



## Impact of Project-Based Learning and Student Engagement among Junior Secondary School Social Studies Students in Kaduna State

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### ABSTRACT

*This study examined the impact of project-based learning and student engagement among junior secondary school social studies students in Kaduna State. The study adopted a quasi-experimental research design, specifically the non-equivalent control group design. The population of the study comprised one thousand, three hundred and eighty (1,380) junior secondary school students and Social Studies teachers in Kaduna State. A sample of 300 students and 30 Social Studies teachers was selected using simple random sampling technique. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and Social Studies Performance Test (SSPT) administered to junior secondary school students and Social Studies teachers to obtain information on project-based learning practices and students' cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement in Social Studies. Independent samples t-test was employed to determine differences between the experimental and control groups, while Pearson Product Moment Correlation was used to examine relationships among students' engagement, academic performance, and teachers' awareness and use of project-based learning. The findings indicated that project-based learning significantly enhances students' engagement in Social Studies. students' engagement significantly influences academic performance in Social Studies. teachers' awareness significantly influences their use of project-based learning. The study conclude by recommending that Educational authorities and school administrators should encourage and support the systematic adoption of project-based learning in junior secondary school Social Studies classrooms, as it has been shown to significantly enhance students' engagement and learning outcomes, among others.*

### ARTICLE INFO

Article History

Received: September, 2025

Received in revised form: November, 2025

Accepted: January, 2026

Published online: January, 2026

### KEYWORDS

Project-Based Learning, Student Engagement, Social Studies

### INTRODUCTION

The importance of Social Studies in the Nigerian junior secondary school curriculum is crucial. It helps shape young learners into responsible citizens by instilling values of democracy, civic duty, cultural understanding, and social justice (Okam, 2012; Akinbote, 2021). Social Studies exposes students to key national issues such as ethnic intolerance, corruption, insecurity, and political instability, which continue to affect Nigeria's development. By integrating knowledge from fields like history, geography,

economics, and government, Social Studies provides students with the skills they need to analyse and address societal issues (Ogundare, 2020). However, traditional teaching methods, such as rote memorization, lectures, and textbook recitation, often fail to achieve the curriculum's objectives (Egbo, 2015; Onasanya & Adegbija, 2022). These conventional approaches discourage student interaction, limit creativity, and hinder the development of higher-order thinking skills, resulting in disengagement and poor academic performance in Social Studies.

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Project-Based Learning (PBL) offers a strong alternative to these outdated teaching methods. PBL is a student-centered instructional approach in which learners acquire knowledge and skills by investigating and addressing complex, real-world problems (Thomas, 2000; Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2006). Grounded in constructivist learning theories, especially Vygotsky's (1978) ideas on active engagement, social interaction, and meaningful tasks, PBL encourages students to collaborate, integrate knowledge across subjects, and undertake authentic assessments that deepen understanding. In Social Studies classrooms, students often engage with real societal issues, develop solutions, and present findings through reports, models, or presentations, thereby enhancing cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement (Larmer, Mergendoller, & Boss, 2015; Fredricks, Wang, & Allensworth, 2020; Lee, Blackwell, Drake, & Moran, 2021).

Recent studies demonstrate that PBL positively impacts both student engagement and academic performance. Learners exposed to PBL display greater critical thinking, problem-solving skills, motivation, interest, and active participation compared to peers taught with conventional methods (Condliffe et al., 2017; Miller & Krajcik, 2019; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). In Social Studies specifically, PBL has been shown to increase civic competence, empathy, and engagement with social issues, enabling students to connect historical, civic, and ethical concepts to real-life contexts (Boss & Krauss, 2018; Frazee & Galen, 2020; Halvorsen et al., 2012). These benefits are especially critical in Nigeria, where Social Studies often suffers from student disinterest due to abstract teaching approaches (Egbo, 2015; Yusuf & Okebukola, 2022).

Despite the proven benefits of PBL, its implementation in Nigerian schools faces challenges. Many teachers lack the necessary training and preparation for student-centered approaches, struggle with project design and assessment, or revert to lecture-based methods due to curriculum demands and time constraints (Akinola, 2020; Ofoegbu & Alonge, 2016). Additionally, inadequate teaching materials,

overcrowded classrooms, limited ICT resources, and a rigid, exam-focused curriculum further hinder effective PBL adoption. These challenges highlight the need for empirical research on how PBL can be applied to enhance Social Studies outcomes in contexts like Kaduna State.

