

Understanding Students' Experiences with Project-Based Assessment across Educational Levels and Contexts

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Abstract

Project-based assessment (PBA) is often highlighted as a more authentic, engaging, practical, and student-centered approach compared to traditional exams. However, despite its growing use, there is limited and unified understanding of how students actually experience PBA across different educational levels and learning contexts. This gap in the literature is crucial, as student experiences are central to determining the effectiveness and inclusiveness of assessment practices in diverse classroom settings. It is crucial to understand how students experience PBA to ensure that this assessment approach fulfills its potential of meaningful, equitable, and effective learning. This article aims to systematically review empirical studies that explore students' experiences with PBA, focusing on how these experiences vary across primary, secondary, and tertiary education as well as cultural and institutional contexts. The study is grounded in qualitative data drawn from published research articles, analyzed using thematic synthesis under the PRISMA framework. Inclusion criteria targeted peer-reviewed studies that foreground student voices and were published within the last 10 years. Findings indicate a combination of positive experiences, such as increased engagement, collaboration, and real-world skill development, alongside persistent challenges, including perceived workload imbalance and unclear assessment criteria. The review underscores the significance of adapting PBA to specific contexts and advises that future research systematically include student perspectives to refine assessment methods better and promote fairness. Implications of these findings for practice for educators and policy makers are that more nuanced and responsive assessment strategies have the potential to improve inclusiveness and instruction. Future research should also look into how school support, teacher support, and cultural contexts influence the efficacy of PBA interventions.

Keywords: Project-based assessment; Students' experiences; Assessment practices; Educational levels

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, education has seen increasing dissatisfaction with standardized testing and traditional assessments, which often focus narrowly on memorization and multiple-choice answers. As a result, a wider range of assessments used, including classroom assessment, oral assessment, written examination, standardized test, portfolio, task-based assessment, project-based assessment, and technology-based assessment (Izzah, 2021). As defined by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture (2016), a project-based assessment measures students' skills in applying their knowledge to a project in a given time frame and it has become a valuable alternative, praised for promoting critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and real-world problem-solving. In addition,

Hidayati and Widiati (2019) also stated that project based assessment integrate both experiential and meaningful learning process. According to Barge (2010), a project-based assessment gives students a clear description of the teachers' teaching methods, how the teachers combine theory and practice, and the learning objectives. These characteristics are in line with the important skills needed in the 21st century, which focus on helping the students' autonomous learning. Moreover, in the global discourse of education innovation, PBA is often presented as a method that enhances learner agency and connects academic content to the interests of society, thereby fostering engagement and responsibility (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). This heightened international interest in PBA has also influenced policy and practice in Indonesia, where education reform initiatives are attempting to shift from rote to competency-based models of learning. However, there is still limited research on how students personally navigate this transition.

Viewed in the context of Indonesia's ongoing education reforms, it is supposed to increasingly encourage implementing project-based learning and assessment at all school levels. The Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek) has promoted Merdeka Belajar, a policy framework that encourages innovative and student-centered pedagogical approaches, including project-based assessments. While these efforts signal a progressive shift toward more meaningful learning, classroom realities in Indonesia often tell a more complicated story. Reports from teachers and students indicate that the implementation of PBA frequently lacks clear guidelines, sufficient resources, and is difficult to grade, especially in under-resourced schools (Kalabzov, 2015; Williams, 2017). In addition, many rural Indonesian schools struggle to conduct PBA effectively due to limited digital access, lack of teacher training, and large class sizes. Many students, especially in rural areas, feel unclear about the assessment rules and see project-based assessment (PBA) as extra work or a burden instead of a helpful and meaningful experience. This shows there is a gap between what PBA promises and how it actually happens in practice. The challenge extends beyond just teaching techniques and includes important factors such as accessibility, how prepared teachers are, and whether schools have the capacity to properly support authentic assessment methods in various educational settings. Such concerns highlight the necessity to discover how cultural values such as collectivism, respect for authority, and harmony influence student engagement and perceptions of fairness in collaborative assessment such as PBA that is crucial in aligning its implementation to the Indonesian educational context.

