

# **The Role of Social Education in Developing 21st Century Competencies: Critical Thinking, Collaboration, and Social Awareness**

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## **Abstract**

This research aims to analyze the role of social education in developing 21st century skills, particularly critical thinking, collaboration, and social awareness. The research method used is qualitative with a case study approach in secondary school students, through observation, interviews, and analysis of learning documents. The results showed that students experienced an increase in critical thinking skills in analyzing social issues, increased collaboration skills through group work and discussions, and the growth of social awareness reflected in empathy and concern for environmental problems and diversity. However, the effectiveness of learning is influenced by teacher readiness, the availability of contextual learning resources, and the level of active student participation. The discussion confirms that social education functions not only as a means of value transfer, but also as a social laboratory to form an adaptive, critical and caring generation. This research provides important implications for the development of more contextualized and innovative social learning strategies to prepare students to face global and national challenges.

**Keywords:** social education, 21st century competencies, social awareness

## **Introduction**

In a global context, the demands of the 21st century emphasize the importance of mastering the 4C skills (Critical Thinking, Creativity, Collaboration, Communication) combined with social awareness as the main provision to face the complexity of modern life (Siregar, 2024). Education can no longer be limited to academic achievement, but must also play a role in shaping students' personalities, characters, and social competencies so that they are able to adapt and contribute to a dynamic society (Supa'at & Ihsan, 2023). In Indonesia, the direction of national education policy through strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile emphasizes the importance of building a generation that is faithful, independent, critical, creative, and has social awareness and the ability to work together across cultures (Zainuddin et al., 2025). This shows that education must be a strategic vehicle to integrate academic and social dimensions in a balanced manner to produce a generation that is both intelligent and characterized (Adel, 2024).

The phenomenon of social education further emphasizes its role as a bridge between academic knowledge and the life skills that students need in dealing with social reality (Johansson & Sandahl, 2024). Through social education, students are facilitated to understand the values, norms, and responsibilities inherent in social life, so that they not only become cognitively intelligent individuals, but also sensitive to their social environment (Mulang & Putra, 2023). Global trends show the integration of social education with social emotional learning (SEL), which has proven effective in fostering empathy, sharpening self-awareness, and strengthening social care among students (Pham, 2024). More than just theory transfer, social education emphasizes experiential learning that trains practical skills, such as cooperation, conflict resolution, and ethical decision-making (Salinas-Navarro et al., 2024). Thus, social education serves as an important foundation to prepare students to become

individuals who are not only knowledgeable, but also have character and are able to face social challenges in the modern era (Miftakhu Rosyad et al., 2022).

The problem faced in the implementation of education today is the dominant focus on cognitive aspects, so that the development of students' social skills has not been maximized (Almulla & Al-Rahmi, 2023). The learning process often only emphasizes mastery of academic material and achievement of grades, while the dimensions of empathy, collaboration, and social care receive less adequate attention (Putri et al., 2025). In addition, the limited learning platforms that encourage collaboration, critical thinking, and real social action make students tend to be passive in responding to issues that occur in their environment. This condition is further exacerbated by students' low awareness of the important social roles in facing global challenges, such as diversity, climate change, and social justice issues (Hariyani & Mardikaningsih, 2022). As a result, the potential of education to form a generation that is not only intellectually intelligent, but also caring and useful in society, has not been fully realized.

The urgency of integrating 21st century competencies in social education is becoming increasingly apparent as the world faces complex and multidimensional global challenges (Martínez-Bravo et al., 2022). Social education has a strategic role in honing critical thinking skills, collaboration, and social awareness through authentic and contextual learning experiences, so that students not only understand issues, but are also able to formulate solutions (Hariyanto et al., 2022). By equipping students with transformative skills, social education prepares young people to face global issues such as environmental crises, social inequality, and the dynamics of cultural diversity in a reflective and solutive way (Waghid, 2024). This is in line with the direction of education transformation 4.0 and 5.0 which not only emphasizes technological literacy, but also emphasizes the importance of technological humanization and social sustainability. Thus, social education can be an important pillar to form an adaptive, innovative, and caring generation for the sustainability of life together.

There is still limited research that explicitly highlights the contribution of social education to the development of 21st century competencies. So far, social education has been discussed more in the context of values, morals, and character building, while its practical dimensions in training critical thinking skills, collaboration, and social awareness have not been widely revealed. In Indonesia, in particular, research that highlights the direct relationship between social education and critical thinking skills, cross-group cooperation, and social awareness in the school environment is still rare. This suggests the need for more in-depth studies to fill this gap, as well as to provide empirical evidence on how social education can be a strategic tool in preparing students to face global challenges while shaping student profiles in accordance with the direction of national education policy.

The purpose of this study is to deeply analyze the role of social education in developing 21st century skills, especially critical thinking, collaboration, and social awareness which are important provisions for students in facing global dynamics. In addition, this research also aims to identify relevant and contextualized social learning strategies that can increase the effectiveness of social education in schools. Furthermore, this research is expected to provide recommendations for social education curriculum innovation that is adaptive to global and national needs, and in line with the direction of education transformation 4.0/5.0 which emphasizes the humanization of technology and social sustainability.

## **Method**

This research uses a qualitative method with a case study approach because it focuses on an in-depth understanding of the role of social education in developing 21st century competencies, particularly critical thinking, collaboration and social awareness skills. This approach was chosen to comprehensively explore how the social learning process is implemented in schools and what strategies teachers apply in fostering these skills. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with teachers and students, observation of learning activities in the classroom and outside the classroom, and analysis of relevant curriculum documents. The data were analyzed thematically to find patterns, meanings and relationships between social education and 21st century skills. With this method, the research is expected to provide a complete picture of social education practices while offering recommendations for curriculum development that is adaptive to global and national needs.