In Kaduna State, a region characterized by religious and ethnic diversity as well as socio-economic challenges, the use of PBL in Social Studies is particularly relevant. When effectively implemented, PBL can promote unity, tolerance, critical thinking, and informed civic participation. However, little empirical evidence exists on its effect on students' cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement or academic performance in Social Studies classrooms within this region (Akinola, 2020; Yusuf & Okebukola, 2022). Therefore, this study seeks to examine the impact of project-based learning on student engagement and academic performance in junior secondary school Social Studies classrooms in Kaduna State. The findings are expected to provide valuable insights into how modern, student-centered teaching methods can improve learning outcomes and foster more engaged, socially responsible citizens.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite the documented benefits of Project-Based Learning (PBL), its use in junior secondary school Social Studies classrooms in Kaduna State is still limited. Many teachers continue to depend on rote memorization, lectures, and textbook-based instruction, which often leave students disengaged and unmotivated (Adeyemi, 2012). Low student engagement in Social Studies leads to poor academic performance and a lack of interest in civic issues among youths. There is a pressing need to explore active teaching strategies that can boost engagement and improve learning outcomes. This research is important to provide data-driven insights on how PBL can enhance engagement and academic performance. It will also identify barriers to using PBL in Kaduna State schools and offer recommendations for policy, curriculum reform, and teacher development.

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## Objectives

The specific objectives of this study are to:

1. Assess the extent to which project-based learning influences cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement of students in Social Studies.
2. Examine the relationship between student engagement and academic performance in Social Studies.
3. Investigate teachers' level of awareness and use of project-based learning in junior secondary Social Studies classrooms in Kaduna State.

## Research Questions

1. To what extent does project-based learning influence the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement of junior secondary school students in Social Studies?
2. What relationship exists between students' engagement (cognitive, emotional, and behavioural) and their academic performance in Social Studies?
3. What is the level of teachers' awareness and use of project-based learning in junior secondary school Social Studies classrooms in Kaduna State?

## Research Hypotheses

$H_0_1$ : Project-based learning has no significant influence on the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement of junior secondary school students in Social Studies.

$H_0_2$ : There is no significant relationship between students' engagement (cognitive, emotional, and behavioural) and their academic performance in Social Studies.

$H_0_3$ : There is no significant relationship between teachers' level of awareness of project-based learning and their use of project-based learning in junior secondary school Social Studies classrooms in Kaduna State.

## METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a quasi-experimental research design, specifically the non-equivalent control group design. This design was considered appropriate because the participants were studied in their natural classroom settings without random assignment to experimental and control groups. The design enabled the researcher to determine the effect of project-based learning on students' engagement and academic performance in Social Studies. The population of the study comprised one thousand, three hundred and eighty (1,380) junior secondary school students and Social Studies teachers in Kaduna State.

A sample of 300 students and 30 Social Studies teachers was selected using simple random sampling technique. The sampled students were assigned to experimental (project-based learning) and control (conventional teaching method) groups. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and Social Studies Performance Test (SSPT) administered to junior secondary school students and Social Studies teachers to obtain information on project-based learning practices and students' cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement in Social Studies. The experimental group was taught Social Studies using project-based learning, while the control group was taught using the conventional teaching method over a period of six (6) weeks. To test the hypotheses formulated for the study, independent samples t-test was employed to determine differences between the experimental and control groups, while Pearson Product Moment Correlation was used to examine relationships among students' engagement, academic performance, and teachers' awareness and use of project-based learning.

## RESULTS

### Hypothesis One:

Project-based learning has no significant influence on the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement of junior secondary school students in Social Studies.

