

Integrating Life Skills into the Curriculum to Enhance Student Well-Being at SMP Alam Balikpapan

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received June 13, 2026

Revised July 27, 2026

Accepted August 8, 2026

Keywords: Life Skills, Student Wellbeing, Principal's Role, Contextual Learning Practices

ABSTRACT

Student well-being has recently received serious attention from the government, as reflected in the policy of providing free nutritious meals. This study aims to examine the extent to which life skills embedded in the curriculum contribute to improving student wellbeing. The research employed a qualitative case study approach involving one principal, one teacher, and two eighth-grade students as participants. Data were collected through observation, interviews, and document analysis, while data validity was ensured through triangulation of data sources and research techniques. The findings indicate that the principal of SMP Alam Balikpapan plays a crucial role not only as an administrative manager but also as a visionary leader who directs school policies and culture toward strengthening life skills and student wellbeing. The principal actively integrates life skills into the curriculum, promotes experiential learning, and creates a safe learning environment that supports students' social and emotional development. This role is reinforced through collaboration with teachers and support for instructional innovation. The implementation of contextual learning through outdoor activities and real-world projects has been shown to enhance students' independence, responsibility, leadership, cooperation, and self-regulation, leading to increased self-confidence, resilience, and positive social relationships as key components of student wellbeing.

I. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary education, student well-being has become a crucial element in determining the quality and sustainability of the learning process. Student well-being is not solely defined by academic achievement but also by the integration of emotional, social, spiritual, and physical dimensions that enable students to develop holistically. Schools that provide safe, supportive, and inclusive learning environments, while fostering positive relationships among students, teachers, and peers, have been shown to enhance students' motivation and engagement in learning activities (Nur'am et al., 2025; Dwi & Fathoni, 2025; Santoso et al., 2023). Furthermore, strong social support within the school environment plays a significant role in reducing psychological distress and promoting students' happiness and satisfaction in learning (Felipus & Amseke, 2024; Dwitami & Selian, 2025; Sidabutar et al., 2024). Moreover, student well-being cannot be separated from a positive school climate. Schools that encourage collaboration, respect diversity, and actively involve students in various learning activities help them experience greater satisfaction and meaning throughout the learning process (Gazali & Azizi, 2024). Therefore, student well-being should be regarded as a central focus of educational practice because it is closely associated with students' personal development and academic achievement (Muhibbin, 2024; Firdausi, 2022; Utami et al., 2025). Along with the rapid development of society, education is expected not only to emphasize the mastery of academic content but also to promote the development of life skills. Life skills equip students with the ability to think critically, make informed decisions, solve problems, and adapt to

the social and emotional challenges encountered in everyday life (Febiani et al., 2025; Riswandi et al., 2024). Learning that integrates life skills has been proven to enhance students' independence, creativity, and readiness to face real-world challenges (S. D. Utami & Habiby, 2024).

Contextual and experiential learning approaches position life skills as a bridge between academic knowledge and social reality. Learning models such as Problem-Based Learning (PBL) have been demonstrated to effectively develop students' analytical thinking, collaboration, and communication skills while simultaneously fostering broader social awareness (Fonna & Nufus, 2024; Mubarakah et al., 2025; Raharjo, 2024; Ifnaldi, 2021). In addition, life skills education contributes to the development of positive character, empathy, and students' ability to adapt to their surrounding environment (Balkis et al., 2024). Life skills influence not only students' cognitive development but also play a significant role in maintaining emotional balance and mental health. Students who possess strong social-emotional competencies tend to be more resilient in coping with academic and social pressures, thereby improving their psychological well-being (Ananta et al., 2025; Fitriah, 2025; Ramadhani & Nur, 2025). Consequently, life skills should serve as a fundamental component of the learning process in preparing students who are not only intellectually competent but also emotionally and socially mature (Sumiyati et al., 2025; Cahyono et al., 2025). In efforts to integrate life skills into the curriculum and promote student well-being, the role of the school principal is indispensable. Effective leadership, whether through servant leadership or transformational leadership, is capable of fostering a collaborative, supportive, and student-centered school culture (Latifah, 2022; Sulistiyarini et al., 2024; Hasra et al., 2024; Gusli et al., 2024). Leadership that promotes social responsibility and environmental awareness has also been shown to enhance students' learning motivation while creating a positive and nurturing school climate (Harianto & Abdurrahman, 2025; Dewi et al., 2025; Hasan et al., 2024; Nadila & Rifqi, 2024). SMP Alam Balikpapan was selected as the research site because of its distinctive educational approach, which emphasizes nature-based and experiential learning. Although previous studies have discussed the relationship between life skills education, contextual learning, and student well-being, limited studies have explored how these elements are systematically integrated through school leadership practices within a nature-based junior high school context. This research addresses this gap by examining the implementation process, leadership strategies, and learning practices that connect life skills development with student well-being. Therefore, this study aims to analyze how the integration of life skills into the curriculum serves as a strategy for enhancing student well-being at SMP Alam Balikpapan. The findings are expected to provide practical insights for schools seeking to develop holistic educational environments that balance academic achievement, character development, and students' emotional and social growth.

II. METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to explore the phenomenon comprehensively within its natural setting without excessive intervention (Juita et al., 2025; Mariyono, 2024). The participants consisted of one school principal, one teacher, and two eighth-grade students who were selected based on their direct involvement and experience in implementing life skills-based learning at SMP Alam Balikpapan. Although the number of participants was limited, their positions represented key perspectives required to understand school policies, instructional practices, and students' learning experiences. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Participant observation was conducted to examine classroom learning activities, outdoor experiential learning, and students' entrepreneurship projects. In-depth interviews were carried out to obtain information regarding instructional strategies, as well as educators' and students' perceptions and experiences related to the implementation of life skills education. In addition, document analysis was conducted by reviewing curriculum documents, lesson

plans, and activity journals to support and validate the findings. The collected data were analyzed using three stages: data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions. Data reduction was performed to identify and organize relevant information, while data display involved presenting the findings in a descriptive narrative to facilitate interpretation. The final stage consisted of drawing conclusions to generate meaningful insights from the data. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, source and methodological triangulation were employed by comparing data obtained from interviews, observations, and document analysis. This triangulation process enhanced the credibility and accuracy of the interpretations. Overall, the qualitative approach enabled the researchers to develop a comprehensive understanding of how life skills integration was systematically implemented in the teaching and learning process at SMP Alam Balikpapan.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that the integration of life skills at SMP Alam Balikpapan is implemented through a holistic educational approach rather than as isolated or fragmented activities. The educational process is designed as an integrated system that aligns school leadership, instructional practices, and initiatives to promote student well-being. Compared with previous studies that often examine life skills programs as separate interventions, this study highlights the importance of viewing life skills integration as a school-wide strategy involving leadership, curriculum design, and learning culture. Learning is conceptualized as a process of developing meaningful life experiences, enabling students not only to acquire academic knowledge but also to develop competencies necessary to navigate real-life situations. Accordingly, the discussion of this study is organized into three major themes: (1) the school principal's leadership strategies, (2) the implementation of contextual and experiential learning, and (3) the impact of life skills integration on student well-being. These themes are consistent with previous studies, which emphasize that effective school leadership and context-based learning approaches are fundamental to fostering students' life skills while simultaneously enhancing their overall well-being (Sulistyo & Hidayati, 2024; Wijati et al., 2024). Together, these three dimensions form an interconnected educational framework that reinforces both students' holistic development and the sustainability of meaningful learning experiences.

3.1. The Strategic Role of the School Principal in Strengthening Life Skills

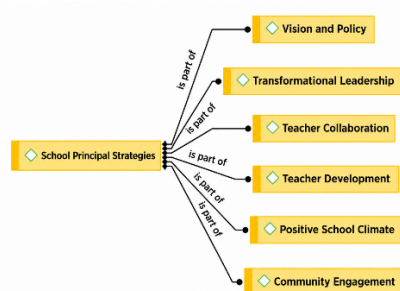


Figure 1. School Principan Strategies

The coding results presented in Figure 1 indicate that the school principal occupies a central role in shaping the direction of school development, particularly in fostering a learning culture that emphasizes life skills. This role is manifested not only through formal policies but also through the principal's efforts to cultivate a shared understanding that learning is a holistic process of meaningful experiences closely connected to students' everyday lives (Leithwood et al., 2020; Mugara & Ali, 2025). The school principal serves as the driving force in ensuring that life skills are systematically integrated into every aspect of the educational process.

