



## Meaning of Social Studies Learning and Social Behavior Implication Among Junior High Students in Brebes

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### Abstract

Social behavioral degradation among students, including bullying, low empathy, and weakening social values, reflects a persistent gap between the ideals of Social Studies (IPS) education and its classroom implementation. Grounded in George Herbert Mead's Symbolic Interactionism theory, this study employs a qualitative phenomenological approach to examine how IPS teachers and students construct meaning in learning interactions and how this process shapes students' social behavior in junior high schools in Brebes Regency. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation across three schools using purposive and snowball sampling. The findings reveal that teachers have reframed IPS as a medium for character formation enacted through contextual methods, direct habituation, and symbolic classroom interactions. Students construct meaning primarily through teacher modeling, with internalized values manifesting in concrete prosocial behaviors. Sustained synergy among teachers, school programs, and family support is essential to transform cognitive understanding into genuine social behavioral commitments. Theoretically, this study contributes to understanding how symbolic interaction in educational settings shapes students' self-concept and social behavior. Practically, the findings offer actionable insights for teachers, school policymakers, and curriculum developers seeking to strengthen character-based education through IPS learning.

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## INTRODUCTION

The paradox with the function of education as mandated in Article 1 and Article 3 of the Republic of Indonesia Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System, which emphasizes that national education serves to shape the character and dignified civilization of the nation, is that various phenomena of social behavior degradation among students continue to recur. Changes in social behavior due to the influence of social media, violence, bullying, student brawls, and a lack of sense of responsibility have become phenomena that deserve serious attention from both the government and the education sector (Pramudita et al., 2025). At the same time, Indonesia's social capital, rich in local wisdom values, seems to be receiving insufficient attention, raising concerns about the loss of solidarity, justice, unity, and noble values derived from the nation's socio-cultural heritage (Surahman & Mukminan, 2017).

This change in values is observed in various schools across Indonesia, and this condition demands educational institutions to not only focus on academic achievements but also on the character formation and social behavior of students that reflect noble national values, because when the majority of societal character is negative and weak, the civilization that is formed becomes weak as well (Surahman & Mukminan, 2017). This phenomenon is also clearly observed in the environment of junior high schools in Brebes Regency, where the heterogeneity of students' economic backgrounds, languages, and family environments creates unique challenges for character formation thru formal education. Various inappropriate social actions still emerge and impact other students who are in the process of developing moral character in the practice of school life. This condition indicates a gap between the ideal goals of education and the reality of students' social behavior in the field, which demands serious attention, especially regarding the implementation of subjects that directly touch on the formation of values and social character, namely Social Sciences (IPS). Therefore, strengthening students' character thru IPS learning in formal schools, including in Brebes Regency

Junior High Schools, is something that must be done immediately and in a structured manner.

Regarding the responsibility in the field of education, Social Sciences (IPS) is one of the subjects that plays a significant role in shaping students' character and social behavior, both at the elementary and secondary school levels. Social Studies (IPS) is created based on phenomena, problems, and social realities thru an interdisciplinary approach involving various social science and humanities disciplines such as citizenship, history, geography, economics, sociology, anthropology, and education (Endayani, 2017). The material taught includes various events, a collection of facts, concepts, and generalizations related to real issues, social phenomena and problems, as well as regional potential. With such a broad scope, Social Studies has great potential to create intelligent, critical, and well-charactered citizens.

The goal of IPS education aligns with the urgent need to shape students' social character (Tanggur et al., 2025). As explained by Rahmad (2016) the IPS subject aims to enhance students' abilities to be more sensitive to social issues occurring in society, to have a positive mental attitude in addressing all forms of injustice, and to be able to solve problems that arise in daily life. In line with that opinion, Ridwan (2014) and Ahmad (2025) state that the goal of social studies education is to prepare students to become good citizens in society. Therefore, social studies in education is a concept that focuses on the development of knowledge, attitudes, and social skills to shape and develop the character of good citizens.

Character education becomes an important aspect that cannot be separated from social studies learning. Character education can be understood as education about values, moral education, or character education that has the same goal as social studies learning, which is to shape students into good citizens (Isaf et al., 2025). This effort includes the process of promoting and internalizing core values to students so that they become confident, highly moral, democratic, and responsible citizens. Schools should function as places for gathering and tools for fostering friendships that can develop positive values, where cooperation between

teachers, families, and parents is greatly needed to help advance students' good morals.

