

Teacher's Strategy in Fostering Students Empathy through Thematic Learning Approach in Elementary School

Darman Manda^{*1} Iqbal Arifin²

^{1*} Universitas Negeri Makassar, Indonesia

² Universitas Sulawesi Barat, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Empathy is an essential social skill in child development, especially in primary school. Developing empathy in children helps them manage better social relationships and builds a caring character towards others. While the main focus in primary education often lies on academic achievement, social-emotional development, including empathy, should receive more attention. Thematic learning integrates various subjects in one theme relevant to students' real lives and offers an effective approach to fostering empathy. This article uses the literature review to analyze relevant sources on strategies to develop empathy through thematic learning in primary schools. The researcher reviewed scientific articles, books, and journals that discuss the implementation of thematic learning, character development, and empathy in primary education. Based on this literature review, thematic learning can create space for students to understand and feel the feelings of others through collaboration, social interaction, and character values-based learning. This research also shows the importance of the teacher's role in designing and implementing thematic learning that involves social values, including empathy. Thus, thematic learning can improve students' academic achievement and develop the social-emotional skills needed to form a more harmonious and tolerant society.

Informasi Artikel

Kata Kunci:

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Pembelajaran
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ABSTRAK

Empati merupakan keterampilan sosial yang sangat penting dalam perkembangan anak, terutama pada usia sekolah dasar. Pembentukan empati pada anak tidak hanya membantu mereka mengelola hubungan sosial yang lebih baik, tetapi juga membentuk karakter yang peduli terhadap orang lain. Meskipun fokus utama dalam pendidikan dasar sering kali terletak pada pencapaian akademik, pengembangan sosial-emosional, termasuk empati, seharusnya mendapat perhatian yang lebih. Pembelajaran tematik, yang mengintegrasikan berbagai mata pelajaran dalam satu tema yang relevan dengan kehidupan nyata siswa, menawarkan pendekatan yang efektif untuk menumbuhkan empati. Artikel ini menggunakan metode tinjauan literatur (*literature review*) untuk menganalisis berbagai sumber yang relevan mengenai strategi pengembangan empati melalui pembelajaran tematik di sekolah dasar. Peneliti mengkaji artikel ilmiah, buku, dan jurnal yang membahas penerapan pembelajaran tematik, pengembangan karakter, serta empati dalam pendidikan dasar. Berdasarkan tinjauan literatur ini, ditemukan bahwa pembelajaran tematik dapat menciptakan ruang bagi siswa untuk memahami dan merasakan perasaan orang lain melalui kolaborasi, interaksi sosial, dan pembelajaran berbasis nilai-nilai karakter. Penelitian ini juga menunjukkan pentingnya peran guru dalam merancang dan menerapkan pembelajaran tematik yang melibatkan nilai-nilai sosial, termasuk empati. Dengan demikian, pembelajaran tematik tidak hanya dapat meningkatkan pencapaian akademik siswa, tetapi juga mengembangkan keterampilan

sosial-emosional yang diperlukan untuk membentuk masyarakat yang lebih harmonis dan toleran.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Empathy is the ability to feel, understand, and respond to the feelings of others, which is an essential social skill in child development, especially at primary school age (Agusniatih & Manopa, 2019; Aurelia et al., 2024; Ningsih, 2024). During this time, children begin to develop the ability to interact with peers, understand others' feelings, and manage conflict. Building empathy at an early age greatly impacts the quality of their future social relationships and how they interact with society. Good empathy skills allow students to manage differences constructively, respect others, and form healthy relationships with others (Hasanah & Wathon, 2018; Putri & Wathon, 2024). Therefore, character education that focuses on fostering empathy is very relevant to develop, given the role of empathy in building a more harmonious and tolerant society.

However, empathy development in primary schools often receives insufficient attention, given the heavy focus on academic achievement. While many education policies are orientated towards improving the quality of academic learning, students' socio-emotional development often does not have an adequate place in the curriculum. Social-emotional development, including empathy, is significant in shaping the personalities of students who are academically brilliant and concerned for others. Therefore, a practical approach is needed to integrate empathy development into learning.

One approach that can be used to foster empathy is thematic learning. *Thematic learning* is an approach that integrates various subjects into one theme that is relevant to students' real life (Hidayah, 2017; Perdana & Suswandari, 2021). Students can learn more contextualized and meaningfully by using themes that are close to their lives. Thematic learning allows students to relate lessons to their social experiences, which provides opportunities for them to understand the feelings and perspectives of others. For example, themes on cooperation or tolerance can be the focus of learning, allowing students to learn the importance of respecting and understanding others in various social contexts (Anisah & Holis, 2020a; Kadarwati & Malawi, 2017; Wafiqni & Nurani, 2018).