In the Indonesian context, scholarly discussions around project-based assessment (PBA) have likewise demonstrated a noticeable imbalance. Much of the existing research tends to emphasize the pedagogical or curricular advantages from the perspective of teachers, curriculum developers, or education policymakers. These studies often highlight how PBA can foster student creativity, critical thinking, and collaborative skills (Dutta, 2022; Hidayati, 2023). However, considerably less attention has been paid to how Indonesian students interpret and experience these assessments, how they make sense of the tasks, manage group dynamics, or perceive the fairness and clarity of the evaluation criteria. This is problematic, as student agency and emotional investment play significant roles in shaping learning outcomes, especially in constructivist assessment models like PBA (Thomas, 2000). When students' voices are included, they are frequently presented through quantitative instruments such as Likert-scale surveys or achievement scores, which limit the exploration of deeper emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions of their experiences. Current research approaches have unevenly prioritized certain methodologies, creating gaps in fully grasping how performance-based assessment (PBA) shapes student motivation, self-concept, and participation across Indonesia's varied educational settings. To more equitably and completely evaluate PBA's role, we must

center student voices, lived experiences, and cultural interpretations as foundational elements for analyzing its pedagogical value and fairness. This study makes a unique contribution by emphasizing students' own experience of PBA in various learning settings in Indonesia, which has been largely neglected in previous studies. Through systematic synthesis of qualitative and mixed-method research studies conducted in the past decade, it begins to open up new insights into how students experience, understand, and are affected by project-based assessment, making it different from previous studies that emphasized teachers or institutional experience.

Several existing reviews have documented the pedagogical rationale and implementation strategies of PBA (Condliffe et al., 2017). Yet, few have systematically synthesized what students themselves report about their encounters with project-based assessment across different educational levels, elementary, secondary, and tertiary, and across diverse institutional and cultural contexts. The existing body of work is also largely shaped by Western educational settings, limiting the transferability of findings to Global South or marginalized communities. For example, studies in the U.S. often presume high levels of learner autonomy and institutional support, which do not always translate well to developing country contexts where classroom conditions are highly variable and teacher-centered approaches remain dominant. This literature gap has serious implications, particularly in multicultural or multilingual learning environments where student voice is already underrepresented in research.

This article addresses that gap. Specifically, it seeks to map and analyze the empirical findings on students' experiences with PBA, focusing on the diversity and complexity of those experiences rather than assuming uniform benefits. It adopts a systematic literature review methodology to collect and synthesize qualitative and mixed-method studies published in peer-reviewed journals over the past decade. By foregrounding student voices, this review contributes a much-needed perspective to the ongoing debates about the role of assessment in inclusive, student-centered education. The review adopts the PRISMA framework (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) to ensure a transparent and replicable methodological process, which enhances the credibility and utility of its findings (Moher et al., 2009).

The aim of this review is not simply to catalogue positive or negative experiences but to interpret them as indicators of broader structural, pedagogical, and socio-emotional factors that shape learning. In doing so, the article critically examines how project-based assessment operates within and across different learning contexts. The primary objective is to map the range of student experiences in order to uncover patterns, contradictions, and blind spots in the current implementation of PBA. This goes beyond a descriptive account, moving toward an analysis of the systemic conditions under which PBA either enhances or hinders learning. This approach also aligns with calls in educational research for assessment models that are not only valid and reliable, but also culturally responsive and ethically sound.

The central argument of this review is that the success of project-based assessment cannot be measured solely by academic outcomes or institutional policy adoption. Instead, it must be evaluated through the lens of student experience—how assessment tasks are understood, felt, negotiated, and reflected upon by the learners themselves. Students' experiences with PBA are influenced by interactions among factors such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, cultural expectations, and organizational environments. Recognizing the complex nature of PBA is crucial if it is to serve as a genuinely transformative approach to teaching and learning, rather than simply a new label for traditional assessment methods. The findings of this study indicate that the success of PBA is closely tied to a careful consideration of the specific educational context and the thoughtful inclusion of student perspectives throughout its implementation. As schools

and educational systems across the globe move toward more inclusive and student-focused approaches, understanding how students perceive and experience PBA grows ever more significant. Centering students' viewpoints in these conversations is fundamental to creating assessment practices that are fair, transparent, and truly effective. The goal of this study is to amplify student voices in order to develop more transparent, equitable, and efficient assessment practices for the new educational era.

Based on the aforementioned explanation, the formulation of the research problems can be provided as follows:

- 1) What are the common experiences reported by students undergoing project-based assessment (PBA) across different educational levels (primary, secondary, and tertiary) in various learning contexts?
- 2) What challenges do students face during the implementation of PBA, particularly regarding workload, clarity of assessment criteria, and available support systems?

