

Thematic Learning in Elementary School: Problems and Possibilities

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Abstract: Thematic learning is one of the recommended approaches for elementary schools in Indonesia. Thematic approaches use themes to create active, interesting and meaningful learning. However, there are still problems in the implementation of thematic learning. The purpose of this study is to identify problems and opportunities of thematic learning in elementary schools. Qualitative research methods were used in this study. This study is limited in the area around Boyolali and Surakarta. Observation, interviews, questionnaires and document analysis techniques were carried out to collect data. A total of 22 elementary school teachers from grade one to six became the respondents for this study. These respondents were randomly selected and spread from various elementary schools. The results of this study indicate that the thematic learning carried out in school is good, but still has problems they are (1) the thematic teaching materials provided by the government are not in accordance with the daily conditions of students, (2) teachers who have not conveyed the benefits of learning a theme and interactions between themes taught, and (3) students who are still having difficulty understanding the link between the themes studied and learning content. For this reason, as the opportunity that can be taken, this study proposes thematic learning with a contextual approach. The implication of this opportunity is the need for the development of contextual thematic teaching materials so that learning is carried out closer to students' daily lives and is more meaningful.

Keywords: *thematic learning, contextual teaching materials, problems and thematic learning opportunities*

INTRODUCTION

Thematic learning is an effective way to contextualize learning methods. In addition, thematic learning orientates students' concrete learning methods and facilitates students and teachers to get cooperative and interactive learning opportunities in the classroom (Min, 2012). Thematic learning integrates several subjects related to a theme. The theme is central to the development of several integrated lessons, as well as the focus of material development, as the main concern in learning, and as a tool for understanding material. Thematic learning supports learning in elementary schools. Students can learn various phenomena in their daily lives through a theme. Nature provides information about various disciplines holistically, not separately. A theme that is lifted from natural and social phenomena that are close to students will make learning more intact and meaningful (Ain & Rahutami, 2018; Hayes, 1989; MacQuarrie, Nugent, & Warden, 2015).

Thematic instructions involve the use of themes as the main point for students, strengthening ties to knowledge. In this approach, the teacher will effectively use strategies that not only involve students in a fun way, but also that makes a strong connection between abstract ideas and understanding. The teacher must have a clear understanding of the material and be aware of what ideas need to be taught and the best way to teach them. The teacher must also know how students learn what they already know and how much more they have to learn (Yuh-Tyng Chen, 2012). Traditional teaching is based on units, subjects, chapters, and learning design elements; these parts are usually delivered to students using separate and one-way methods by the teacher. However, thematic teaching uses themes to regulate these parts. Thematic teaching strategies

are based on ideas that are usually related to students' life experiences and thus easily increase students' interest and involvement in learning (Yuh-Tyng Chen, 2012).

Elementary schools in developing countries are required to have high quality. Providing quality education in developing countries is very important for the advancement of their future (O'Sullivan, 2006). This is in line with Indonesia's education mission. Through the 2013 curriculum the government established a new curriculum with a policy that thematic learning must be carried out for all students at the elementary school level.

This thematic learning is carried out not only in Indonesia through the 2013 curriculum but also in various countries even long before Indonesia did it. Many studies have been conducted by researchers and teaching experts to implement this thematic learning like developing an environment-based thematic math book with a realistic approach to instill a caring attitude towards the environment in first-level of the elementary school students in Kupang (Ekowati & Nenohai, 2016), assessing the effectiveness of an approach to thematic teaching (Bitchener & Turner, 2011), the influence of thematic learning models, learning styles, and reading skills on student learning outcomes (Nurlaela, Samani, Asto, & Wibawa, 2018), research on the use of technology and thematic approaches in elementary schools in Japan (Wepner, 1993), research on increasing teacher knowledge and abilities related to the application of integrated thematic curricula (Wu & Chang, 2015), and other studies on the application of thematic approaches from various countries (Lung, 2012; Resor & Gandy, 2013; Sheppard, 2012; White, 2014; Willey, 2006).

In Indonesia, thematic learning has been carried out through the 2013 curriculum. The government determines the themes learned by students from grade 1 to 6 through thematic books shared. The books are used as a guide by the teacher to plan, teach, and evaluate thematic learning in elementary schools (Ain & Rahutami, 2018). The implementation of the 2013 curriculum in Indonesia has several challenges. One of the challenges faced by teachers in implementing the 2013 curriculum are learning materials and learning processes. Learning materials are considered as an important component for teachers and students in the learning process. The 2013 curriculum learning resources used by teachers today refer to teacher books and student textbooks provided by the government. In practice, government textbooks used by teachers and students in the learning process seem to have some weaknesses in both content and material. This is one of the problems faced by teachers to apply thematic learning (Yuliana, Wiryawan, & Riyadi, 2018).

