Optimizing the Implementation of Thematic Learning in the Independent Curriculum: As a Solution to Increase Student Engagement

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Abstract:
> This research focuses on the implementation of thematic learning in the Independent Curriculum. This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design that involves interviews, observations, and documentation as data collection techniques. The main sources of information consist of teachers involved in thematic learning and students who are participants in the learning. The results of the study show that thematic learning in SD Lab School Integrated can increase student engagement and make it easier for them to relate concepts from various subjects to real life. However, time management is a major challenge, due to the limited time available to complete all thematic materials and the need to coordinate multiple subjects in one theme. Nonetheless, teachers strive to address these challenges by prioritizing the most relevant activities and using a project-based approach to improve student understanding. The implication of this study is the importance of more flexible time planning and increased collaboration between teachers to optimize the implementation of thematic learning. This research contributes to enriching the literature on thematic learning and the Independent Curriculum, as well as providing practical insights for schools in implementing more contextual and relevant learning. Further research is needed to further explore other challenges in the implementation of thematic learning in various school contexts.

Keywords: *Thematic Learning, Independent Curriculum, Time Management*

INTRODUCTION

Education in Indonesia currently faces great challenges in adapting the curriculum to the needs of the ever-evolving world (Desmarini & Kasman, 2020; Khasanah & Antariksa, 2021; Kurniawati, 2023). One response to this challenge is the implementation of the Independent Curriculum, which prioritizes learning that is more flexible, relevant, and based on students' interests and needs (Chiu et al., 2021; Tantawy, 2020; Yurtseven Avci et al., 2020). Thematic learning, which is an important part of the Independent Curriculum, seeks to connect various subjects in one theme that can be applied in daily life (Desmarini & Kasman, 2020; Khasanah & Antariksa, 2021; Wardani et al., 2023). However, although it is expected to increase student engagement and understanding, the implementation of thematic learning in the field often faces various obstacles, such as time constraints, lack of collaboration between teachers, and challenges in managing very diverse materials (Al Qorin, 2022; Dolfing et al., 2021; Yusuf, 2021). Therefore, it is important to explore how thematic learning is applied in

elementary schools, especially in the context of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum.

Previous studies have shown that thematic learning can improve students' understanding because this method allows them to see the connections between different concepts from different subjects. Previous relevant research studies have discussed a lot related to similar topics that shows that a thematic approach to learning can increase student motivation and involvement in the learning process (Almanthari et al., 2020; Meng & Dan-Dan, 2022; Widayat et al., 2023). On the other hand, some studies have also identified major challenges in the implementation of thematic learning, such as difficulties in time management and coordination between teachers. This is as well as the research that revealed that although thematic learning can enrich the student experience, teachers often have difficulty managing time and materials effectively (Ali, 2020; Julia et al., 2020; Junarti et al., 2023). This is important for further research in order to provide more concrete solutions in the application of thematic learning in Indonesia, especially at the elementary school level.

This research was conducted to explore the implementation of thematic learning in the Independent Curriculum at SD Lab School Integrated, focusing on teacher involvement in the preparation of materials, challenges in time management, and its impact on student understanding and engagement. Specifically, this study will answer the following questions: (1) How do teachers implement thematic learning in the Independent Curriculum in SD Lab School Integrated? (2) What are the challenges faced in the application of thematic learning, especially related to time management? (3) What is the impact of thematic learning on student understanding and engagement? This research is expected to provide a clear picture of the effectiveness of thematic learning at the elementary school level and provide recommendations for better implementation.

This study assumes that thematic learning in the Independent Curriculum can increase students' understanding of the concepts taught because this approach connects various subjects with real life. In addition, this study also hypothesizes that although thematic learning brings many benefits, teachers in SD Lab School Integrated face challenges in time management and coordination between subjects. Based on initial interviews with several teachers, the provisional answers suggest that although time management is a challenge, thematic learning can significantly increase student engagement. However, challenges in timing and collaboration between teachers still need to be overcome so that thematic learning can run more effectively and optimally. This study aims to further explore the factors that affect the implementation of thematic learning and provide insight into strategies that can overcome these challenges.

RESEARCH METHOD

The unit of analysis in this study is the implementation of thematic learning in students and teachers at SD Lab School Integrated. This study uses a qualitative research design with a case study approach, because it aims to deeply explore the experience and understanding possessed by teachers and students related to the implementation of the Independent Curriculum and thematic learning (Maxwell, 2021; Monaro et al., 2022; Riazi et al., 2023). The main focus of this research is to understand how thematic learning is applied, the involvement of teachers in the preparation of materials, and the challenges in

time management faced by educators. By using case studies, this research provides a detailed overview of the context and dynamics that occur in the field, as well as enriches the literature on the application of thematic learning at the basic level (Aurini et al., 2021; Miles et al., 2020; Nassaji, 2020).

The main sources of information in this study consist of teachers who are directly involved in the planning and implementation of thematic learning at SD Lab School Integrated, as well as students who are participants in the learning. The teachers involved in this study were selected based on the criteria of their involvement in the thematic learning process and their understanding of the Independent Curriculum. In addition, interviews were also conducted with the principal who provided an overview of educational policies that support the implementation of thematic learning in the school. To get a more comprehensive understanding, interviews were also conducted with students who were actively involved in thematic learning to find out their perception of the learning process carried out.

