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Learning trauma in elementary social studies classrooms (*IPS*): a phenomenological inquiry

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Abstract

Emotional experiences significantly shape students' engagement and academic identity, yet subject-specific learning trauma in elementary Social Studies remains underexplored. This study explored the lived experiences of elementary students who encountered learning trauma—defined as a pedagogical phenomenon of repeated emotional distress, not a clinical diagnosis—during Social Studies instruction. A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with eight purposively selected students (grades 4–6) from two elementary schools in Pekanbaru, Indonesia, who reported experiencing repeated negative emotions during Social Studies lessons. Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's phenomenological method. Four essential themes emerged: fear of public humiliation, anxiety toward evaluation and memorization, emotional withdrawal, and defensive avoidance behaviors. These experiences were shaped by evaluative classroom practices and teacher-centered instruction, not extreme events. The findings suggest that learning trauma can arise from routine emotional injuries in the classroom. Practical implications include minimizing public correction (e.g., providing individual feedback privately), shifting from memorization-based to inquiry-driven assessment, and embedding trauma-informed emotional safety strategies—such as predictable routines and supportive teacher–student relationships—into daily Social Studies teaching.

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1. Introduction

Education is not merely a cognitive enterprise; it is an emotional experience that fundamentally shapes how learners perceive themselves and the world. Contemporary educational research increasingly acknowledges that emotions are central to learning processes, influencing attention, motivation, memory, and identity formation (Immordino-Yang, 2025; Pekrun et al., 2023; Wang & Zhang, 2024). However, while positive emotional climates enhance engagement and achievement, repeated negative emotional experiences in classrooms may generate persistent fear, anxiety, and avoidance behaviors. When such experiences become internalized and associated with specific learning contexts, they may develop into what can be conceptualized as learning trauma, a pedagogical construct distinct from clinical trauma or generalized academic anxiety. In this study, *learning trauma* is defined as a subject-specific, emotionally distressing pattern arising from recurrent negative classroom interactions that cumulatively undermine students' perceived safety, self-concept, and engagement in a particular subject area, without meeting diagnostic criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder.

The concept of trauma in education has traditionally focused on exposure to extreme adversities such as violence, abuse, or disasters (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014). Trauma-informed educational frameworks emphasize safety, trust, empowerment, and emotional regulation to support affected learners (Carello & Butler, 2015; Imad, 2021; Sgaglione, 2024). However, educational discourse has only recently begun to consider how everyday pedagogical practices may themselves produce emotionally harmful experiences. Fear-based discipline, public humiliation, excessive performance comparison, and high-stakes testing environments may not constitute clinical trauma, but they can create chronic stress responses that negatively affect students' psychological well-being and academic engagement (Koslouski & Stark, 2021; Wall, 2021). Recent studies in Indonesian elementary contexts similarly highlight that emotionally unsupportive classroom climates contribute to student disengagement and negative self-perception (Dewi, 2022; Tanjung et al., 2025). However, subject-specific emotional injuries—particularly in social studies—remain underexamined.

From the perspective of achievement emotion theory, students' emotional experiences in academic settings are shaped by their perceived control and the subjective value they attach to learning tasks (Pekrun, 2006). When students perceive low control and high evaluative pressure, they are more likely to experience anxiety, shame, and hopelessness, emotions that undermine deep learning and intrinsic motivation. Repeated exposure to such emotional patterns may foster avoidance strategies and disengagement (Putwain, 2007). At the elementary level, where academic self-concept is still developing, emotionally distressing experiences may have long-term implications for learners' confidence and identity formation (Santrock, 2018). Hence, a systematic inquiry into how routine pedagogical practices generate subject-specific emotional distress is both timely and necessary.

