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Implementation of Innovative Learning Models in Thematic Learning in Elementary Schools

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Abstract

Thematic learning in elementary schools is designed to integrate multiple subjects into meaningful learning experiences that encourage active participation and deeper understanding. However, classroom practices often remain dominated by conventional teaching methods, limiting students' engagement and learning outcomes. Therefore, the implementation of innovative learning models is considered essential to improve the effectiveness of thematic instruction. This study aims to analyze the implementation of innovative learning models in thematic learning in elementary schools and examine their influence on students' engagement and conceptual understanding. The research employed a qualitative descriptive design involving classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with teachers and students, and documentation analysis of lesson plans and learning materials. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns related to instructional practices and students' learning experiences. The findings indicate that the use of innovative learning models such as Problem-Based Learning, Discovery Learning, Inquiry Learning, cooperative learning strategies, and digital learning media significantly improves student engagement, collaboration, and conceptual understanding in thematic learning. Students demonstrated higher participation in discussions, problem-solving activities, and collaborative tasks. However, several challenges were identified, including teachers' readiness, integration of thematic content, and limited learning resources. Overall, the study concludes that innovative learning models can enhance the effectiveness of thematic learning when supported by proper instructional planning and adequate learning resources.

Keywords:
Innovative Learning Model, Thematic Learning, Elementary Education, Student Engagement, Learning Implementation

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1. INTRODUCTION

Thematic learning has become one of the central approaches in elementary education because it integrates multiple subjects into meaningful learning experiences that reflect real-life contexts. In elementary schools, thematic learning is designed to connect knowledge across disciplines such as science, social studies, language, and mathematics, allowing students to develop a holistic understanding of concepts. Through thematic instruction, students are expected to explore relationships between topics while developing cognitive, social, and affective competencies simultaneously. This approach aligns with contemporary educational paradigms that emphasize meaningful learning experiences and interdisciplinary understanding. However, the effectiveness of thematic learning largely depends on the instructional strategies employed by teachers in organizing and facilitating learning activities in the classroom (Putri et al., 2023).

In practice, thematic learning requires teachers to be creative and innovative in designing learning experiences that integrate multiple subject areas into coherent and engaging activities. Teachers must organize content, learning tasks, and classroom interactions in ways that enable students to actively construct knowledge rather than passively receive information. When implemented effectively, thematic learning can help students develop deeper understanding because they can connect concepts across subjects and apply them in authentic contexts. Furthermore, thematic learning can foster curiosity, collaboration, and creativity among students by encouraging them to explore real-world problems through integrated learning experiences (Lestari et al., 2024).

Despite its potential benefits, the implementation of thematic learning in elementary schools still faces several challenges. In many classrooms, learning practices remain dominated by traditional teacher-centered methods, where teachers deliver information through lectures and students mainly listen and complete individual assignments. Such instructional practices often limit students' opportunities to actively engage with learning materials and participate in meaningful inquiry. Consequently, the integration of multiple subjects in thematic learning becomes superficial, as teachers may simply combine topics without creating meaningful connections between them (Rosmilasari & Adoe, 2021).

Another challenge in implementing thematic learning is the limited understanding among teachers regarding thematic lesson planning and integrated instructional design. Designing effective thematic instruction requires teachers to carefully map competencies across subjects, select appropriate learning activities, and create assessments that reflect integrated learning outcomes. However, several studies indicate that many teachers still struggle with these processes, particularly in integrating different subject contents and aligning them with thematic learning objectives. These difficulties often result in fragmented learning experiences that fail to fully achieve the goals of thematic education (Tryas & Hashim, 2025).

The Indonesian education system has attempted to address these challenges through curriculum reforms that emphasize student-centered learning and integrated thematic instruction. The 2013 Curriculum promotes thematic-integrative learning approaches that aim to develop students' knowledge, skills, and attitudes in a holistic manner. This curriculum framework encourages teachers to design learning activities that involve

exploration, collaboration, and reflection, enabling students to actively participate in the learning process. By adopting student-centered pedagogies, thematic learning is expected to support the development of twenty-first century competencies such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity (Sahabuddin et al., 2023).

However, the success of thematic learning implementation depends not only on curriculum design but also on the instructional models used in classroom practice. Innovative learning models play an essential role in transforming thematic learning into an engaging and meaningful process. These models provide structured learning strategies that encourage students to actively explore ideas, collaborate with peers, and solve problems within integrated thematic contexts. Without appropriate instructional models, thematic learning may remain theoretical and fail to produce meaningful learning experiences for students (Putri et al., 2023).

Various innovative learning models have been developed and applied to improve the effectiveness of thematic learning in elementary schools. Cooperative learning models such as Group Investigation and Jigsaw have been widely used to enhance students' collaborative learning experiences. These models encourage students to work together in groups, share ideas, and collectively construct knowledge about thematic topics. Research shows that cooperative learning strategies can improve students' academic achievement, social interaction, and conceptual understanding because students learn through active discussion and peer collaboration (Alfateza et al., 2025).

Similarly, Problem-Based Learning (PBL) has been recognized as an effective instructional model for thematic education. In PBL environments, students are presented with real-world problems that require them to apply knowledge from multiple subjects to develop solutions. This approach stimulates critical thinking and encourages students to explore various perspectives when addressing complex issues. Studies indicate that PBL can significantly improve students' learning outcomes and social attitudes while fostering deeper conceptual understanding in thematic learning contexts (Yuswantoro & Winanto, 2022).

