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## Contextual Thematic Learning in Primary Education: A Literature Review on Its Impact on Understanding and Critical Thinking

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### Abstract

Context-based thematic learning is a learning approach that integrates various subjects through themes associated with students' real-life experiences. This approach is considered relevant in primary education because it enables the creation of meaningful learning experiences and encourages active student engagement. This study aims to examine the impact of contextual thematic learning on the understanding and critical thinking skills of elementary school students through a literature review. The research method employed is a qualitative approach, incorporating a literature review of scientific journal articles, academic books, and related publications. Data analysis was carried out through content analysis to identify patterns, key findings, and implications of contextual thematic learning. The study's results demonstrate that context-based thematic learning enhances students' understanding of concepts by linking learning materials to everyday life contexts. Additionally, this approach contributes positively to the development of critical thinking skills through analysis, discussion, and problem-solving activities. Thus, contextual thematic learning has the potential to be an effective strategy in improving the quality of learning in primary education.

**Keywords:** thematic learning, contextual learning, understanding, critical thinking, basic education

### INTRODUCTION

Primary education plays a fundamental role in shaping students' cognitive, social, and critical thinking abilities. At this stage, learning should not only focus on the acquisition of factual knowledge but also on developing students' understanding and higher-order thinking skills. However, traditional teacher-centred approaches often limit students' active engagement and fail to connect learning materials with real-life contexts, which can hinder meaningful learning experiences (OECD, 2018).

In response to these challenges, contextual learning has emerged as an instructional approach that emphasises the integration of learning content with students' everyday experiences. Contextual learning encourages students to construct knowledge by relating new information to familiar situations, thereby enhancing comprehension and retention. Research suggests that learning becomes more meaningful when students can connect abstract concepts with real-world applications (Johnson, 2002).

Thematic learning, which integrates multiple subjects around a common theme, is widely implemented in primary education to promote a holistic approach to learning. By organising instruction around themes relevant to students' lives, thematic

learning supports interdisciplinary understanding and helps students see connections across different subject areas. When combined with a contextual approach, thematic learning can foster more profound understanding and active participation among primary school students (Drake & Reid, 2018).

Several empirical studies indicate that contextual thematic learning has a positive impact on students' understanding and critical thinking skills. By engaging students in problem-based activities and real-life scenarios, this approach encourages analysis, reflection, and reasoning. Critical thinking skills, which are essential for lifelong learning, can be effectively nurtured through instructional strategies that promote inquiry and problem-solving rather than rote memorisation (Facione, 2015).

Despite growing interest in contextual thematic learning, existing research remains fragmented, with varying findings across educational settings. Therefore, a comprehensive review of the literature is needed to synthesise current knowledge on how contextual thematic learning influences students' understanding and critical thinking in primary education. This study aims to address this gap by examining relevant literature and providing insights for educators and policymakers seeking to improve instructional practices at the primary education level.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Contextual learning and meaningful understanding in primary education**

Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) emphasises connecting instructional content to learners' real-life situations so that knowledge is constructed as meaningful and usable rather than memorised. In primary education, this principle is particularly relevant because children learn more effectively when new concepts are linked to concrete experiences and familiar contexts. Empirical work in school settings demonstrates that CTL-oriented activities (e.g., using real-world problems, local phenomena, or everyday narratives) can enhance students' cognitive understanding and learning performance compared to conventional instruction, primarily by increasing relevance and comprehension through authentic contexts (Winarso, 2020; Lestari et al., 2021). In addition, contextual materials can support gradual abstraction—moving students from concrete examples to formal concepts—thereby strengthening conceptual clarity in early grades (Selvianiresa & Prabawanto, 2017).

### **Thematic (integrated) learning as an interdisciplinary framework**

Thematic learning integrates multiple subjects around a unifying theme, enabling learners to see relationships across concepts and disciplines. In primary schools, thematic integration is often employed to reduce fragmented learning and foster a holistic understanding. When learning content is organised around themes close to students' lives (e.g., environment, community, "my region"), it can increase engagement and make learning objectives more coherent across subjects. Evidence from the development of integrated or thematic modules suggests that well-designed thematic instruction—especially when aligned with active learning models—can be valid, practical, and effective in improving learning outcomes, as it structures knowledge in connected "big ideas" rather than isolated topics (Oktarisma et al., 2023). This supports the argument that thematic learning is a natural platform for contextualization in primary education.

### **Impact on critical thinking: inquiry, reasoning, and problem-solving**

Critical thinking in primary education is commonly fostered through learning designs that require students to question, reason, and make decisions rather than recall information. The literature indicates that contextual and thematic learning can contribute to critical thinking by positioning students as active problem-solvers: they analyse real situations, compare evidence, justify answers, and reflect on outcomes. Studies using CTL-based interventions and learning media report measurable improvements in learners' critical thinking (e.g., interpretation, analysis, inference) when instruction involves contextual tasks and guided inquiry (Lestari et al., 2021; Hasanah et al., 2021). Similarly, problem-based thematic modules have been shown to improve primary students' critical thinking by embedding problems within thematic units, prompting students to investigate and propose solutions collaboratively (Twiningsih et al., 2019).