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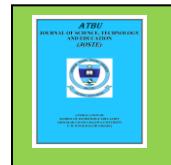


Table 1: Independent Samples t-test on the Influence of Project-Based Learning on Students' Cognitive, Emotional, and Behavioural Engagement in Social Studies

| Engagement Dimension   | Teaching Method | N   | Mean | Std. Deviation | df  | t-value | Sig. (p) | Remark |
|------------------------|-----------------|-----|------|----------------|-----|---------|----------|--------|
| Cognitive Engagement   | PBL             | 150 | 3.42 | 0.61           | 298 | 6.18    | 0.000    | Sig.   |
|                        | Conventional    | 150 | 2.98 | 0.64           |     |         |          |        |
| Emotional Engagement   | PBL             | 150 | 3.51 | 0.58           | 298 | 6.47    | 0.000    | Sig.   |
|                        | Conventional    | 150 | 3.05 | 0.60           |     |         |          |        |
| Behavioural Engagement | PBL             | 150 | 3.38 | 0.63           | 298 | 6.01    | 0.000    | Sig.   |
|                        | Conventional    | 150 | 2.91 | 0.66           |     |         |          |        |

Table 1 shows that project-based learning has a significant influence on students' cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement in Social Studies. Students taught using project-based learning recorded higher mean scores in cognitive ( $M = 3.42$ ), emotional ( $M = 3.51$ ), and behavioural engagement ( $M = 3.38$ ) than those taught using the conventional method ( $M = 2.98$ ,  $3.05$ , and  $2.91$  respectively). The independent samples t-test results further revealed that the differences in mean scores were

statistically significant in all three dimensions ( $p < 0.05$ ). Consequently, the null hypothesis was rejected, indicating that project-based learning significantly enhances students' engagement in Social Studies.

**Hypothesis Two:**

There is no significant relationship between students' engagement and their academic performance in Social Studies.

Table 2: Pearson Product Moment Correlation Analysis of the Relationship Between Students' Engagement and Academic Performance in Social Studies ( $N = 300$ )

| Variables              |                        | N   | Mean | Std. Deviation | r    | Sig. (p) | Remark |
|------------------------|------------------------|-----|------|----------------|------|----------|--------|
| Cognitive Engagement   | & Academic Performance | 300 | 3.40 | 0.62           | 0.56 | 0.000    |        |
| Emotional Engagement   | & Academic Performance | 300 | 3.48 | 0.59           | 0.61 | 0.000    | Sig.   |
| Behavioural Engagement | & Academic Performance | 300 | 3.35 | 0.65           | 0.53 | 0.000    |        |

Table 2 shows that students' engagement is significantly related to their academic performance in Social Studies. The results reveal positive and statistically significant correlations between cognitive engagement ( $r = 0.56$ ), emotional engagement ( $r = 0.61$ ), behavioural engagement ( $r = 0.53$ ), and academic performance at the 0.05 level of significance. This indicates that increases in students' engagement are associated with improvements in their academic performance. Consequently, the null

hypothesis was rejected, confirming that students' engagement significantly influences academic performance in Social Studies.

**Hypothesis Three:**

There is no significant relationship between teachers' level of awareness of project-based learning and their use of project-based learning in junior secondary school Social Studies classrooms in Kaduna State.

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Table 3: Pearson Product Moment Correlation Analysis of the Relationship Between Teachers' Awareness and Use of Project-Based Learning in Junior Secondary School Social Studies Classrooms in Kaduna State

| Variables                               | N  | Mean | Std. Deviation | r    | Sig. (p) | Decision              |
|---|----|------|----------------|------|----------|-----------------------|
| Teachers' Awareness of PBL & Use of PBL | 30 | 3.26 | 0.58           | 0.64 | 0.001    | Reject H <sub>0</sub> |

Table 3 reveals a positive and statistically significant relationship between teachers' level of awareness of project-based learning and their use of project-based learning in junior secondary school Social Studies classrooms in Kaduna State ( $r = 0.64$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). This indicates that teachers with higher awareness of project-based learning are more likely to apply it in their instructional practices. Consequently, the null hypothesis was rejected, showing that teachers' awareness significantly influences their use of project-based learning.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The finding that project-based learning (PBL) significantly enhances students' engagement in Social Studies is consistent with both theoretical and empirical literature on learner-centred instructional approaches. Project-based learning emphasizes active participation, collaboration, inquiry, and real-world problem solving, which naturally promote cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement among students (Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2006; Larmer et al., 2015). Studies have shown that when students are involved in meaningful projects, they demonstrate deeper thinking, sustained attention, and positive emotional attachment to learning tasks (Boss & Krauss, 2018; Lee et al., 2021).

