

Teachers' Competence in Implementing Thematic Social Studies Instruction: An Evaluative Study at Junior High School Level of Lumajang Regency

Kompetensi Guru dalam Implementasi Pembelajaran IPS Tematik: Studi Evaluatif pada Tingkat Sekolah Menengah Pertama di Kabupaten Lumajang

diterima: 22-05-2025, disetujui: 18-06-2025, diterbitkan: 30 Juni 2025

doi: 10.24832/jpnk.v10i1.5759

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Abstract: *The effective implementation of thematic learning in Social Studies (IPS) at the junior secondary level requires teachers to possess interdisciplinary knowledge and advanced pedagogical skills. This study explores competency gaps among Social Studies teachers without formal Social Studies qualifications in Lumajang Regency, Indonesia, and examines how these gaps affect thematic learning delivery. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through nonparticipant observations, structured questionnaires, and in-depth interviews with 30 teachers from SMP and MTs schools. The findings reveal significant disparities in subject matter expertise, instructional design, and classroom management, with only 50% of teachers meeting competency standards for thematic Social Studies teaching. Key factors underlying these gaps include diverse academic backgrounds, limited understanding of the thematic curriculum, and insufficient engagement in professional development activities. The study highlights the urgent need for targeted capacity-building programs, continuous professional learning opportunities, and collaborative teacher networks to bridge competency deficiencies. Furthermore, policy interventions are recommended to standardize teacher qualifications and support sustained professional growth. Addressing these challenges can improve the quality of thematic Social Studies instruction and improve student learning outcomes. This study provides an empirical foundation and policy recommendations for improving teacher competence within the context of an integrated curriculum which can be utilized by education stakeholders in Indonesia and in similar settings.*

Keywords: *thematic learning, teacher competence, secondary education, Social Studies education*

Abstrak: *Pelaksanaan pembelajaran tematik yang efektif dalam Ilmu Sosial (IPS) di tingkat sekolah menengah pertama mengharuskan guru untuk memiliki pengetahuan interdisipliner dan keterampilan pedagogis yang baik. Studi ini bertujuan mengidentifikasi kesenjangan kompetensi di antara guru IPS tanpa kualifikasi IPS formal di Kabupaten Lumajang dan dampaknya terhadap penyampaian pembelajaran tematik. Dengan pendekatan fenomenologi kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui observasi nonpartisipan, kuesioner terstruktur, dan*

wawancara mendalam dengan 30 guru dari sekolah SMP dan MTs. Hasil penelitian mengungkapkan disparitas yang signifikan dalam keahlian mata pelajaran, desain instruksional, dan manajemen kelas. Hanya 50% guru yang memenuhi standar kompetensi untuk pengajaran IPS tematik. Faktor utama yang mendasari kesenjangan ini meliputi latar belakang akademis yang beragam, pemahaman yang terbatas tentang kurikulum tematik, dan keterlibatan yang tidak memadai dalam kegiatan pengembangan profesional. Studi ini menegaskan perlunya program pengembangan kapasitas yang terarah, kesempatan belajar profesional berkelanjutan, dan jejaring kolaborasi antarguru untuk menjembatani kekurangan kompetensi. Intervensi kebijakan direkomendasikan untuk penstandaran kualifikasi guru dan mendukung pertumbuhan profesional berkelanjutan. Dengan mengatasi tantangan tersebut, kualitas pembelajaran IPS tematik dapat meningkat sehingga berdampak positif pada hasil belajar siswa. Studi ini memberikan dasar bukti empiris dan usulan kebijakan tentang peningkatan kompetensi guru dalam konteks kurikulum terpadu yang dapat digunakan oleh para pemangku kepentingan pendidikan di Indonesia dan lingkungan dengan kondisi serupa.

