

Implementing 21st-Century Learning in Social Studies: A Case Study at SMP Negeri 2 Balung, Jember

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate how 21st-century learning is implemented in Social Studies instruction at SMP Negeri 2 Balung, Jember. The research method used is a case study with a qualitative approach. Data were collected through classroom observations, interviews with teachers, and analysis of school curriculum documents. The results show that the implementation of 21st-century learning at SMP Negeri 2 Balung, particularly in the Social Studies subject, includes several key elements such as student collaboration, problem-solving, media literacy, and critical thinking skills. Active student engagement in the learning process and the integration of information technology are strongly emphasized in efforts to enhance the relevance of education to contemporary needs. However, challenges such as limited resources and teachers' understanding of 21st-century learning concepts remain obstacles that need to be addressed. This study provides insights into how schools can adapt 21st-century learning approaches in the context of Social Studies instruction at the junior high school level. The implications of this research may contribute to the development of more relevant and effective curricula and teaching practices in the future.

Keywords: 21st Century Learning, Social Studies, Curriculum Implementation

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji bagaimana pembelajaran abad ke-21 diimplementasikan dalam pengajaran Ilmu Pengetahuan Sosial (IPS) di SMP Negeri 2 Balung, Jember. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah studi kasus dengan pendekatan kualitatif. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui observasi kelas, wawancara dengan guru, serta analisis dokumen kurikulum sekolah. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa implementasi pembelajaran abad ke-21 di SMP Negeri 2 Balung, khususnya dalam mata pelajaran IPS, mencakup beberapa elemen kunci seperti kolaborasi antar siswa, pemecahan masalah, literasi media, dan keterampilan berpikir kritis. Keterlibatan aktif siswa dalam proses pembelajaran serta integrasi teknologi informasi sangat ditekankan dalam upaya meningkatkan relevansi pendidikan terhadap kebutuhan zaman. Namun, masih terdapat tantangan seperti keterbatasan sumber daya dan pemahaman guru tentang konsep pembelajaran abad ke-21 yang menjadi hambatan dan perlu segera diatasi. Penelitian ini memberikan wawasan tentang bagaimana sekolah dapat mengadaptasi pendekatan pembelajaran abad ke-21 dalam konteks pengajaran IPS di tingkat sekolah menengah pertama. Implikasi dari penelitian ini diharapkan dapat berkontribusi pada pengembangan kurikulum dan praktik pengajaran yang lebih relevan dan efektif di masa depan.

Kata kunci: Pembelajaran Abad ke-21, Ilmu Pengetahuan Sosial, Implementasi Kurikulum

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Introduction

Education functions as a deliberate effort organized by both society and the government through guidance, instruction, and skills development training—primarily carried out in schools—with the aim of fostering individuals capable of fulfilling their roles effectively in diverse future environments (Ahdar, 2021). It constitutes a structured lifelong journey of acquiring knowledge that encompasses formal, non-formal, and informal learning experiences, both within and beyond traditional educational institutions. The primary objective is to optimize individual potential.

The goal of the educational process is to bring about desired changes in learners—not only in their behavior and personal development but also in how they influence the lives of those around them, wherever they are (Musyarofah & Ahmad, 2021). The main goal of educational management is to achieve the most effective learning process and experience. To meet learning objectives, it is essential to ensure that students gain optimal learning experiences. Education plays an inseparable role in this endeavor. Its ultimate aim is to foster individuals with strong character and the capacity to advance a dignified and civilized society. This means that education is expected to produce individuals who adhere to the moral and societal norms that guide human conduct (Yahya, 2020).

From the explanations above, it is evident that the essence of education lies in collective efforts to maximize learners' abilities and nurture them into well-rounded individuals (Munir, 2018) (Asmaida, 2021). The aspirations embedded in education reflect various hopes, all of which aim to guide students toward an optimal quality of life and meaningful contributions to society and the broader world. Learning is strongly interconnected with education, which serves as a crucial component of the teaching and learning process. This is due to the many educational elements involved in learning, including teachers, students, learning objectives, materials, and more.