This paper aims to systematically examine and synthesize empirical evidence on students' experiences with project-based assessment (PBA) across various educational levels and learning contexts. Specifically, it seeks to identify and map the recurring patterns in how students perceive and experience PBA at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of education and to analyze the specific challenges that students encounter during PBA implementation, with particular focus on perceived workload, the clarity of assessment criteria, and the availability of instructional and institutional support systems. This study seeks to offer a perspective centered on students which aims to deepen and refine the understanding of PBA practices by emphasizing their relevance within inclusive and contextually diverse educational settings.

METHOD

This present study used a systematic literature review which aims to synthesize students' experiences and challenges in PBA across various educational levels and contexts. The review was conducted following the PRISMA guidelines (Moher et al., 2009.), ensuring transparency, reproducibility, and methodological rigor. To analyze the qualitative findings from the selected studies, we adopted a thematic synthesis approach (Thomas & Harden, 2008), which allows for the integration and interpretation of qualitative data across diverse research contexts. Thematic synthesis followed a three-step process: (1) preliminary coding of key study findings, (2) establishment of descriptive themes, and (3) formulation of analytical themes that exceed initial study findings. Codes were inductively created and iteratively refined to make sense of the variability of student experience and concerns. NVivo software was used to facilitate consistency of coding and organization of themes.

Search Strategy and literature retrieval

The search strategy involved six categories: (a) Study Population, (b) Project Assessment, (c) Project Duration, (d) Study Methodology, (e) Student Experience Data, and (f) Data Perspective. To maximize the number of eligible studies, four popular data sources were gathered from existing reviews and utilized: Web of Science, Scopus, Research Gate, and SAGE Journal. Those 4 sources provide high-quality research which are relevant to the six categories utilized in this study. To ensure high-quality research, only articles published in reputable journals with the minimum of SINTA 4 accredited. By selecting the reputable journals and high-quality research, with reference to existing reviews, the review shall exclude editorials, opinion pieces, and dissertations to reduce potential bias (Zhai & Wibowo, 2023). A natural language query aligned with the research questions was used to retrieve relevant studies. The initial search yielded the 50 most

relevant journal articles filtered for relevance to project-based assessment and student experience.

Screening, Inclusion and Data Extraction

To ensure methodological quality and transparency, studies were screened using the PRISMA four-stage process: Identification, Screening, Eligibility, and Inclusion. Specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were established to select studies that were both relevant and methodologically sound. To be included in the review, studies had to focus on students enrolled in formal primary, secondary, or tertiary education. The core intervention examined had to be project-based assessment (PBA), defined as involving tasks lasting at least one week to ensure the depth and complexity of engagement. Additionally, eligible studies were required to employ either qualitative or mixed-methods research designs that directly captured student experiences, rather than relying solely on teacher or institutional perspectives. Only studies that reported on student perceptions, emotional responses, challenges, or reflections on assessment processes were included. In contrast, studies were excluded if they focused exclusively on educator viewpoints, involved short-duration projects, or lacked direct qualitative insights from students. To enhance transparency, the review also documented the year of publication, geographic region, and publication outlet of each included study. The selected articles spanned a range of contexts including urban and rural schools, public and private institutions, and culturally diverse classrooms which allow for broader applicability of findings. Following these criteria, 10 studies were selected for final synthesis (Figure 1).