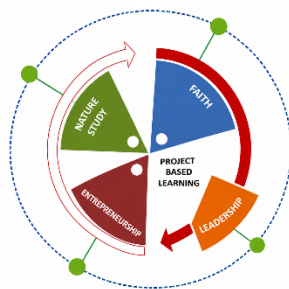


Figure 2. The pillars of the junior high school nature curriculum in Balikpapan

Based on Figure 2, the curriculum and educational programs at SMP Alam Balikpapan are developed around four fundamental pillars: spirituality, scientific reasoning, leadership, and entrepreneurship. These four pillars serve as the foundational framework for designing learning experiences that actively engage students with their environment and authentic real-life situations (Sulistyo & Hidayati, 2024). The school principal emphasized that learning becomes more meaningful when students are directly involved in authentic experiences, as reflected in the following interview excerpt: *“Students need to experience things firsthand so that what they do becomes truly meaningful.”* (N1). This perspective indicates that experiential learning constitutes the core of the school’s leadership vision. It reflects the principles of transformational leadership, in which the school principal acts not only as an administrator but also as a change agent who guides the educational process toward the development of students’ character and essential life skills (Leithwood et al., 2020; Roja & Salim, 2023). Programs such as the *Live-in Program* and *Basic Survival Training* represent concrete manifestations of this vision in everyday educational practice. In its implementation, the school principal also emphasized the importance of strong collaboration with teachers. Teachers are regarded as strategic partners in supporting students’ growth and development rather than merely as curriculum implementers. Although administrative responsibilities present ongoing challenges, the school strives to maintain a balance that enables teachers to continue providing optimal guidance and mentorship for students (Mantau, 2023). This commitment is reflected in the following statement: *“Teachers are responsible for administrative tasks, but they must also make time to mentor and support their students.”* (N1). Furthermore, the school principal highlighted the importance of teachers’ emotional presence in students’ lives. Teachers are expected to become trusted adults who provide students with a sense of security and a safe space to express their thoughts, emotions, and personal experiences. As the principal explained: *“We want teachers not only to teach academic content but also to be caring adults who are willing to listen to and support their students.”* (N1). These efforts contribute to the creation of a positive, safe, and supportive school climate that promotes students’ holistic development across academic, social, and emotional dimensions (Fikria et al., 2021).

3.2. The Implementation of Contextual and Experiential Learning in Developing Life Skills

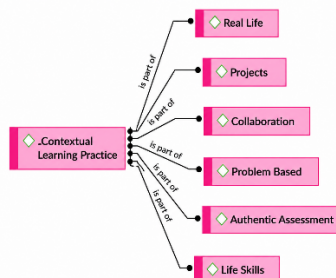


Figure 3. Contextual Learning Practice

The coding results presented in Figure 3 demonstrate that the learning practices at SMP Alam Balikpapan are designed to connect academic content with students’ authentic life experiences.

Learning is not confined to the classroom; instead, it is extended through outdoor activities that are practical, exploratory, and challenge-based (Ainiyah et al., 2025). This approach enables students to develop a more concrete understanding of academic concepts while recognizing their relevance to everyday life. The *Live-in Program* and *Basic Survival Training* exemplify project-based and challenge-based learning experiences. Through these programs, students are exposed to authentic situations that require independence, decision-making, responsibility, and problem-solving skills, both individually and collaboratively (Passarelli & Kolb, 2023). As one teacher explained, these activities provide comprehensive learning experiences: *“During the survival program, students learn how to manage themselves, organize their activities, and take responsibility for their roles.”* (N2). The teacher further emphasized that outdoor learning helps students discover their personal potential while developing emotional self-regulation in challenging situations: *“Students become more aware of their own limits. They learn when to collaborate with others and when to regulate their emotions.”* (N2). This contextual and experiential learning approach promotes meaningful social interaction through collaborative group work. Students develop effective communication skills, adapt to individual differences, and build healthy teamwork competencies (Muhartini et al., 2023). These learning experiences are reflected in positive changes in students’ social behavior, including greater openness, empathy, and the ability to collaborate effectively with their peers. Student assessment is conducted through authentic assessment practices that emphasize both the learning process and the tangible outcomes demonstrated during activities. Consequently, assessment extends beyond measuring cognitive achievement to include the development of students’ attitudes and life skills (Rosnaeni, 2021). From the students’ perspective, these experiential learning activities provide long-term benefits, as expressed in the following interview excerpt: *“The Live-in Program has had the greatest impact on me because it taught me to be independent and to lead myself.”* (N3)