The data in this study was collected through three main techniques, namely interviews, observations, and documentation. Interviews were conducted with teachers and students to obtain first-hand information about their experiences related to the application of thematic learning. Observation is used to see firsthand the learning process in the classroom, as well as the interaction between students and teachers. Documentation is used to collect teaching materials, lesson plans, and LKPD used during thematic learning. Data analysis is carried out by following the stages of data reduction, data display, and verification. The data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation will be reduced to obtain the core information, then presented in the form of a more structured data display, and finally verified to ensure the suitability between the findings and existing theories.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Result
Implementation of Thematic Learning in the Independent Curriculum

Based on the documentation obtained from the learning implementation plan (RPP) and teaching materials used in SD Lab School Integrated, it can be seen that thematic learning has been implemented with a focus on the application of relevant concepts in students' daily lives. The study implementation plan (RPP) shows that each theme is designed to connect a variety of different subjects, such as Science, Social Studies, and Mathematics, with topics that are close to the lives around students. For example, the theme "*Lingkungan Sahabat Kita*" raised in the RPP integrates various concepts from the fields of health, science, and geography that are relevant to their lives. This allows students to see the connection between what they learn in class and the real world they experience on a daily basis. Thematic learning in this school encourages students not only to master the material from one subject, but to see the interconnectedness of various concepts and fields of knowledge that complement each other. As documentation materials, the following is included in the Student Worksheet (LKPD) and the cover of the thematic book "*Lingkungan Sahabat Kita*", which describes the implementation of this theme in classroom learning.
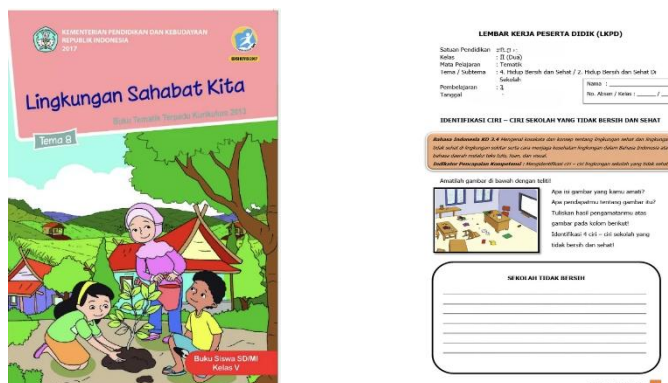
Figure 1. The Student Worksheet (LKPD) is themed "Healthy Environment".

More in-depth documentation shows that the application of thematic learning in SD Lab School Integrated provides more opportunities for students to engage in activities that connect theory with hands-on practice. In the learning materials recorded in the documentation, for example, there is an observation task of the cleanliness of the school environment followed by writing a report on what was found during the observation. Students are also invited to engage in group projects, which require them to work together to solve problems related to the theme being studied. This project-based learning fosters students' social skills, including their ability to communicate, work in teams, and think critically. For example, in the theme "*Lingkungan Sahabat Kita*", students were asked to present the results of a group project on ways to maintain clean water in their school, which integrates knowledge from different disciplines and provides hands-on experience in solving problems together.

The existing documentation shows that thematic learning at SD Lab School Integrated provides great benefits for students, because this learning connects various subjects and applies the concepts learned in real life. Through this thematic learning, students not only memorize the material, but they learn to see the connection between the concepts taught and the world around them. Learning based on themes relevant to daily life provides space for students to be more engaged and feel that the material they learn is more meaningful and applicable. As such, thematic learning provides a more comprehensive experience that develops a range of skills that students need in the 21st century, such as critical thinking skills, social skills, and the ability to work in teams.

Teacher Involvement in the Preparation of Thematic Learning

The results of observations at SD Lab School Integrated show that teacher involvement in the preparation of thematic learning plays a very important role in the quality of learning applied. The teachers were seen actively discussing in designing each learning theme, which was designed to combine various subjects. Observations during several lesson sessions showed that teachers not only refer to the existing syllabus, but also adapt the material to the needs and interests of students. In thematic learning, for example on the theme "Healthy Environment", teachers integrate materials from various fields, such as natural sciences (IPA) about the water cycle, health education about hygiene, and mathematics lessons to calculate the volume of water needed. These activities show that teachers creatively connect lessons with the real world that are relevant to students' lives.

During the observation, the teachers at SD Lab School Integrated were also

seen sharing ideas and experiences on the best way to teach different themes. Teachers hold regular meetings to discuss the most effective teaching methods and how to motivate students to be active in learning activities. In addition, teachers also collaborate to design projects that involve students in experiments and field research. Their involvement in this collaborative process shows that thematic learning is not only about delivering material, but also encouraging deeper interaction between teachers and students. For example, in the theme of "Marine Life", teachers work closely with students to create a model of a coral reef using recycled materials, which not only teaches science concepts but also creative and environmental skills.