Teachers play a central role in the implementation of social studies education, which not only touches on the cognitive realm but also the affective and psychomotor realms in a balanced manner. Social studies teachers are expected to implement teaching in accordance with the goals of social studies itself, namely building the cognitive realm thru mastery of social knowledge, the affective realm thru instilling attitudes of appreciation, empathy, social responsibility, and moral awareness, as well as the psychomotor realm such as community living skills, cooperation, and emotional control (Surahman & Mukminan, 2017).

Teachers today face growing challenges as rapid technological advancement and shifting moral values in society increasingly influence students' social attitudes, making their responsibilities greater than ever in preparing students to navigate these changes. In this context, the teacher's role becomes pivotal in improving student behavior through motivation, supervision, guidance, and exemplary conduct, so that students adhere to school rules and social norms based on genuine awareness rather than mere obligation.

In the theoretical framework, understanding IPS learning implementation can be enriched through George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism theory, which posits that IPS education employs social symbols as tools of communication and meaning-making. Interactions between teachers and students involve the exchange of symbols carrying social values, enabling students to interpret these symbols, form their self-concept, and internalize prevailing social norms. Consequently, differences in how teachers and students interpret these symbols can directly affect the effectiveness of social value internalization and the formation of students' social behavior in school.

Although research on IPS learning and student character development has been extensively conducted, a significant research gap remains. Most existing studies focus on curricular aspects and general teaching methods (Surahman & Mukminan, 2017; Tanggur et al., 2025), with few examining how teachers and students together construct meaning through daily classroom interactions.

Furthermore, students' social behavior is predominantly studied as a quantitatively measurable variable, leaving the subjective dimension of value internalization underrepresented in the literature. Research at the junior high school level in Brebes Regency is also very limited, despite the significant influence of local socio-cultural context on meaning-making and value internalization in IPS learning. This research aims to fill that gap through a qualitative phenomenological approach grounded in Mead's symbolic interaction theory. Based on the foregoing, this study examines the meanings attributed by teachers and students to IPS learning and their implications for students' social behavior, with the aim of understanding IPS implementation, analyzing meaning-making within the symbolic interaction framework, and informing teachers, schools, families, and policymakers in developing balanced cognitive, affective, and psychomotor approaches to IPS education. This study is presented in the research titled "Meaning of Social Studies Learning and Social Behavior Implication Among Junior High Students in Brebes".

## METHOD

This research employs a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design, considered most suitable for examining the subjective experiences and meanings that teachers and students construct regarding the implementation of social studies (IPS) learning and its implications for students' social behavior. A qualitative approach was chosen because this research does not statistically quantify variables, but rather aims to understand meaning, process, and social interactions within the context of IPS learning in a holistic manner (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The paradigm used is the interpretative paradigm grounded in George Herbert Mead's symbolic interaction theory, which allows researchers to examine how teachers and students interpret and assign meaning to social symbols in the IPS learning process, and how these interpretations shape students' self-concept and social behavior. Data analysis follows the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman & Saldaña (2014) encompassing three stages: data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion

drawing, ensuring findings are presented in a systematic, credible, and accountable manner.

This research was conducted in three junior high schools in Brebes Regency, Central Java, purposively selected to represent variation in school characteristics, namely a public school in an urban area, a public school in a rural area, and a private Islamic boarding school. The selected schools are SMP Negeri 2 Tanjung, SMP Negeri 3 Tanjung, and SMP Islam Darussalam Kersana. Research subjects were determined through purposive and snowball sampling, with informants consisting of IPS teachers, eighth-grade students, curriculum coordinators, and student affairs coordinators who are directly involved in the IPS learning process, as listed in the following table.

**Table 1.** List of Informants

| Informant                             | Category            |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Main (Social Studies Teacher) Student | Experienced Teacher |
|                                       | New Teacher         |
|                                       | Grade VIII Student  |
|                                       | Male Student        |
|                                       | Female Student      |
| Key                                   | Deputy Curriculum   |
|                                       | Student Affairs     |

Source: Research Data processed in 2025

Data were collected through three complementary methods: in-depth semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document study. Interviews were conducted to understand how teachers and students interpret IPS learning and how these interpretations manifest in students' daily social behavior. Participant observation was carried out in classrooms and school environments to observe symbolic interaction dynamics, including communication patterns and social behavior. Document study covered lesson plans, teaching modules, assessment records, school regulations, and student behavior reports. Data validity was ensured through source, technique, and time triangulation, as well as member checking, to maintain the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the research in accordance with qualitative validity standards.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### The Meaning of Social Studies Learning for Teacher