Through thematic learning, students not only acquire academic knowledge but also develop social attitudes that support their empathy development. Anisah & Holis (2020) explained that through activities that involve collaboration, such as traditional games integrated in thematic learning, character values, including empathy, can be introduced and practised directly in students' social experiences. In this way, thematic learning not only promotes academic achievement, but also provides space for students to develop their social and emotional skills. This collaboration and social interaction-based learning will make students care more about the feelings of others and learn to empathise in various social situations.

In addition, learning methods such as *Think-Pair-Share*, often applied in thematic learning, can support the development of empathy. In this method, students are asked to discuss in pairs and then share their opinions with a larger group. This process allows students to listen to each other and understand their peers' perspectives. (N. Azizah et al., 2023) shows that the application of *Think-Pair-Share* method in thematic learning can improve students' social-emotional development as students learn to cooperate, respect others' opinions, and pay attention to their friends' feelings. This, of course, greatly supports the development of empathy which is one of the important social skills for students.

Thematic learning also provides opportunities for students to learn holistically by integrating various disciplines in one coherent theme. This makes learning more relevant to students' real lives and introduces them to very important social values, such as concern for others, tolerance and co-operation. As suggested by (Hakim (2014) learning that integrates various subjects, including character education, will be more effective in fostering empathetic attitudes in students because they can see the connection between the concepts learned and their social lives. Therefore, thematic learning enriches students' academic knowledge and gives them a deeper understanding of the importance of healthy social relationships and empathy towards others.

However, although thematic learning has great potential to foster empathy, its implementation requires appropriate skills and strategies from teachers. Teachers must design and implement thematic learning that integrates social and emotional values effectively. This includes choosing themes relevant to students' social lives, designing activities that involve constructive social interactions, and creating an environment that supports the development of empathy. As suggested by (Ghati 018) problem-based learning, often applied in thematic learning, also has great potential to develop empathy because students are invited to solve problems together, which involves a deep process of communication and cooperation.

This study identifies and analyzes how teachers can use thematic learning to foster empathy in primary school students. The results of this study are expected to provide a better understanding of effective strategies for integrating empathy development into the curriculum and provide practical recommendations for teachers to create learning that focuses not only on academic achievement but also on building positive social character. Therefore, this research is highly urgent to support the development of a more holistic education, which includes academic learning and students' social-emotional development in a balanced manner. Thus, it is hoped that this research can contribute to creating a more empathetic, caring, and tolerant generation towards others.

2. METHOD

This article uses the literature review method to analyze various sources relevant to teachers' strategies for fostering empathy through thematic learning in primary schools. The literature review method was chosen because it allows the researcher to explore and summarise existing findings from previous studies and identify patterns, similarities, and differences that emerge in developing empathy through thematic learning. With this approach, the researcher can better understand the topic and relate it to current educational practices.

The criteria for selecting sources in this study include scientific articles, books, journals, and research directly related to primary education, thematic learning, and students' social-emotional development. The sources selected were works published in reputable academic journals and relevant to the topic of discussion. The main focus was research that examined thematic learning approaches in the primary school context, character development, and the cultivation of empathy values in learning. The researcher also considered the relevance of the context and methodology used in the studies to ensure that the sources contributed significantly to the topic.

The analysis process was conducted by grouping and categorizing the findings from the existing literature based on relevant themes, such as teachers' strategies in implementing thematic learning, the impact of thematic learning on empathy development, and the

integration of character values in the learning process. The researcher then analyzed each finding to see the relationship between these concepts and how their application can be optimized in the context of primary school education. This literature review summarises the existing findings and provides a more comprehensive understanding of how thematic learning can effectively foster empathy among primary school students.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Thematic learning in primary schools is vital in shaping students' character, especially in developing empathy, one of the critical social competencies in child development. Empathy, defined as the ability to understand and feel the feelings of others, is not just a cognitive ability but also an essential element in children's social-emotional development (Muthmainah & Wulandari, 2024; Setyawan & Dewi, 2019). At this stage, empathy becomes the bridge connecting children to the social world around them, allowing them to interact healthier and more caringly. As explained by (Friska, 2021) empathy relates not only to the ability to understand the feelings of others but also to the ability to respond with actions that show attention and concern for the feelings of others. In the context of primary school education, the development of empathy is significant, as it is during this time that children begin to form a basic understanding of the world, other people, and the social relationships they live in every day.