Kata Kunci: *pembelajaran tematik, kompetensi guru, pendidikan menengah, pendidikan IPS*

INTRODUCTION

Thematic learning is an instructional approach that connects multiple themes closely related to students' environments to provide meaningful learning experiences. According to Amini & Usmeldi (2022), the themes used in thematic learning ensure the integration of multiple subjects. This learning model focuses on developing students' communication skills, character, attitudes, and critical thinking abilities (Mukniah, 2020; Oikonomakou & Papakitsos, 2021; Qondias et al., 2022). These competencies are fostered through learning processes that encourage students to solve problems independently and creatively (Aisah et al., 2019). Thematic learning constitutes a fundamental element of Indonesia's 2013 Curriculum. It applies a scientific method that helps students identify, understand, and analyze various materials while encouraging them to become independent and confident learners instead of relying solely on the teacher's explanations. Ultimately, students are expected to solve problems effectively.

In Indonesia, integrated thematic learning is implemented at the junior high school level. A single subject integrates multiple related disciplines within an interdisciplinary or thematic framework. The development of thematic learning often begins with a topic from a particular discipline, which is then complemented, explored, expanded, and deepened using perspectives from other disciplines. These topics may derive from current issues, events, or emerging problems.

Social Studies (IPS) education aims not only to foster intellectual development but also to foster social development (Mendo-Lázaro et al., 2022). It comprises three primary dimensions, namely, knowledge, practice, and ethics (Corbella & Ucar, 2019). Veiga, (2022) identifies these dimensions as a technical and academic

knowledge, self-knowledge, and the development of transversal skills required for social interaction—such as active listening, empathy, acceptance, respect, creativity, and reflection. At the basic education level, Social Studies begins with conceptual understanding integrated with cognitive development.

Social Studies seeks to operationalize social sciences in daily life (Christensen, 2022), while simultaneously developing students' social cognition and emotional regulation (Lee & Choi, 2022). These elements are crucial for students' moral and social development and their ability to interact with peers and society (Chmutina & Von Meding, 2022; Dorris et al., 2022). Social Studies must equip students not only with theoretical knowledge but also with practical understanding (Wedin & Aho, 2022). Abdul Latief et al., (2022) emphasize that, as an applied science, Social Studies prioritizes concepts that foster solidarity, maintain social harmony, and instill honesty, sportsmanship, responsibility, and egalitarianism. Achieving these goals mainly depends on teacher quality (Pabbajah et al., 2020). Educators must not only master the social sciences but also demonstrate the ability to enhance students' skill development and motivation (Phung et al., 2020).

Thematic learning primarily relies on teacher competence and planning tailored to students' conditions and potential. Teacher competence includes personal, social, spiritual, and academic aspects essential to educational success (Redjeki et al., 2021). Beyond academic qualifications, this competence encompasses the ability to guide character development. Teachers must be equipped with various instructional methods to adapt to classroom dynamics (Farihin et al., 2022; Teig & Nilsen, 2022). Competent teachers can respond quickly and effectively to instructional challenges (Beckmann, 2021).

However, curriculum changes and evolving competency demands often create gaps in teachers' abilities, especially due to differences in educational backgrounds. This issue is evident in Social Studies instruction, which is often delivered by teachers with diverse academic qualifications such as economics, geography, law, civics, or history. Competency gaps in thematic instruction must be urgently addressed, as they directly impact learning effectiveness (Sudargini & Purwanto, 2020). Without adequate competence, learning cannot be conducted optimally, and student outcomes are likely to suffer (Erikson & Erikson, 2019).

To date, studies on thematic Social Studies learning have primarily focused on the form and implementation of instruction without deeply exploring teacher competence as a critical determinant of instructional success. Most previous research has been descriptive, concentrating on general teacher perceptions and their broad impact on thematic learning implementation and professional development (Makan et al., 2019; Nurlaela et al., 2018). In practice, findings from various regions indicate that teacher involvement in planning thematic Social Studies instruction remains limited. Learning themes are often developed by designated teams, with teachers functioning merely as technical executors. This hinders the internalization and optimal development of professional competence.

This condition is also evident in Lumajang Regency, East Java, Indonesia, the research site. Preliminary observations indicate low participation among teachers—especially those without Social Studies backgrounds—in designing and developing thematic content for Social Studies instruction. This is exacerbated by a lack of initiative in self-development, with only about 8% of teachers actively participating in competency development activities outside formal training programs. Approximately 70% of teachers still rely mainly on government-provided training, resulting in passive and unsustainable professional development.