### **Mechanisms explaining why contextual thematic learning works**

Across studies, several mechanisms recur. First, relevance increases attention and motivation; students participate more actively when content mirrors their daily life. Second, contextual tasks provide cognitive scaffolding, allowing students to anchor new information in prior knowledge and support deeper comprehension. Third, thematic integration reduces cognitive overload by organising content around coherent themes, helping students transfer learning across subjects. These mechanisms are reinforced when contextual thematic learning is paired with engaging learning resources (e.g., contextual comics, modules, or worksheets) that prompt discussion and reasoning, thereby strengthening critical thinking practices in the classroom (Lestari et al., 2021; Oktarisma et al., 2023).

### **Implementation challenges and research gaps**

Despite positive evidence, the literature highlights recurring implementation barriers, including teachers' limited preparation time to design integrated, contextual tasks, uneven assessment practices for critical thinking, and variability in classroom resources. Some studies note that contextualization is sometimes applied superficially (e.g., adding "examples from daily life" without structured inquiry), which limits the impact on reasoning skills. There is also variation in how "critical thinking" is measured across studies, complicating comparison and synthesis. Therefore, further research is needed to (1) standardise indicators of understanding and critical thinking for primary settings, (2) compare contextual thematic learning across subjects and grade levels, and (3) examine teacher professional development models that reliably support high-quality contextual thematic implementation (Winarso, 2020; Twiningsih et al., 2019).

## **METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative research approach, utilising a literature review method, to examine the impact of contextual thematic learning on students' understanding and critical thinking skills in primary education. Relevant literature was systematically collected from reputable academic databases, including Scopus and Google Scholar, as well as indexed international journals. The inclusion criteria consisted of peer-reviewed articles published in English, focusing on contextual learning, thematic or integrated learning, primary education, and outcomes related to

understanding or critical thinking. Both empirical and conceptual studies were considered to ensure comprehensive coverage of the research topic (Creswell, 2014).

The data analysis was conducted through thematic content analysis, involving the identification, categorisation, and synthesis of key findings across selected studies. The analysis focused on patterns related to instructional design, learning mechanisms, and reported impacts of contextual thematic learning on cognitive and critical thinking outcomes. To enhance the credibility of the findings, sources from diverse educational contexts were compared, and consistent themes were triangulated across studies. This systematic synthesis enabled the development of integrative insights that can inform instructional practices and policy decisions in primary education (Miles et al., 2014).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **The Influence of Contextual Thematic Learning on Student Comprehension**

The results of the literature review show that context-based thematic learning has a significant positive impact on the understanding of elementary school students. The integration of learning materials with students' daily experiences helps them relate abstract concepts to real-life situations, thus facilitating the process of knowledge construction. Studies have reported that students who learn through a contextual approach show a deeper understanding of concepts compared to students who follow conventional lecture-based learning. This is due to the increasing relevance of the material and the active involvement of students in the learning process. Thematic learning also plays a role in reducing the fragmentation of material between subjects. By organising learning through integrated themes, students can see the relationships between concepts holistically. The literature indicates that this approach not only enhances information retention but also facilitates students' understanding of the connection between academic and real-life knowledge, a key objective of basic education.

### **Influence on Critical Thinking Skills**

In addition to improving understanding, the results of previous research confirm that contextual thematic learning contributes to the development of students' critical thinking skills. This approach encourages students to observe real phenomena, ask questions, analyse information, and solve problems based on the context they are familiar with. Activities such as group discussions, real-world problem-solving, and project-based learning have proven effective in developing critical thinking skills since elementary school. The literature also shows that critical thinking skills are more developed when learning focuses not only on right or wrong answers, but also on students' thinking processes. In contextual thematic learning, teachers act as facilitators who guide students to reason, reflect, and evaluate the solutions they find. This aligns with the demands of 21st-century education, which emphasises the development of higher-order thinking skills (HOTS).

### **Supporting Factors and Implementation Challenges**

The results of the study indicate that the success of contextual thematic learning is significantly influenced by teachers' readiness to design meaningful learning experiences. Teachers who can select relevant contexts, design collaborative activities, and manage classroom discussions effectively tend to produce learning that has a

greater impact on students' understanding and critical thinking. Curriculum support and the availability of learning resources are also important supporting factors in the implementation of this approach. However, the literature also reveals several challenges, including limited planning time, variations in teachers' understanding of contextual learning, and difficulties in conducting objective assessments of critical thinking skills. These challenges demonstrate that contextual thematic learning necessitates ongoing support through teacher training, the development of learning tools, and effective evaluation systems.

### **Implications of the Discussion**

Overall, these results and discussions confirm that context-based thematic learning is a practical approach to improve the understanding and critical thinking skills of elementary school students. The integration of real-life contexts in learning not only makes the learning process more meaningful but also prepares students to face real problems reflectively and analytically. Therefore, this approach deserves to be continuously developed and implemented systematically in basic education practice.

### **CONCLUSION**

Based on the results of the literature review, it can be concluded that context-based thematic learning has a significant positive influence on improving the understanding and critical thinking skills of elementary school students. The integration of learning materials with students' daily experiences enables more meaningful learning, facilitating students' construction of knowledge more profoundly and comprehensively.

In addition, a contextual thematic approach encourages students' active engagement through real-context analysis, discussion, and problem-solving activities. This process fosters the development of critical thinking skills from an early age, a crucial competency in 21st-century education. However, the effectiveness of implementing this approach is highly dependent on teacher readiness, curriculum support, and the availability of appropriate learning resources and assessment systems.

Therefore, context-based thematic learning needs to be implemented systematically and sustainably by improving teacher competence, developing contextual learning tools, and integrating assessments that comprehensively measure students' understanding and critical thinking. Thus, this approach has the potential to be an effective learning strategy in improving the quality of basic education.

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