Within this broader emotional landscape of schooling, Social Studies education at the elementary level presents a particularly significant yet underexamined context. Social Studies integrates history, geography, economics, and civics, aiming to cultivate informed, critical, and participatory citizens (Ballin, 2023; Syazali et al., 2025). However, instructional practices often emphasize memorization of historical facts, textbook-driven instruction, and summative assessment (Fitchett & Heafner, 2010). Such approaches may limit dialogical engagement and create performance-oriented classroom climates. Research has shown that when Social Studies instruction is marginalized or reduced to mere factual recall, students

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may experience boredom, anxiety, and a sense of low perceived competence (Gao, 2020). In Indonesia, large-scale assessments and teacher-centered pedagogies still dominate many elementary classrooms, which may exacerbate these emotional risks (Alamsyah et al., 2022; Dewi, 2022).

Moreover, classroom climate plays a decisive role in shaping students' emotional experiences. A supportive and autonomy-oriented environment fosters engagement, whereas controlling and evaluative climates increase anxiety and withdrawal (Reeve, 2012). In contexts where teacher-centered approaches remain dominant and hierarchical relationships are culturally reinforced, students may be reluctant to express confusion or dissent. This dynamic may intensify feelings of embarrassment or fear when students fail to meet academic expectations. Over time, these experiences may accumulate into subject-specific emotional distress, particularly in Social Studies, where public discussion, oral recitation, and interpretation of abstract social issues are common. A study by Tanjung et al. (2025) on emotional dyslexic tendencies in Indonesian students revealed that unresolved academic shame often transforms into subject avoidance. This resonates with the current focus on Social Studies learning as trauma, a distinct pedagogical phenomenon.

Although research on social-emotional learning (SEL) emphasizes the importance of emotional competence and safe classroom environments (Durlak et al., 2011), limited studies have explored how students experience emotionally distressing Social Studies instruction from their own perspectives. Existing research often relies on quantitative measures of anxiety or stress, providing limited insight into how students interpret and give meaning to such experiences (Burrell-Craft, 2022; Patti, 2020; Tsabita et al., 2024). Furthermore, much of the literature on trauma-informed education originates in Western contexts, underscoring the need for culturally situated research in other educational systems (Duane, 2025; Garay et al., 2024; Niman, 2025).

In Indonesia, ongoing educational reforms promote student-centered and character-based education. Nevertheless, classroom practices in many primary schools continue to emphasize content mastery, obedience, and examination performance. Empirical investigation into how Indonesian elementary students experience emotionally harmful learning situations, particularly within Social Studies classrooms, remains scarce. Understanding these lived experiences is crucial, as early negative associations with civic and social learning may undermine the democratic and participatory goals of Social Studies education itself (Alamsyah et al., 2022; Dewi, 2022; Tanjung et al., 2025).

To address this gap, the present study employs a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of elementary school students who encounter learning trauma in Social Studies classrooms. Phenomenology seeks to uncover the essence of lived experience by examining how individuals interpret and construct meaning from their everyday realities (Moustakas, 1994). By foregrounding students' voices, this study aims to illuminate the emotional dynamics embedded within Social Studies instruction and to contribute to the development of more emotionally responsive pedagogical practices (Neubauer et al., 2019). Specifically, the research question is: *How do elementary school students experience and interpret learning trauma in Social Studies classrooms?* The novelty of this study lies in its conceptualization of subject-specific learning trauma as a pedagogical construct emerging from routine classroom interactions rather than clinical events, and in its contextual focus on Indonesian elementary settings.

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2. Literature review

2.1 Trauma in educational contexts

The concept of trauma has traditionally been associated with exposure to extreme events such as violence, abuse, war, or natural disasters (SAMHSA, 2014). Within educational settings, trauma-informed approaches emphasize the creation of safe, predictable, and supportive learning environments that recognize the emotional needs of students (Carello & Butler, 2015). These approaches are grounded in the understanding that trauma affects cognitive processing, emotional regulation, and interpersonal relationships, thereby influencing academic performance and engagement (Perry & Daniels, 2016).

