher emphasized the additional time needed for discussion and reflection. S7 later reported greater comfort in group participation. These accounts suggest that student guidance and sufficient reflective time are important features of implementation. The overall observation score of 3.67 reflects favorable ratings of engagement-related aspects but cannot verify equal delivery of all intervention components across sessions.

The mixed-methods component contributed insight into how students interpreted fairness, responsibility, and collaborative participation. The quantitative comparisons and qualitative accounts offered complementary perspectives without independently confirming a causal mechanism. This distinction is essential to the evidentiary contribution of the joint display.

Theoretical Contributions, Limitations, and Future Research

Conceptually, the study proposes a literature-informed mapping of justice values, authentic project activities, and related socio-civic processes. Empirically, it integrates quantitative posttest evidence with observation and interview accounts in one Indonesian lower secondary social studies context. Its contribution lies in specifying this pedagogical integration and examining participants' experiences, rather than proving a causal increase in empathy or civic awareness.

Several limitations qualify the findings. The absence of pretests prevents verification of baseline equivalence; one intact class per condition makes classroom characteristics inseparable from instruction; student-level t-tests do not adequately account for clustering; and self-report questionnaires may reflect desirable responses rather than observed behaviors. The civic knowledge-related measure was not an objective knowledge test, interviewees came from the experimental class only, and one school limits transferability. The observation aggregation procedure was not available for independent fidelity assessment.

Future research should involve multiple classes and schools, baseline and delayed follow-up measures, class-level random assignment where feasible, statistical methods appropriate for clustered data, and independently assessed prosocial or civic behaviors. More detailed intervention records could evaluate the roles of fairness deliberation, perspective-taking, inclusion, and structured reflection. Such work would help establish whether the learning opportunities identified here produce durable and generalizable socio-civic outcomes.

CONCLUSIONS

Students participating in social justice-oriented project-based social studies learning obtained higher social empathy and civic awareness posttest scores than students receiving conventional instruction. The qualitative evidence illustrated students' reported sensitivity to inequality, reflections on fairness and responsibility, and experiences of collaborative participation. Together, these findings suggest that explicitly incorporating justice values into authentic projects can create opportunities to connect social understanding with responsible action.

The principal contribution is a literature-informed framework translating social justice values into project activities, fair decision-making, inclusive collaboration, and structured reflection. However, a posttest-only comparison with one class per condition, self-report measures, and a single school setting limit causal inference and transferability. The findings should therefore be understood as context-specific evidence warranting further examination.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For classroom practice, teachers should design manageable projects based on locally meaningful issues such as unequal access to resources, environmental concerns, and shared community responsibilities. Each project should explicitly address equity, inclusion, and fairness and provide opportunities for student voice, shared decisions, and guided reflection. Questions such as “Whose needs are being considered?”, “Is this decision fair?”, and “What responsibilities do we share?” may help connect activity with socio-civic understanding.

School administrators can support these activities by allowing sufficient time for planning, implementation, discussion, and reflection; providing suitable materials; and facilitating collaboration with community partners. Coordination among teachers can help address uneven group participation and competing curricular demands.

Teachers should use formative evidence—reflective journals, observation rubrics, group discussion records, and student portfolios—to provide feedback, support hesitant learners, and refine subsequent project cycles. These practices are intended for continuous classroom improvement rather than substitutes for causal research evaluation.

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Conflict of Interest Statement
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Informed Consent
This study involved 60 Grade VIII students aged approximately 13–15 years from two intact classes at SMPN 2 Dawuan, Subang, Indonesia. The research was conducted within regular social studies learning activities and involved classroom observations, posttest questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews with selected participants. Students' identities were protected by reporting quantitative findings in aggregate form and presenting qualitative responses using participant codes.

Ethical Approval
This study was permitted to be conducted in a formal educational setting at SMPN 2 Dawuan, Subang, Indonesia. The research involved the implementation and observation of classroom-based learning activities, administration of educational questionnaires, and interviews with selected students and a teacher. The procedures described in the manuscript did not involve invasive interventions. Quantitative findings were reported at the group level, and qualitative data were presented using participant codes to maintain confidentiality.

Data Availability
The data supporting the findings of this study, including questionnaire responses, classroom observation records, interview transcripts, and qualitative coding results, are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The complete dataset is not publicly available because it contains information relating to minors and may include potentially identifiable participant information. Any data-sharing request will be considered in accordance with applicable ethical requirements and participant confidentiality.

Author Contributions Statement

Name of Author	C	M	So	Va	Fo	I	R	D	O	E	Vi	Su	P	Fu
Gina Meilina Syarifah	✓	✓			✓	✓		✓	✓		✓			
Dadang Sundawa	✓	✓		✓						✓		✓		

C : **C**onceptualization
M : **M**ethodology
So : **So**ftware
Va : **Va**lidation
Fo : **Fo**rmal analysis
I : **I**nvestigation
R : **R**esources
D : **D**ata Curation
O : Writing - **O**riginal Draft
E : Writing - Review & **E**diting
Vi : **Vi**sualization
Su : **Su**pervision
P : **P**roject administration
Fu : **Fu**nding acquisition

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