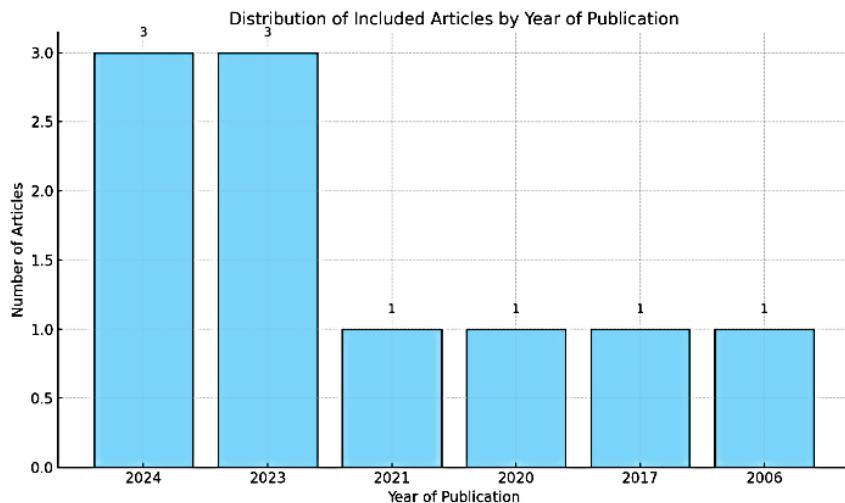


Figure 1. The Number of Articles by Year

For each of the selected studies, a structured data extraction template was used to systematically gather relevant information. The extracted data included: (1) the research design (e.g., qualitative case study, action research, mixed methods); (2) the educational level and learning context (such as the type of institution, subject area, or geographic region); (3) participant details, including the number of student participants, gender distribution, academic level, and sampling method; (4) student-reported experiences and challenges, such as perceived autonomy, collaboration, workload, and assessment clarity; and (5) the assessment methodology, covering elements like grading criteria, evaluation type (peer or instructor-based), and weighting of project components.

The data extraction form was designed for this review particularly to ensure consistency across studies and to allow for the collection of both emergent and structured

themes. It had closed fields for demographic information and open fields for qualitative comments to enable flexible representation of the data while allowing comparison. While the initial extraction was supported by a large language model to ensure efficiency, all data were cross-verified manually to maintain accuracy and consistency in interpretation across studies.

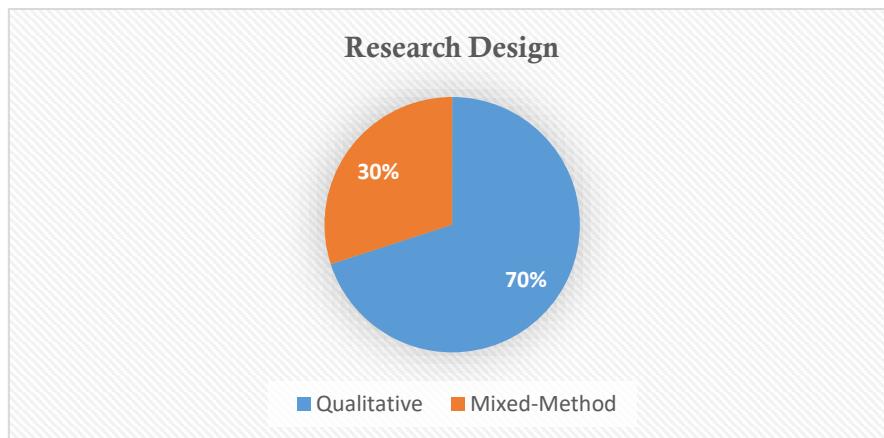


Figure 2. Reserach methods used in the reviewed studies

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Characteristics of Included Studies

The 10 studies included in this review varied across publication years, geographic locations, educational levels, disciplinary contexts, and research methodologies. Most of the studies were published between 2016 and 2024, with a noticeable rise in publications after the COVID-19 pandemic, signaling a growing academic interest in active, student-centered assessment models during and post-remote learning periods. Geographically, the studies spanned 7 different countries. The United States, Indonesia, and Turkey contributed the highest number of representatives and both brought Western and Global South perspectives. That representation is reflective of the global nature of PBA, although some areas are not as well represented in the literature. In terms of educational level, most studies focused on tertiary or higher education contexts, with fewer studies conducted in primary and secondary settings (Oduro, et al., 2024; Sagita, et al., 2023). The distribution of the studies focuses are shown in Figure 4. This suggests that PBA may be more widely implemented, or at least more thoroughly studied, in higher education environments, possibly due to greater institutional autonomy and emphasis on experiential learning in universities.

Disciplinary contexts included a range of fields such as engineering, education, computer science, and language learning. The predominance of STEM and education disciplines may indicate that these fields are more conducive to project-based formats, or that they have stronger traditions of documenting and researching pedagogical innovations. Methodologically, the majority of studies employed qualitative research approaches, including interviews, focus group discussions, and reflective journals (Figure 3). A smaller number used mixed methods to triangulate student perceptions with performance data or survey results. This qualitative research focus empowered a close analysis of learners' lived experience, which allowed for the identification of the emotional, cognitive, and contextual factors that contribute to their involvement in PBA. When collectively considered, these characteristics represent a rigorous integration of the current state of research on learners' experiences with PBA. The diversity of contexts,

topics, and methods addressed in the studies provides rich ground for grasping how PBA is theorized and practiced under different conditions of education.