According to Symbolic Interactionism, teachers do not passively implement the curriculum, but actively assign meaning to every symbol they encounter, including the symbol "Social Studies" itself (Blumer, 1986). According to Symbolic Interactionism, teachers do not passively implement the curriculum, but actively assign meaning to every symbol they encounter, including the symbol "Social Studies" itself. The meaning attached to Social Studies will fundamentally determine how teachers view objectives, select materials, and design classroom practices. Research findings indicate that teachers' understanding of social studies has undergone a fundamental transformation, from merely transmitting theoretical knowledge to equipping students with social skills and character building. Social Studies teachers collectively view this subject as a living science closely tied to the daily lives of students, as expressed by one teacher: "Social Studies is not just about understanding the subject matter, but also about how students can recognize their social environment, understand societal dynamics, and learn to be part of communal life" (Ms. Eka, SMP Negeri 2 Tanjung, October 20, 2025). A similar interpretation is also evident in the context of pesantren-based schools, where teachers view daily practices such as the honesty canteen system as a medium for internalizing social values without lengthy theoretical explanations (Mr. Iwan, Darussalam Islamic Boarding School Junior High School, November 6, 2025). Mansur (2023) that meaningful social studies learning must always connect the material with the real-life context of the students, so that students become active subjects rather than mere recipients of information. In Mead (1934) framework, this interpretation encourages teachers to make the school environment a symbolic laboratory where students develop themselves through interaction, internalizing the expectations of honesty and responsibility norms, which ultimately shape The Me (the organized social self).

The definition of social studies learning is not static, but rather constantly formed and negotiated

through social interactions between teachers and students in the classroom. The process of meaning formation involves the use of specific symbols employed by teachers to communicate the underlying values of social studies. Class opening rituals, reprimands, and rule enforcement all serve as symbols representing social expectations. A teacher, for example, consistently begins the class with a greeting and reminds students of the learning contract to instill responsibility and discipline (Mr. Iwan, Darussalam Islamic Boarding School, November 6, 2025), while another teacher uses exemplary behavior and strict sanctions to emphasize that social attitudes must be applied consistently (Mrs. Khor, Tanjung Public Middle School 2, October 20, 2025). Teachers also creatively utilize routine class. This strategy aligns with the findings of Sari & Handayani (2020) that effective social studies teachers consciously transform cognitive knowledge into socio-affective attitudes thru verbal interventions that connect students' actions with their social consequences. In Mead's perspective, thru this interaction, students engage in role-taking, internalizing collective expectations into a norm-consciousness that shapes The Generalized Other within themselves.

Teachers' actions in selecting strategies and teaching methods are a direct manifestation of their symbolic interpretation of the goals of social studies. Because social studies is understood as a discipline oriented toward social practice, teachers consistently choose methods that involve interaction and direct experience, especially Problem-Based Learning (PBL) and group work that is directly supervised in the classroom. This method is chosen not merely as a pedagogical technique, but as an arena where students practice role-taking and internalize the values of cooperation, empathy, and responsibility thru real actions. The teacher even faces the challenge that some students have weak collaboration skills, so a policy of group assignments in class is implemented so that the teacher can directly monitor each student's involvement and gradually intervene with reprimands to sanctions for those who do not participate (Ms. Aprilia, SMP Negeri 3 Tanjung, October 20, 2025). The effectiveness of this approach is reinforced by Setiawan & Wardani

(2021) who demonstrate that PBL in social studies not only improves students' cognitive learning outcomes but also significantly enhances their social skills, cooperation abilities, and empathy. Overall, the teacher's approach to teaching social studies focuses on the principle of consistent direct habituation, where classroom routines and collaborative methods function as symbolic laboratories to ensure that social values are not only cognitively understood but truly internalized as a natural part of students' character and behavior in their daily lives.

