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The Influence of Integrated Thematic Learning Method on the Academic Achievement of Primary School Students in Indonesia

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Abstract:
This study investigates the influence of integrated thematic learning on the academic achievement of primary school students in Indonesia. Recognizing that elementary education serves as the foundation for cognitive, affective, and psychomotor development, the research explores how integrated learning methods which unify multiple subjects under a single contextual theme impact students' learning outcome. Employing a mixed methods approach with a correlational design, the study involved questionnaires, interviews, classroom observations, and documentation from third-grade students and teachers in a public elementary school. Quantitative results revealed a statistically significant positive correlation between the implementation of thematic instruction and students' academic performance. Meanwhile, qualitative findings emphasized increased student engagement, contextual understanding, and collaborative learning experiences. These results underscore the pedagogical effectiveness of integrated thematic learning, especially in supporting the holistic development of students under the 2013 Curriculum framework. The study contributes to existing literature by combining statistical evidence with classroom insights and offers practical recommendations for curriculum developers, teachers, and policymakers seeking to improve learning outcomes through innovative, student-centered instructional strategies.

Keywords:
Integrated Thematic Learning, Academic Achievement, Primary Education, 2013 Curriculum.

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INTRODUCTION

Primary education serves as the cornerstone in shaping students' cognitive, affective, and psychomotor abilities from an early age. In the context of Indonesia's educational system, learning at the elementary level is expected not only to deliver knowledge but also to cultivate character and nurture critical and creative thinking skills. This demand calls for learning approaches that go beyond content mastery, emphasizing cross-disciplinary integration and real-life relevance. In response to these needs, the integrated thematic learning method has emerged as a strategic approach that consolidates various subjects under a central theme, allowing students to engage in learning that is unified, contextual, and meaningful. As introduced by Fogarty (1991), this model supports a deeper understanding by presenting information in a holistic and non-fragmented manner. The Indonesian 2013 Curriculum (K13) has adopted this approach particularly for lower grades (grades I–III), aiming to foster comprehensive competencies in young learners.

Despite its theoretical promise, the implementation of integrated thematic learning in Indonesia continues to face practical challenges. Several studies have indicated that teachers often

lack a deep understanding of subject integration, leading to learning that remains conventional and less innovative (Sofyan, 2020). On the other hand, research by Wahyuni and Arifin demonstrated that when implemented effectively, thematic learning can significantly improve student achievement, particularly in conceptual understanding and critical thinking skills (Wahyuni & Arifin, 2019). These findings affirm the importance of examining not only the theoretical foundation but also the empirical effectiveness of this method within Indonesia's primary education framework.

Theoretically, this study is grounded in constructivist learning theory, which emphasizes that knowledge is actively constructed by learners through experience and social interaction. Piaget (1973) asserted that children develop understanding by engaging with their environment, while Vygotsky highlighted the importance of social context and scaffolding in learning processes. Within the integrated thematic approach, these principles are reflected in the use of contextual themes, collaborative learning, and experiential activities that encourage students to construct meaning actively and reflectively (Vygotsky, 1978).

This study seeks to describe how integrated thematic learning is implemented in primary school classrooms and to analyze whether this method has a significant impact on student academic performance. Specifically, the study addresses two central questions: (1) How is integrated thematic learning applied in elementary-level teaching and learning processes? and (2) Does the integrated thematic method significantly affect the academic achievement of primary school students?

The contribution of this article lies in its dual focus on theoretical and practical outcomes. Empirically, the study provides evidence of how thematic instruction impacts student learning outcomes within the Indonesian curriculum system. Theoretically, it enriches discourse on curriculum integration and supports the advancement of constructivist educational models within early education. The findings are expected to offer useful insights for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers seeking to optimize teaching strategies at the foundational level of education.

The integrated thematic learning model draws its theoretical foundation from constructivist educational theory, which posits that students construct knowledge actively through meaningful experiences. This model was elaborated by Fogarty (1991), who proposed curriculum integration across disciplines under a central theme to promote holistic learning. In this approach, subject boundaries are intentionally blurred to help students see connections between concepts and apply them contextually. In Indonesia, the 2013 Curriculum institutionalized this approach in early primary education, aiming to foster critical thinking, creativity, character development, and collaborative skills among young learners (Setiawan, 2019). The emphasis on thematic learning is in line with Piaget's and Vygotsky's views, which stress learning as a process shaped by individual exploration and social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978).