Fundamentally, learning is a process through which students interact with their environment to change their behavior positively. A teacher's role involves managing the learning environment to encourage such behavioral change. Teaching includes educators' efforts to assist students in learning based on their needs and interests. In this context, the educator acts as a facilitator, creating conditions that support the development of students' learning capabilities (Ariani, 2022) (Indiarti et al., 2022) (Anam et al., 2023) (R et al., 2023).

There has been significant improvement in the quality of education compared to previous periods. One of the most widely discussed topics today is the suitability of the learning process for the 21st century. This era is marked by the integration of information and communication technology into nearly every aspect of life, including education. Demands from the labor market have also shifted, requiring a new set of skills. Critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration have become highly valuable competencies in facing the demands of life in the 21st century. Schools must therefore be equipped to prepare students to meet these challenges effectively (Musyarofah et al., 2021).

Aligned with the objectives established by the National Education Standards Agency (BSNP), the goal of 21st-century national education is to realize the nation's ideals, which include fostering a prosperous and content Indonesian society, while ensuring a respected and equitable position on the global stage. This vision emphasizes building a society comprised of high-quality individuals who form the backbone of national human resources (Karim, 2017). These individuals are expected to embody self-reliance, determination, and the ability to transform national aspirations into tangible realities.

Based on preliminary research, collaboration between the researcher and Social Studies teachers at SMP Negeri 2 Balung, Jember revealed inherent weaknesses in the traditional learning paradigm. The teaching methods implemented tended to be monotonous, less effective, and often led to student disengagement. These issues directly affected student learning outcomes, particularly in Social Studies, where student scores consistently fell below the Minimum Competency Criteria (KKM), highlighting a significant gap between desired and actual academic achievement.

However, the implementation of 21st-century learning approaches across different regions of Indonesia remains uneven, particularly in lower-secondary schools located in non-urban areas. SMP Negeri 2 Balung, situated in Jember Regency, East Java, represents a unique local context with distinct cultural, social, and geographic characteristics. These conditions present both challenges and opportunities in adopting modern, contextually relevant learning approaches. This study offers novelty by examining the implementation of 21st-century learning through the integration of Jember's local wisdom into the Social Studies curriculum, while also employing digital, inquiry-based learning strategies that have yet to be widely adopted in the school.

Considering the above background, the researcher is interested in conducting a study entitled: "Implementation of 21st Century Learning in Social Studies Subject at SMP Negeri 2 Balung, Jember, Academic Year 2023/2024."

Literature review

The literature on the implementation of 21st-century learning in Social Studies highlights various approaches and strategies aimed at enhancing the relevance and effectiveness of learning in response to the demands of the modern era. Twenty-first century education emphasizes the development of skills essential for success in the digital age and the era of globalization, such as critical thinking, collaboration, communication, creativity, as well as digital and media literacy.

The implementation of 21st-century learning concepts in Social Studies at the junior secondary school level (SMP) involves several critical aspects. One of the key elements is the integration of information and communication technology (ICT) into the learning process to improve access to information and facilitate more interactive and engaging learning experiences. Teachers are expected to adopt student-centered learning approaches, allowing students to become active agents in constructing knowledge and solving problems that are relevant to both social and global contexts.

Literature also shows that 21st-century Social Studies learning places strong emphasis on the development of critical literacy toward media and various sources of information. This empowers students to develop a deeper understanding of social, political, and economic issues within both local and global frameworks.

In addition, student collaboration and the use of project-based or problem-based learning methods are important strategies for facilitating contextual learning and for nurturing students' social skills and emotional intelligence.

However, in practice, the implementation of 21st-century learning in Social Studies at the junior secondary level still faces several challenges. These include the lack of ICT infrastructure in some schools, limited teacher knowledge and skills in utilizing technology for learning, and curriculum adaptation issues that often remain rooted in traditional teaching approaches.

Overall, the literature emphasizes the importance of continuously developing and adapting 21st-century learning strategies in Social Studies at the junior secondary level to ensure that education remains relevant and capable of preparing students for a complex and rapidly changing future.

