Integrated Thematic Learning during COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The present study was driven by the conditions of students and teachers encountering challenges while implementing integrated thematic learning, notably during the online classroom activities. This study aimed at identifying the planning, implementation, and evaluation of integrated thematic learning. Mixed Methods were employed as the research design. The class teachers (thematic teachers) and headmaster of MIN Kota Banda Aceh were recruited as the investigative participants. Quantitatively, the data were collected through questionnaire administration based on Likert. Qualitatively, interviews were performed to gain more qualitative data. The participants were the thematic teachers and the headmasters of MIN 11 and 6 Banda Aceh. The findings reported that the thematic teachers of MIN 11 and 6 were able to design lesson plans effectively. Although the COVID 19 forced them to implement and evaluate integrated thematic learning online, they could perform them well. In particular, they argued that the activities were very good (55%) and good enough (44%). On the other hand, the teachers of MIN 6 and 11 faced challenges while actualizing thematic learning. Those challenges were encountered when the participants began their learning experiences of teaching in the post-pandemic.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic occurring since two years ago has significantly affected life. Numerous activities have been disrupted and constrained by rules. The impacts of COVID-19 have changed miscellaneous sectors, including education. In this case, the change involves the process, methods, and evaluation of learning (Elisvi, et. al. 2020; Sundari, et. al. 2021). In a similar vein, COVID-19 has drastically altered everything related to education (Azhari & Fajri, 2021; Jati & Putra, 2020; Dewi, 2020).
A significant shift from office to home or work from home (WFH) has led teaching and learning practices to be online or learn from home (LFH). Although LFH is not a new type of learning activity in urban schools, it has become a challenge for students living in rural areas where technology and human resources remain limited (Pratama & Mulyati, 2020; Royani, Nazurty, & Hamidah, 2021).

Online learning has become considerably taboo and even difficult to implement. Conversely, online learning is the only way for learning to resolve problems. There was a circular letter from the Minister of Education and Culture (MONEC) Number 4 of 2020 regarding guidelines for applying learning from home during the COVID-19. In addition, another letter was issued, namely joint decisions of the minister of education and culture, minister of religion, minister of health, and minister of home affairs (circular letters number 01/KB/2020, number 516 of 2020, number HK 03.01/Menkes/363/2020 and number 440-882 of 2020) regarding guidelines for actualizing learning activities in the 2020/2021 academic year and the 2020/2021 academic year during the pandemic. Miscellaneous responses from the community have emerged in response to the relatively new learning system. Most of them complained due to the limitations of technology, poor internet network, and data playing significant roles in online learning practices.

This phenomenon has been a new-fangled challenge in education. As a matter of fact, junior high school students have faced several challenges to perform online learning. One of them was the unavailability of supporting learning media, such as smartphones and laptops. Asrul & Afil (2020) argue that smartphones and laptops enable students to learn online effortlessly. Such challenges become more complicated for elementary school students who do not have supporting communication devices (e.g. smartphones) and laptops. This situation forces them to borrow their parents’ devices if they have one. However, it can be worse when they do not have it at all. As a result, online learning practices can be highly disruptive for students, teachers, and parents.

Each level of education indicates a typical curriculum adapted to the students’ level of competence. At the junior and senior secondary levels, learning is designed in the form of subjects. This is different from the elementary level where the learning process is framed in the form of themes called integrated thematics. In particular, there are many diversities in terms of planning, implementation, and evaluation of learning practices. In planning, the integrated theme has lesson plans in which each theme contains more than two subjects. The existence of basic competencies or sub-themes becomes a reference in planning learning in one or more meetings (Rusman, 2015).

In the implementation stage of learning, the scientific approach is commonly applied. Based on the government’s regulation No. 65 of 2013 concerning process standards, the scientific approach in learning practices includes several steps, namely observing, questioning, reasoning, trying, networking (Kemendikbud, 2013). Essentially, the scientific approach is considered to be more effective than the conventional learning approach (Maryani, 2018). The evaluation stage is performed through an authentic assessment. This assessment is not only assessing the results of learning competencies but also its process. Prastowo (2019) argues that the process-based assessment is pivotal because the assessing results can be maximized.

The integrated thematic learning activities in Aceh since 2015 have been facing obstacles in its implementation. Practically, since the offline learning activities have not occurred as expected, the thematic learning practices should be performed online. One of the reasons why this took place is due to unfamiliar and untrained teachers utilizing thematic learning. Further, knowledge building and creativity activation have also become inevitable components to reach the effective implementation of thematic learning activities (Susilawati & Syaripah, 2019; Via Reza Nuanda, 2021; Zalma, 2021).