## **Result and Discussion**

### **Critical Thinking**

The results showed that students experienced significant development in critical thinking skills, especially when analyzing complex social issues, such as cultural diversity, social inequality, and environmental problems. Through group discussions and case studies, students not only learn to identify problems, but also try to decipher the root causes and find alternative solutions. This shows that the experiential approach can activate higher-level cognitive processes that are difficult to achieve through conventional learning. However, some students still have difficulties in connecting the concepts of social theory with concrete realities in society. They tend to stop at descriptive understanding without being able to further elaborate the relationships between social variables that occur in the phenomena discussed.

This finding strengthens the argument that social education has the potential to be an effective instrument to foster critical thinking skills, especially when using problem-based learning and case study approaches. These strategies allow students to learn through real problems, while fostering social sensitivity to the issues they face. This is in line with the constructivism perspective, which emphasizes that knowledge is built from direct experience and active involvement of students in the learning process. However, challenges arise in the limited learning resources that are contextual and relevant to students' lives. Without materials that are close to everyday experiences, students' understanding risks being abstract and not well internalized. Therefore, teachers are required to design teaching materials that raise local and global issues in a balanced manner, so that students can link theory with real practice. This effort is expected to not only improve critical thinking skills, but also encourage the birth of reflective awareness and the ability to make ethical decisions in facing social dynamics in the 21st century era.

### **Collaboration**

The results showed that students' collaboration skills improved after participating in project-based social learning and group discussion. Students are more actively working together in completing tasks, sharing roles, and giving feedback to each other's ideas. This was evident in the role play and social action project activities, where students were able to agree on common goals and resolve minor conflicts that arose

during the teamwork process. However, not all groups show the same results, because there are still students who tend to be passive or only follow the dominant directions of other group members. This condition shows that collaboration skills are still developing gradually, influenced by group dynamics and individual characteristics.

This discussion reinforces the view that social education can serve as an important platform for honing collaborative skills, in line with the 21st century competency framework that emphasizes cooperation across individuals. Cooperative learning theory states that social interaction in groups not only improves cognitive learning outcomes, but also fosters interpersonal skills such as communication, empathy and conflict management. In this study, collaboration was shown to help students understand different points of view and integrate them into a shared solution. However, obstacles arise when there is an imbalance of roles within the group, which often leads to domination by a few active students. Therefore, teachers need to design more structured collaborative strategies, for example through jigsaw learning or assigning specific roles to each member. Thus, collaboration is not only understood as group work, but as a social skill that involves shared responsibility, fair distribution of roles, and the ability to build consensus in dealing with real problems.

### **Social Awareness**

The results show that social learning contributes significantly in increasing students' social awareness. Through involvement in discussions of actual issues such as cultural diversity, social inequality, and environmental problems, students become more sensitive to the conditions of the society around them. Social action project activities designed in learning also encourage students to interact directly with the environment, for example through social service activities or environmental awareness campaigns. As a result, most students show empathy, a sense of responsibility and a willingness to actively participate in community activities. However, the findings also show that the level of social awareness is uneven; some students still see social activities as a school obligation, not as part of a personal commitment to contribute to social change.

This discussion reinforces the understanding that social education has a strategic role in shaping social awareness, which is in line with the principles of social emotional learning (SEL). Through this approach, students not only learn social norms and values theoretically, but also internalize empathy and care through real experiences. This is in line with the Pancasila Student Profile framework that emphasizes the importance of building caring and mutual cooperation characters. However, the emerging gap between "formal" social awareness and what students actually live out suggests the need for pedagogical innovation. Teachers can integrate local issues that are closer to students' lives, such as waste problems in the school environment or tolerance among peers, so that students can feel the real relevance of social learning. Thus, social awareness is not just a normative concept, but a practical skill that is embedded in students' daily lives and prepares them as empathetic and socially responsible global citizens.

This synthesis of research findings confirms that social education is not just a supporting subject, but an important foundation in the formation of sustainable 21st century competencies. Improved critical thinking skills can be seen in students' ability to analyze complex issues with a multidimensional perspective, while collaboration aspects develop through active

involvement in group projects that demand coordination, communication and compromise. At the same time, social awareness grows through hands-on experiences that demand empathy, caring, and involvement in real action. These three aspects reinforce each other, showing that social education is effective when designed as a holistic learning process that integrates cognitive, affective and psychomotor dimensions.

However, this research also emphasizes the existence of prerequisites that determine success, namely adaptive teacher learning strategies, the availability of learning resources that are relevant to local and global issues, and active student participation. Without these three aspects, social education has the potential to fall back into a normative approach that does not provide space for real experiences. By adopting a more contextual and experience-based approach, social education can function as a social laboratory that trains students to become critical individuals, able to work together across differences, and have sensitivity to community dynamics. These findings open up opportunities for more integrative curriculum innovations, so that social education truly plays a role in preparing young people who are competent, adaptive and have the character to face global and national challenges.

## Conclusion

The conclusion of this research shows that social education has a strategic role in developing 21st century competencies, especially critical thinking, collaboration, and social awareness. Through discussion-based learning, case studies, and collaborative projects, students are able to improve their ability to analyze social issues, strengthen collaboration skills, and foster empathy and concern for the surrounding environment. However, the effectiveness of social education is highly dependent on teachers' learning strategies, the relevance of learning resources to local and global contexts, and the active involvement of students in the learning process. Thus, social education not only functions as a means of value transfer, but also as a social laboratory that trains young people to think critically, work together across differences, and have social sensitivity, so that they are ready to face global and national challenges adaptively and transformatively.

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