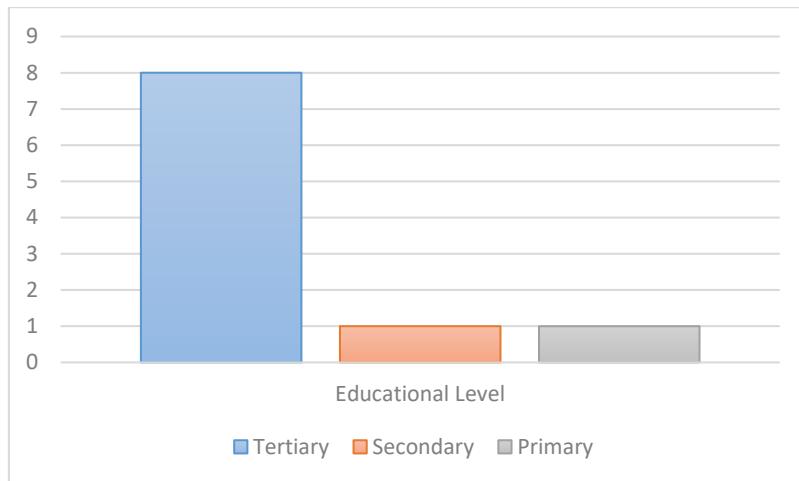


Figure 4. Studies by Educational Level

Students Experiences with Project-Based Assessment

The review confirmed that students had a wide range of experiences with PBA, from positive to negative. Students typically reported substantial learning gains, such as improved critical thinking, collaboration, and communication skills (Mutanga, 2024; Noor & Nurhayati, 2024; Oduro et al., 2024). These experiences were especially evident when project objectives were clearly communicated, resources were sufficient, and instructor support was consistent. On the other hand, a significant number of studies revealed that students often struggled with ambiguous expectations, unbalanced workload distribution, and limited feedback (Sagita et al., 2023; Hussein, 2021; Dutta et al., 2023). Such issues often led to frustration and, in some cases, disengagement.

Positive student experiences with PBA were usually entailed with contexts in which they enjoyed greater control and facilitation for real-world application. When students were able to connect projects to practical, community-based, or interdisciplinary problems, they expressed a heightened sense of purpose and motivation (Yulhendri et al., 2023; Matilainen et al., 2020). This sense of relevance empowered students to engage more deeply with course content. However, such outcomes were not universally experienced. In many cases, the absence of structured guidance led to confusion and uneven group dynamics, particularly where roles and responsibilities were not clearly defined (Hussein, 2021; Hassanien, 2006). These findings reflect how implementation quality directly shapes students' affective and cognitive responses.

The mixed experiences reported suggest that while PBA has transformative potential, its success is heavily dependent on contextual and instructional variables. Students in resource-rich institutions or in classes led by well-trained instructors tended to benefit more than those in under-resourced settings. The social dynamics of group work was also an important variable. Students often complained of feeling uncomfortable with unequal participation and grading practices, particularly when the peer evaluation were perceived to be biased or inaccurate (Dutta et al., 2023; O'Connor et al., 2017). Such interpersonal and procedural issues imply that reconsideration of the assumptions about student readiness and group work as inherently productive is needed. When situated within the broader discourse on assessment reform, these findings demonstrate that the emotional and psychological aspects of student experience are often underappreciated. While educational policies emphasize the cognitive benefits of PBA, students in this review raised concerns about stress, anxiety, and fairness, dimensions that are not easily

captured through grades or performance metrics (Sagita et al., 2023; Noor & Nurhayati, 2024). This finding underscores the importance of student-centered, qualitative research in evaluation because it reveals lived experiences that data cannot.

Compared to earlier research by Thomas (2000) and Bell (2010), whose results took into consideration the possibility of PBA having a positive influence on learning, this review presents a more contemporary report. It confirms those theoretical benefits but complicates them with the practical challenges students encounter. It also contributes new insights by emphasizing the relational and emotional labor involved in collaborative assessment. The implication is clear: if PBA is to achieve its intended goals, its design must integrate structured scaffolding, transparent grading, and mechanisms for emotional and peer support. Educators and institutions must see students not just as learners but as partners in assessment design. Through this, PBA will be able to move closer towards being an equitable, authentic, and inclusive practice.