### **The Meaning of Social Studies Learning for Students**

The Symbolic Interactionism approach views learners as actors who actively engage in meaning-making of all symbols and interactions in the classroom, rather than passive recipients of knowledge (Blumer, 1969). The process of students' symbolic interpretation is divided into two main objects, namely curricular symbols such as the concepts of democracy, diversity, and responsibility, as well as the pedagogical actions of teachers that include teaching methods, language, and non-verbal expressions (Setyowati et al., 2016; Romdloni, 2024). Research findings indicate that students' understanding of social studies is formed thru two complementary channels. First, cognitively-transformative, as expressed by a student: "Social Studies can change my knowledge about social life, and make me more aware of what we should do in the community" (Tifatul, Darussalam Islamic Boarding School Junior High School, November 18, 2025). Second, more dominantly, thru the direct example (modeling) of the teacher, where students interpret social studies thru the teacher's care, politeness, and firmness in upholding norms. The use of the phrase "Excuse me" by the teacher, for example, is interpreted by students as a symbol of genuine politeness in social life (Farid, SMP 3 Tanjung, October 24, 2025). This is in line with Syah (2024) findings that the teacher's personality competence is a determining factor in the success of internalizing social values, so for students, the meaning of social studies shifts from merely an academic subject to a guide for ethical living, the relevance of which is assessed thru the teacher's behavior in the classroom.

The process of internalizing IPS values by students, which from Mead's (1934) perspective is closely related to the formation of The Me and the ability to role-take, has proven successful in transcending the cognitive realm and manifesting in real daily actions. The values of cooperation, empathy, and responsibility taught thru group tasks, problem-based assignments, and extracurricular activities have been internalized into concrete spontaneous actions, such as the initiative to help a fallen friend and take them to the health room, the discipline of disposing of trash properly, and the conscious execution of class duties (Salma, SMP 2 Tanjung, November 5, 2025). The active involvement of students in activities that demand collective responsibility aligns with Nichla (2025) findings that experiential-based methods effectively bridge cognitive understanding with affective and psychomotor actions. In addition to classroom activities, internalization is also reinforced thru non-academic contexts, as expressed by a student: "During basketball, the teacher teaches teamwork... that's when I realized that teamwork is important" (Agnes, SMP 3 Tanjung, October 14, 2025), which emphasizes that the internalization of IPS values occurs across contexts, both inside and outside the classroom, in accordance with Sulaswari (2022) finding.

Overall, the majority of students successfully interpret IPS learning as practical knowledge with high relevance to social life, manifested in their ability to socialize, show concern, cooperate, and take responsibility in various environments. This relevance serves as a bridge that transforms cognitive understanding into real actions, proving that social studies function as an essential social guide in shaping students' character (Setiawan et al., 2021). However, there is a disparity in interpretation among students; a small minority still limits the benefits of social studies to the mere expansion of academic knowledge, "My knowledge has become broader" (Adinda, SMP 2 Tanjung, October 26, 2025), while others face psychological barriers such as embarrassment, which prevents the consistent application of social values in daily life. This disparity indicates that the success of the internalization of social studies values is highly determined by the extent to which students are able

to find meaningfulness and personal relevance in the learning they receive (Romdloni, 2024), thus requiring teachers to continuously develop adaptive and contextual approaches so that the entire spectrum of students can achieve an optimal stage of value internalization.

### **The Implementation of Social Studies Learning and Learning Factors Affecting Students' Social Behavior**

The internalization of social studies values is a crucial phase that bridges students' initial understanding with the manifestation of real behavior, and this process is closely related to George Herbert Mead's concept of the formation of the Social Self or The Me. The success of this internalization does not occur in a vacuum, but is strongly influenced by the institutional context of the school, where the role of the Vice Principal in designing social value habituation programs, full-day school, and extracurricular activities becomes a symbol of a supportive environment. The consistency between the values taught by IPS teachers and school policies strengthens students' belief in those values, as students see their relevance widely recognized by school authorities. However, this process faces significant contextual challenges, as revealed in the following interview: "In general, the social character of the children here is unique. They are actually good, but when it comes to socializing, they still lack. One of the reasons is the use of language. Children are more comfortable using Javanese and Sundanese, so when interacting with teachers or outsiders, they feel a bit awkward... For example, when passing by a teacher, not all students greet or behave politely, maybe only one out of thirty does." (Mrs. Riska, Vice Principal of SMP 2 Tanjung, October 27, 2025)