In Social Studies specifically, PBL provides opportunities for learners to explore societal issues, civic responsibilities, and national values in authentic contexts, thereby increasing relevance and interest (Fazee & Galen, 2020; NCSS, 2010). This finding also supports the engagement framework proposed by Fredricks et al. (2004) and Appleton et al. (2008), which identifies instructional strategies as key determinants of multidimensional student engagement. In the Nigerian context, where Social Studies faces challenges of rote teaching

and limited learner participation (Adeyemi, 2012; Egbo, 2015), the effectiveness of PBL observed in this study highlights its potential as a viable strategy for revitalising classroom engagement.

The finding that students' engagement significantly influences their academic performance in Social Studies further reinforces existing evidence that engagement is a critical predictor of learning outcomes. Research consistently demonstrates that cognitively engaged students invest greater effort in understanding content, emotionally engaged students develop positive attitudes toward learning, and behaviourally engaged students participate actively in classroom activities, all of which contribute to improved academic achievement (Fredricks et al., 2004; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Empirical studies have established strong links between engagement and performance across subject areas, including Social Studies (Fredricks et al., 2020; Onasanya & Adegbija, 2022). This finding also aligns with the social constructivist perspective, which posits that learning occurs most effectively when learners actively interact with content, peers, and teachers (Vygotsky, 1978).

Furthermore, Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) emphasize that instructional environments that foster engagement support deeper learning and long-term academic success. Within the Nigerian secondary school context, where poor academic performance in Social Studies has been attributed to low student motivation and passive learning environments (Akinbote, 2021; Ogundare, 2020), this finding underscores the importance of engagement-focused teaching strategies for improving students' achievement.

The finding that teachers' awareness significantly influences their use of project-based learning highlights the central role of teacher knowledge and professional competence in

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instructional innovation. Teachers who are aware of the principles, benefits, and procedures of PBL are more likely to adopt and effectively implement it in their classrooms (Condliffe et al., 2017; Miller & Krajcik, 2019).

Several studies in Nigeria have identified limited awareness, inadequate training, and insufficient professional development as major barriers to the use of innovative teaching methods, including project-based learning (Akinola, 2020; Ofoegbu & Alonge, 2016). This finding supports Nworgu's (2012) assertion that curriculum implementation largely depends on teachers' understanding and interpretation of instructional strategies. It also aligns with Savery (2015), who argues that learner-centred approaches require deliberate teacher preparation and pedagogical awareness to be successfully applied. In the context of Social Studies education, where traditional lecture methods still dominate classroom practice (Okam, 2012; Adeyemi, 2012), the significant relationship between awareness and use of PBL suggests that targeted teacher training and continuous professional development could enhance instructional quality and promote innovative teaching practices.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined the influence of project-based learning on students' engagement, the relationship between student engagement and academic performance, and the effect of teachers' awareness on the use of project-based learning in junior secondary school Social Studies classrooms in Kaduna State. The findings revealed that project-based learning significantly enhances students' cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement. This indicates that when learners are actively involved in meaningful, real-life projects, they are more attentive, motivated, and participatory in Social Studies lessons, thereby addressing long-standing concerns about student passivity in the subject. The study further established a significant relationship between students' engagement and their academic performance in Social Studies. Engaged students demonstrated better understanding, improved

participation, and higher achievement levels, confirming that engagement is a critical factor in academic success. This underscores the importance of instructional strategies that promote active learning and sustained learner involvement rather than reliance on traditional, teacher-centred methods.

Additionally, the study found that teachers' level of awareness significantly influences their use of project-based learning. Teachers who are knowledgeable about project-based learning are more likely to adopt and implement it effectively in their classrooms. This highlights the central role of teacher preparation, awareness, and continuous professional development in successful curriculum implementation and instructional innovation in Social Studies education.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were put forwards based on the findings:

1. Educational authorities and school administrators should encourage and support the systematic adoption of project-based learning in junior secondary school Social Studies classrooms, as it has been shown to significantly enhance students' engagement and learning outcomes.
2. Regular workshops, seminars, and in-service training programmes should be organised for Social Studies teachers to improve their awareness, understanding, and practical skills in implementing project-based learning effectively.
3. Teachers should deliberately design instructional activities and assessment strategies that promote cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement, recognizing engagement as a key driver of improved academic performance in Social Studies.

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