Previous studies have examined the effectiveness of integrated thematic learning from various perspectives. Research by Tisngati and Budiningsih highlighted its positive contribution to students' character development in the early grades (Tisngati & Budiningsih, 2019). Similarly, Yunisrul et al. demonstrated improvements in student engagement and classroom participation

following the implementation of lesson study-based thematic learning (Yunisrul et al., 2021). Setiawan also developed a thematic learning design oriented toward scientific literacy, showing that integration enhances not only academic knowledge but also scientific reasoning skills (Setiawan, 2019). These findings were echoed by Sofa and Sutisna, who found that students taught using thematic approaches showed better understanding and enthusiasm compared to traditional instruction (Sofa & Sutisna, 2019).

Despite these promising results, several studies have identified notable gaps in the implementation of thematic learning. Mutiah and Rijadi reported that many primary school teachers struggle with integrating content across subjects due to limited training and inadequate teaching resources (Mutiah & Rijadi, 2023). Dewantara also noted inconsistencies in curriculum execution and varying teacher competence across schools (Dewantara, 2020). Furthermore, Syamsuddin et al. emphasized that while thematic learning enhances motivation, its success largely depends on teacher innovation and institutional support (Syamsuddin et al., 2021). In addressing these gaps, this article positions itself as an empirical response to the limited evidence on the direct influence of integrated thematic learning on student academic achievement in the Indonesian context. By employing a mixed methods design, the study bridges the gap between theoretical advocacy and practical outcomes, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between instructional approach and student performance.

Many prior studies have employed either qualitative designs focused on classroom practices or quantitative surveys measuring student perception and motivation. For instance, Darsono et al. analyzed the use of worksheets in thematic teaching but did not examine performance outcomes (Darsono et al., 2018). Meanwhile, Rachman explored curriculum implementation among teachers but lacked analysis on student achievement metrics (Rachman, 2019). The current study contributes by combining statistical data on learning outcomes with qualitative perspectives from both teachers and students, thus offering more robust conclusions about the method's educational impact.

Synthesizing the conceptual and empirical foundations of thematic learning, this study constructs its analytical framework around three key premises: (1) the integration of subject matter enhances conceptual understanding; (2) learning within contextual themes promotes student engagement; and (3) collaborative and reflective classroom environments foster higher-order thinking. These assumptions guide the methodological and analytical orientation of the research, ensuring alignment between theoretical constructivist perspectives and the observed educational realities in Indonesian primary schools.

METHOD

This study employed a mixed-methods approach with a correlational strategy to investigate the influence of integrated thematic learning on primary school students' academic achievement. The research design was chosen to capture both quantitative trends and qualitative insights regarding the implementation and outcomes of the thematic approach in Indonesian elementary education. Data were collected from both primary sources, including questionnaires distributed to students and teachers, structured interviews, classroom observations, and student learning outcome documents,

and secondary sources, such as syllabi, lesson plans (RPP), daily assessment records, and institutional curriculum documents. The integration of qualitative and quantitative data was aimed at providing a comprehensive view of how thematic learning is practiced and its impact on learning outcomes.

Data collection utilized several instruments: student questionnaires to measure engagement and perceptions of thematic instruction; observation checklists to document teacher practices and thematic integration; and academic records to represent student achievement quantitatively. The inclusion criteria for participants required that students be enrolled in grade III and actively engaged in thematic instruction during the second semester of the 2024/2025 academic year. Teachers were selected based on their involvement in teaching using the integrated thematic approach. The sample was drawn using probability sampling, involving 30–40 students and 1–2 classroom teachers.

Data analysis combined descriptive statistics to assess learning achievement levels, normality and homogeneity tests for distribution quality, and simple regression or Pearson correlation tests to examine the relationship between the implementation of integrated thematic learning (independent variable) and student academic achievement (dependent variable). Triangulation was applied to validate qualitative findings. Data were processed using standard statistical software and coded thematically for qualitative analysis to ensure methodological rigor and validity in interpreting the results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), (Miles et al., 2019; Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017; Field, 2020; Fetters et al., 2013; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings of this study are presented in two parts, corresponding to the mixed methods design: quantitative data illustrating the correlation between integrated thematic learning and academic achievement, and qualitative data capturing classroom implementation and student experiences.

