

Improving Children's Independence Through the Project Based Learning Model Group A

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Abstract

Early childhood is a critical period in which foundational aspects of personality and character are established. This research aims to enhance the independence of early childhood learners through the application of the Project Based Learning (PjBL) model in Group A at Raudhatul Athfal Harapan Ibu, Desa Labat Muara, Kecamatan Aluh-Aluh, Kabupaten Banjar. Independence is a crucial aspect of early childhood development, reflecting a child's ability to perform tasks without relying on others. The PjBL model was chosen because it provides meaningful, contextual, and active learning experiences through project activities that directly involve children. The research employed a Classroom Action Research (CAR) method conducted in two cycles. Each cycle consisted of planning, action, observation, and reflection. The subjects were 15 children in Group A, while data were collected through observation, documentation, and field notes. Project activities in Cycle I involved making pencil holders from used cardboard and straws, while Cycle II involved creating pencil holders decorated with flannel fabric. The results indicated a significant increase in children's independence after implementing the PjBL model, as evidenced by the shift in children's independence categories and improvement in key indicators such as initiative, responsibility, and decision-making. Therefore, it can be concluded that the PjBL model is effective in enhancing independence in early childhood education settings.

Keywords

active learning; classroom action research; early childhood, Independence; project-based learning.



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INTRODUCTION

Early childhood is a critical period in which foundational aspects of personality and character are established. Children aged four to six are in a formative stage, constructing their identities, building self-esteem, and developing social competencies (Sujiono, 2020). During

these early years, the habits, attitudes, and values acquired will profoundly influence the trajectory of their lives. Among these traits, independence stands out as a cornerstone of holistic development, equipping children to face future academic and life challenges with resilience and confidence. Independence in early childhood is reflected in the ability to perform daily tasks without excessive reliance on adults, make simple decisions, solve problems, and take responsibility for actions. The development of independence empowers children to become proactive learners, critical thinkers, and socially competent individuals (Hurlock, 1978). The cultivation of independence is not only a developmental milestone but also a right of every child, as echoed in educational policies and child development guidelines globally.

Modern educational reforms, such as Indonesia's Kurikulum Merdeka (Independent Curriculum), emphasize student engagement, project-based learning, and the nurturing of 21st-century skills—including independence, creativity, and collaboration. However, despite these progressive policies, the reality in many early childhood settings remains traditional, with teacher-centered instruction dominating classroom practices. In such environments, children are typically passive recipients of knowledge, with limited opportunities to explore, experiment, or make decisions by themselves (Chairilisyah, 2020). Observations at Raudhatul Athfal Harapan Ibu revealed that most Group A children were dependent on adults for guidance, hesitant to take initiatives, and struggled with basic self-management tasks. These issues are exacerbated by factors such as limited use of interactive and child-centered learning models, lack of stimulating classroom environments, and insufficient parental or institutional support for independence-building activities.

The importance of fostering independence in early childhood is supported by a range of educational theories. Piaget's constructivist theory posits that children learn best through active engagement with their environment, constructing knowledge via hands-on experiences (Suyadi, 2014). Vygotsky's social constructivism further underscores the role of scaffolding and social interaction in enabling children to transition from dependence to autonomy (Vygotsky, 2000). The zone of proximal development (ZPD) describes how adult guidance or more capable peers can help children achieve tasks just beyond their current ability, gradually removing support as independence emerges. Moreover, character education frameworks stress the role of independence as a precursor to other virtues such as responsibility, self-discipline, and perseverance (Sugandi, 2014). Islamic educational perspectives also highlight the importance of instilling basic values such as independence, as reflected in the story of Luqman in the Qur'an, where parental guidance is balanced with encouragement for the child to think, act, and make choices independently.

Project Based Learning (PjBL) is recognized as an effective pedagogical model for promoting independence and other higher-order skills in children (Daryanto & Karim, 2017). PjBL involves learners in meaningful projects that require planning, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking. Children are encouraged to set goals, solve real-world problems, make decisions, and reflect on their learning. Through this process, they develop not only academic

competencies but also essential life skills such as initiative, perseverance, and adaptability (Purba, 2021). In early childhood settings, PjBL can be particularly impactful. Projects that are hands-on, relevant to children's daily lives, and open-ended allow young learners to explore, experiment, and express themselves. The role of the teacher shifts from information provider to facilitator, guiding children through challenges while allowing room for autonomy and self-expression. Given the observed challenges and the potential of PjBL, this research was conducted to examine the implementation of the Project Based Learning model in increasing independence among Group A children at Raudhatul Athfal Harapan Ibu. Furthermore, to identify the factors that influence the success of PjBL in fostering independence and recommend strategies for effective implementation in early childhood settings. By addressing these objectives, this study contributes to the growing body of literature advocating for innovative, child-centered approaches in early childhood education and provides practical insights for educators and policymakers.