However, emerging scholarship suggests that trauma in schools should not be limited to large-scale or clinically defined adversities. Chronic exposure to psychologically unsafe environments, including fear-based discipline, public shaming, excessive control, and rigid performance comparison, can generate sustained stress responses in students (Koslouski & Stark, 2021). Such experiences may not meet diagnostic criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder, yet they may result in persistent anxiety, avoidance behaviors, and diminished academic self-concept. Wall (2021) introduced the term “educational trauma” to refer to the psychological harm caused by school practices themselves, a notion that aligns with the present study’s focus on learning trauma in a specific subject.

In educational psychology, negative achievement emotions such as anxiety, shame, and hopelessness are known to undermine motivation and deep learning (Pekrun et al., 2023). According to control-value theory, these emotions arise when students perceive low control over learning outcomes while simultaneously attributing high value to success (Pekrun, 2006). When such emotional experiences become repeated and associated with a particular subject, they may evolve into enduring patterns of avoidance. Thus, what may initially appear as temporary academic anxiety can, over time, develop into subject-specific learning trauma. Researchers in Indonesia have similarly observed that elementary students who experience repeated academic shame in Social Studies begin to exhibit emotional numbing and decreased participation (Syazali et al., 2025; Tsabita et al., 2024). However, there remains a scarcity of studies that frame these emotional injuries as learning trauma from the students’ own perspectives.

2.2 Emotional dimensions of social studies learning

Social Studies education at the elementary level aims to cultivate civic competence, historical understanding, and social awareness. Ideally, it should foster critical thinking, empathy, and participatory values. However, research indicates that Social Studies is often marginalized in elementary curricula due to the dominance of literacy and mathematics testing (Fitchett & Heafner, 2010). This marginalization frequently results in compressed instructional time, textbook-driven delivery, and memorization-oriented assessment. In Indonesian elementary schools, Social Studies is often taught through lecture and fact-recall methods, which may diminish student interest and increase performance anxiety (Dewi, 2022; Tanjung et al., 2025).

Students’ perceptions of Social Studies have been shown to vary depending on classroom climate and instructional approach. Gao (2020) found that when Social Studies is taught through rote memorization and teacher-centered lectures, students report boredom and disengagement. Conversely, participatory and discussion-based approaches enhance interest and relevance. These findings underscore the strong relationship between pedagogy and emotional engagement. Recent work by Alamsyah et al. (2022) emphasized that parents

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as authentic learning sources can alleviate textbook dependency and emotional pressure, yet this is rarely implemented in Social Studies classrooms.

Classroom climate research further demonstrates that autonomy-supportive teaching enhances intrinsic motivation, while controlling environments increase anxiety and withdrawal (Reeve, 2012). In Social Studies classrooms where public recitation, presentation, and evaluative questioning are common, students who struggle with content comprehension may experience embarrassment or fear of negative judgment. Such emotional experiences may become internalized, particularly during the elementary school years, when self-concept is still developing (Santrock, 2018). The integration of emotionally charged topics, such as historical conflict or social inequality, may intensify students' vulnerability if not facilitated in psychologically safe ways. When instructional practices fail to provide emotional scaffolding, students may associate Social Studies with discomfort or threat rather than empowerment (Niman, 2025).

Although social-emotional learning (SEL) initiatives emphasize emotional competence and safe classroom interaction (Durlak et al., 2011), research rarely addresses how emotionally distressing experiences manifest specifically within Social Studies instruction. Patti (2020) argues that educational trauma often goes unrecognized because it is embedded in routine academic practices. In Indonesian primary education, studies have begun to examine speech acts that trigger learning trauma (Tsabita et al., 2024), but these have not been linked to subject-specific emotional patterns in Social Studies. The absence of subject-specific emotional analysis limits understanding of how pedagogical routines shape students' long-term relationships with civic learning.

2.3 Phenomenology and the study of lived experience in education

To understand learning trauma as experienced by students, it is insufficient to rely solely on quantitative measures of anxiety or stress. While survey-based studies provide valuable generalizations, they often fail to capture the depth and meaning of personal experience. Phenomenology offers a methodological alternative that seeks to uncover the essence of lived experience (Moustakas, 1994).