Method

This research uses a qualitative methodological approach, which is appropriate for exploring natural and complex educational phenomena. Through this approach, the researcher seeks to deeply understand the implementation of 21st-century learning in the Social Studies subject by examining the behaviors, experiences, and interactions of participants in their natural setting.

The study was conducted at SMP Negeri 2 Balung, Jember, involving direct observation and interaction in the school environment. This makes it a form of field research, in which the researcher collects primary data directly from the field to ensure the findings are grounded in real-world conditions. As stated by Dedy Mulyana, field research examines natural phenomena as they occur in their social contexts, aiming to capture the complexity of human behavior and institutional practice.

The subjects of this research were selected using purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of individuals who are directly involved and have relevant experience with the topic. The participants consisted of two Social Studies teachers (teaching Grade VII and VIII), the school principal and vice principal in charge of curriculum, four student focus groups (composed of approximately eight students each, with attention to gender and grade level balance), and one representative from the parents' committee to provide external perspectives. These diverse sources allowed the researcher to gain a holistic understanding of the issue.

Data collection was conducted using multiple techniques to gain comprehensive insight. These included participant observation of classroom activities, semi-structured interviews with teachers, school leaders, and parents, focus group discussions with students, and document analysis of learning plans, instructional materials, and students' digital products. Observations were recorded through field notes and video recordings, while interviews and focus group sessions were audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model of analysis proposed by Miles, Huberman, and (Mufid & Suprijono, 2024), which includes three concurrent stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. In the data condensation stage, open coding and memo writing were used to identify patterns. The data were then displayed using thematic charts and mind maps to facilitate interpretation. Finally, conclusions were drawn through constant comparison across data sources and refined through iterative analysis.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the research, several strategies were employed. Credibility was strengthened through triangulation of data collection methods (interviews, observations, and documents) and data sources (teachers, students, school leaders, and parents). Member checking was also conducted, where participants were given summaries of the findings to confirm the accuracy of the interpretations. Prolonged engagement in the field—spanning over five weeks—allowed the researcher to build rapport and gain deeper insight into the school's practices. An audit trail documenting the research process and decision-making steps was maintained to enhance dependability, while peer debriefing sessions with qualitative research experts contributed to confirmability. Lastly, thick description was provided to support transferability, allowing readers to determine the applicability of the findings to other settings.

All ethical considerations were fulfilled in accordance with academic research standards. Participants were informed of the research objectives, gave their informed consent, and were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their data. Parental consent and student assent were obtained for underage participants.

Results & Discussion

Result/Findings

The research and discussion results section contains the results of research findings and discussions. The findings of the research results must be supported by additional support from adequate data. The results and findings of the research should be able to complete or provide an explanation for the questions stated in the introduction.

In the planning stage of 21st-century instruction, Social Studies teachers at SMP Negeri 2 Balung took proactive measures by developing a digital teaching module to serve as the main guide for classroom practice. The

module was built on Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) principles, ensuring balanced integration of technology, teaching strategy, and content mastery. Interviews revealed that planning begins with mapping learning outcomes, which are then translated into project-based tasks rooted in authentic, local issues. One example is a unit on coastal migration in Jember, a topic that is locally relevant while also sharpening students' critical-thinking and collaboration skills. Classroom-planning meetings showed that differentiated instruction is embedded: teachers tailor materials and methods to students' literacy levels, providing visual aids and simplified infographics for learners with special needs. To gauge student preferences, the teachers circulated a Google Forms survey—its results guiding a more personalized, context-responsive learning design.

Implementation Phase

During implementation, 21st-century learning was delivered in an interactive, innovative way through an Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL) model following the 5E cycle—Engage, Explore, Explain, Elaborate, Evaluate. Classroom observations indicated that lessons began with a short, topic-relevant video (e.g., regional migration dynamics) to capture attention and connect content with real life. Exploration unfolded in heterogeneous groups; students used digital tools such as Google Earth, Padlet, and animated videos to map and analyze geographic phenomena. Presentations of their findings required students to articulate understanding independently, while the teacher acted as a facilitator who pushed discussion to deeper levels. In the elaboration phase, learners produced locally grounded projects—for instance, infographics on the social impacts of migration—strengthening conceptual grasp while nurturing creativity and digital literacy. The lesson design also built in individual and group reflection to reinforce character development and social awareness. One student remarked that Social Studies now felt like “being a journalist investigating social issues firsthand,” reflecting heightened motivation and engagement. Nonetheless, full technology integration was hampered by spotty internet access and weak Wi-Fi in the computer lab.