Thus, observations show that teacher involvement in the preparation of thematic learning in SD Lab School Integrated is very important to create more effective and enjoyable learning. Teachers who actively discuss and collaborate in designing learning activities have succeeded in creating a more dynamic and creative learning atmosphere. This involvement also allows teachers to better understand the needs of students and adjust learning materials that are more suitable for the context of their lives, so that learning becomes more meaningful and applicable.

Time Management in Thematic Learning

In interviews with several teachers at SD Lab School Integrated, time management is one of the topics that often arises. Some teachers stated that they often found it difficult to complete all the material in the time allotted. "Sometimes we have to condense the material or reduce certain topics so that the learning can be completed on time," said one teacher (G_A, 2023). This shows that although thematic learning provides many benefits in the integration between subjects, time management remains a major challenge. In addition, some other teachers also suggested that scheduling time between subjects in a more structured manner can help a smoother learning process, as stated by other teachers: "With limited time, we must really focus on the main goal of learning so that no material is missed" (G_B, 2023).

From further interviews, it was found that the teachers at SD Lab School Integrated tried to make various adjustments to overcome the time constraints. "We usually prioritize the activities that are most relevant to the theme being discussed," said one teacher (G_C, 2023). In other words, while some topics may not be taught in depth, teachers try to adapt their approach by providing learning that is more contextual and directly connected to the student experience. This is also reflected in the implementation of project-based learning, where students are given the opportunity to explore themes independently even though the available time is limited. This approach is considered effective for improving students' understanding even though not all the details of the material can be taught in a short time. To further clarify the main themes that arise in time management, the following table is presented that analyzes the results of interviews with teachers, which includes various challenges and adjustments they make in the thematic learning process as described in table 1.

Table 1. Analysis of Time Management in Thematic Learning

Main Theme	Theme Description	Quote from the Speaker
Difficulty Completing the Material	Teachers find it difficult to complete all the material in a limited time.	"Sometimes we have to condense the material or reduce certain topics so that learning can be completed on time" (G_A, 2023).

Structured Scheduling	Some teachers have suggested the need for more structured scheduling to optimize time.	"With limited time, we must really focus on the main goal of learning so that no material is missed" (G_B, 2023).
Adaptation in Approach	Teachers adjust their approach to learning by prioritizing the most relevant activities.	"We usually prioritize the activities that are most relevant to the theme being discussed" (G_C, 2023).
Implementation of Project-Based Learning	The use of project-based learning to maximize student understanding even though time is limited.	There are no direct quotes, but this approach is reflected in interviews with teachers regarding how they manage their time.

From the table above, it is explained that time management in thematic learning in SD Lab School Integrated is greatly influenced by how teachers organize and prioritize the topics taught. Although thematic learning has many advantages in terms of subject integration, the limited time forces teachers to make careful choices about which material should take precedence. However, teachers at this school are constantly looking for ways to ensure that the available time is used as best as possible to achieve learning goals. They adapt to the situation at hand, focusing on the outcomes that are most important to the student's development.

This study produced findings related to the implementation of thematic learning in the Independent Curriculum in SD Lab School Integrated showing a positive impact on student engagement and their understanding of the concepts taught. In line with these findings, a study conducted by Elshami et al. (2021) found that a theme-based approach can increase student engagement with the material, as contextual learning provides deeper meaning for students. A thematic approach that integrates various subjects also supports more holistic learning, as highlighted by Bachmid (2016), which states that the incorporation of disciplines allows students to see the relationships between concepts that are not separate. However, the results of this study also highlight the challenges of time management, which are obstacles in ensuring that the material can be delivered optimally. This is in line with research by Palahudin et al. (2020), which emphasizes that although project-based and thematic curricula are very effective in improving student understanding, time constraints often affect the depth of learning. Thus, although the implementation of thematic learning shows positive results, better time management and strategy adjustments need to be considered to optimize the effectiveness of this learning.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the implementation of thematic learning in the Independent Curriculum in SD Lab School Integrated has a significant impact on student engagement and their understanding of learning materials. Learning that integrates various subjects with themes relevant to students' lives allows them to understand concepts in a more in-depth and applied way. These findings underscore the importance of a contextual approach in education, where students can see the connection between the knowledge they acquire in the classroom and their real world. In addition, the results of the study also show that collaboration between teachers and adjusting learning to student needs is the key to creating an effective learning experience. However, the challenge of time management is a limiting factor that needs to be overcome so that thematic learning can be applied optimally.

This research makes a significant contribution to enriching the literature

on thematic learning and the Independent Curriculum. By highlighting the importance of flexibility in time management and active teacher engagement, this study offers new insights on how best to optimize the implementation of thematic learning in schools. This research also adds to the understanding of how collaboration between teachers can improve the quality of integrated learning. However, this research has limitations in its scope, which is limited to one school and one type of learning theme, as well as the interview method used. Therefore, further research by expanding the sample, more diverse survey methods, and considering factors such as the age and background of students are urgently needed to provide a more comprehensive picture. This further research can be the basis for a more appropriate education policy that is in accordance with the needs of various schools in Indonesia.

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