In the context of thematic Social Studies instruction, teacher competence is essential for managing content from concrete to abstract concepts and for connecting learning themes to students' real-life contexts to ensure meaning and relevance (Fanani et al., 2020). A lack of understanding of thematic principles not only affects instructional quality but also hinders student learning outcomes (Van Alten et al., 2019). Therefore, this study focuses on evaluating the factors contributing to the inability of non-Social Studies teachers to implement effective thematic instruction in junior high schools (SMP/MTs) in Lumajang Regency, while also identifying contextual and applicable strategies for improvement.

Lumajang Regency was selected as the research location based on field conditions that demonstrate a clear competence gap among Social Studies teachers without relevant academic backgrounds. Additionally, this region represents the characteristics of a semiurban area with unique educational dynamics. These features make it a suitable context for generating generalizable findings.

Thus, this study aims not only to contribute to the development of evaluative research in education but also to serve as a foundation for designing contextual teacher competency development models and more effective strategies to improve the quality of thematic Social Studies learning.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative field research design with a phenomenological approach. The phenomenological method was selected based on the premise that each phenomenon or event forms part of an interconnected sequence and cannot be fully understood in isolation; rather, it must be interpreted through the perspectives and lived experiences of those directly involved. The research was conducted in junior secondary schools (SMP and MTs) throughout Lumajang Regency, involving a sample of 30 schools. The population comprised all Social Studies (IPS) teachers at the junior secondary level whose academic backgrounds do not originate from a pure Social Studies discipline.

Data collection techniques included non-participant observation, questionnaires, and open-ended interviews. Non-participant observation involved the researcher observing the teaching process without engaging in classroom activities. Questionnaires were administered online via Google Forms and consisted of close-ended questions regarding participants' academic backgrounds, mastery of core

competencies (including subject matter knowledge and instructional objective formulation), history of professional development participation, and ability to deliver instructional content.

Open-ended interviews were conducted with both teachers and school principals to explore in depth the process of designing thematic lesson plans for Social Studies, challenges encountered during the planning process, and considerations employed in identifying sub-themes within the thematic curriculum.

Data analysis was performed using an inductive approach to identify emerging patterns of meaning from participants' experiences and to understand the relationships among the competencies of teachers without Social Studies academic backgrounds, student comprehension of Social Studies material, and efforts to enhance the effectiveness of thematic instruction.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Teacher Competence in Social Studies Instruction

The competence of teachers in implementing thematic instruction remains limited. The majority demonstrate strength in only one specific area of expertise, which is insufficient to meet the interdisciplinary demands of Social Studies content. Table 1 presents the educational backgrounds of Social Studies teachers in junior secondary schools in Lumajang Regency.

Table 1 Educational Background of Social Studies Teachers

Bacground	Number of Teachers	Percentage
Economic	14	47%
Geography	5	16%
History	3	10%
Social Science	1	4%
Other Fields	7	23%
Total	30	100%

Source: Data processed by researches, 2023

The data indicate that only a minority of teachers have a comprehensive social science background. Specifically, 47% majored in economics, 16% in geography, 10% in history, 4% in social science, and 23% in unrelated fields. This significant diversity in academic background may negatively affect the quality of thematic instruction, as integrated Social Studies at the junior high school level requires systematic mastery across multiple disciplines. This situation highlights the necessity of a structured thematic learning framework to enhance both pedagogical and subject-matter competencies.

Table 2 Mastery of Core Competence

Competency Category	Number of Teachers	Percentage
Optimal Mastery	15	50%
Partial Mastery	11	37%
No Mastery	4	13%
Total	30	100%

Source: Data processed by researches, 2023

To evaluate mastery of core competencies, teachers responded to two closed-ended questions: (1) "Have you mastered all the core themes in Social Studies?" and (2) "Have you developed case-based learning models?" Responses were scored as "Yes" (3), "Partially" (2), and "No" (1). Total scores classified mastery as optimal (5–6), partial (3–4), or none (<3). Table 2 summarizes the findings.

