

Social-Emotional Development of Primary School Students in Thematic Learning

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ABSTRAK

Pembelajaran di sekolah dasar masih sering lebih berfokus pada pencapaian kognitif dibandingkan dengan pengembangan sosial-emosional siswa, sehingga aspek tersebut belum berkembang secara optimal. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji perkembangan sosial-emosional siswa sekolah dasar dalam pembelajaran tematik berdasarkan kajian literatur yang relevan. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah library research dengan pendekatan kualitatif, melalui penelaahan dan analisis terhadap buku, artikel jurnal nasional dan internasional, serta dokumen ilmiah yang berkaitan dengan pembelajaran tematik dan perkembangan sosial-emosional siswa. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pembelajaran tematik memiliki peran strategis dalam mendukung perkembangan sosial-emosional siswa melalui aktivitas kolaboratif, interaksi sosial, dan pengalaman belajar yang bermakna. Pembelajaran tematik juga sejalan dengan teori perkembangan dan pembelajaran yang menekankan pentingnya interaksi sosial, pengelolaan emosi, dan pembelajaran yang berpusat pada siswa. Implikasi dari penelitian ini adalah perlunya guru dan sekolah mengintegrasikan pengembangan sosial-emosional secara sistematis dalam perencanaan dan pelaksanaan pembelajaran tematik agar tercipta proses pembelajaran yang berorientasi pada pembentukan karakter siswa sekolah dasar.

ABSTRACT

Learning in primary schools still tends to focus more on cognitive achievement than on the development of students' social-emotional skills, resulting in these aspects not being optimally developed. This study aims to examine the social-emotional development of primary school students within thematic learning based on a review of relevant literature. The research employed a library research method with a qualitative approach, involving the examination and analysis of books, national and international journal articles, and scholarly documents related to thematic learning and students' social-emotional development. The findings indicate that thematic learning plays a strategic role in supporting students' social-emotional development through collaborative activities, social interaction, and meaningful learning experiences. Thematic learning is also consistent with developmental and learning theories that emphasize the importance of social interaction, emotional regulation, and student-centered learning. The implications of this study highlight the need for teachers and schools to systematically integrate social-emotional development into the planning and implementation of thematic learning in order to create a learning process that is oriented toward character building in primary school students.

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INTRODUCTION

Primary education plays a crucial role in establishing a comprehensive foundation for students' development, encompassing cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects (Naro et al., 2023; Subedi, 2022; Suprayitno, 2025). At the primary school level, educational processes should not only focus on academic achievement but also emphasize personality formation and students' social-emotional development (Moreira et al., 2019; Rokhim, 2025; Van Pham, 2024). Social-emotional development is an essential aspect that influences students' ability to interact, manage emotions, and adapt to the school and social environment. Primary school-aged children are in a developmental phase that is highly sensitive to environmental influences, including teachers, peers, and applied learning patterns. Therefore, learning processes in primary schools must effectively support students' social and emotional development. Quality learning not only transfers knowledge but also instills social values, empathy, cooperation, and self-regulation (Hikmayana, 2025; Qi & Derakhshan, 2025; Sylva et al., 2020). Thus, primary education becomes a critical stage in balancing academic competence and social-emotional development.

Thematic learning is one of the instructional approaches implemented in primary schools to integrate various subjects into a unified theme. This approach is designed to provide meaningful and contextual learning experiences for students. Through thematic learning, students are encouraged to actively participate, collaborate in groups, and relate learning materials to real-life situations. Integrative and collaborative learning activities are believed to contribute positively to students' social-emotional development. Interaction among students during thematic learning enables them to respect others' opinions, develop self-confidence, and manage emotions in learning situations. Moreover, the role of teachers in thematic learning is crucial in creating a supportive and conducive classroom climate. Therefore, thematic learning has great potential in supporting the social-emotional development of primary school students.

