

REVIEW ARTICLE

Project Method in Social Studies: Pen Pal Project

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History

Received: 15.04.2025

Accepted: 11.06.2025

First Published: 29.06.2025

Keywords

Pen pals

Project-based learning

Social studies

Student

Teacher



ABSTRACT

Today, teachers can go beyond being passive recipients or transferrers of information to students in the learning process. Teachers can apply project-based learning in their classes to increase students' participation, question, discover and learn effectively throughout the teaching-learning process. As a result of using project-based learning in classes, students can develop research, participation, collaboration, rethinking, critical thinking and decision-making skills. Projects can increase students' motivation, be exciting and interesting. At the same time, deep learning can occur. Therefore, teachers can develop original projects for their students in classes. A pen-pal project can be one of these methods. Students' knowledge and skills in subjects such as recognizing different cultures, establishing intercultural interaction and communication can be expanded with the pen-pal project. This study was designed to examine the positive gains that social studies teachers can provide to students as a result of implementing project-based learning in their classes. This study was conducted using the document review method, one of the qualitative research methods. In this study, data were collected primarily through document analysis and document decoding. In the document review, project studies used in social studies education and articles on penpal projects were examined. In the document review, international studies, primarily the NCSS publications Social Education, Social Studies and Young Learner journals, were used. The document review was conducted between the years 2024-2025. In social studies education, project-based learning can provide students with opportunities such as solving real-world problems, questioning, sharing experiences, looking at events from different perspectives, creating meaningful learning opportunities, understanding different perspectives, using technology, establishing connections, deepening knowledge, discovering and doing interdisciplinary studies. Project-based learning can be one of the ways that motivates students, educates them with factual information, provides awareness and develops skills. A pen-pal project from primary sources can be exciting, interesting and intriguing for students. Teachers can apply project-based learning in social studies classes. Teachers can implement a pen-pal project to ensure that students interact with different cultures.

Please cite this paper as follows:

Topal, M. (2025). Project method in social studies: Pen pal project. *Bulletin of Educational Studies*, 4(1), 34-40.
<https://doi.org/10.61326/bes.v4i1.357>

1. Introduction

Project-based learning can be an active method that ensures the highest level of student participation in the learning process. In project-based learning, students can learn effectively and show more interest in the lesson. Social skills such as cooperation and communication develop among students and a real problem can be addressed in a structured process (Walberg

& Paik, 2002). Research results on project-based learning have determined that it includes a process far from practical and traditional learning activities aimed at increasing student participation and preventing rote learning (Bell, 2010). Project-based learning supports questioning, authentic, meaningful and creative learning in students. The project approach emphasizes the importance of listening to students, following their leadership, seeing them as talented researchers, and providing

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real-life experiences for questioning and exploring (Katz et al., 2014). This learning method can play a role in encouraging students to be aware, rethink, think critically, as well as providing deep learning and facilitating learning (De la Torre-Neches et al., 2020).

Teachers can implement pen-pal projects as projects by working collaboratively with students to conduct research, make decisions, answer questions and provide real-life experiences during the project process. In pen-pal projects carried out to create original project-based learning, my students can establish connections beyond the classroom, increase their self-confidence and develop relationships with positive role models (Bram, 2023). As a result of the pen-pal project, there can be developments in students' attitudes, increase motivation, learn about different cultures and develop communication skills (Hendrickson & Peterson-Hernandez, 2020). In this context, the need for change in social studies education, transformation into innovative and constructive learning, and changing the understanding while teaching the subject content to students (Halvorsen et al., 2019). Using project-based learning in classes is very effective for achieving specific learning outcomes. It also increases students' academic achievement and provides a deep learning experience (Larmer, 2018). Therefore, schools should encourage students to participate in simulations of democratic processes and procedures. Simulations of voting, hearings, legislative debates, and diplomacy in schools can lead to increased political knowledge and interest. Students learn skills that are clearly applicable to both civilian and non-civilian contexts, such as public speaking, teamwork, close reading, analytical thinking, and the ability to argue both sides of an issue. All of these are skills that prepare students for active citizenship as well as future academic and career success (NCSS, 2013). These individuals are also more likely to vote, debate politics, speak publicly and communicate with their elected representatives, volunteer, and work on community issues in the future. Schools with civic education programs are more likely to be safe, inclusive, and respectful (Jamieson et al., 2011). The purpose of this research is to provide information to textbook writers, curriculum developers, field experts, and teachers by evaluating the positive outcomes that social studies teachers can provide to their students as a result of implementing project-based learning in their classes.