The findings reveal that only half of the teachers demonstrated optimal mastery, with 37% showing partial mastery and 13% lacking mastery. Pedagogical competence—especially classroom management and instructional problem-solving—is equally crucial for effective thematic teaching. Three yes/no questions assessed these skills: (1) ability to explain material effectively, (2) ability to assess student characteristics and apply varied instructional methods, and (3) regular evaluation of student learning outcomes. "Yes" was scored 2, "No" scored 1. Scores of 5–6 indicated effective delivery; scores below 5 indicated less effective delivery (Table 3).

Table 3 Material Delivery Mastery

Delivery Category	Number of Teachers	Percentage
Effective	20	67%
Less Effective	10	33%
Total	30	100%

Source: Data processed by researches, 2023

Although the majority demonstrated effective delivery, a considerable proportion requires support in classroom management and formative assessment. Therefore, pedagogical training focused on delivery strategies and formative evaluation should be incorporated into ongoing professional development.

Regarding professional development sources, Table 4 illustrates teachers' participation in thematic-oriented human resource development activities. The data show that 66% of teachers participate in professional development via Regency-level associations, while fewer engage in school-based training, peer learning, or independent efforts. This suggests that professional development opportunities are unevenly accessed and that diversification is needed.

Table 4 Thematic-Oriented Human Resource Development Activities

Development Source	Number of Teachers	Percentage
Professional Association (Regency Level)	20	66%
School-based Training	5	17%
Peer Learning	1	3%
Independent Efforts	4	14%
Total	30	100%

Source: Data processed by researches, 2023

The analysis indicates that most teachers do not meet the competency standards required for effective thematic instruction. This situation warrants urgent intervention through workshops, seminars, and continuous certification programs. In response to this, Recommended school-level strategies include:

- 1) Mapping teacher competencies in thematic instruction;
- 2) Conducting internal workshops aligned with the Kurikulum Merdeka;
- 3) Establishing teacher learning communities;
- 4) Implementing regular supervision and reflective practices; and
- 5) Collaboratively designing and implementing thematic teaching modules.

Individual motivation and self-development are also critical (Al-Sayyed, 2014). Accordingly, recommended individual strategies include:

- 1) Participating in relevant training (online/offline);
- 2) Applying project-based learning approaches;
- 3) Developing interactive thematic teaching media;
- 4) Conducting weekly reflections for self-evaluation; and
- 5) Collaborating on thematic lesson plan development.

Such efforts are expected to strengthen teacher professional capacity and improve thematic instruction quality consistent with the Kurikulum Merdeka principles.

At the policy level, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology should mandate specialized professional development for teachers lacking Social Studies backgrounds to close cross-disciplinary competency gaps. Ensuring all teachers possess adequate skills will support integrated, contextual, and student-centered Social Studies instruction. Such efforts will help advance equitable thematic education across the nation.

Effective thematic instruction relies on teachers' facilitation of holistic scientific understanding. However, full thematic integration is not always feasible, as some materials resist meaningful combination. Thus, a deep understanding of core competencies (KI), basic competencies (KD), and learning indicators (IPK) is essential. One informant (X, 45 years old) explained that the process begins with mapping KI, KD, and IPK to thematic content, followed by syllabus and lesson plan

development. However, teachers with limited competence often rely heavily on existing lesson plans without contextual adaptation, which may reduce the originality and relevance of instruction.

Theme selection should consider not only KI and KD but also student needs, interests, and local context (Al-Sayyed, 2014). Another informant (Y, 36 years old) described two common approaches: (1) mapping KI and KD to determine themes and (2) selecting themes based on student interests then aligning with competencies. The first approach is more widely used for practicality. Nonetheless, student involvement in theme selection remains limited. Instruction tends to be teacher-centered which hinder participatory learning and poses a significant barrier to effective thematic instruction. (Beckmann, 2021).

The Competency Gap of Non-Linear Teachers in the Thematic Social Studies Learning in Lumajang Regency

Thematic Social Studies instruction requires teachers to integrate disciplines such as geography, history, economics, sociology, and anthropology into a cohesive thematic curriculum. Professional competence, as defined by Tang et al. (2020), includes knowledge, performance, and values, encompassing interdisciplinary content mastery, pedagogical skills, and professional ethics. These dimensions form the foundation for delivering thematic learning that is both holistic and contextual. (Sutomo, 2017; Widyatmoko, 2020). Integration also demands digital literacy, spatial flexibility, and creative instructional methods such as playful learning (Grammens et al., 2022; Jørgensen et al., 2023).