Some studies have been conducted to scrutinize the implementation of thematic learning, notably in Indonesia. One of them was carried out by Susilawati and Syaripah (2019). They focused on investigating how thematic learning was actualized in a normal situation. The findings revealed that teachers should be able to integrate several teaching materials to a theme and adjust it to an appropriate learning method. This led them to make the teaching materials possible to deliver in a meeting. Besides,
selecting proper teaching methods and recruiting skilled teachers to remain crucial to attain the expected teaching and learning objectives.

Banda Aceh, which is the center of the provincial capital of Aceh, is also a pilot project for education in Aceh. Advancement in the economic and developing fields certainly affects the education sector, both in terms of human resources (teachers, students, and policymakers) and infrastructures (e.g., supporting infrastructures). Given these facts, the quality of basic education in Banda Aceh should be better than in other areas in Aceh.

Grounded in an initial survey, the basic level of thematic learning still encountered a variety of challenges during its implementation. As an example, teachers were still perplexed to link a theme with a number of subjects. In other words, teachers as the spearhead of teaching and learning practices were still incapable of executing their duties properly. Hence, online thematic learning could replace the existence of the offline one.

Gaining a more in-depth understanding of integrated thematic learning attainment can be accomplished by planning, implementing, and evaluating the employed integrated thematic learning activities.

Evaluation should be carried out to identify the achieved goals of the proposed programs. As a matter of fact, classroom-based evaluation is considered essential to measure their academic competencies and performances. The evaluation provides information and enables us to achieve the intended goals. First, it occurs regularly and provides a better report of the student's academic status. Second, since this type of evaluation is repeated regularly, teachers can regulate their instructions to prevent failure. Third, teachers are not burdened with stress as in the summative assessments. Lastly, teachers tend to spend much time teaching rather than assessing students (Mottaghi & Talkhabi, 2019). Regarding the evaluating system emphasized in this study is the evaluation of context, input, process, and product (hereafter, CIPP).

The CIPP-based evaluation encompasses context evaluation, input evaluation, process evaluation, and evaluation. First, context evaluation, such as understanding environmental conditions, teachers' comprehension, and students' learning needs (Junanto & Kusna, 2018; Wijayanti, Yulianti, & Wijaya, 2019). Second, the input evaluation covers the evaluation of learning plans and the availability of learning facilities. Third, process evaluation outlines the learning atmosphere and implementation. Fourth, product evaluation concerns the representation of learning atmosphere and practices. Finally, product evaluation refers to the students' learning outcomes-based evaluation manifested in their report cards or test scores. With these in mind, evaluation of integrated thematic learning activities can be conducted effectively during the pandemic.

Practically speaking, CIPP is regarded as a model of evaluation offering a comprehensive evaluation to programs from the beginning to the end of learning activities. In addition, the CIPP model is employed to measure, translate and validate the ongoing programs (Fahrudin, 2020; Pratiwi, 2019). Hence, this evaluative model fits to be applied during the pandemic. Wijayanti (2019) and Bhakti (2017) agree that this model can provide an overview of integrated thematic learning during the pandemic. For these reasons, this evaluative model can be developed if it runs well. Nevertheless, if the model indicates a number of problems, alternative suggestions and feedback can be a breakthrough to resolve such problems.

2. METHODS

This research was carried out through evaluative scrutiny involving a qualitative and quantitative approach. This approach is recognized as triangulated research or a combination of qualitative and quantitative investigation. A quantitative approach was employed to determine the percentage of teachers' abilities in performing thematic learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. A qualitative approach was applied to observe the extent of the teacher's abilities while conducting thematic learning during COVID-19. The utilized evaluation model was the Context, Input, Process, and Product (CIPP) evaluation model. The population in this study were all class teachers and headmasters of MIN in...
Banda Aceh. From the population, a sample was determined, namely teachers and headmasters of MIN 6 Banda Aceh and MIN 11 Banda Aceh. The sampling technique utilized in this study was purposive sampling with the consideration that MIN 6 Banda Aceh and MIN 11 Banda Aceh were madrasa pilot projects for the 2013 Curriculum in Aceh.

Generally speaking, this study deployed questionnaires administration (surveys), interviews, and documentation as the data collection techniques. For the evaluation variable of learning planning using observation and documentation data collection methods. In particular, observation and documentation were employed to collect the data related to evaluative variables of the lesson plans.