Table 1. The finding of study

Aspect	Key Findings	Interpretation / Implication
Study Design	Mixed-methods: Quantitative (academic performance data) + Qualitative (classroom observation & student experiences)	Combines numerical analysis with contextual understanding to provide a holistic view.
Quantitative Focus	Comparison between students using integrated thematic learning vs. conventional instruction	Allows evaluation of effectiveness through measurable outcomes.
Formative Assessment Results	Mean score of 84.2 (SD = 4.7) for thematic learning group vs. 78.5 (SD = 5.3) for control group	Thematic learning leads to higher academic achievement.
Data Normality & Homogeneity	Kolmogorov–Smirnov test ($p > .05$) confirmed normal distribution; Levene's test showed equal variance	Statistical assumptions met for valid correlation and regression analysis.
Correlation Analysis	Pearson's $r = 0.612$, $p < .001$	Indicates a moderately strong positive correlation between thematic learning integration and academic achievement.
Regression Analysis	Simple linear regression: $R^2 = 0.375$	Thematic learning explains 37.5% of variance in student performance, confirming predictive strength.
Qualitative Insights (Overview)	Classroom observation and student feedback highlight engagement, contextual learning, and relevance of material.	Qualitative data supports quantitative findings, reinforcing the effectiveness of thematic integration in enhancing learning outcomes.

Quantitative results indicate that students who participated in integrated thematic learning showed higher average scores in formative assessments compared to those exposed to conventional instruction. Descriptive analysis revealed a mean score of 84.2 (SD = 4.7) for students engaged in thematic learning, compared to 78.5 (SD = 5.3) in the non-thematic control group. A normality test using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov method confirmed that the data were normally distributed ($p > .05$), and Levene's test for homogeneity indicated equal variance across groups. The Pearson correlation coefficient between the degree of thematic integration (as measured through teacher self-reports and classroom observations) and student academic performance was $r = 0.612$, with $p < .001$, indicating a statistically significant and moderately strong positive correlation. A simple linear regression analysis further demonstrated that the integrated thematic learning method accounted for 37.5% of the variance in student achievement ($R^2 = 0.375$), confirming the predictive strength of the instructional model.

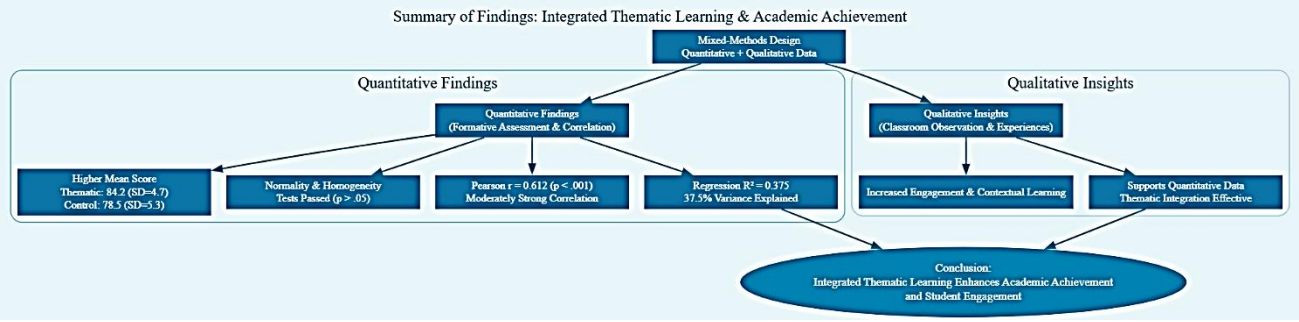

Figure 1. Integrated Thematic Learning Method

Qualitative findings, based on interview transcripts, observational notes, and thematic analysis, yielded three major themes. First, instructional relevance and student engagement: students perceived thematic lessons as more connected to real-life experiences, which increased their motivation and attentiveness in class (Yunisrul et al., 2021). Second, teacher challenges in planning and integrating content: several teachers admitted difficulty in designing lesson plans that balance curriculum objectives and thematic coherence, particularly due to limited training and lack of inter-subject teaching materials (Mutiah & Rijadi, 2023). Third, collaborative learning as a catalyst for concept mastery: activities that involved group discussions, role-plays, and projects within thematic units led to improved peer interaction and higher-order thinking skills (Tisngati & Budiningsih, 2019). Observations also indicated that student participation was more dynamic during thematic lessons compared to fragmented subject-based sessions.

Documentary analysis supported these findings by showing that lesson plans aligned with the 2013 Curriculum often integrated character education and literacy objectives within thematic units. Reports from classroom observers noted that when implemented effectively, thematic instruction created smoother transitions between subjects and improved the flow of learning activities (Sofa & Sutisna, 2019). Furthermore, many student worksheets and task products showed higher completion rates and more accurate answers in thematic settings, especially in literacy and social studies themes (Setiawan, 2019). Collectively, the results affirm the positive influence of integrated thematic learning both quantitatively through improved academic performance and qualitatively through

enhanced engagement and instructional coherence.