2. Method

This study was conducted using the document review method, which is one of the qualitative research methods. The document review method can be defined as obtaining, examining, questioning and analyzing various documents that are considered as primary or secondary sources that constitute the data set of the research (Özkan, 2019). In this study, data were collected primarily through document analysis and document decoding. In the document review, articles related to

the project method used in social studies education and the pen pal project were used. The document review was conducted between the years 2024-2025.

3. Social Studies Education with Project Based Learning Method

Through project-based learning, students can take part in the planning, discussion and implementation of projects that are important to their nation, local community or themselves (Blank, 1997). Thus, students can learn content and skills by addressing real problems through project-based learning. In this context, project-based learning manifests itself in three stages that reflect the scientific research process. These stages;

Stage 1. Students can talk about their personal information as well as the experiences shared by their friends to create research questions. The aim of this stage is to find out what students already know about a topic and what they want to know more about. Students can bring works related to the topic from home and display their existing knowledge on a web site. In this way, teachers can detect students' misconceptions about the topic.

Stage 2. Students try to find answers to their questions by researching new information, drawing what they have learned, body movements or other expressions. Teachers plan learning experiences for children to answer research questions and provide in-depth information. During this stage, students can research on the internet, in books and review published lesson plans. Students can go on field visits or have an expert come and visit them in the classroom. Students can share their new knowledge through various means of representation, such as writing, drawing, graphics, paint, clay, dramatization, and construction.

Stage 3. Students disseminate what they have learned by sharing what they know with others. Finally, students have the opportunity to share what they have learned. There can be many different ways to finalize a project to prove knowledge, such as organizing an event (game, celebration, grand opening) or creating a product (book, poster, or digital video) and sharing it with others (Damjanovic et al., 2021). In addition, project-based learning can be carried out in the form of interdisciplinary learning. Students can learn about the functioning of government, the structure of politics, and politically controversial issues (Larmer, 2018). In this context, project-based learning was used to teach citizenship skills to students at a school in the USA. The stages of the project are as follows:

- In the first project, students took on the role of delegates to the 1787 Constitutional Convention, where they had to debate the merits of the Constitution, understand the principles of federalism, and decide whether the federal government or state governments should make important decisions.

- The second project was a simulation of a U.S. presidential election in which students were assigned the roles of candidates, campaign managers, the media, political parties, and interest groups. Through the project, students learned about the complexities of the election process as they tried to elect the candidate most suited to their interests.

- In the third project, students took on the role of Supreme Court justices and attorneys as they conducted mock court trials (mock appellate court hearings) in important Supreme Court cases.

- In the fourth project, students took on the role of a legislative body in which they worked together as members of Congress to enact legislation.

- In the fifth project, students served as political consultants to interest groups. In this final project, students used all the knowledge they learned throughout the course to provide comprehensive political action plans for the interest group (Piper & Neufeld-Kaiser, 2018). These topics are vital to laying the foundation for civic learning in students. Project-based learning can directly teach students about government, history, economics, law, and democracy in ways that foster critical thinking skills and can contribute to students' long-term civic and political engagement (NCSS, 2013).

3.1. Elements of the Project Method

The Buck Institute for Education also outlines seven key design elements for a project. These elements are:

- A compelling problem: The project is framed by a meaningful problem to be solved or a question to be answered at an appropriate level of difficulty.

- Sustained inquiry: Students engage in a rigorous and long-term process of asking questions, finding sources, and applying knowledge.

- Originality: The project includes a real-world context, tasks, tools, quality standards, or impact. It addresses students' personal concerns, interests, and issues in their lives. Because originality is a key project design element, simulations can occasionally be used in historical contexts rather than requiring all projects to be completely "real world." For example, simulations can be used in a topic on ancient Egypt. Students are more likely to find originality in a project about recent history, where students can interview people who lived it or find evidence of its lasting impact on their society. However, a project about more distant history is often more engaging if it can be connected to themes or issues that students find relevant today.

- Student decisions: Students make some decisions about the project, including how they will work and what they will create.

- Reflex: Students and teachers reflect on learning, questioning, and the effectiveness of project activities, the quality of student work, obstacles, and how to overcome them.

- Critique and revision. Students give, receive, and use feedback to improve their processes and products.

- Social product: Students make their projects public by explaining, exhibiting, or presenting them to people beyond the classroom (Piper & Neufeld-Kaiser, 2018).