Challenges in Implementing Project-Based Assessments

The findings identify a number of persistent issues that impede the successful application of project-based assessment. A primary, most reported issue is the uncertainty of assessment criteria, which makes students unclear about what to expect and on what standards they will be assessed. This vagueness impacts their capacity to channel effort efficiently, leading to confusion or misdirection of the teacher's objectives (Mutanga, 2024; Hussein, 2021; Sagita et al., 2023). Ineffective rubrics and ambiguous systems of feedback compound the issue, so that students see grading as random or unintelligible.

Another central challenge relates to unequal workload distribution in group projects. Many students expressed dissatisfaction with how responsibilities were shared, noting that there are individuals in a group who do much less but receive the same grades (Hassanien, 2006; Dutta et al., 2023). This imbalance fosters resentment and undermines collaboration, especially in large classes where instructor oversight is limited. In addition, the use of peer assessment as a grading tool typically caused uneasiness due to apprehension about bias, social pressure, and a lack of proper training in making fair judgments (O'Connor et al., 2017).

A third key challenge involves limited instructional support and feedback throughout the project process. Students in multiple studies reported that the instructors provided poor guidance at planning and execution phases so that the students did not know how to make their way through their assignments (Noor & Nurhayati, 2024; Yulhendri et al., 2023). Poor formative feedback decreases opportunities for iterative improvement and may decrease the educational value of the assessment. In some contexts, logistical constraints such as large class sizes or insufficient resources also prevented meaningful instructor-student interaction. The emotional toll of project-based assessment is another recurring theme. Students most frequently described feeling anxious, stressed, or overwhelmed by the excessive demands of time management, peer coordination, and fulfilling ill-defined expectations in the literature (Sagita et al., 2023; Matilainen et al., 2020). This affective labor, while less deliberated upon within assessment literature, is a central role for the student engagement and learning outcomes. Without proper psychological and academic support, these sources of stress have the potential to lead to disengagement or compromised academic performance.

These challenges are not isolated to global studies alone but align closely with systemic barriers reported in the Indonesian context. Despite the national push for pedagogical innovation through initiatives like Merdeka Belajar (Kemendikbudristek, 2020), several studies highlight a persistent disconnect between policy vision and classroom realities. For instance, Kalabzov (2015) and Williams (2017) emphasize how under-resourced schools, particularly in rural regions, struggle to implement PBA

effectively due to limited infrastructure, unclear guidelines, and insufficient teacher training. These systemic issues echo the findings in this review—where students reported inadequate guidance, ambiguous criteria, and lack of emotional support during assessments. Furthermore, Izzah (2021) highlights the diversity of forms of assessment in Indonesian classrooms to the neglect of quality of implementation, an issue articulated through students' sense of unfairness and lack of clarity. These national-level insights reinforce the need for contextually grounded, student-informed strategies to support PBA's success.

Collectively, they emphasize the pressing necessity for more context-sensitive implementation strategies. Rather than applying PBA to work routinely, schools need to invest in scaffolding, support systems, and staff development in order to realize its pedagogical potential as quality practice. The research suggests that structural conditions such as class size, literacy in assessment, and access to resources play a major role in shaping the quality of students' assessment experiences. Addressing these gaps is essential for ensuring that PBA contributes to equitable and transformative learning.

Table 1. Implementation Challenges

Challenge Category	Description	Impact on Learning	Support Mechanism
Workload/Time Management	High workload, time-consuming tasks, feeling overwhelmed, difficulty balancing group schedules	Can lead to stress, reduced engagement, and incomplete tasks	Instructor support, structured timelines, peer support (Matilainen et al., 2020; Hussein, 2021; Oduro et al., 2024; Noor and Nurhayati, 2024; Sagita et al., 2023)
Collaboration Issues	Uneven contribution, poor communication, dominance, coordination problems	Frustration, perceived unfairness, reduced learning outcomes	Structured communication, clear role assignment, supportive culture (Hussein, 2021; Noor and Nurhayati, 2024; Sagita et al., 2023; Hassanien, 2006)
Assessment Criteria Clarity	Unclear grading criteria, lack of guidance, inconsistent assessment, peer vs instructor weighting	Uncertainty, focus on grades over learning, concerns about fairness	Transparent rubrics, iterative feedback, instructor guidance (Mutanga, 2024; Dutta et al., 2023; Noor and Nurhayati, 2024; O'Connor et al., 2017)
Resource Constraints	Insufficient resources, inadequate materials/content, logistical barriers	Limits ability to complete tasks, increases anxiety	Institutional support, resource provision, digital platforms (Oduro et al., 2024; Noor and Nurhayati, 2024)
Support System Effectiveness	Variable instructor and peer support, need for robust feedback mechanisms	Can moderate or exacerbate other challenges	Regular check-ins, feedback sessions, assignment seminars (Matilainen et al., 2020; Noor and Nurhayati, 2024; Hassanien, 2006)