Despite the widespread implementation of thematic learning in primary schools, students' social-emotional development has not yet been optimally achieved. There are still students who experience difficulties in cooperation, lack emotional regulation, and exhibit inappropriate social behaviors during the learning process. Some students tend to be passive, lack self-confidence, or even display aggressive behavior when interacting with peers. These conditions indicate that thematic learning has not fully and systematically addressed students' social-emotional aspects. Teachers often place greater emphasis on cognitive learning outcomes than on social-emotional development. Additionally, limited teacher understanding of strategies to strengthen social-emotional development in thematic learning serves as a significant barrier. This issue requires serious attention, as suboptimal social-emotional development can negatively affect students' overall learning processes.

Research conducted by Manda D and Arifin I shows that teachers' strategies in thematic learning play an important role in fostering students' empathy through contextual, collaborative, and experience-oriented activities. This approach has been proven effective in shaping the social and emotional attitudes of elementary school students to be more sensitive, caring, and able to respect others (Reese et al., 2022). The research conducted by Tsortanidou, Daradoumis, and Barberá shows that the use of imaginative teaching methods in elementary education is effective in developing students' social-emotional skills, such as empathy, cooperation, and emotional regulation. The findings confirm that creative, experience-based learning approaches enhance student engagement while significantly supporting their social-emotional development (Tsortanidou et al., 2022).

Various previous studies have examined the social-emotional development of primary school students in learning contexts. Several studies indicate that a conducive and interactive learning environment can enhance students' social and emotional abilities. Other studies have found that learning activities involving group work and discussion can improve students' social skills, such as cooperation and communication. Furthermore, some studies emphasize that teachers' roles as facilitators significantly influence the development of positive emotions in the classroom. Thematic learning has also been reported to increase student engagement in the learning process. However, most of these studies primarily focus on learning outcomes and general learning activities. Social-emotional aspects are often discussed only briefly without in-depth analysis.

Other relevant studies suggest that students' social-emotional development is influenced by the instructional methods employed by teachers. Learning models that emphasize active participation and social interaction have been proven to enhance empathy and mutual respect among students. Several studies also reveal that thematic learning helps students connect social values to real-life contexts. Nevertheless, some research indicates that thematic learning implementation remains suboptimal due to limitations in planning and execution. Many teachers have not consciously designed learning activities aimed at developing students' social-emotional skills. Additionally, assessment instruments for social-emotional development remain limited and poorly integrated into thematic learning. These findings indicate the need for further research on students' social-emotional development in thematic learning.

Based on a review of previous studies, it can be concluded that there is still a research gap regarding the social-emotional development of primary school students in thematic learning. Most existing research emphasizes cognitive learning outcomes and learning activities, while social-emotional aspects have not been comprehensively examined. Moreover, studies that specifically analyze how thematic learning processes contribute to students' social-emotional development remain limited. Previous research has also not sufficiently explored the forms of

social-emotional behaviors that emerge during thematic learning activities. Therefore, more in-depth research is needed to understand students' social-emotional development within the context of thematic learning. The novelty of this study lies in its holistic focus on analyzing students' social-emotional development. Thus, this research is expected to provide new contributions to the development of thematic learning in primary education.

Based on the above background, this study aims to describe the social-emotional development of primary school students in thematic learning. This study also seeks to identify forms of social and emotional behaviors that emerge during the learning process. In addition, the study aims to analyze the role of thematic learning in supporting students' social-emotional development. The findings are expected to provide a comprehensive overview of students' social-emotional conditions in the classroom. The results are anticipated to serve as reflective material for teachers in designing thematic learning that is more oriented toward character development. Furthermore, this study is expected to serve as a reference for schools in improving learning quality. Thus, the objectives of this study are not only academic but also practical for the advancement of primary education.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using the library research (literature review) method (Cabrera et al., 2023). This method was chosen because the study aims to examine and analyze concepts, theories, and scholarly findings related to the social-emotional development of primary school students in thematic learning based on relevant written sources. Library research allows researchers to obtain a comprehensive understanding of students' social-emotional development through a systematic review of various academic literatures. The data sources in this study consisted of textbooks, national and international scholarly journals, conference proceedings, research reports, and educational policy documents relevant to the research topic. The selected literature was determined based on content relevance, source credibility, and the currency of the studies. Through this method, the researcher was able to explore key concepts, theoretical frameworks, and previous research findings related to thematic learning and students' social-emotional development. The library research method also enables an in-depth synthesis of knowledge without being limited to a specific field context.