3.2. Topics in Project Methodology

Since globalization and rapid technological developments in the 21st century have deeply affected the conceptualization of what it means to be a productive member of democracy and society, any subject such as society, history, government, and economy can be included in the project within the framework of the design elements determined for the project (NCSS, 2013). Project topics should focus on students' areas of interest and concrete elements. They can contribute to the development of students' knowledge and skills by working on the following topics with their students as project topics. These topics;

- A debate, speech, social media campaign, or multimedia presentation about a current event or controversial issue,

- A museum exhibition about a historical time, place, person, event, or development,

- A monument proposal that describes a historical event or development,

- A simulation of a situation in which the student has to solve a problem, make a decision, or give advice to a leader,

- A sign, podcast, guided tour, field guide, or annotated online map about local history,

- An action or service learning project that will benefit society.

3.3. Skills Developed in Students as a Result of the Project Method

The project-based learning topics mentioned can be used at all grade levels. All students can be included in the project. Nations ask students to think critically, solve real-world problems, communicate with different people, collaborate, use technology, and develop speaking and listening skills. Such competencies are also called 21st century skills. Project-based learning can be one of the most effective ways to develop these skills. This method is also motivating, engaging, factual, and suitable for making connections between disciplines (Larmer, 2018).

In an example of a study conducted in the form of interdisciplinary learning, the teacher decided to ask the students the research question "How do we get the ingredients we need to cook?" She asked the students to visit the market to

expand their understanding of places that sell food and explore it more deeply. During the first field visits, the students observed, interacted, and recorded their experiences while sampling the available items. During the second visit, students were exposed to real-life economic, math, science, literacy, and social interaction competencies. Students had the chance to see, smell, touch, and even taste products, and learn what they were made of. They voted for what they liked the most, then purchased items from the market by exchanging money, interacting with others in the community, and applying their math knowledge. Meanwhile, some students were responsible for drawing, photographing, and documenting their experiences. The experience of participating in the fieldwork led the children to explore the market. It gave them the opportunity to work as part of a group, with each student taking on specific roles that supported a broader vision of creating their own market. Students voted to select products to purchase, embracing the civic idea that everyone's voice matters when making product choices. Through their interactions with vendors, students observed the ways products are sold, customer interactions, and the buying and selling process. As a result of this study, it was determined that students developed collaborative, problem-solving, basic democratic principles, and civic skills (Damjanovic et al., 2021).

In social studies education, project work creates real learning opportunities in developing students' citizenship skills. It stands out in supporting and deepening interaction with various content areas by adding purpose and meaning to students' experiences. Projects are important in terms of recognizing the role they play in students' development of meaningful connections, creating fun learning, and creating spaces for sharing and exploring culture. The project approach focuses on connections with students' lived experiences, ideas, and skill levels. Project work allows for highly differentiated education by inviting children to question at their own individual level. Teachers can provide highly differentiated integrated learning opportunities based on identifying connections between content areas and developing children's skills and mental levels. The ongoing inquiry process throughout the project can create opportunities for students to engage in more than one content area at the same time while exploring the real world around them and deepening their knowledge about the world (Damjanovic et al., 2021).

3.4. Pen Pal Project in Social Studies Education

In societies where citizens have historically been divided and diverse, it is essential for citizens to develop a rational commitment to the founding principles and values that bind them together. Commitment to democratic principles, a desire to participate in the democratic process, and high-quality civic education policies and programs that will ensure the blessings of freedom for future generations should be encouraged. In order to create policies that provide high-quality social studies

education for all students at all grade levels (NCSS, 2013), the teacher read to students an 1818 letter from the Archbishop of Mexico about the Spanish colonial period. The letter included information about history, geography, and the local people of the period. The teacher asked the students to make presentations about this letter, provide information about the Spanish colonial period, and use drawings and models. The students presented the assigned tasks in the next lesson. As a result, it was determined that students developed skills such as participation, critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity (Larmer, 2018).