Cross-Level Comparison of Student Experiences

A comparative look across educational levels (primary, secondary, and tertiary) reveals important variations in how students experience project-based assessment (PBA). Students in primary and secondary settings tend to rely more heavily on teacher guidance and structured support. In studies like those by Sagita et al. (2023) and Oduro et al. (2024), younger learners expressed enthusiasm for collaborative tasks but also reported higher anxiety when instructions were unclear or when the stakes felt overly academic. Their ability to navigate group dynamics and manage project timelines was limited by developmental and contextual constraints, making scaffolding and clear rubrics particularly important.

In contrast, tertiary-level students, who dominated the sample pool in the reviewed literature, demonstrated a more independent approach to project-based tasks (Mutanga, 2024; Hussein, 2021; Yulhendri et al., 2023). University learners often appreciated the autonomy afforded by PBA and valued the opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge to real-world problems (Matilainen et al., 2020). However, they were also more vocal about challenges related to workload management, unclear assessment expectations, and peer contribution imbalances (Dutta et al., 2023; Hassanien, 2006). These issues were often linked to the broader institutional environment, such as large class sizes or instructor workload, which affected the depth of feedback and mentoring they received. A key interpretive insight here is that while the core benefits and frustrations of PBA, collaboration, autonomy, ambiguity, and workload, appear across all levels, their expression and impact differ significantly depending on the age, cognitive maturity, and institutional support available to students. For instance, while the same problem could be an issue of motivation for tertiary students, it can be a significant barrier for younger students if teachers do not provide considerable support. These differences between educational levels underscore the importance of tailoring approaches to suit each group. Applying a uniform PBA model overlooks the changing requirements of students as they progress through different phases of learning.

Hence, the results suggest that policy makers and teachers must develop PBA framework not just in correlation to curriculum goals but also with respect to student readiness and situation possibilities. Further research should also explore how cultural, developmental, and institutional variables shape PBA outcomes across levels, especially in underrepresented educational contexts.

Table 2. Cross-Level Comparison

Experience Aspect	Primary Level	Secondary level	Tertiary Level
Engagement/Interest	No mention found	High engagement, creativity, initial anxiety (Oduro et al., 2024; Sagita et al., 2023)	Enhanced engagement, deeper understanding, practical application (Mutanga, 2024; Matilainen et al., 2020; Noor and Nurhayati, 2024; Yulhendri et al., 2023)
Skill Development	No mention found	21st-century skills (critical thinking, self-regulation), teamwork (Oduro et al., 2024; Sagita et al., 2023)	Teamwork, communication, critical thinking, leadership, problem-solving (Mutanga, 2024; Dutta et al., 2023; Matilainen et al., 2020; Noor and Nurhayati, 2024;

Experience Aspect	Primary Level	Secondary level	Tertiary Level
Collaboration Challenges	No mention found	Uneven group contribution, dominance, communication issues (Sagita et al., 2023)	Priority conflicts, coordination, communication, group dynamics (Hussein, 2021; Noor and Nurhayati, 2024; Hassanien, 2006)
Assessment Clarity	No mention found	Unclear criteria, insufficient content, initial uncertainty (Oduro et al., 2024; Sagita et al., 2023)	Unclear grading, peer vs instructor weighting, desire for more guidance (Dutta et al., 2023; Hussein, 2021; Noor and Nurhayati, 2024; O'Connor et al., 2017)
Support System Effectiveness	No mention found	Peer support generally positive; instructor support variable (Sagita et al., 2023)	Instructor and peer support critical; need for robust feedback mechanisms (Matilainen et al., 2020; Noor and Nurhayati, 2024; Hassanien, 2006)
Workload Management	No mention found	Time-consuming, overwhelming at times (Oduro et al., 2024; Sagita et al., 2023)	High workload, stress, need for time management (Matilainen et al., 2020; Noor and Nurhayati, 2024; Yulhendri et al., 2023)

The findings of this review are closely aligned with the theoretical framework of PBA presented in the introduction. As formulated by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture (2016), PBA is designed to assess students' abilities to apply knowledge in practical contexts. This review reaffirmed the reality that students had more interest and deeper learning where projects were strongly connected to real-world, practical problems. Such outcomes align with Hidayati and Widiati's (2019) assertion that project-based tasks integrate experiential and meaningful learning processes. At the same time, however, when students reported ambiguity in criteria and lack of guidance, these conditions undermined the experiential promise of PBA, revealing a gap between theoretical ideals and classroom realities.