In contrast, several thematic developments present a story of a project developing a thematic curriculum that operates from a dynamic perspective, based on the tradition of Progressive Education. There are many thematic units and teaching methods as well as appropriate assessments for thematic learning. In most, teachers are encouraged to develop thematic units by identifying topics, developing visual representations, ideas and facts related to the topic, identifying materials, and designing learning activities (Freeman & Sokoloff, 1995). These provide an overview of the opportunities for applying thematic learning that can be applied in elementary schools in Indonesia.

The implementation of thematic learning in elementary schools in Indonesia is like two sides of a coin that contains problems and opportunities that cannot be separated. For this reason, the purpose of this study is to identify problems and opportunities for thematic learning in elementary schools. By identifying the problems and opportunities of implementing thematic learning in elementary schools, it is hoped that it will become an input and improvement material for teachers and also government policies on thematic learning in elementary schools.

METHOD

In this study, qualitative research methods were used. This study is limited in the area around Boyolali and Surakarta. Observation, interview, questionnaire and document analysis techniques were carried out to collect data. Observation was carried out in one of the schools in the area around Boyolali. This observation aims to see the implementation of thematic learning. The questionnaire technique is used to get criticism data and suggestions from teachers on thematic learning in their respective schools. A total of 22 elementary school teachers from grade 1 to grade 6 were respondents for this study. These respondents were randomly selected and spread from various elementary schools around Boyolali and Surakarta. Document analysis is done to see the possible solutions of the problems that exist in thematic learning. The focus of this study is to investigate problems and possible opportunities in the implementation of thematic learning. The formulation of the problems in this study are (a) how the problems faced by teachers for the implementation of thematic learning in elementary schools, and (b) how are the possible solutions for improving thematic learning in elementary schools.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Identification of problems in implementing thematic learning

Thematic learning is one of the curriculum implementation models that are recommended to be implemented in elementary schools. Thematic approaches use themes to create active, interesting and meaningful learning (Min, 2012). Thematic learning is an integrated learning model that is part of a learning system that allows students, individually or in groups, to be active and discover scientific principles holistically and authentically. Thematic learning accommodates students to be able to understand the main concepts and connect between concepts in thematic learning (Yuliana et al., 2018).

The definitions of the thematic learning above are not always in line with the implementation in schools. Based on the results of observations, interviews, and questionnaires, several gaps have been identified between expectations and reality that have caused problems in the implementation of thematic learning. The identification of these problems is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Identification of problems in thematic learning

No	Aspect	Problems
1	Teaching Materials	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Teaching materials in the form of centralized thematic learning books result in a lack of learning contexts that are suitable for students' daily lives 2. Teaching materials provided by the government are not always shared by every school, so teachers experience difficulties in teaching 3. Lack of evaluation instruments related to the theme of the teaching materials
2	Teacher	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sometimes it difficult for the teacher to explain the themes found in textbooks from the government because the context of the theme is not familiar with students 2. Learning is still teacher-centered. Students have not been much involved 3. In terms of delivering learning, there are still a few teachers who convey the benefits of learning the theme in their daily lives.
3	Student	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students have diverse characters. Not all students can be active in thematic learning 2. Students cannot be fully responsible for the assignments given by the teacher related to thematic learning 3. Students feel confused in thematic learning

Based on Table 1, the main problems that arise are from the teaching materials used, because the thematic learning begins from the teaching material used. The national thematic teaching materials prepared by the government make students unfamiliar with the theme being taught. Whereas, the thematic approach is the teaching method used by the teacher to enable students to be actively involved in activities that focus on the topics they choose to learn (Piazza, Scott, & Carver, 1994). This understanding is not in accordance with the reality that happened at school. Teachers and students cannot choose the theme to be taught. Contrary to that, according to White (2014) teachers who explore themes widely with students will be able to teach more and help them develop a deeper understanding of the content of the lesson (White, 2014).

Thematic learning integrates knowledge from various disciplines and encourages students to explore topics in depth, read various sources and engage in various activities. The use of various sources encourages students to be involved in planning, finding material, and thinking more actively and deeply rather than when learning is based on one text. As a result of their in-depth study, students are more likely to understand and feel confident in their learning (Gardner, Wissick, Schweder, & Canter, 2003). Thematic learning offers a way to combine students' interests with core skills to motivate them to do less-favored academic activities. Thematic units also provide opportunities for collaboration between special and general education teachers to examine, adapt, and combine basic skills with themes (Gardner et al., 2003). Therefore, if thematic learning cannot make students more active and meaningful learning, then there is a problem in it.

The results of research conducted by experts provide an overview of solutions for thematic learning. Among them are integrated thematic learning to improve the quality of learning (Lipson, Valencia, Wixson, & Peters, 1993), research on thematic learning with inquiry to improve literacy (Shanahan, 1997), the application of thematic maps in elementary schools (Michaelidou, Nakos, & Filippakopoulou, 2007; Trifonoff, 1995) and research on the effects of thematic learning, direct science teaching with a textbook approach for students (McCarthy, 2005).