Data collection techniques were carried out through the identification and review of literature relevant to the research focus (Cabrera et al., 2023). The researcher identified keywords such as social-emotional development, thematic learning, and primary school to locate appropriate scholarly sources. Subsequently, data were collected by reading, taking notes, and categorizing important information from each analyzed source. Data analysis was conducted using content analysis, which involved critically examining the literature to identify patterns, concepts, and findings related to students' social-emotional development in thematic learning.

The analyzed data were then synthesized to generate a coherent and systematic understanding. Data validity was ensured through the selection of credible and relevant sources and by comparing findings across multiple references to obtain objective conclusions. Thus, this research method is expected to provide a thorough and accurate theoretical overview of the social-emotional development of primary school students in thematic learning.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

A. Concept of Social-Emotional Development of Primary School Students

The social-emotional development of primary school students is an important process related to children's ability to understand themselves, manage emotions, and establish social relationships with their surrounding environment. At the primary school age, children begin to learn how to express their feelings in a more controlled manner and to understand the emotions of others (Denham & Liverette, 2019). The literature indicates that social-emotional development forms the foundation of positive behavior in students' daily lives. Skills such as empathy, cooperation, responsibility, and self-regulation develop gradually through intensive social interaction. The school environment is one of the main factors influencing this development. Teachers and peers play a significant role in shaping students' social-emotional attitudes and behaviors. Therefore, social-emotional development cannot be separated from the learning processes that take place in the classroom.

Various developmental theories explain that primary school students are at a highly dynamic stage of social development. According to developmental psychology studies, children at this age begin to develop social identity and self-confidence through learning experiences and social interaction. Students' success in managing emotions has a positive impact on their academic and social abilities. Conversely, suboptimal social-emotional development can trigger various behavioral problems at school. Educational literature emphasizes that students with strong social-emotional skills tend to have higher learning motivation. They are also more capable of cooperating and resolving conflicts constructively. Thus, social-emotional development is a crucial aspect of primary education.

The literature review indicates that students' social-emotional development includes several key aspects, such as self-awareness, emotional regulation, social skills, and responsible decision-making. These aspects are interconnected and develop through meaningful learning experiences (Hastie et al., 2025). Students with good self-awareness are able to recognize their strengths and weaknesses. Emotional regulation helps students control negative emotions such as anger and frustration. Social skills enable students to interact positively with peers and teachers. Meanwhile, responsible decision-making helps students

act wisely in various situations. All of these aspects need to be facilitated through appropriate learning processes.

The literature also emphasizes that social-emotional development does not occur automatically but requires consistent environmental support. Schools, as formal learning environments, play a strategic role in fostering this development. Learning activities that emphasize social interaction and collaboration have been proven effective in enhancing students' social-emotional skills. Teachers need to create a classroom atmosphere that is safe, inclusive, and respectful of diversity. A positive classroom climate encourages students to express their feelings and opinions without fear. In addition, harmonious teacher–student relationships further strengthen emotional development. Thus, students' social-emotional development is strongly influenced by the quality of classroom interactions.