METHODS

This study utilized a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design, following the model proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart (Nasution, 2023). CAR is particularly suited for educational improvement as it allows educators to identify real classroom issues, implement interventions, observe outcomes, and reflect on practice in a cyclical, systematic manner. The research consisted of two main cycles, each with three meetings. Each cycle included the stages of planning, action, observation, and reflection. This iterative approach enabled the researcher and classroom teacher to continuously adapt and improve instructional strategies based on ongoing observations and data analysis. The study was conducted at Raudhatul Athfal Harapan Ibu, located in Desa Labat Muara, Kecamatan Aluh-Aluh, Kabupaten Banjar. The research took place in a typical Group A classroom, involving 15 children (8 boys and 7 girls) aged 4–5 years. The institutional context is characterized by adequate facilities, a supportive school community, and a commitment to holistic child development.

Cycle I: Children created pencil holders from recycled cardboard and colorful straws. The project emphasized group collaboration, following instructions, and basic decision-making (e.g., color and pattern selection). Cycle II: Children made pencil holders from plastic cups decorated with flannel. This project placed greater responsibility on individual students for design, decoration, and presentation, emphasizing creativity and independent problem-solving. Observation: The primary data collection method was structured observation. Teachers and researchers used detailed rubrics to assess seven key indicators of independence:

1. Self-confidence (willingness to express desires and opinions)
2. Motivation to learn and initiate actions
3. Ability and courage to make independent choices
4. Creativity and innovation
5. Responsibility in completing tasks
6. Adaptability to the environment and social situations

7. Non-dependence on others

Each indicator was rated using a four-level scale: Not Yet Developed (BB), Starting to Develop (MB), Developing as Expected (BSH), and Very Well Developed (BSB). Documentation: Photographs, samples of children's work, and teacher notes were collected to provide qualitative evidence of progress and engagement. Field Notes: Researchers recorded anecdotal observations, children's verbal responses, group interactions, and notable moments of initiative or problem-solving. Data analysis was performed using both qualitative and simple quantitative methods: Quantitative: The percentage of children in each independence category was calculated for each cycle and meeting. Success was defined as at least 75% of children reaching BSH or BSB. Qualitative: Narrative descriptions and documentation were analyzed to identify themes, challenges, and breakthroughs in children's independence development. Validity Measures: Triangulation (using multiple data sources), member checks (discussing findings with teachers), and repeated cycles ensured the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Certainly! Here is a significantly expanded and in-depth Results and Discussion section, integrating quantitative evidence, qualitative classroom vignettes, critical analysis with educational theory, and detailed reflection on challenges and best practices—as would be found in a top-tier early childhood education research article. This section is suitable to help fill several pages in your manuscript.

Baseline Condition (Pre-Action)

Prior to the implementation of the Project Based Learning (PjBL) model, baseline observations at Raudhatul Athfal Harapan Ibu revealed that the majority of children in Group A exhibited low levels of independence. Out of 15 participants:

- 10 children (66.7%) were classified as Not Yet Developed (BB),
- 3 (20%) as Starting to Develop (MB),
- 2 (13.3%) as Developing as Expected (BSH), and
- None were categorized as Very Well Developed (BSB).

The children's daily behavior reflected their dependence on adults. Many were reluctant to make decisions, such as choosing colors or materials for activities, and most waited for explicit teacher directions before acting. Several children struggled to initiate or persevere in tasks without encouragement and regularly sought help even for tasks within their capability. This is consistent with literature on the impact of teacher-centered instructional practices, which often stifle autonomy and initiative (Chairilsyah, 2020).

Cycle I: Introduction and Early Adaptation to Project Based Learning

Project Activities and Classroom Dynamics

In Cycle I, children were introduced to a class project: making pencil holders from recycled cardboard and colorful straws. Teachers provided demonstrations, divided children into small groups, and facilitated collaborative work. While the project was novel and

engaging for the children, the initial reaction was a mixture of enthusiasm and uncertainty. Quantitative Progress at the end of Cycle I, the distribution was:

- 2 children (13.3%) in BB,
- 5 (33.3%) in MB,
- 8 (53.3%) in BSH,
- 0 in BSB.