Identifying possible thematic learning opportunities

Thematic learning has been carried out through the 2013 curriculum, in the elementary school from grade 1 to 6. The teacher's response to the implementation of elementary school thematic learning has been documented through this study. The results are presented in Table 2.

Based on Table 2, elementary school teachers tend to have positive comments on thematic learning in elementary schools from grade 1 to 6. However, there are still some criticisms and suggestions from the teachers showing thematic elementary school learning still needs to be improved. In fact, according to grade 2 teachers, in one of the schools around Boyolali and Surakarta there was still a distribution of lesson hours in accordance with the subjects. This refers to traditional teaching, without themes.

Table 2. Teacher responses to thematic learning

No	Classroom Teacher	Response
1	Teacher of 1 st Grade	In the learning process using thematic learning is quite easy and in accordance with student development, but what is still an obstacle is the evaluation.
2	Teacher of 2 nd Grade	Actually, thematic learning is very good applied to primary schools, especially in the low class, of course with facilities and supporting human resources. However in practice, course schedules are still separate based on subjects.
3	Teacher of 3 rd Grade	Thematic learning, it's good. It makes students be active and learn directly from everyday life. It's just that the scoring system in report cards, which is quite complicated
4	Teacher of 4 th Grade	Thematic learning in elementary schools, in my opinion, is necessary and good for the stage of student development in learning. Thematic learning trains students to learn through the process. They start by exploring knowledge and information so that they can bring up an idea or draw a conclusion. Thematic learning also requires students to actively participate in learning, and the knowledge gained by students does not only focus on one thing but can be linked to other diverse knowledge. This can train students to think critically and creatively.
5	Teacher of 5 th Grade	I think thematic learning is quite fun, because learning is broad and unlimited. Students are not limited by certain subject. They are given the freedom to find and build their own knowledge in accordance with the learning experience they have
6	Teacher of 6 th Grade	Good, because it can combine subjects with one another in one theme

Traditional teaching is based on units, subjects, chapters, learning design elements. These parts are usually delivered to students by separate and one-way methods by the teacher. However, thematic teaching uses themes to regulate these parts. Thematic teaching strategies are based on ideas that are usually related to students 'life experiences and thus easily increase students' interest and involvement in learning (Yuh-Tyng Chen, 2012).

In addition to documenting Teacher's responses to thematic learning. This study also documented the teacher's suggestions about the thematic approaches that should be applied at school. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Teacher's suggestions for thematic learning

No	Classroom Teacher	Suggestions
1	Teacher of 1 st Grade	Thematic learning should involve many students, both body and mind
2	Teacher of 2 nd Grade	The themes used in thematic learning should be appropriate for the environment conditions where the students live
3	Teacher of 3 rd Grade	Thematic learning is done by connecting the material to everyday life. Besides being more fun, it also makes it easier for students to understand the material presented.
4	Teacher of 4 th Grade	Thematic learning should be done with a variety of learning methods, of course supported by adequate media and learning facilities, so that the essence of thematic learning is achieved. Students can explore independently and the teacher serves as a companion or facilitator in learning activities.
5	Teacher of 5 th Grade	Thematic learning should be done by exploring students' experiences and encouraging them to develop their knowledge independently. Teachers are only facilitators who direct students to develop their experiences and knowledge.
6	Teacher of 6 th Grade	Thematic learning should be done by focusing the lesson on students. The teacher, as the facilitator, fully supports the students by preparing the appropriate learning media, creating an interesting learning atmosphere, and increasing student participation in learning

Table 3 shows that the teacher has awareness of thematic learning. The suggestions given by the teacher lead to meaningful learning that can involve students actively and in accordance with their daily lives. From the study of the problem and the advice given by the teachers about thematic learning, then through this study, we propose a contextual approach to thematic learning. This contextual approach connects learning materials to the real situations of students in social lives in which they will study, work and live (Kurniasari, Sukarmin, & Sarwanto, 2018). Contextual teaching and learning is based on cognition situations that build the construction of students' thinking processes such as critical thinking, inquiry and problem solving that are situated according to the intellectual state and social conditions of students. This contextual approach prepares students to learn to deal with complex problems in the future (Glynn & Winter, 2004).

Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) is a constructivist approach and focuses on contextual knowledge that is relevant to the concept as well as process skills of students from various backgrounds. Themes in contextual teaching and learning motivate students to make connections between knowledge and its application to community social life (Glynn & Winter, 2004). Contextual Teaching and Learning is a learning system based on the philosophy that students can absorb lessons if: 1) they can understand the meaning of academic material and school assignments, and 2) they can associate new information with their previous knowledge and experience. CTL is in line with the conscience of humans who always want to find their meaning. CTL invites students to meaningfully associate school assignments in daily life. When students see meaning in a task that must be done, they will absorb the lesson and remember it (Johar, Agussalim, Ikhsan, & Zaura, 2018).