Rooted in Husserlian philosophy, phenomenology aims to describe phenomena as they are consciously experienced, free from preconceived theoretical assumptions. In educational research, phenomenological inquiry has been used to explore students' experiences of belonging, exclusion, engagement, and identity formation (Neubauer et al., 2019). By emphasizing participants' narratives, this approach enables researchers to identify essential structures underlying subjective experiences. In the context of learning trauma, phenomenology allows exploration of how students interpret emotionally distressing events: How do they describe their feelings? How do they respond behaviorally? How do these experiences influence their perception of Social Studies as a subject? Through systematic analysis, such as Colaizzi's or Moustakas's procedures, researchers can distill individual accounts into thematic structures representing the shared essence of the phenomenon.

Several Indonesian studies have utilized phenomenology to examine affective aspects of learning (Syazali et al., 2025; Tanjung et al., 2025), yet its application to subject-specific learning trauma in Social Studies remains novel. This study, therefore, extends phenomenological inquiry to a domain where emotional injuries are often hidden beneath routine classroom practices.

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2.4 Research gap and conceptual positioning

Based on the reviewed literature, three major gaps are evident: (a) conceptual gap: Trauma in education is predominantly framed within clinical or large-scale adversity contexts, with limited attention to trauma emerging from routine pedagogical practices in specific subjects; (b) subject-specific gap: Emotional distress has rarely been examined as a phenomenon embedded within elementary Social Studies, despite the subject's unique demands on memorization, public discussion, and value-laden content; and (c) methodological gap: Existing studies largely employ quantitative measures, leaving a need for in-depth qualitative exploration of students' lived experiences in Indonesian elementary settings.

This study positions *learning trauma* as a subject-specific, emotionally constructed pedagogical phenomenon shaped by classroom climate, instructional practice, and evaluative interaction. By employing phenomenological inquiry, it seeks to illuminate the essence of students' experiences and contribute to more emotionally responsive Social Studies pedagogy.

3. Method

3.1 Research design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of elementary school students who encountered learning trauma in Social Studies classrooms. Phenomenology seeks to understand the essence of a phenomenon as experienced by individuals (Moustakas, 1994). This approach is appropriate for investigating learning trauma because it allows in-depth exploration of students' subjective interpretations, emotional responses, and meaning-making processes.

The study followed Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological data analysis procedure, which provides systematic steps for extracting, organizing, and validating thematic meanings from participants' narratives. The goal was not to generalize statistically but to identify the essential structure of learning trauma as experienced in Social Studies instruction.

3.2 Research setting and participants

The study was conducted in two elementary schools in Pekanbaru, Indonesia. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (a) students in Grades 4–6; (b) have experienced repeated negative emotional responses during Social Studies lessons; (c) willing to share their experiences; and (d) parental consent obtained. A total of 8 students (4 female, 4 male) participated in the study. This number aligns with phenomenological research standards, which typically involve 6–10 participants to allow deep exploration while maintaining analytic rigor (Creswell et al., 2003). Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality.

3.3 Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth, individual interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 40–60 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview protocol included open-ended questions such as:

a) Can you describe your experiences during Social Studies lessons?
b) Have you ever felt afraid, anxious, or uncomfortable in Social Studies class? Why?
c) What usually happens when you cannot answer a question correctly?