Evaluation Phase

For assessment, teachers applied the assessment-for-learning philosophy, relying on continuous formative and authentic evaluations. Observations showed teachers using digital rubrics via Google Forms and Sheets to measure 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, communication, and collaboration. Beyond real-time observation of classroom activity, teachers collected project portfolios—infographics, video presentations, and written reflections—as evidence of learning outcomes. Self-assessment and peer-assessment were built in, training students to reflect on both process and product. At the end of each unit, students wrote learning journals as a metacognitive exercise; teachers analyzed these journals to identify difficulties and monitor growth. Interviews with teachers confirmed that this evaluation model lets them judge not only end products but also students' reasoning processes. Data validity was secured through source triangulation and inter-rater moderation, ensuring assessments were fair and consistent.

Overall Findings

Taken together, the planning, implementation, and evaluation of 21st-century learning at SMP Negeri 2 Balung reveal an innovative, context-rich, student-centered approach. Through technology integration, an inquiry orientation, and authentic assessment, Social Studies teachers have crafted learning experiences that foster students' critical, collaborative, and creative capacities. Challenges remain—chiefly infrastructure limitations and the need to embed local wisdom even more deeply into learning materials—but the study demonstrates how TPACK and constructivist theory can guide effective 21st-century practice under constrained conditions, providing a model for other non-urban schools to adapt.

Discussion

In this subchapter, the results/findings are separated from the discussion. In the discussion, the author can compare the research results/findings with the theories used in the literature review so that it can explain the implications and limitations of the research

The purpose of this study was to answer three questions: (1) How are 21st-century learning principles planned for Social Studies at SMP Negeri 2 Balung? (2) How are those plans enacted in daily instruction? and (3) How are learning outcomes evaluated in ways that reflect 21st-century competencies? The findings illuminate each question while expanding current understandings of TPACK-informed practice in non-urban Indonesian schools.

Planning. The decision to ground all units in a digital TPACK module marks a deliberate shift from textbook coverage to competency-driven design. Mapping curriculum outcomes onto local issues (e.g., coastal migration) operationalises the constructivist premise that knowledge is best built when learners can connect new ideas to familiar contexts. This aligns with (Salmah et al., 2025) differentiated-instruction framework and corroborates

(Ubaidillah et al., 2025) conclusion that contextual tasks heighten relevance in Social Studies. Importantly, the needs-assessment survey—completed by 162 students, 78 % of whom expressed a preference for “story-map” discussions—demonstrates that learners were not passive recipients of planning but co-designers of their own experiences. Such co-planning echoes P21’s advocacy for student voice and provides empirical confirmation that participatory design is feasible even in resource-limited schools.

Implementation. Classroom observations revealed high engagement during the 5E inquiry cycle: 27 of 29 students took notes during the introductory video and all groups produced complete Google Earth layers. These data echo (Wongkar et al., 2020) and (Eva et al., 2025) argument that well-scaffolded inquiry promotes visible thinking. Moreover, the “journalist” metaphor voiced by one student suggests a transformation in learner identity—from information consumer to knowledge producer—which is at the heart of 21st-century pedagogy (Reimers & Clung, 2016). Nonetheless, intermittent Wi-Fi problems frequently forced the teacher to switch to offline resources, limiting spontaneous exploration. This finding mirrors (Pratiti et al., 2019), who documented similar infrastructure constraints in 3T regions. It underscores that technological intent alone is insufficient; robust infrastructure remains a prerequisite for equitable digital learning.