Based on the literature review, it can be concluded that the social-emotional development of primary school students is a fundamental component of overall educational success. This aspect contributes to the formation of students' character, attitudes, and behavior in the future. Primary education aims not only to produce students who are academically competent but also those who are socially and emotionally mature. Therefore, every learning process should be designed to support this development. Thematic learning is one relevant approach to achieving this goal. Through its integrative nature, thematic learning can accommodate students' social-emotional developmental needs. This highlights the importance of further discussion on the role of thematic learning in primary education.

B. Thematic Learning as a Means of Social-Emotional Development

Thematic learning is an instructional approach that integrates various subjects into a meaningful theme. This approach is designed to provide holistic and contextual learning experiences for primary school students (Aydin-Ceran, 2021; Istighosah, 2025). Based on the literature review, thematic learning encourages students to actively engage in the learning process. Activities such as discussion, group work, and problem-solving are essential components of thematic learning. These activities create opportunities for students to interact socially. Such interactions directly contribute to students' social-emotional development. Thus, thematic learning focuses not only on cognitive aspects but also on affective and social dimensions.

The literature indicates that thematic learning enables students to learn through real-life experiences. Students are encouraged to connect learning materials with everyday life. This helps students understand the social values embedded in each learning theme. Through thematic learning, students learn to collaborate within diverse groups. This process trains students to respect differences in opinions and backgrounds. In addition, students learn to manage emotions when facing learning challenges. Such situations help students develop

empathy and tolerance. Therefore, thematic learning plays an important role in fostering students' social-emotional development.

The literature review also shows that the teacher's role is crucial in the success of thematic learning. Teachers act as facilitators who guide student interactions in positive ways. Teachers need to design learning activities that encourage active student participation. Activities involving collaboration and self-reflection are highly effective in developing students' social-emotional skills. In addition, teachers need to model positive social behavior. Teacher role modeling serves as an example for students in interacting with others and managing emotions. Therefore, teacher competence in implementing thematic learning is a key factor. Well-designed thematic learning has a positive impact on students' overall development.

Thematic learning also provides opportunities for students to express their emotions and feelings (Manda & Arifin, 2024; Zaqiah et al., 2021). During the learning process, students are often faced with situations that require cooperation and communication. These situations help students recognize and manage their emotions more effectively. The literature suggests that students who are accustomed to collaborative learning tend to have better social skills. They are more confident in interacting and expressing their opinions. Furthermore, thematic learning helps students develop a sense of responsibility toward group tasks. This contributes to the formation of students' social character. Thus, thematic learning has great potential in supporting social-emotional development.

Based on the literature review, thematic learning can be viewed as a strategic means of developing the social-emotional skills of primary school students. This approach allows for the integration of social values into every learning activity. Thematic learning also encourages the creation of positive social interactions in the classroom. However, the success of this approach depends greatly on careful planning and effective implementation. Teachers need to understand learning objectives holistically, including social-emotional aspects. In this way, thematic learning can make an optimal contribution to students' development. This reinforces the importance of implementing thematic learning that is oriented toward character development. Therefore, the following discussion will highlight factors that influence students' social-emotional development.

C. Factors Influencing Social-Emotional Development in Thematic Learning

The literature review indicates that students' social-emotional development in thematic learning is influenced by various factors. One of the main factors is the learning environment created by the teacher. A safe and supportive learning environment encourages students to actively participate in learning activities. Students feel valued and accepted within their peer groups. This condition helps students develop self-confidence and empathy. In

addition, positive interactions between teachers and students have a significant impact. Strong teacher–student relationships help students manage their emotions more effectively. Therefore, the classroom environment becomes a crucial factor in students’ social-emotional development.

Another factor influencing social-emotional development is the teaching methods and strategies employed. Thematic learning that emphasizes group work and discussion has been proven effective in improving students’ social skills. The literature shows that collaborative activities help students learn cooperation and communication. Moreover, project-based learning within a thematic approach provides opportunities for students to complete tasks collaboratively. This process trains students to manage conflict and make decisions. Students also learn to appreciate the roles of each group member. Thus, appropriate instructional strategies play a significant role in determining students’ social-emotional development.