In Table 4 below, the opinions of the teachers about the solution to the existing thematic learning problems, namely contextual thematic learning according to the daily lives of students are presented.

Table 4. Teacher responses to contextual thematic learning

No	Classroom Teacher	Response
1	Teacher of 1 st Grade	Very good. Children are easier to understand the material because they experience themselves and are close to their environment.
2	Teacher of 2 nd Grade	This method in my opinion is good, because students will more easily understand something related to their daily lives
3	Teacher of 3 rd Grade	Yes it's very good, because even in everyday life children also unconsciously learn. Then when learning children can provide real examples when the teacher asks.
4	Teacher of 4 th Grade	Contextual thematic learning is learning that is in accordance with the things or events experienced by students or in accordance with the environment around them. Contextual thematic learning certainly presents a learning content that is not foreign to students. The information and knowledge to be conveyed are related to the daily lives of students which have been real or concrete experienced or seen by students. Thus it does not make students think abstractly, because school age is the basic stage of thinking of students in the concrete stage of thinking. Therefore, the thematic learning is deliver in accordance to the environment of everyday life of students.
5	Teacher of 5 th Grade	Yes thematic learning is very suitable with contextual learning, because in the learning process, students will more easily develop their learning experiences and knowledge through their daily living environment
6	Teacher of 6 th Grade	Contextual thematic learning in accordance with the daily lives of students, in my opinion, is good, because will give a little picture of what students can do to the surrounding environment in real life everyday. The thematic learning can increase the love of the environment, confidence, group activities and discussions that can be applied by students in the daily life after school

Table 4 contains teacher responses to contextual thematic learning according to the daily lives of students. In general, all teachers think positively about this. They assume that if the theme used in thematic learning is in accordance with the daily lives of students in their place of residence, then thematic learning carried out will further increase their interest and learning achievement.

This is in accordance with the demands of 21st century education. To prepare the next generation schools and teachers must be transformed in order to facilitate students to be able to think ahead, have flexible problem solving skills, and have the communication and collaboration skills needed in the workforce and everyday life (Care & Griffin, 2015; Care, Griffin, & Wilson, 2018; Griffin, Care, & McGaw, 2012; Shidiq & Yamtinah, 2019; Trilling & Fadel, 2009; Urbani, Roshandel, Michaels, & Truesdell, 2017)

Several studies have proven that contextual learning can improve students' critical thinking skills, conceptual abilities (Gayatri, Soegiyanto, & Rintayati, 2018; Wahyuningtyas & Wuryadi, 2018), social participation, behavior (Strogilos & Stefanidis, 2015), problem solving skills, scientific attitudes (Suryawati, Osman, & Meerah, 2010), creativity (Kurniasari et al., 2018). Besides that contextual learning is an effective strategy to be applied in the classroom (Bryk, Harding, & Greenberg, 2012; Hobri, Septiawati, & Cahya Prihandoko, 2018; Mauliana, Ikhsan, & Subianto, 2018; Selvianiresa & Prabawanto, 2017; Tait, Horsley, & Tait, 2018; Vermunt, 2005; Wahyuningtyas & Wuryadi, 2018)

Contextual thematic learning is one opportunity to make thematic learning more meaningful. However, if we look at the existing reality, the teaching materials or textbooks that the school has are still general, not specific to each region in Indonesia. For this reason, the implications of the study of the possible ways to improve the quality of thematic learning with a contextual approach is the development of teaching materials carried out by teachers in each region. Thus, this method will impact the teacher's contribution as well as students on the design of the themes they will learn. The teacher can determine and design their own thematic learning that he will do based on the context of the lessons that have been adjusted. This study discusses and identifies problems and the opportunity of solving problems based on input and responses from the teacher in elementary schools. It is expected that this study can provide input to science and the development of thematic learning in the future.

CONCLUSION

Thematic learning is an effective way to contextualize learning methods. In addition, thematic learning orientates students' concrete learning methods and facilitates students and teachers to get opportunities for cooperative and interactive learning in the classroom. Thematic learning carried out around the Boyolali and Surakarta areas is good, but still has problems, they are (1) the thematic teaching materials provided by the government are not in accordance with the daily conditions of students, (2) teachers who have not conveyed the benefits of learning a theme, and (3) students are still having difficulty to understand the link between themes taught and learning content. For this reason, this study proposes thematic learning with a contextual approach. The implication of this is the need to develop contextual thematic teaching materials so that learning is closer to students' daily lives and more meaningful.

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