Carrying out such activities in the classroom can develop students' understanding of the basic processes of democracy, understanding and awareness of public and social issues, the ability to acquire information, critical thinking, the ability to look at events from different perspectives and the ability to understand different perspectives (NCSS, 2013). In this context, two teachers working in Indiana and Hawaii decided to carry out a pen-pal project for their students. The project aimed to make the students' learning experiences about society as concrete and relevant to real life as possible, to provide them with intercultural experiences, to introduce them to the citizens of a culturally different nation and to enable them to establish relationships with the world. The pen-pal project brought about unforgettable learning experiences with the use of children's literature, society and technology resources. In order to use pen-pal correspondence as an important student activity, the teacher developed a plan for a standards-based, integrated unit of study about society. During the seven-week duration of the theme, students in the two states compared the geographic, economic and cultural aspects of their countries. The teachers encouraged the students to find answers to some questions in their letters. These questions were as follows; (1) How do people living in Michigan City differ from people living in other regions? (2) How far is the distance between Indiana and Hawai'i? (3) What are the social problems experienced in Indiana and Hawai'i? (4) What are the common characteristics and differences between the two cultures? (5) Are household items more expensive in Hawaii or Indiana? Three letters were exchanged between the students. The students brought objects that they thought represented their culture or society to the classroom. These items included photographs, toy jewelry they made themselves, and sculpted clay figures. Each student selected one of these items and introduced it to their pen pal in Hawaii and wrote a short letter explaining the importance of the selected item. The students from Hawaii also introduced their own cultural items to their pen pals. In addition, the students were advised to use children's books, explanatory texts, and internet resources to explore the similarities and differences between Hawai'i and Indiana. After approximately two weeks, the students brought different types of sand, seashells in various shapes, pictures of the students' families, origami, and colorful neck ties to the classroom. Students introduced each other by selecting an item.

In this way, students discovered similarities and differences between the two countries. Students compared the prices of products in their countries using information collected from the latest Indiana and Hawaii newspapers. As a result of the study; students saw the differences and similarities between the two societies through the pen-pal project. Students exchanged information about homes, family members, traditions, languages, foods, geographical locations, physical systems, community resources and economic factors. Students found the pen-pal project interesting, intriguing and exciting. It was determined that students developed skills such as questioning, connecting with people who are different from them in various aspects and intercultural interaction (Callahan & Chan, 2007). Through penpals, students can consider the impact of economic status, gender, and religion in different societies. Students can confront issues such as poverty or child labor. They can build bridges to other social studies topics, such as the history of European rule in colonial America, the women's suffrage movement, and the struggle for twentieth-century civil rights (Sider, 2008).

Projects such as pen pals from primary sources can facilitate students' learning about history and civics (Duncan, 2011). Teachers can provide first-hand information to help students learn about topics better and discover new ways to participate. In one study, students in a world history class expressed a desire to learn about dance traditions from around the world. The teacher decided to find pen pals in South Africa to fulfill her students' desire. The teachers who helped the teacher manage the pen pal project indicated that the project would be an interesting way to explore the topic of dance. The students asked their pen pals about dance traditions. So, I arranged for a day when we would write letters to our pen pals about dance traditions in the United States and asked about their dance traditions. After about two months, the pen pals listed a number of dance traditions in their letters. The teacher and her students decided to choose one of the dance traditions listed in the letters. Working in groups, the students began to critically question the dance tradition they had chosen. This research included an understanding of what the dance tradition looks like now, as well as the historical foundations of the dance tradition. Through this research, students were able to make connections between a number of modern and historical dance traditions around the world. After completing their research, students compiled a compilation of historical dance traditions that replaced the modern dance tradition they researched. In addition to the performance, they made a presentation that included a historical analysis of the dance tradition (Allen, 2023).

Through visual imagery and thinking strategies, students were able to see the lifestyle of another region or nation, the diversity of climates, landforms, diversity in socio-economic levels, economic activities, and differences between rural and urban areas. In this context, students in two schools between

Dundlod and Rajasthan cities established pen-pal friendships. Excerpts from the student letters are as follows; "I have a cow at home that gives us milk. How many students are in your class?" "I have a goat at home. It gives us milk. Our village is covered in sand. I like peacocks, but there are too many peacocks in my village!" "The best animal that can help us here is camels," "My favorite food is pepper rice." "I want to be an engineer, what is your goal?" "Our national flower is lotus." "My family went for a picnic to Mount Abu." The students found Mount Abu on the map out of curiosity. This study in social sciences is based on interaction, hands-on experiences with Indian culture, and fostering intellectual curiosity (Sider, 2008).

Students in schools that embrace civic ideals can take active roles in local and global events. Opportunities can be created for students to understand the world and develop their long-term propensity, skills, and desire to take action. In this context, pen pals were formed between students in Colorado and Belize. The students in Colorado learned about the inequality of resources at the school their pen pals in Belize attended. Therefore, they decided to collect school supplies for their peers. The students were excited as they brainstormed a list of things to do for a successful project. What began as a process of encouraging students to take action became a long-term service-learning initiative that continued with the children and families helping to collect materials. In this way, students learned about global issues in age-appropriate ways and developed the skills and dispositions that are the hallmarks of active citizenship. Students became curious global citizens. Instead of making broad cultural generalizations, they dug deeper and learned more (Fry et al., 2012).