Table 1. Indicators and Instruments of the Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
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<th>Types of research Instrument</th>
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<th>Number of Question Items</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>A Review rubric of lesson plans</td>
<td>Lesson Plans of the Thematic Teachers</td>
<td>30 Items</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interview Guidelines</td>
<td>Headmaster and Thematic Teachers</td>
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<td>1-5</td>
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<td>Interview Guidelines</td>
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<td>5 Items</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>A Questionnaire</td>
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<td>Investigative Documents</td>
<td>Thematic Teachers</td>
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<td>Interview Guidelines</td>
<td>Headmaster and Thematic Teachers</td>
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This research was carried out in the following stages: Figure 1 Research Flow

Figure 1. Research Flow

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

During Covid-19, integrated thematic learning at MIN 6 Banda Aceh was carried out online through assorted media and learning applications. At the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, teachers and students conducted lessons through WhatsApp (WA) groups. The employment of WA in learning is the same as research conducted by (Jessika, Sugiatno, Eka Yanuarti, Warsah, & Deri, 2020). WA can be used in online learning. Over time, online learning is not only done with WA groups, but also added
with other applications such as google meet, google classroom (GC), zoom meeting, Edmodo, and so on. Many things become lessons for teachers, due to circumstances that force online learning, eventually, teachers try to find alternative ways of learning (Afniabar & N, 2020; Pegi Nuriska, 2020).

Online learning is not a big problem for teachers mastering IT and its implementation. Nonetheless, it is different from senior teachers who have not mastered IT. Learning can only be conducted through the WA group. Even though they complained that the cellphones utilized as an instructional medium were occasionally disruptive and the limited memory capacity, they still attempted to keep teaching online to facilitate their students.

Head of MIN 6 Banda Aceh, Mrs. Hilmiyati, explained that at the beginning of the implementation of thematic learning in MIN 6 in 2015, none of the teachers understood what thematic learning was. They initially learned thematic learning from their teachers' training, namely teachers' professional education program (PPG). It aimed at introducing, implementing, and evaluating the 2013 curriculum. This program generated some problems, notably for senior teachers, such as operating laptops. This was caused by their unfamiliarity and incomprehensibility of utilizing IT devices (e.g. zoom). As a result, although they claimed that learning practices have been performed based on the thematic learning notions, students and parents assumed it as a non-thematic learning practice.

On the other hand, this situation was different from young teachers mastering IT and learning applications. In this case, the teachers were able to employ a number of applications simultaneously during learning practices. The implementation of integrated thematic learning can take place even though it was not always in the form of thematic learning. Teachers assisted by parents in implementing online thematic learning admitted that they were considerably overwhelmed (Warsah, Imron, Siswanto, & Sendi, 2020). When learning was conducted online, it was challenging for teachers to invite students to study thematically. Occasionally, teachers had attempted to teach based on the themes. Conversely, due to the limited knowledge of parents accompanying them at home, learning practices finally took place based on subjects.

A number of problems related to online thematic learning were experienced by the teachers of two MINs (MIN 6 and MIN 11). Each MIN had its limitations in online implementation. Like MIN 6 where learning did not only take place during school hours, there were still students submitting assignments to the teachers. As a result, the teachers still had to check students' assignments. Meanwhile in MIN 11, when learning was conducted through zoom, there were still students who could not participate due to poor internet networks and inaccessible areas of students' houses. However, the teacher kept trying to teach students with WA.

Based on the interview, Mrs. Suheli (a teacher at MIN 6 Banda Aceh) argued that since 2015 she has been teaching at MIN 11. She taught class V. As a teacher, she tried to do her best. Initially, she encountered obstacles during implementing online learning practices. As an example, in the beginning, teachers and parents did not know what online learning was like. In response to this, she tried to understand online learning activities autonomously. Moreover, she coordinated with her peer teachers to deepen their knowledge of online learning. Even, she discussed with her peer teachers at the national level. One of the discussed topics was how to operate Google Classroom (GC) practically. Then, she shared what she learned with other friends in her schools. However, she encountered a few challenges while applying GC, notably during managing the submitted assignments. This occurred because of the limited memory of her smartphones. To resolve this, she decided to utilize WA as an alternative platform. Another problem also came from parents accompanying their children to learn. Many parents had not been familiar with GC features so they faced difficulties to help their children learn through GC.

The problems at MIN 6 Banda Aceh are not much different from MIN 11 Banda Aceh. To illustrate, Mrs. Yanti (one of the teachers at MIN 11 Banda Aceh) verbalized that students would not be able to engage in online learning activities because they had no smartphones supporting them. Most of them even borrowed their parents' smartphones. Hence, many students could not join the meeting. Further, she found problems with the scoring results of students. As an illustration, students who gained the
highest scores dishonestly because of their parents, brothers, sisters, or other relatives. In other words, they did their assignments and performed the assigned learning activities without others' interference.