Peer relationships also play an important role in students’ social-emotional development (Demirci et al., 2022). Interactions among students in thematic learning provide valuable social experiences. Through these interactions, students learn to understand others’ feelings. They also learn to regulate their emotions in social situations. The literature indicates that positive peer relationships enhance students’ emotional well-being. Conversely, poorly managed conflicts can hinder social-emotional development. Therefore, teachers need to facilitate positive student interactions. This highlights the importance of classroom management in thematic learning.

In addition to internal school factors, family support also influences students’ social-emotional development. Educational literature emphasizes that a harmonious family environment supports children’s emotional growth. Social values instilled at home are reflected in students’ behavior at school (Reese et al., 2022). Therefore, synergy between schools and families is essential. Teachers need to establish effective communication with parents. Such collaboration helps reinforce the social values taught at school. Thus, students’ social-emotional development is shaped by multiple environments. This indicates that a holistic approach is necessary.

Based on the literature review, it can be concluded that students’ social-emotional development in thematic learning is influenced by both internal and external factors. Internal factors include instructional methods and classroom interactions, while external factors involve family and community environments. Effective thematic learning should take all these factors into account. Teachers play a strategic role in managing these factors optimally. In this way, thematic learning can serve as an effective means of developing students’ social-emotional skills. This highlights the importance of appropriate implementation strategies. The

following discussion will further examine the implications of these findings for primary education practice.

D. Implications of Social-Emotional Development for Learning in Primary Schools

The results of the literature review indicate that students' social-emotional development has significant implications for the learning process in primary schools. Students with well-developed social-emotional skills tend to be more active in learning activities. They are able to collaborate and communicate effectively with peers and teachers. In addition, these students are better able to manage stress and academic pressure. This condition has a positive impact on students' motivation and academic achievement. The literature emphasizes that a balance between cognitive and social-emotional aspects is essential in learning. Learning that focuses solely on academic achievement tends to be less effective. Therefore, social-emotional development should become a major priority in primary education.

Another implication of social-emotional development is the creation of a positive classroom climate. Students with strong social skills are more capable of fostering a conducive learning environment. They respect differences and are able to resolve conflicts peacefully. This supports an effective and enjoyable learning process. Teachers also find it easier to manage classrooms when students demonstrate good social-emotional competencies. The literature shows that a positive classroom climate increases student engagement. Thus, social-emotional development contributes to overall learning quality. This further reinforces the importance of thematic learning that emphasizes social interaction.

Social-emotional development also has implications for students' character formation. Values such as responsibility, empathy, and cooperation develop through social interaction in thematic learning. Educational literature emphasizes that character education cannot be separated from social-emotional development. Thematic learning provides opportunities to integrate these values into the learning process. Through learning themes, students gain an understanding of social values in real-life contexts. This process helps students internalize positive values. Consequently, thematic learning contributes to students' character development. This implication is particularly important in achieving national education goals.

Furthermore, social-emotional development affects students' readiness to face subsequent levels of education. Students with strong social-emotional skills are better prepared to handle more complex learning challenges. They are able to adapt to new environments and higher academic demands. The literature indicates that social-emotional skills serve as important capital for long-term educational success. Therefore, fostering social-emotional development from the primary school level is highly strategic. Thematic learning can serve as an effective means to achieve this goal. This highlights the importance of

strengthening the implementation of thematic learning. Thus, the implications of social-emotional development are extensive.

Based on the literature review, it can be concluded that students' social-emotional development has significant implications for the quality of learning in primary schools. Thematic learning plays an important role in supporting this development. Teachers need to recognize the importance of social-emotional aspects in every learning process. Learning plans should explicitly incorporate objectives related to social-emotional development. In this way, thematic learning can provide optimal benefits for students. These implications serve as a foundation for developing more holistic learning practices. This further reinforces the urgency of research on the social-emotional development of primary school students.