3.5. Benefits of Pen Pals

Real-life experiences can be a driving force for the social studies curriculum. Teachers can incorporate primary sources and real images into their lesson plans. For example, a Nigerian author's book from an African perspective can be read to students by the teacher, or an e-mail message sent by a child from Zomba can be responded to. This can make the daily lives of Africans at home, in the community, and at school vivid and real for students. Often, students make generalizations about Africa as if it were a country rather than a continent of more than 50 nations with different histories, societies, and landscapes. Africans are often viewed as mere recipients of American aid rather than creators of their own lives. Hearing from people from across the continent helps students understand other cultures. For example, Wangari Maathai, a Kenyan woman who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 for her contributions to sustainable development and peace, can be used to broaden students' images of Africa (Brown & Carroll, 2008).

Teachers can develop strategies that enhance students' knowledge and provide experiences. At this point, University

of Texas Elementary School, which believes that cultural celebrations are beneficial by increasing students' respect for cultural diversity, provides information to students about Red/White/Blue Day, Rosh Hashanah, Ramadan, Thanksgiving, Circle of Light (Fitr, Hannukah, Christmas, Kwanzaa), Las Posadas, Martin Luther King Day, Black History Month, Lincoln's Birthday, Passover, and Easter. School-wide events for each celebration attract the attention of students and families (Field & Bauml, 2012).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

In social studies education, project-based learning can provide students with opportunities such as solving real-world problems, questioning, sharing experiences, looking at events from different perspectives, creating meaningful learning opportunities, understanding different perspectives, using technology, establishing connections, deepening knowledge, discovering and doing interdisciplinary studies. Levin (2016) stated in his study that project activities can increase students' citizenship competencies. It was stated that the project allows students to gain multiple perspectives by comparing their own perspectives on events or phenomena with different perspectives. At the same time, students get to know the values of the society they live in through projects. They develop their skills. It was stated that individuals can apply these values and skills they have learned in issues related to citizenship. In the study conducted by Tonbuloğlu et al. (2013), it was found that the project-based learning method created a significant difference in the students' metacognitive skills and self-efficacy perceptions, and it was concluded that the behaviors in the groups generally changed positively over the weeks. In the research conducted by Ulukaya Öteleş and Ezer (2020), it was determined that the academic success scores of the control group, where traditional learning activities were used, and the experimental group, where the project-based learning method was used, increased. In the research conducted by Gömleksiz and Fidan (2013), it was concluded that the views of the students regarding the positive effects of the project-based learning method in terms of cognitive aspects were permanence, application opportunity, effective learning, web design, active participation, reinforcement, feedback-correction and higher-order thinking. It was obtained that the student views were mostly focused on permanence in terms of cognitive positive effects.

Project-based learning can be one of the ways that motivates students, educates them with factual information, provides awareness and develops skills. Pope et al. (2011) stated in their study that citizenship projects are student-centered and action-oriented. It was stated that projects support both students' academic success and civic participation. It has been determined that students expand their skills such as collaboration, problem solving, communication, critical thinking and rethinking through project-based learning. In a

study conducted by Print (1999), it was concluded that citizenship education provides students with skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, decision making, participation, voting and social service.

A pen-pal project from primary sources can be exciting, interesting and intriguing for students. In a study conducted by Coquillon and Wei (2011), it was stated that pen-pal projects provide students with the opportunity to examine, understand, evaluate, communicate, reason and create and express ideas on all aspects of critical thinking. With pen-pals, students can interact with different cultures by getting to know them. In addition, students can expand their skills such as communication, empathy and participation. In a study conducted by Larrotta and Chung (2020), it was determined that a pen-pal project helps individuals develop civic skills. It has been determined that penpals increase intercultural interaction, and individuals develop participation, communication and socialization skills necessary for citizenship by getting to know different cultures and eliminating prejudices and stereotypes. In the research conducted by Özsoy and Baş (2024), regarding the difference between the pre-test and post-test writing success scores of the students with the pen-pal application, it was concluded that the writing success scores of the students increased in the post-test application compared to the pre-test application, and the pen-pal application improved the students' writing skills positively and with a great effect.

5. Recommendations

Teachers can implement project-based learning in social studies classes. Teachers can carry out interdisciplinary learning through project-based learning. Teachers can implement a penpal project to ensure that students interact with different cultures. Teachers can develop different strategies and methods that can provide skill development in students.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

This study does not require an ethics committee decision.

Conflict of Interest

The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

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