The results of the interview with Mrs. Rahmi (a MIN 11 teacher) conveyed that "as first-grade teachers, the children in grade one understand the material very quickly. However, understanding, sometimes sitting to observe how students sat remains demanding. Listen, let's open a printed book, which is a printed book? But other than the printed book, you don't have it on the table. But they were confused. Everything, everything out. So it was the parents who provided for their learning needs. Keep it that way as long as you're online until second grade. Students were not familiar with actual instructions. It's the same with names. When they logged in again after being online, they got used to it again. However, students' independence must still be trained. Even though they could read because there was no independence in learning and so on, in the end, it needs to be trained."

The results of the Context evaluation related to the integrated thematic learning process during the COVID-19 pandemic at the MIN Banda Aceh as a whole have been well-systemized. Although at the beginning of its implementation, adjustments were needed in terms of the IT capabilities of teachers, students and parents. Furthermore, it is necessary to support facilities and infrastructure for some students coming from the middle to lower economic statuses. Some of them require supportive facilities and infrastructures. On the other hand, most of them come from families who are financially upper-middle class. In the context of this situation, it reflects that the research participants are eligible to be evaluated using the CIPP model (Subar Junanto & Kusna, 2018; Tsani, Arsyadana, Sufirmansyah, & Shafira, 2021)

3.1. Integrated Thematic Learning Planning

The evaluation of the thematic learning practices in MIN 6 and MIN 11 was performed by reviewing the teachers' lesson plans or rencana pelaksanaan pembelajaran (RPP). In making the lesson plans, they engaged with other thematic teachers to harmonize perceptions, learning objectives, and teaching materials. Their lesson plans were approved by the principals before being issued. The lesson plans were reviewed using an integrated thematic lesson plan assessment rubric adapted from one of the 2013 curriculum development experts, namely Dr. Rusman, M. Pd. Based on the results of the analyzed lesson plans of the teachers of MIN Banda Aceh, the quality of the lesson plans was considered "good" with an average score of 84.4. In other words, the teachers were able to design lesson plans according to thematic learning effectively. Additionally, grounded in the results of questionnaire administration, it can be analyzed that the MIN teachers of Banda Aceh were active in participating in the application of integrated thematic learning socialization. Further, they understood well how to design lesson plans and utilize learning methods and proper learning models.

3.2. Implementation of Integrated Thematic Learning

The implementation of integrated thematic learning is conducted through online learning applications and media. Regarding the implementation of integrated thematic learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher interviewed Mrs. Suhelli, a teacher at MIN 6 Banda Aceh. She claimed that one of the obstacles of implementing integrated thematic learning was dominated by technical problems. However, it could be resolved after communicating it with the students' parents. At first, it was difficult for parents to accept this new learning system. Conversely, after adapting for a few meetings, they eventually accepted it. Another obstacle was when the learning was not by allotted time as scheduled. As evidence, they could teach and learn dynamically without being restricted by time and places. Another example was parents confirming their children's task submission status and deadline at night. This can be assumed that online teaching and learning practices forced teachers and students to carry out their academic activities beyond their working and learning time. Additionally, the number of students in a class was very excessive so it caused a crowded classroom atmosphere (N=40 students). This led to another problem when conducted in the online mode. However, since most of the students' parents were from a medium to high economic background, they did not have any significant problems with the implementation of online learning. Even, they motivated their children to be more competitive during online learning activities (Rahmah, 2016).
About online thematic learning activities, teachers perceived that they faced challenges to convey the thematic teaching materials comprehensively due to limited time (Rosdiana, 2021; Melinda, 2021). As an example, one of the teachers from MIN 6 Banda Aceh (Mrs. Suhelli), had many obstacles to teaching thematic learning online. In response to it, she employed YouTube to overcome those problems. Besides, she deployed Google Form to help teach students online during the pandemic (Krismadika, 2020). However, students seemed unfamiliar with those instructional platforms. To illustrate, when they were required to participate in an examination, they faced many barriers to conducting it online for the first time. Although they felt confused to utilize such technology-based instruction initially, both teachers and students currently could adjust to the online integrated thematic learning activities. On the one hand, teachers could evaluate students’ competence and performance effectively. On the other hand, students were able to check their learning evaluation instantly. Both teachers and students preferred to learn online while engaging in integrated thematic learning and evaluation. Unfortunately, parents preferred to have offline learning activities.

In response to such issues, every teacher has strategies to resolve the problems of online integrated thematic learning. In terms of facilities, MIN 6 is not constrained because most of the students' parents were from upper-middle-class status. In other words, it is difficult for teachers to find underprivileged families in MIN 6. Conversely, the main problem was that parents did not believe their children while utilizing cell phones.