Therefore, primary school education needs to integrate learning that focuses on academic achievement and character development, especially in terms of empathy. Thematic learning is an approach that offers a more holistic and comprehensive way of learning. In thematic learning, students are taught about academic concepts and exposed to learning experiences based on social values that are relevant to their lives. By integrating various aspects of social life in one theme, thematic learning provides opportunities for students to learn about knowledge and feel, understand, and apply empathy in their daily lives (Anisah & Holis, 2020b; Armini, 2024; Bali et al., 2022). Therefore, thematic learning becomes a very effective tool in shaping students' social character, especially in terms of developing empathy towards others.

Empathy, as one of the social competencies, is very important in shaping children's character, especially in the process of social interaction. As explained by Sabiq (2012) Empathy makes students more sensitive to the feelings and needs of others and motivates them to act socially and prosocially. This process is vital, especially for children at a stage of social-emotional development that affects their interaction skills with peers, family, and society. By developing empathy, students are expected to manage conflicts more wisely, develop the ability to cooperate and develop good communication skills. It will also shape them into individuals who are more concerned about the welfare of others and more responsive to the social challenges they face. Through education based on the development of empathy, students will be better able to understand the different perspectives and backgrounds of social life around them, which is essential for creating a more harmonious and tolerant society.

Thematic learning that integrates various subjects in one theme allows students to understand social issues relevant to their lives better. In this context, the themes raised in thematic learning often include deep social values, such as diversity, humanity, justice, and tolerance. In this way, students learn about academic facts and concepts and develop awareness and concern for the social environment around them (Lestari, 2024; Sari et al., 2021). This learning creates space for students to explore their feelings, respond to complex social situations, and build empathy for others with different life experiences.

For example, in thematic learning with the theme 'Environment,' students not only learn about how to care for the environment or the effects of environmental damage on life, but they are also faced with social challenges that arise due to inequality of natural resources, economic differences, or the impact of climate change on more vulnerable communities. As stated by (Maulia, 2023) students can see the world from another person's perspective through this thematic approach, which is very important for developing empathy. Not only do they gain knowledge on topics relevant to their lives, but they are also invited to understand the feelings of others affected by environmental change, such as people living in disaster-prone areas or those marginalized by natural destruction. This kind of experience allows students to develop empathy in the form of a deeper understanding of the feelings of others while giving them the skills to address social issues with an empathic and caring attitude.

In order for thematic learning to effectively develop empathy in students, teachers need to implement various strategies that involve social interaction, self-reflection, discussion, and collaboration between students. One strategy that can be applied is the cooperative learning model, where students work in groups to complete tasks related to the taught theme. Cooperative learning focuses on academic outcomes and the social processes that occur as students work together, share opinions, and collaborate to achieve a common goal. In this process, students learn to respect different opinions, listen to others, and find solutions that benefit all parties, which is a form of empathy development in a social context (Azizah & Maemonah, 2022). This collaboration allows students to understand better and feel the different experiences of their peers, which in turn strengthens their sense of caring for others.

Cooperative learning is one of the most effective approaches to developing student empathy. In this model, students are taught to achieve shared academic goals and work in groups that support their social-emotional development, particularly in terms of empathy. Cooperative learning allows students to share their opinions, listen to others' ideas, and appreciate the differences within the group (Johnson & Johnson, 2004). This approach emphasizes teamwork and collaboration to achieve a common goal, so students learn to understand and provide emotional support to each other. This model invites students to solve tasks or problems together, which requires critical thinking and deep social skills.

For example, in thematic learning with the 'Social Diversity' theme, students can be divided into small groups to discuss related topics such as tolerance between religions, ethnicities, or races. Each group member is allowed to express his/her views. In contrast, the other members are asked to listen with empathy, understand the background of the opinions expressed, and find the best solution together. As a result, students learn to appreciate differences and enrich their views with different perspectives, developing their empathy skills.

Furthermore, the cooperative learning model can also be applied through the jigsaw approach, where students work in groups to learn different parts of the material and then pool the information they have learned to present to other groups. This process involves collaboration and responsibility towards the group and classmates. Students learn how to help each other, convey information in a way that is easy to understand, and value the contributions of others in reaching a common understanding. Research by Halimah & Sukmayadi, (2019) revealed that cooperative learning, such as the jigsaw model, can increase empathy among students as they rely on each other in acquiring and disseminating knowledge.