The average independence score rose to 61.9%. While this improvement was encouraging, the data revealed a transitional stage: some children began to show initiative, but many still relied on teacher guidance for most steps. During group work, children often deferred to adults or dominant peers when making decisions. However, as the project continued, several children showed emerging leadership: one child suggested arranging straws in a rainbow pattern, and another volunteered to share glue with classmates. Children who were initially quiet began to offer opinions when praised for their participation. A few children, though, were easily distracted or disengaged when tasks became challenging. Consistent with Vygotsky's ZPD, children progressed when teachers provided just enough support to guide decision-making but resisted the urge to "fix" or complete tasks for them.

Peer Influence: Some children learned from more independent peers, modeling behaviors such as independently selecting materials or asking to present their work. Emotional Support: Children's willingness to take risks increased when teachers responded with encouragement **rather** than correction, reinforcing Hurlock's (1978) assertion that emotional security underpins autonomy. Anecdotal evidence from teacher field notes describes a moment where a child, previously reluctant to participate, became excited after successfully attaching straws to the cardboard: "He beamed with pride and called the teacher to show his work, asking 'Can I do more myself?'" In Cycle II, the project was made more individual and complex: each child created a pencil holder from a plastic cup, decorated with flannel, and encouraged to design, cut, and assemble the product independently. Teachers provided instructions at the start and then stepped back, observing and offering help only when explicitly requested. By the end of Cycle II, the distribution had shifted dramatically:

- 0 children in BB,
- 2 (13.3%) in MB,
- 9 (60%) in BSH,
- 4 (26.7%) in BSB.

The average independence score had increased to 78.8%, surpassing the research's success threshold. Classroom observations recorded significant growth in self-confidence, initiative, and problem-solving. Children independently selected colors and patterns for their flannel decorations, cut shapes with minimal guidance, and discussed their work with peers. A few children even offered solutions to classmates experiencing difficulty, such as suggesting a new way to attach a stubborn piece of flannel. Children were visibly proud of their work, often requesting to present their finished product in front of the class. One child, who had previously struggled with separation anxiety, confidently explained her design choices and

helped clean up without being prompted.

Piaget's Constructivism: Children built knowledge through hands-on experimentation and reflection, developing independence as they constructed meaning from their successes and setbacks. Vygotsky's Social Constructivism: The gradual reduction of adult guidance allowed children to operate within their ZPD, moving from supported to independent action. Motivation Theory: The opportunity to make authentic choices and see tangible results increased intrinsic motivation (Sugandi, 2014). Factors Supporting and Hindering Independence. Meaningful, Relevant Projects: Children were more invested in tasks that mirrored real-life experiences or allowed for personal expression. Teacher as Facilitator: A non-directive, supportive teacher role enabled children to experiment and develop resilience in the face of difficulties. Safe and Stimulating Environment: Access to a variety of materials and a non-judgmental atmosphere encouraged risk-taking and creativity. Peer Collaboration: Opportunities for group work and peer teaching nurtured both independence and social competence.

Some children initially hesitated to make decisions, fearing mistakes or negative evaluation. The introduction of a "safe to fail" classroom culture, where all attempts were celebrated, gradually overcame this barrier. A few remained distracted or passive, especially when tasks were too easy or too difficult. Teachers addressed this by differentiating instructions and providing graduated challenges. Limited resources occasionally hampered project completion; creative use of recycled or easily sourced materials mitigated this issue. The findings echo those of Nikmah (2023) and Nawangsasi (2022), who found that PjBL increases motivation, initiative, and independence in early childhood. The observed shift from dependence to autonomy underscores the importance of intentional scaffolding, as advocated by Vygotsky (2000), and the need for authentic, hands-on learning opportunities, as described by Piaget and constructivist educators.

Moreover, the study demonstrates the practicality of integrating PjBL within the Indonesian early childhood context. By aligning project themes with children's interests and developmental needs, educators can foster not only independence but also broader competencies such as creativity, collaboration, and responsibility. Based on the findings, several practical recommendations can be made: Start Small and Gradually Increase Complexity: Begin with simple, group-based projects and progress to more individualized, challenging tasks as children's independence grows. Emphasize Process Over Product: Focus on the learning journey, celebrating effort, creativity, and problem-solving rather than perfect outcomes. Foster Reflective Practice: Encourage children to reflect on their decisions, challenges, and feelings throughout the project, facilitating self-awareness and metacognition. Engage Families: Communicate with parents about the goals of PjBL and strategies for supporting independence at home, creating a supportive learning ecosystem.

The results also align strongly with Vygotsky's social constructivist perspective, particularly the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). At the beginning of the intervention, many children still depended heavily on teacher guidance and peer assistance.