Furthermore, the interview results of Ms. Fadilla (a teacher at MIN 6 Banda Aceh) contended that her educational background was B.A. in Physics. She continued her professional development by participating in the Teachers Professional Education Program or Pendidikan Profesi Guru (hereafter, PPG) for two years. She argued that she had a lot of work to accomplish while joining the program. Besides, in this program, she knew what thematic learning is. Unfortunately, during the pandemic, thematic learning activities were conducted online. As a result, the utilization of technological devices remained demanding. This was similar to one of the students’ parents (Suhelli) who acknowledged that she should learn how to operate technological devices to help her daughter learn well.

The interview results with Mrs. Ratna (a teacher at MIN 6 Banda Aceh) affirmed that online class III merely applied the WA application since students are not familiar with other learning platforms and communication devices (e.g. email). Besides, most of them also still utilized their parents’ cellphones to send assignments. Even, they sent the assignments beyond office hours (e.g. midnight). Fortunately, it ran well. One of the benefits of these online learning practices was students and parents were able to know the results of evaluation directly.

The interview results with the Head of MIN (Mrs. Dahriana) revealed that the school provided specialized programs for students, such as Information and Technology (IT) program, the Language Program, and the Tahfiz program. She argued that as the head of MIN, she supported the online learning process set by the government and the coordinators of such programs. Generally, she claimed that there were no significant obstacles in implementing integrated thematic learning because all parties (teachers, students, and parents) were willing to cooperate and support each other. They were open to each other for the success of online thematic learning at MIN 11 Banda Aceh.

Integrated Thematic Learning Evaluation

The teachers employed miscellaneous applications to evaluate their students while participating in the integrated thematic learning activities. As an example, they applied a google form as an evaluating platform and distributed it to the students (see Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.). In particular, the evaluation also involved other platforms, such as google classroom and quizizz. This evaluative model offered both teachers and students benefits, such as a simple grading scoring system and good motivation for test-taking. To illustrate, quizizz motivated students to compete in reaching the first rank in the integrated thematic learning practices. They indicated excitement while answering the question items. Further, they could see the ranking and scoring results during test-taking as illustrated subsequently:
Based on the results of the questionnaire about the evaluation of integrated thematic learning practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, it revealed that the MIN teachers of Banda Aceh have evaluated integrated thematic learning well. This can be viewed from the average questionnaire from number 19 to number 25 indicating 36.71% (strongly agree) 37.29% (agree), 13.57% (disagree), and 12.43% (strongly disagree). It means that the teachers of MIN Banda Aceh can evaluate integrated thematic learning activities during the pandemic based on the principles of learning evaluation.

Similarly, the teachers of MIN Banda Aceh have evaluated learning on a daily and semester basis. Daily learning evaluation is performed by checking student attendance at each meeting, conducting assessments when learning takes place, evaluating learning in real-time based on the schedule, and providing clear rules related to the exam. Furthermore, based on the results of the questionnaire analysis, it was found that the teachers of MIN Banda Aceh had evaluated the students’ behaviors during engaging in the integrated thematic learning practices.
Overall, the results of the evaluation of the implementation of integrated thematic learning during the COVID-19 pandemic at MIN Banda Aceh emphasize four main foci, namely the context, input, process, and product components. Regarding the results of this study, three main results (integrated thematic learning planning, implementation of integrated thematic learning, and evaluation of the implementation of integrated thematic learning) designated a very good category with 55% and 45% as an evaluative representation of the attained implementation. Briefly stated, the MIN Banda Aceh has carried out the online integrated thematic learning practices with good preparation and planning.

4. CONCLUSION

The integrated thematic learning planning created by the teacher obtained an average percentage in the good category. Based on this, it can be said that Banda Aceh City MIN teachers have been able to design lesson plans well. The implementation of integrated thematic learning that has been carried out by the teacher has an average percentage in the good category. This is an indication that teachers can carry out integrated thematic learning during the pandemic by consistently utilizing various media and learning applications. The evaluation of integrated thematic learning that has been carried out by the teacher obtained an average percentage of good categories by being able to use various media and learning applications well.

Overall, the evaluative results of CIPP to integrated thematic learning activities during the pandemic at MIN in Banda Aceh remain positive. Therefore, this evaluative model helps teachers evaluate their students’ activities when engaging in thematic learning activities. Viewed from a managerial perspective, managers should be able to pay more attention to the development of more current instructional media to support integrated thematic learning practices. Viewed from an empirical perspective, future researchers can apply the CIPP model to evaluate other educational programs.

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