From a constructivist perspective, as underscored by Thomas (2000), effective learning requires students to actively construct meaning with sufficient scaffolding. The problems identified in this review—particularly workload imbalance, confusing rubrics, and insufficient feedback—illustrate that in the absence of scaffolding, the constructivist strength of autonomy can very readily devolve into frustration and disengagement. This point also problematizes Barge's (2010) contention that PBA needs to introduce clarity regarding teaching methods, goals, and assessment. Although some students certainly thrived on clear structures, others reported that a lack of clear expectations hindered them from achieving the target values of autonomy and collaboration to the fullest.

The findings also reflect global perspectives of PBA as a way of fostering learner agency and responsibility (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Students in this synthesis

commonly exhibited enthusiasm when projects allowed them to connect academic work to real-world or community-based uses. However, the same evidence also highlights that in under-resourced contexts—such as the majority of Indonesian schools—the lack of institutional support made the students view PBA as an additional burden rather than an empowering potential. This lends credibility to the view that learner agency cannot flourish in the absence of appropriate structural conditions, echoing the concerns raised by Kalabzov (2015) and Williams (2017) regarding limited resources and teacher training in the Indonesian context.

Finally, these findings respond to the objectives of this study by pushing to the center student voices as central to evaluating fairness and inclusivity in assessment. While Dutta (2022) and Hidayati (2023) emphasize PBA's potential for enhancing creativity and collaboration, this review demonstrates that students' lived experiences complicate those claims. Reports of stress, anxiety, and perceived unfairness illustrate that inclusivity is not guaranteed through the adoption of PBA by itself but needs to be forged through explicit design choices that centre student well-being. To this end, the results confirm the imperative, stated in the introduction, to develop assessment practices that are not only theoretically sound but also culturally responsive, ethically defensible, and contextually sustainable. In sum, this review not only maps the range of students' experiences with PBA but also reveals the structural and emotional conditions that determine whether it functions as a transformative or burdensome practice.

CONCLUSION

Surprisingly, although Project-Based Assessment (PBA) has long been promoted as an authentic and student-centered evaluation method, the findings of this study reveal that students' experiences with PBA are highly varied and not uniformly positive. The notion that PBA exerts an automatic impact on motivation and teamwork is not universally applicable across all learning levels. Contrary to the initial hypothesis, this review set a series of systemic issues that are prevalent in most learning environments. The issues encompass deficient test specifications, imbalance of cooperation, and deficient pedagogical support. Recent studies have determined that stress and tension in students' emotions are the strong interferences of students' learning engagement. It implies that without scaffolding to carry it along, PBA would never come close to reaching its reform potential. The findings contradict the common assumptions of PBA efficiency and demand additional evaluation of its use and implementation.

This study offers a significant contribution to the field of education, particularly within the discourse on alternative assessment and constructivist learning. By placing student voices and lived experience at its core, the review provides an insight in the academic literature that the success of PBA depends not only on curriculum design or wise policy but also on institutional readiness, teaching expertise, and sensible student workload. In addition, levels of comparison show requirements for applying pedagogic methods commensurate with age and maturity level of students. This review emphasizes calls for change in the assessment process and provide a sound foundation for building more equitable and inclusive PBA practices.

Nevertheless, this study is not without limitations. Firstly, the data examined were drawn from a mere 10 articles, the majority of which were concerned with tertiary studies, meaning that primary and secondary school experiences were underrepresented. Secondly, methodological weaknesses in the studies reviewed, including a predominant use of qualitative methods with inadequate triangulation, limit the generalizability of findings. Therefore, this review recommends that future

research explore a wider range of educational levels using more robust mixed-methods approaches. Comparative studies across cultural and institutional settings are also needed to test the consistency of these findings and to broaden our understanding of how PBA functions across diverse educational ecosystems.

For educators and policymakers, the findings underscore the importance of adopting more nuanced and responsive assessment strategies. Transparent criteria, structured feedback, and strong teacher and institutional support are critical if PBA is to become an empowering rather than burdensome practice. Aligning reforms, such as Merdeka Belajar, with classroom realities will be essential to ensure that PBA fulfills its potential as an inclusive and transformative form of assessment.

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