Discussion

The main finding of this study confirms that the integrated thematic learning method has a significant and positive influence on primary school students' academic achievement. This is aligned with the research objectives and central hypothesis, which posit that thematically connected instructional practices not only enhance comprehension but also foster student engagement and meaningful learning. The quantitative data demonstrate a moderate to strong correlation between the degree of thematic integration and academic performance, while the qualitative data reflect positive perceptions and increased student motivation within integrated learning environments. These results support the notion that instructional coherence and contextual relevance play key roles in improving educational outcomes.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings reinforce constructivist principles, particularly those articulated by Piaget and Vygotsky, in which learning is viewed as an active, experience-based process. The integration of themes across subjects allows learners to construct knowledge through meaningful connections, consistent with Piaget's concept of schema development. Additionally, the collaborative nature of thematic instruction echoes Vygotsky's emphasis on social interaction and scaffolding as essential elements of cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978). By situating learning in real-life contexts and encouraging group-based activities, integrated thematic instruction aligns pedagogically with constructivist learning theory and affirms its applicability within the Indonesian primary education context.

The results also correspond with earlier studies highlighting the benefits of integrated thematic learning. For instance, research by Yunisrul et al. (2021) found that lesson study-based thematic instruction improved classroom participation and student attentiveness (Yunisrul et al., 2021). Similarly, Tisngati and Budiningsih (2019) documented enhanced character development and student collaboration in thematic classrooms (Tisngati & Budiningsih, 2019). Setiawan (2019) demonstrated that thematic units guided by scientific literacy principles led to more profound conceptual understanding among students (Setiawan, 2019). Likewise, Sofa and Sutisna (2019) observed greater learning enthusiasm and smoother lesson delivery when teachers utilized thematic strategies (Sofa & Sutisna, 2019).

Conversely, this study also sheds light on the barriers faced by educators in applying the thematic approach effectively. Mutiah and Rijadi (2023) noted that insufficient professional development opportunities contribute to inconsistent instructional design among teachers (Mutiah & Rijadi, 2023). Dewantara (2020) emphasized systemic issues such as unequal distribution of learning resources and varying teacher competence, which may affect curriculum execution (Dewantara, 2020). These challenges were also echoed by Syamsuddin et al. (2021), who highlighted the dependence of successful implementation on teacher creativity and institutional support (Syamsuddin et al., 2021).

Scientifically, this article contributes to the growing body of empirical research that supports

curriculum integration in early education. While most studies have focused on either classroom observation or student perception, this study adds value by quantifying academic outcomes through regression analysis, offering stronger evidence for causality. Methodologically, the mixed methods design enables a more holistic understanding of the instructional process and its results, affirming the utility of multi-perspective inquiry in educational research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Fetters et al., 2013; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

Nevertheless, the study has limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the sample size, although adequate for correlation analysis, was limited to one school, potentially affecting generalizability. Second, the cross-sectional nature of the data limits the ability to track long-term effects of thematic instruction. Third, while triangulation was applied, qualitative findings may still be subject to interpretative bias. Future research should consider broader sampling across diverse school contexts, incorporate longitudinal designs, and explore more specific thematic units in relation to distinct cognitive or affective learning outcomes. Practically, these findings have implications for teacher training programs, curriculum designers, and educational policymakers. Investing in sustained professional development for teachers and providing integrated instructional materials could help overcome current barriers. Additionally, the findings support the integration of thematic learning into national curriculum frameworks and reinforce the importance of aligning pedagogical practices with constructivist principles. Schools are encouraged to adopt collaborative planning structures to support teachers in designing and delivering integrated lessons that are both engaging and academically rigorous.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that the implementation of the integrated thematic learning method has a positive and significant impact on the academic achievement of primary school students. Through a mixed methods approach, the research demonstrates that thematic learning enhances not only cognitive outcomes but also student engagement, motivation, and the relevance of classroom activities. Quantitative findings reveal a meaningful correlation between the degree of thematic integration and student achievement, while qualitative data further support this relationship through insights into improved student participation and more coherent instructional delivery. These findings validate the importance of holistic, contextual learning approaches in early education and affirm the value of constructivist pedagogy as a foundation for curriculum design.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the growing discourse on integrated learning by offering empirical evidence that strengthens the link between instructional coherence and student outcomes. It also reinforces the relevance of constructivist learning theories within the context of Indonesia's 2013 Curriculum implementation. Practically, the study provides actionable insights for educators and curriculum developers by highlighting the need for structured support systems, such as teacher training and resource development, to optimize the effectiveness of thematic instruction. Looking ahead, the results suggest the importance of broader and longitudinal investigations across diverse school contexts to further validate and refine integrated learning models. Future research could explore the impact of specific themes or subject pairings, as well as examine the long-term effects of thematic instruction on student learning trajectories and character development.

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