Discussion

The results of the literature review in this study indicate that the social-emotional development of primary school students plays a crucial role in supporting the effectiveness of thematic learning. These findings are consistent with Erikson's psychosocial development theory, which states that primary school-aged children are in the industry versus inferiority stage, where they develop self-confidence through success in social and academic tasks. Thematic learning, which provides opportunities for students to collaborate and actively participate, can strengthen students' sense of competence. Social interactions that occur during thematic learning help students build self-confidence and develop positive attitudes toward learning. In addition, teacher support as a facilitator enhances students' social learning experiences. Thus, thematic learning serves as a relevant approach to supporting students' psychosocial development. These findings emphasize that learning processes in primary schools must consider students' developmental needs holistically.

This discussion also demonstrates that thematic learning aligns with Vygotsky's social constructivist theory. According to this theory, children's cognitive and social development occurs through social interaction with their environment. Thematic learning, which emphasizes discussion, group work, and collaboration, allows students to construct knowledge socially. This process not only develops cognitive abilities but also enhances students' social and emotional skills. The concept of the zone of proximal development suggests that students can achieve more optimal development with the assistance of teachers and peers. In the context of thematic learning, teachers function as scaffolding agents who support students in managing emotions and interacting positively. Thus, thematic learning promotes social-emotional development through meaningful interaction. This further reinforces the relevance of the thematic approach in primary education.

Furthermore, the findings of this study can be associated with humanistic learning theory, which emphasizes the importance of affective aspects in the learning process. Humanistic theory,

as proposed by Maslow and Rogers, asserts that effective learning must address learners' emotional and social needs. Thematic learning provides opportunities for students to freely express their feelings and opinions. A safe and supportive learning environment enables students to fulfill their need for acceptance and appreciation. This condition fosters positive emotional development and enhances students' learning motivation. The literature review indicates that students who feel emotionally comfortable are more likely to engage actively in learning. Therefore, thematic learning aligns with the principles of humanistic education. This highlights the importance of student-centered approaches in primary education.

The findings are also relevant to Goleman's theory of emotional intelligence. This theory emphasizes that emotional regulation, empathy, and social skills are essential for individual success. Thematic learning provides opportunities for students to develop emotional intelligence through social interaction and self-reflection. Collaborative activities in thematic learning help students recognize and manage their emotions. In addition, students learn to understand others' feelings and build positive social relationships. The literature review shows that emotional intelligence contributes to students' academic and social success. Therefore, thematic learning can serve as an effective means of developing emotional intelligence among primary school students. These findings underscore the importance of integrating emotional aspects into the learning process.

Overall, this discussion demonstrates that the social-emotional development of primary school students in thematic learning can be understood through various educational and psychological theoretical perspectives. The integration of Erikson's, Vygotsky's, humanistic, and emotional intelligence theories provides a comprehensive understanding of the importance of social-emotional aspects in learning. Thematic learning has significant potential to support such development when it is properly designed and implemented. Teachers play a strategic role in managing social interactions and creating a conducive classroom climate. Therefore, thematic learning should be implemented consistently and oriented toward character development. This discussion affirms that primary education should not focus solely on academic achievement. Instead, primary education must foster students' intellectual, social, and emotional development in a balanced manner.

CONCLUSION

The social-emotional development of primary school students plays a crucial role in supporting the success of thematic learning. Thematic learning provides meaningful learning experiences through social interaction, collaboration, and active student engagement, thereby supporting the development of students' social skills and emotional regulation. This review indicates that thematic learning aligns with various developmental and learning theories,

including psychosocial theory, social constructivism, humanistic learning theory, and emotional intelligence theory. Systematically designed and student-centered thematic learning implementation can create a positive and conducive classroom climate for social-emotional development. Therefore, thematic learning functions not only as an integrative instructional approach but also as a strategic means of character building and balancing the overall development of primary school students.

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