The statement indicates that language barriers and the lack of familiarization with manners from the family environment pose fundamental challenges to the implementation of social studies. The heterogeneity of students' backgrounds, which includes differences in economic conditions, family integrity, and social environments, creates a spectrum of value readiness within the classroom. This is in line with Hafifah (2025) findings, which emphasize that student character is the result of a dynamic interaction between the family ecosystem

and peer environment, thus requiring social studies teachers to implement differentiation strategies so that values such as tolerance and effective communication can be internalized by the entire spectrum of students. Nevertheless, IPS learning linked to real-life situations has proven capable of fostering positive attitude changes, as expressed by the teacher: "After participating in IPS learning, many students showed improved enthusiasm for learning and began to engage in the learning process. They not only sit and receive information, but they also start to dare to ask questions, discuss, and express their opinions. Their attitude toward the lessons is also more positive, especially when I relate the material to everyday life." (Mrs. Eka, Social Studies Teacher, SMP 2 Tanjung, October 20, 2025).

The main supporting factor for the success of internalizing IPS values is the synergy between interactive and contextual learning and a consistent school ecosystem. Student programs such as Scouts, Paskibra, and other extracurricular activities function as social laboratories that bridge classroom theory with real-world practice, where teachers actively insert moral messages to help students transform theoretical knowledge into real character. Lukitosari (2024) reinforces this finding by stating that extracurricular activities accelerate the internalization of civic values thru positive peer pressure and practical guidance from teachers. Beside the school factor, family support also plays an important role, as expressed by a student: "I see the condition of my parents, they work hard, so I don't want to burden them." That's what motivates me to go to school." (Afan, Student of SMP 2 Tanjung, October 26, 2025)

This statement emphasizes that parental role models act as a strong emotional driver in shaping responsible social behavior in students, in line with Permata (2023) findings which state that active family involvement combined with systematic school support creates positive stimulation that accelerates the internalization of values into students' self-identity.

On the other hand, the process of internalizing IPS values also faces a series of complex obstacles, both from internal and external factors of the students. Externally, the negative

influence of peers becomes a significant obstacle, as students tend to adopt group behavior more easily than formal school rules (Madyarini & Wijayanti, 2025). The absence of a specific social studies module focused on instilling values and the limited extracurricular time also serve as structural obstacles that cause the process of internalizing social values to be scattered and less profound (Karma et al., 2023). Internally, the obstacles stem from the heterogeneity of the students' character itself, including temperamental traits, low emotional regulation abilities, and low interest in social studies subjects. This was honestly expressed by a student: "A slight obstacle for me is my temperamental nature and my ego, which is still a bit difficult for me to control." "When there is a problem with a friend, I often have difficulty making a calm decision." (Farid, Student at SMP 3 Tanjung, October 24, 2025)

That confession reflects that the student is in a stage of turmoil between The I (the impulsive side) and the effort to build The Me (the socially conscious identity). Madyarini (2025) explains that self-regulation is the main prerequisite for the social values taught in IPS to be realized in actual behavior, so teacher intervention in the form of emotional management guidance is very necessary. Overall, the internalization of social values thru IPS learning is a continuous transformative process that involves a complex dialectic between supporting and inhibiting factors. Its success demands a personalistic approach, emotional regulation reinforcement, and a strong synergy between teachers, school programs, and families, so that the social values taught in social studies can be instilled in students' daily behavior.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study is to better understand the implementation of social studies learning, to investigate the meanings constructed by teachers and students within the framework of symbolic interactionism, and to analyze the implications for students' social behavior in Brebes Regency junior high schools. The research results show that IPS teachers interpret learning not merely as the transmission of knowledge, but as a systematic effort to shape character thru contextual

approaches, direct habituation, and exemplary behavior. Meanwhile, students construct meaning primarily thru teacher modeling and the exchange of social symbols such as language, classroom rules, and habits, which then encourage the internalization of values and manifest in prosocial behaviors such as empathy, responsibility, care, and social awareness. These findings demonstrate the relevance of George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism theory in the context of education, particularly that meaning is co-constructed thru interaction and that students' self-concept is formed thru social processes in the classroom. Therefore, the effectiveness of social studies education in shaping students' social behavior heavily relies on the quality of symbolic interaction between teachers and students, as well as the ongoing synergy between schools and families. Based on these findings, it is recommended that social studies teachers consistently use interactive and contextual approaches that encourage meaningful social symbol exchanges, that schools develop structured and continuous character education programs, that families synergize with schools in applying social values in daily life, that curriculum developers design social studies learning that balances cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects, and that future researchers expand the scope of subjects and research locations with a longitudinal approach to observe the sustainability of students' social behavior changes in the long term.

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