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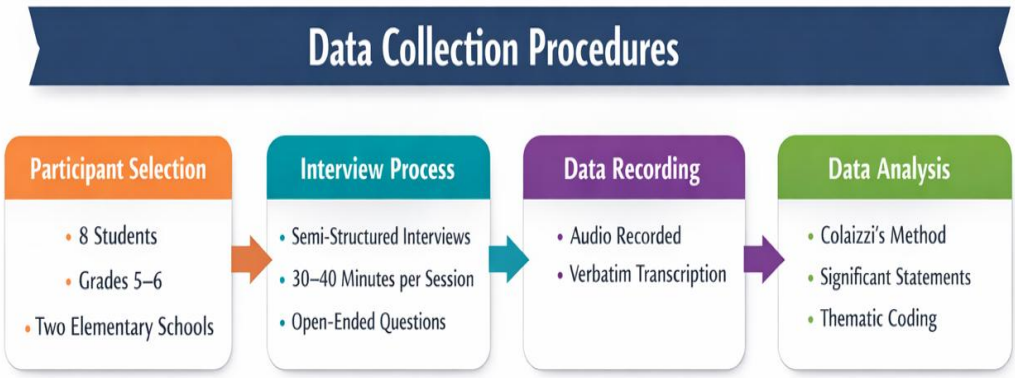
d) How do these experiences affect your feelings toward Social Studies?

Follow-up probing questions were used to clarify meanings and deepen responses. Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal expressions and contextual details.

3.4 Data analysis procedure (Colaizzi's method)

Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step phenomenological method. The data collection process is presented in Flowchart 1.



Flowchart 1. Data collection process

a) Step 1: Familiarization (All transcripts were read multiple times to obtain a general sense of the participants' experiences.)
b) Step 2: Identifying Significant Statements (Statements directly related to experiences of fear, anxiety, humiliation, or distress in Social Studies were extracted.)
c) Step 3: Formulating Meanings (Each significant statement was interpreted to identify underlying meanings while remaining faithful to participants' perspectives.)
d) Step 4: Clustering Themes (Formulated meanings were grouped into clusters representing emerging themes.)
e) Step 5: Developing an Exhaustive Description (A comprehensive narrative description of learning trauma in Social Studies classrooms was constructed.)
f) Step 6: Producing the Fundamental Structure (The essential structure of the phenomenon was synthesized.)
g) Step 7: Member Checking (Participants were asked to review summaries of findings to validate accuracy and credibility.)

3.3 Coding process

The coding procedure is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Coding procedure

Significant Statement	Formulated Meaning	Theme Cluster
"When I could not answer the teacher's question, my friends laughed, and I felt very embarrassed."	Experience of public humiliation	Fear of Public Humiliation
"Before Social Studies class, I always feel nervous because the teacher might ask me to memorize dates."	Anticipatory anxiety toward evaluation	Anxiety Toward Evaluation

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Significant Statement	Formulated Meaning	Theme Cluster
"Sometimes I pretend to be sick, so I do not have to join the class."	Avoidance behavior as a coping strategy	Defensive Learning Behavior
"After being scolded, I stopped raising my hand."	Emotional withdrawal and reduced participation	Emotional Withdrawal

A total of 126 significant statements were extracted from the transcripts, reduced to 28 formulated meanings, and subsequently clustered into four essential themes. Through iterative comparison, these clusters were refined into four essential themes representing the structure of learning trauma in Social Studies classrooms.

3.6 Trustworthiness

To ensure rigor, the study followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria: Credibility, Transferability, Dependability, and Confirmability.

3.7 Ethical considerations

Prior to data collection, permission was obtained from the principals of the participating elementary schools in Pekanbaru, Indonesia. Written informed consent was secured from parents or legal guardians, and verbal assent was obtained from all student participants. Students were informed about the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without academic consequences.

To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used and identifying information was removed from transcripts. All data were securely stored and accessed only by the research team. The study adhered to ethical principles for research involving human participants, including respect for participants, voluntary participation, and protection of privacy.

4. Results

Phenomenological analysis revealed four essential themes describing the lived experiences of learning trauma in elementary Social Studies classrooms: (1) Fear of Public Humiliation, (2) Anxiety Toward Evaluation and Memorization, (3) Emotional Withdrawal and Silencing, and (4) Defensive and Avoidant Behaviors. Table 2 summarizes the themes, the number of participants reporting each theme, sample quotations, and their interpretive meanings.