However, observations and interviews in Lumajang reveal that many Social Studies teachers from non-linear academic backgrounds lack comprehensive mastery of social studies content. These teachers typically excel in only one discipline that leads to fragmented instruction and suboptimal integration (AM, et al., 2018). Effective thematic instruction—including problem-based learning and local wisdom-based materials—requires extensive professional competence (Permatasari et al., 2019; Ulfah & Purwanti, 2020).

Empirical data show that among 35 Social Studies teachers, only about 50% have achieved optimal competency, 37% are developing, and 13% have not achieved mastery. This gap affects thematic instruction quality, with teachers often acting as content deliverers rather than facilitators of critical thinking (Sardiman, 2010). Additionally, limited digital competence—particularly in the use of educational technology and AI tools—impedes creation of engaging and future-oriented learning environments (Lin et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2022; Mariati et al., 2022).

Balancing knowledge, performance, and values is crucial for thematic learning success. Imbalances hinder content integration and the achievement of Social Studies education goals emphasizing critical thinking, problem-solving, and social values. Comprehensive competency development should involve formal education—such as graduate studies and certification—as well as informal education like workshops,

training sessions, and interdisciplinary collaboration.(Hackman, 2003; Turmuzi & Wahidaturrahmi, 2021). Therefore, Collaboration among teachers from diverse backgrounds is a recommended strategy to bridge gaps.

Mastery of interdisciplinary content, instructional media, thematic materials, and curriculum principles is fundamental (Hamirul, 2021; Jogo et al., 2022). Lack of competence in these areas hinders integrative instruction development. Institutional and governmental support for training and mentoring is urgently required, especially for teachers with non-linear backgrounds.

The competency gap among non-linear teachers presents a serious challenge. Professionalism in teaching requires continuous learning that goes beyond initial qualifications to support adaptive, contextual, and future-oriented instruction (Farihin et al., 2022; Sukardjo et al., 2020; Teig & Nilsen, 2022). High-quality thematic Social Studies education is achievable only if teachers possess comprehensive competence across knowledge, performance, and values.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion

This study reveals that the competencies of non-social studies (non-IPS) teachers in implementing thematic instruction remain uneven and generally suboptimal, both in terms of content mastery and pedagogical skills. The diverse educational backgrounds of social studies teachers contribute to limited interdisciplinary integration within the social sciences. As a result, the planning and implementation of thematic lessons become less effective. Most teachers depend heavily on external professional development, while self-initiated efforts for capacity building remain relatively low.

To enhance the quality of thematic instruction, targeted interventions are essential. These include continuous professional development programs, strengthening teacher learning communities, regular supervision, and collaborative development of instructional materials. Furthermore, the government should formulate specific policies aimed at non-IPS teachers to foster balanced cross-disciplinary competencies in thematic Social Studies instruction. Ultimately, individual teacher awareness and commitment, supported by adequate institutional infrastructure, are critical to realizing contextualized, holistic, and meaningful Social Studies learning aligned with the principles of the Kurikulum Merdeka.

Recommendation

Overcoming the challenges faced by Social Studies teachers with diverse academic backgrounds requires synchronized efforts from multiple stakeholders, including local governments, schools, and teacher education institutions. Local governments and the Lumajang District Education Office are advised to design structured capacity-building programs tailored for non-linear Social Studies teachers, focusing on content integration, thematic approaches, and contextual learning strategies. Schools are

encouraged to establish interdisciplinary teacher learning communities to foster collaboration and enhance professional competence. To complement these institutional efforts, Teacher Education Institutions (LPTK) should revise their curricula to produce graduates equipped with thematic and cross-disciplinary competencies that align with the instructional demands of primary and secondary education. At the individual level, non-IPS teachers are encouraged to strengthen their professional capacity through training, continuous development programs, and active participation in professional learning forums. Finally, to support evidence-based policy and practice, Further research is recommended to identify key factors contributing to the competency gap among teachers, with the aim of informing more accurate and context-sensitive policies to improve the quality of thematic instruction.

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