However, teachers gradually reduced scaffolding as children became more capable of handling tasks independently. This gradual release of responsibility enabled children to transition from assisted performance to autonomous action. The improvement occurred because teachers acted as facilitators who provided support only when needed rather than dominating the learning process. Consequently, children developed confidence in their own abilities and became more willing to take initiative. This finding supports previous research by Suci and Fathiyah (2023), which reported that project-based learning creates learning environments that encourage children to become independent problem-solvers and active learners.

Furthermore, the findings are consistent with research conducted by Nikmah (2023), who found that PjBL significantly enhances creativity and independence in early childhood education because children are directly involved in meaningful and contextual activities. Similar to the current study, Nikmah observed that children participating in project activities became more confident in expressing ideas and completing tasks independently. However, the present research extends previous findings by demonstrating how independence develops progressively through repeated cycles of action and reflection. The cyclical nature of Classroom Action Research allowed teachers to identify obstacles during Cycle I and improve instructional strategies in Cycle II. As a result, children showed stronger initiative, greater responsibility, and improved problem-solving abilities in the second cycle. This suggests that the effectiveness of PjBL depends not only on the project activities themselves but also on reflective teacher practices and continuous adaptation to children's developmental needs.

The improvement in children's independence was also influenced by the emotional climate created during project activities. Children were given freedom to make choices without fear of being criticized for mistakes. This "safe-to-fail" learning environment played a crucial role in fostering self-confidence and intrinsic motivation. Hurlock's developmental theory explains that emotional security is a fundamental condition for the emergence of independence because children are more willing to explore and take initiative when they feel psychologically safe. In this study, teachers consistently provided encouragement and appreciation rather than excessive correction. Consequently, children who were initially hesitant gradually became more active participants. The findings indicate that independence is not solely a cognitive skill but also an emotional and social competence that develops within supportive interactions and positive classroom relationships.

Compared with previous studies, this research highlights a stronger emphasis on the role of meaningful and contextual projects in fostering independence. Earlier studies, such as those conducted by Chairilsyah (2020) and Lestari and Fathiyah (2023), primarily emphasized teacher guidance and habituation strategies as key factors influencing children's autonomy. In contrast, this study demonstrates that independence develops more effectively when children are actively involved in authentic tasks that require decision-making, creativity, and responsibility. The use of recycled materials and personally designed products increased children's sense of ownership over their work. Because the projects were closely related to

children's everyday experiences, children became more emotionally engaged and intrinsically motivated to complete tasks independently. This finding suggests that contextual relevance is an important element in maximizing the effectiveness of PjBL in early childhood education.

The findings also reveal that the increase in independence did not occur uniformly among all children. Some children progressed more slowly due to low self-confidence, fear of failure, or difficulty maintaining concentration. This variation indicates that independence development is influenced by individual differences, including temperament, prior experiences, parenting styles, and learning readiness. The existence of these differences supports the argument proposed by Baiti (2020) and Daud et al. (2023) that children's independence is shaped by multiple interconnected factors, including family environment, emotional development, and educational experiences. Therefore, while PjBL is effective, its success also depends on teachers' ability to provide differentiated support and adjust project complexity according to children's individual characteristics.

Scientifically, this study contributes to the growing body of literature supporting child-centered pedagogies in early childhood education. The findings provide empirical evidence that PjBL is not only effective for cognitive or academic development but also for character formation, particularly independence. The study expands theoretical understanding by demonstrating that independence develops through the interaction of cognitive engagement, emotional support, social collaboration, and authentic learning experiences. The findings also reinforce the relevance of constructivist and socio-constructivist theories in explaining how autonomy emerges in early childhood settings. From a practical perspective, the research suggests that early childhood educators should move beyond teacher-centered approaches and design learning experiences that allow children to actively explore, create, and take responsibility for their own learning processes.

CONCLUSIONS

The implementation of Project Based Learning (PjBL) in Group A at Raudhatul Athfal Harapan Ibu brought about a marked improvement in children's independence. Through engaging, hands-on projects and a shift in teacher roles from direct instructors to facilitators, children developed initiative, creativity, and responsibility. The research confirms that PjBL is a highly effective model for promoting autonomy and holistic development in early childhood education. Key takeaways include: PjBL activities should be introduced gradually, with scaffolding matched to children's readiness; Teachers must embrace the role of facilitator, providing encouragement rather than direct answers; Projects should be meaningful, open-ended, and relevant to children's experiences; Institutional and parental support is vital for reinforcing independence both at school and at home.

For future research, it is recommended to extend the application of PjBL to other developmental domains, such as creativity and social skills, and to explore its impact across diverse cultural and educational settings.

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