4.1 Theme 1: fear of public humiliation

All eight participants described experiences of embarrassment or humiliation when unable to answer questions correctly. Alya (Grade 5) recounted, "When I gave the wrong answer about the historical date, the teacher said, 'You should have memorized it.' My friends laughed. After that, I did not want to speak again." Rizky (Grade 6) added, "If I cannot answer, the teacher calls another student and compares us. I feel ashamed because everyone looks at me." These instances were not isolated but recurred over weeks. Some students noted that the fear began even before the class started, indicating anticipatory anxiety. However, the intensity varied: two students described merely feeling embarrassed temporarily, while six reported persistent fear. One participant (Rina, Grade 4) said she could "laugh it off" if friends teased, but still dreaded being called. This variation suggests that public humiliation, while commonly distressing, affects students differently based on personality and peer support.

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Table 2. Essential themes of learning trauma in elementary Social Studies

Essential Theme	N (out of 8)	Sample Quotation	Interpretive Meaning
Fear of Public Humiliation	8	"When I gave the wrong answer... my friends laughed. I wanted to disappear." (Alya)	Public correction becomes a social threat, not just academic feedback.
.Anxiety Toward Evaluation and Memorization	7	"Even if I study, I am still afraid. I think maybe I will forget when I stand up." (Sinta)	Memorization demands reduce perceived control and generate anticipatory anxiety.
Emotional Withdrawal and Silencing	6	"I prefer to stay quiet so the teacher does not notice me." (Nadia)	Withdrawal as self-protection; internalization of "not smart" identity.
Defensive Avoidance Behaviors	5	"I try not to look at the teacher so I will not be asked." (Fikri)	Active avoidance to escape emotional threat; physical symptoms used to avoid class.

Note: Themes are not mutually exclusive; some participants reported multiple themes.

4.2 Theme 2: anxiety toward evaluation and memorization

Participants frequently associated Social Studies with memorization of dates, definitions, and structured answers. This emphasis generated anticipatory anxiety, particularly before tests or oral questioning sessions.

Dimas (Grade 4) shared:
"Before Social Studies, I feel nervous because the teacher might ask about the dates of events. If I forget, I get scolded."

Another participant, Sinta (Grade 6), described:
"Even if I study, I am still afraid. I think maybe I will forget when I stand up."

This theme reflects not only test anxiety but also a broader emotional pattern linked to performance pressure. Students expressed fear of making mistakes rather than curiosity about the content. The repeated association of Social Studies with memorization demands appears to have shaped the subject as a source of stress rather than meaningful civic understanding. The phenomenon here suggests that when perceived control is low and evaluation stakes feel high, students internalize anxiety as a defining feature of the subject.

4.3 Theme 3: emotional withdrawal and silencing

As a consequence of humiliation and anxiety, many participants reported withdrawing from active participation. Rather than engaging in discussion or volunteering answers, students chose silence as a protective strategy.

Rafa (Grade 5) explained:
*"After I was scolded, I stopped raising my h*and. Even if I know the answer, I am afraid it is wrong."
Nadia (Grade 4) said:
"I prefer to stay quiet so the teacher does not notice me."

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This withdrawal was not merely behavioral but emotional. Students described feeling "small," "not smart," or "not good at Social Studies." Such self-perceptions indicate that repeated distressing experiences influenced their developing academic identities.

Silencing, therefore, functioned as both a coping mechanism and a manifestation of internalized insecurity. The classroom became a space of emotional self-protection rather than exploration.

4.4 Theme 4: defensive and avoidant behaviors

Beyond withdrawal, some students developed avoidance strategies to minimize exposure to distressing situations. These included pretending to be unwell, avoiding eye contact, or hoping not to be called upon.

> Fikri (Grade 6) reported:
> *"Sometimes I wish the class ended quickly. I try not to look at the teacher so I will not be asked."*
> Another student stated:
> *"I once told my mom I had a stomachache because I did not want to present my assignment."*

These behaviors reflect a deeper emotional response where Social Studies was perceived as threatening. Avoidance served as a self-protective mechanism against anticipated embarrassment or failure. Over time, participants described reduced interest in Social Studies and a belief that the subject was inherently difficult or frightening. The emotional association appeared persistent, extending beyond single classroom events.