3.3 The Impact of Life Skills Development on Student Well-Being

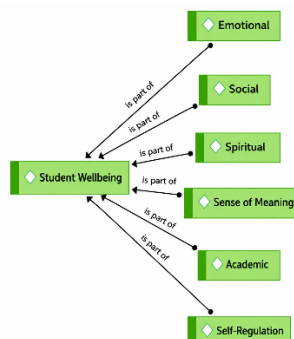


Figure 4. Impact on Student Wellbeing

The coding results presented in Figure 4 indicate that strengthening life skills through school strategies and contextual learning has a positive impact on students’ overall well-being (Muhibbin, 2024). From an emotional perspective, students learn to cope with fear, fatigue, and pressure while participating in various school activities. These experiences gradually foster mental resilience and enhance students’ self-confidence (Nurhaliza et al., 2024), as reflected in the following student interview excerpt: *“At first, I was afraid, but after going through the experience, I became more accustomed to it and gained greater self-confidence.”* (N4). From a social perspective, activities that require collaboration strengthen relationships among students and promote a healthier social environment. The school also actively monitors students’ interactions to ensure the development of a safe, respectful, and inclusive learning environment (Nasution, 2024): *“We observe how students interact with one another, whether they show mutual respect or otherwise.”* (N1). Furthermore, students’ active participation in various school programs reflects increased engagement and enthusiasm for learning. Meaningful learning experiences foster a stronger sense of belonging to both

the school community and the learning process itself (Husnaini et al., 2024). Students also demonstrate improvements in self-regulation, including emotional control, personal responsibility, and academic development through the enhancement of scientific reasoning skills (Kusumawati, 2024): *"Students have become more curious. They ask more questions, explore ideas more actively, and their scientific reasoning skills continue to develop."* (N1). Overall, student well-being at SMP Alam Balikpapan is understood as a condition in which students are able to adapt positively to various situations, regulate themselves effectively, and experience a sense of safety, comfort, and meaning throughout their learning journey. These findings suggest that the systematic integration of life skills into the school curriculum contributes not only to students' academic development but also to their emotional, social, and psychological well-being.

IV. CONCLUSION

Overall, the findings of this study demonstrate that the successful strengthening of life skills in schools depends largely on leadership characterized by a clear vision, well-structured policies, and a strong commitment to students' well-being. In this context, schools are not merely viewed as institutions for the transmission of academic knowledge but as educational ecosystems that play a vital role in shaping comprehensive learning experiences. Accordingly, the learning process is designed not only to achieve academic outcomes but also to foster character development, cultivate students' independence, and enhance their adaptive capacities in responding to the challenges of real-life situations. The findings further reveal that the principal of SMP Alam Balikpapan plays a significant role in integrating life skills throughout the school's educational system (Purwanto, 2020). This contribution is reflected in the consistent implementation of an experiential learning vision supported by transformational leadership practices. The principal functions not only as a policy maker but also as a catalyst for cultivating a positive school culture that encourages close collaboration among teachers. Such collaboration forms the foundation for creating a supportive, safe, and inclusive learning environment that continuously promotes students' well-being. Furthermore, the implementation of contextual and experiential learning through outdoor activities, experience-based projects, and problem-based learning has proven effective in developing students' life skills. These competencies include independence, leadership, collaboration, and problem-solving skills that are relevant to everyday life (Ainiyah et al., 2025; Muhartini et al., 2023). By connecting academic content with authentic experiences, this approach enables students to participate actively, reflect critically on their experiences, and construct meaningful learning throughout the educational process. The integrated strengthening of life skills also contributes positively to student well-being, encompassing emotional well-being, social relationships, learning engagement, a sense of meaning and belonging, self-regulation, and academic development (Faizah & Liliana, 2025). These findings suggest that a life skills-oriented educational approach represents an effective strategy for fostering students' holistic and sustainable well-being. Therefore, this study highlights that improving student well-being cannot be achieved solely by addressing students' physical needs or promoting academic achievement. Instead, it requires an educational approach that places students at the center of the learning process. The integration of life skills into the curriculum, supported by visionary and collaborative school leadership, is essential for creating meaningful, adaptive, and future-oriented learning experiences. This study contributes to the discussion of holistic education by presenting an empirical example of how a nature-based school context can integrate life skills practices with student well-being development. However, further research involving broader participants and multiple school contexts is recommended to strengthen the general understanding of life skills-based education.

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