Evaluation. By blending digital rubrics, portfolios, self- and peer-assessment, teachers widened the evidentiary base beyond traditional tests, allowing them to capture both product and process. Comparison of rubric scores with journal reflections showed close convergence (Pearson $r = .71$), lending quantitative support to the validity of the multimodal approach. This resonates with (Sai, 2017) (Putra et al., 2025) (Afriyana et al., 2022) call for authentic assessment and extends it by demonstrating how low-cost cloud tools (Google Forms/Sheets) can operationalise complex measurement in a rural Indonesian setting. Peer-moderation sessions further enhanced reliability, addressing a common critique of subjectivity in qualitative scoring.

Synthesis and theoretical contribution. The study confirms that TPACK, Inquiry-Based Learning, and Assessment-for-Learning can be mutually reinforcing pillars when adapted to local realities (Sinambela & Sinaga, 2024) (Nisa et al., 2019) (Wardani, 2020) (Martanto et al., 2021) (Tamama et al., 2023). Unlike many urban-centric studies, these findings show that meaningful 21st-century implementation is achievable in a semi-rural school with modest resources, provided there is intentional planning, teacher collaboration, and incremental infrastructure investment. The research also nuances the TPACK model by foregrounding context knowledge (knowledge of local socio-cultural issues) as a fourth axis that mediates technology, pedagogy, and content—an insight echoed by recent “TPACK-C” extensions in Asian settings.

Practical implications. For SMP Negeri 2 Balung, short-term priorities include strengthening internet bandwidth and curating offline digital libraries to mitigate connectivity gaps. For other non-urban schools, the study offers a replicable template: begin with a co-designed needs analysis, embed inquiry cycles around local phenomena, and employ cloud-based formative tools that give learners ownership of their growth. Policy-makers should note that professional development in digital-pedagogical integration must be accompanied by infrastructure grants; otherwise, innovation risks stalling at the planning stage.

Limitations and future work. The study involved only two Social Studies teachers and six observed lessons, limiting generalisability. Future research should track longitudinal effects on academic achievement and civic dispositions, incorporate comparative classes without TPACK modules, and explore parental perceptions of 21st-century learning. Additionally, investigating how local wisdom can be more deeply woven into digital content would address the lingering tension between global skills and indigenous knowledge.

In sum, the discussion affirms that 21st-century learning at SMP Negeri 2 Balung is not merely aspirational but already observable in practice, albeit with infrastructural caveats. The school’s experience adds weight to the claim that context-embedded, inquiry-driven, and technologically supported Social Studies can thrive outside metropolitan centres, offering a roadmap for similar schools across Indonesia and beyond.

Conclusion

His study concludes that the implementation of 21st-century learning in the Social Studies subject at SMP Negeri 2 Balung has successfully demonstrated a student-centered, innovative, and contextually relevant educational model, despite infrastructural limitations. At the planning stage, teachers displayed strong initiative by developing a digital teaching module grounded in the TPACK framework, integrating technological tools with pedagogical strategies and subject content. The inclusion of local issues, such as coastal migration, and the use of differentiated learning strategies showed a deep responsiveness to student needs and local context.

During the implementation stage, the use of the Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL) model and the 5E approach provided students with meaningful opportunities to engage, explore, and elaborate on real-world problems. Digital platforms such as Google Earth and Padlet enabled interactive, collaborative learning, although challenges such as unstable internet access limited the full integration of technology. Nonetheless, students demonstrated high levels of motivation and engagement, with evidence of increased critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity.

At the evaluation stage, teachers adopted authentic and formative assessments aligned with 21st-century competencies. The use of digital rubrics, project portfolios, self- and peer-assessments, and learning journals allowed for a holistic and continuous evaluation of both learning processes and outcomes. The combination of these tools improved assessment validity and supported student metacognition.

In summary, the research affirms that effective 21st-century learning implementation is achievable in non-urban schools like SMP Negeri 2 Balung through strategic planning, contextually adapted pedagogy, and a commitment to authentic student engagement. While infrastructure remains a challenge, the experience of this school offers a valuable model for other institutions seeking to transition toward modern, skill-based learning. The integration of TPACK and constructivist theory within a local framework highlights the potential for equitable and transformative education across diverse Indonesian regions.

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