4.5 Essential structure of the phenomenon

Synthesizing across themes, learning trauma in elementary Social Studies classrooms can be understood as a cyclical process: (a) public evaluative exposure; (b) emotional distress (fear, shame, anxiety); (c) internalization into self-concept; (d) withdrawal or avoidance behavior; and (e) reinforcement of a negative subject association.

This structure illustrates how routine instructional practices, particularly public correction, memorization pressure, and comparative evaluation, can unintentionally cultivate emotionally unsafe learning environments. The essence of learning trauma in this context is not rooted in extreme events but in repeated micro-level emotional injuries that shape students' long-term perceptions of Social Studies learning.

5. Discussion

This study explored how elementary school students experience and interpret learning trauma in Social Studies classrooms. The findings reveal that learning trauma emerges from repeated, emotionally distressing classroom interactions embedded in routine pedagogical practices, not from extreme events. The four themes—fear of public humiliation, anxiety toward evaluation, emotional withdrawal, and defensive avoidance—illuminate the emotional architecture of subject-specific learning trauma. We discuss these themes in light of theory, acknowledge limitations, and propose concrete pedagogical implications.

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5.1 Public humiliation as a pedagogical event

Public correction, though intended to prompt learning, was experienced by students as social exposure that threatened their self-worth. This aligns with achievement emotion theory: when students perceive low control and high evaluative stakes, shame and anxiety intensify (Pekrun, 2006). The anticipatory fear reported by participants indicates that humiliation was encoded as part of the subject's identity, echoing findings that repeated shame can lead to academic disidentification (Turner & Husman, 2008). Importantly, humiliation in this study was relational—distress arose from peer observation, not just teacher feedback—underscoring the social nature of classroom emotions. These results extend trauma-informed education by demonstrating that everyday evaluative routines can function as micro-traumatic events, even if they do not meet clinical thresholds. However, we avoid clinical labeling; the term "learning trauma" is used strictly as a pedagogical construct to describe cumulative emotional harm.

5.2 Memorization pressure and control-value dynamics

The strong association between memorization demands and anxiety supports the control-value theory prediction that low perceived control, combined with high value, produces anxiety (Pekrun, 2006). When Social Studies instruction reduces learning to mere factual recall, students' cognitive engagement decreases, and their emotional vulnerability increases. This finding resonates with critiques of Social Studies marginalization (Fitchett & Heafner, 2010) and with Indonesian studies showing that lecture-based Social Studies generates boredom and stress (Dewi, 2022). However, the counter-example of a student who memorized easily but felt bored suggests that mere memorization, even without anxiety, still fails to foster genuine civic engagement. Thus, the emotional harm of memorization pressure is not limited to anxiety but also includes alienation.

5.3 Withdrawal and identity formation

Emotional withdrawal and silencing reflect more than behavioral disengagement; they signify internalized academic self-concept. When students repeatedly associate Social Studies with negative affect, they adopt identities such as "I am not good at Social Studies," which at the elementary level can have lasting effects (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007). This withdrawal aligns with trauma-informed principles emphasizing that threatened safety leads to protective disconnection (SAMHSA, 2014). However, because these experiences occur in a subject meant to empower democratic participation, the identity damage is particularly concerning. Educators must recognize that silence in class may not indicate a lack of knowledge but internalized fear.

5.4 Avoidance as adaptive but maladaptive

Defensive avoidance behaviors, like feigning illness, represent attempts to regulate emotional threat. While adaptive in the short term, they reduce learning opportunities and reinforce negative subject associations. From a trauma-informed lens, such avoidance indicates that the classroom environment lacks felt safety, prompting students to prioritize self-protection over learning (Carello & Butler, 2015). These findings highlight that creating emotionally safe classrooms is not only about preventing severe trauma but also about mitigating the routine evaluative practices that provoke avoidance.