Besides cooperative learning project-based learning (PjBL) can also enrich students' empathy development. This model provides opportunities for students to collaborate in solving real problems related to their community. PjBL encourages students

to engage in projects that require academic ability and social skills such as communication, cooperation, and problem-solving (Lee et al., 2015). One example of its application in thematic learning is when students conduct projects to solve social problems in the neighborhood, such as plastic waste reduction campaigns or greening projects. Through this project, students develop their academic abilities and engage directly with social issues related to their lives, encouraging them to care more about the condition of the environment and others.

For example, under the theme 'Environment,' students may be asked to design an environmental campaign that educates the surrounding community on the importance of recycling. In this process, students will conduct research, design posters or educational materials, and work together to deliver important messages to others. During this project, students will learn about the impact of human behavior on the environment and empathy for living things affected by environmental degradation. This allows students to see the world through the eyes of others, especially those who live in areas affected by natural disasters or artificial environmental damage.

In addition, project-based learning with social themes can also help students to be more sensitive to the issues faced by society. Projects that lead to solving real problems in the surrounding community, such as reforestation or community empowerment activities, can allow students to experience first-hand how their contributions can impact the lives of others. Such projects hone students' practical skills and increase their social awareness of social issues in their neighborhoods. This aligns with socio-emotional development theory, which states that empathy develops with students' involvement in social activities that allow them to interact with various individuals from different backgrounds (Anisah & Holis, 2020b; Sari et al., 2021)

Story and narrative-based approaches are also efficient for fostering empathy. Through stories that describe other people's life struggles or challenges, students can feel different experiences and understand the feelings of others that they may not experience first-hand. For example, stories about the lives of disadvantaged or marginalized people can arouse students' empathy toward these people and open their eyes to social realities that are often overlooked (Cahyo et al., 2023). These stories also introduce students to moral values such as kindness, honesty, and hard work, essential to children's social character development.

The curriculum implemented in primary schools significantly influences how thematic learning is implemented to develop empathy in students. A curriculum integrating character education with thematic learning can create space for students to integrate academic knowledge with critical social values. For example, a curriculum with social, cultural, and humanitarian themes provides opportunities for students to learn about diversity and inequality and how to respond to them respectfully and empathically. By including topics such as cultural diversity, human rights, and other social issues in the thematic curriculum, students are taught to understand and appreciate the differences that exist in society (Lestari, 2024; Sari et al., 2021).

Overall, thematic learning implemented appropriately has enormous potential to develop empathy in primary school students. With themes relevant to social life and humanitarian issues, students can learn to see the world from various perspectives, understand the feelings of others, and respond to them with a caring attitude. Therefore, teachers need to design learning activities emphasizing mastery of academic material and developing critical social skills and characteristics, such as empathy. Through thematic learning that integrates social values, students not only gain knowledge but also grow into individuals who are more sensitive and caring towards others around them, ultimately contributing to creating a more empathic and inclusive society.

4. CONCLUSION

Thematic learning in primary schools provides ample opportunities for students to acquire academic knowledge and develop social and emotional skills, including empathy. By integrating various subjects into one theme relevant to students' daily lives, thematic learning offers a more holistic and meaningful way of supporting the development of empathy among students. This approach allows students to relate lessons to their social experiences, which provides opportunities for them to understand and feel the feelings of others.

Cultivating empathy through thematic learning is essential in creating individuals who are not only academically intelligent but also have concern for others, can interact constructively, and build healthy relationships with peers and the surrounding community. This research has shown that integrating social values, such as cooperation, tolerance, and concern for others, in thematic learning can improve students' empathy skills.

However, to maximize the potential of thematic learning in fostering empathy, teachers need to have the right skills in designing and implementing learning that emphasizes academic and social-emotional aspects. This includes selecting relevant themes, designing activities that involve positive social interactions, and creating an environment that supports the development of empathy. The successful implementation of thematic learning to foster empathy also requires strong support from the school, parents, and community to create a caring and empathic culture at school jointly.

In the future, this research is expected to contribute to developing an educational curriculum at the primary school level that emphasizes character development, especially empathy, and provides a broader understanding of how thematic learning can be effectively implemented to support a more holistic education. Thus, it is hoped that future generations will grow into individuals who are more caring, tolerant, and able to adapt to the evolving social dynamics.

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