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5.5 Conceptual and practical implications

Conceptually, this study advances the notion of *subject-specific learning trauma* as a distinct pedagogical construct. Unlike generalized anxiety, it is bound to particular instructional contexts and interactional patterns. The identified cyclical process—evaluative exposure → distress → internalization → withdrawal → avoidance—shows how micro-level classroom events accumulate into stable emotional patterns. This expands trauma-informed discourse beyond clinical adversity into everyday pedagogy.

Practically, the findings call for:

a) **Transforming evaluative practices:** Minimize public correction; instead, offer private, constructive feedback. Use “think-pair-share” before whole-class questioning to reduce individual exposure.
b) **Shifting assessment design:** Move from memorization-based tests to inquiry-driven projects that allow students to construct understanding, thereby increasing perceived control and intrinsic motivation.
c) **Fostering emotional safety:** Embed trauma-informed strategies such as predictable routines, clear expectations, and explicit messages that mistakes are part of learning. Teachers should model emotional regulation and actively listen to students' concerns.
d) **Professional development:** Train elementary Social Studies teachers to recognize early signs of emotional distress and to implement autonomy-supportive communication.

These strategies do not require radical curricular overhaul but demand heightened emotional attunement and reflective practice.

5.6 Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations warrant mention. First, the sample was small and limited to two urban schools in Pekanbaru, restricting transferability. Second, reliance on self-reported data from children introduces potential recall bias and social desirability effects; triangulation with classroom observations and teacher interviews would strengthen validity. Third, the screening process based on teacher nomination may have missed students who internalize distress quietly. Fourth, the study did not examine the role of teacher intentions or perspectives, which could reveal mismatches between pedagogical aims and student experiences. Future research should employ mixed-methods designs with larger, more diverse samples, incorporate longitudinal tracking to assess long-term impacts, and develop intervention studies testing the effectiveness of trauma-informed Social Studies pedagogy. Additionally, cross-cultural comparisons could illuminate how cultural norms around authority and public evaluation shape how trauma is learned.

6. Conclusion and implications

This phenomenological inquiry revealed that elementary school students experience learning trauma in Social Studies classrooms primarily through repeated public humiliation, memorization-induced anxiety, emotional withdrawal, and defensive avoidance. These experiences stem from routine evaluative practices, not extreme events, and gradually reshape students’ academic identities, causing them to perceive Social Studies as a threatening subject rather than a space for civic growth. The study underscores that learning

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trauma is a meaningful pedagogical construct that merits attention alongside clinical trauma and generalized anxiety.

The implications for elementary Social Studies teaching are concrete: reduce public evaluative exposure, transition to inquiry-based assessment, and cultivate emotionally safe climates through trauma-informed practices. While exploratory, this research opens the door for more emotionally responsive pedagogy in civic education. With ongoing reforms in Indonesian education emphasizing character and student-centeredness, the findings offer timely guidance for protecting students' emotional well-being while achieving Social Studies' democratic aims.

Credit authorship contribution statement
A: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Writing original draft.
OM: Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation.
RTT: Legal review, Ethical compliance supervision, Methodological validation, Writing, review & editing.
RHS: Formal analysis, Writing, review & editing, Validation.

Declaration of competing interest
The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

Data Availability Statement
The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Because the data include human participant information, they are not publicly available in order to protect participant privacy and confidentiality.

Ethical Declaration
This study involved human participants (elementary school students) and was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Formal permission to conduct the research was obtained from the school authorities in Pekanbaru, Indonesia. Written informed consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians, and verbal assent was obtained from all student participants prior to data collection. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Pseudonyms were used to protect participant identity.

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Declaration of AI statement
Portions of this manuscript were edited with the assistance of ChatGPT (OpenAI) for language refinement. All AI-generated content was critically reviewed, revised, and validated by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the integrity, accuracy, and originality of the final manuscript.

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