Another innovative approach that has gained attention in recent years is Challenge-Based Learning (CBL). This model integrates real-world challenges with technological resources to encourage students to develop creative solutions to authentic problems. In thematic learning environments, CBL can help students develop critical thinking skills and digital literacy while engaging in interdisciplinary learning activities. The integration of technology and real-world challenges makes learning more relevant and motivating for students, particularly in contemporary educational contexts that emphasize digital competence (Isbadrianingtyas et al., 2024).

In addition to these models, other innovative approaches such as shared and webbed models of thematic integration, contextual learning modules, and the use of illustrative thematic media have also been shown to improve students' learning experiences. These instructional strategies aim to create meaningful connections between learning materials and students' daily lives. When students can relate thematic topics to their real-life experiences, they tend to develop stronger motivation and deeper understanding of concepts. As a result, innovative learning models contribute not only to academic achievement but also to students' overall learning engagement (Rita et al., 2023).

Although numerous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of innovative learning models in improving learning outcomes, many of these studies primarily focus on measurable academic results such as test scores and cognitive performance. While these indicators provide valuable information about learning effectiveness, they often overlook the complexities involved in implementing innovative instructional models in real classroom settings. In practice, the implementation of innovative learning models may involve various challenges related to classroom management, student readiness, and limited learning resources (Putri et al., 2023).

Another limitation of existing research lies in the lack of detailed examination of how innovative models are implemented in thematic learning contexts. Many studies report positive learning outcomes without thoroughly analyzing the processes through which these outcomes are achieved. For example, aspects such as how teachers adapt instructional models to classroom conditions, how students respond to new learning strategies, and what challenges arise during implementation are often insufficiently explored. Understanding these aspects is crucial for developing practical guidelines that can support teachers in implementing innovative learning models effectively (Candy et al., 2025).

Furthermore, previous research indicates that teachers often experience difficulties in integrating multiple subject contents when implementing thematic learning. The preparation of thematic lesson plans, alignment of learning objectives, and development of comprehensive assessment strategies require significant pedagogical expertise. Without adequate support and professional development opportunities, teachers may struggle to effectively apply innovative learning models in their classrooms. These challenges highlight the need for research that examines not only the outcomes but also the practical implementation processes of innovative instructional models in thematic education (Lestari et al., 2024).

Recent reviews of project-based and problem-based learning in elementary education also emphasize the importance of examining broader learning domains beyond cognitive achievement. Learning outcomes should include affective, social, and metacognitive dimensions that reflect students' engagement, attitudes, and self-regulated learning abilities. However, many studies still overlook these aspects, focusing mainly on academic performance indicators. Consequently, there is a need for research that provides a more comprehensive understanding of how innovative learning models influence multiple dimensions of students' learning experiences (Candy et al., 2025).

Based on these considerations, there remains a significant research gap concerning the implementation of innovative learning models in thematic learning in elementary schools. While previous studies have demonstrated the potential benefits of these models, fewer studies have examined how they are implemented in real classroom contexts, including the steps taken by teachers, the adaptations made to accommodate classroom conditions, and the challenges encountered during the learning process. Addressing this gap is essential for bridging the discrepancy between curriculum policy and classroom practice in thematic education (Tryas & Hashim, 2025).

This study therefore offers a novel contribution by focusing on the practical implementation of innovative learning models in thematic learning at the elementary school

level. Unlike many previous studies that primarily emphasize learning outcomes, this research examines how innovative instructional models are applied in real classroom contexts and how they influence students' engagement and conceptual understanding. By analyzing the implementation process and its impact on students' learning experiences, the study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of innovative learning models in thematic education.

Therefore, the objective of this study is to analyze the implementation of innovative learning models in thematic learning in elementary schools and to examine how these models influence students' engagement and understanding of thematic learning content. Through this investigation, the study seeks to contribute to the development of more effective instructional strategies that support meaningful and student-centered learning experiences in elementary education.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to examine the implementation of innovative learning models in thematic learning in elementary schools. The qualitative approach was selected because the study aimed to explore how innovative instructional models are implemented in real classroom contexts and how they influence students' engagement and understanding of thematic learning content. The research was conducted in an elementary school where thematic learning is implemented according to the principles of the integrative curriculum. The participants consisted of classroom teachers and students involved in thematic learning activities. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that the selected classes had experience in applying innovative learning models in thematic instruction. Data collection was carried out using several techniques, including classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation analysis. Classroom observations were conducted to examine the learning process, teacher instructional strategies, student participation, and classroom interactions during the implementation of innovative learning models. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers and students to obtain deeper insights into their perceptions, experiences, and challenges during the learning process. In addition, documentation such as lesson plans, learning modules, and student assignments was analyzed to understand how innovative models were integrated into thematic learning activities.

The data analysis in this study followed a qualitative thematic analysis procedure. First, all collected data from observations, interviews, and documentation were organized and transcribed systematically. Second, the data were coded to identify key themes related to the implementation of innovative learning models, including instructional strategies, student engagement, collaborative learning processes, and challenges encountered during classroom implementation. Third, the coded data were categorized into broader themes that reflected patterns of implementation and their influence on students' learning experiences in thematic learning. To ensure the credibility and validity of the findings, data triangulation was applied by comparing information obtained from different data sources, including observations, interviews, and documentation. The interpretation process emphasized identifying relationships between instructional practices and students' engagement and

understanding in thematic learning. Through this analytical process, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive description of how innovative learning models are implemented and how they contribute to improving the quality of thematic learning in elementary schools.

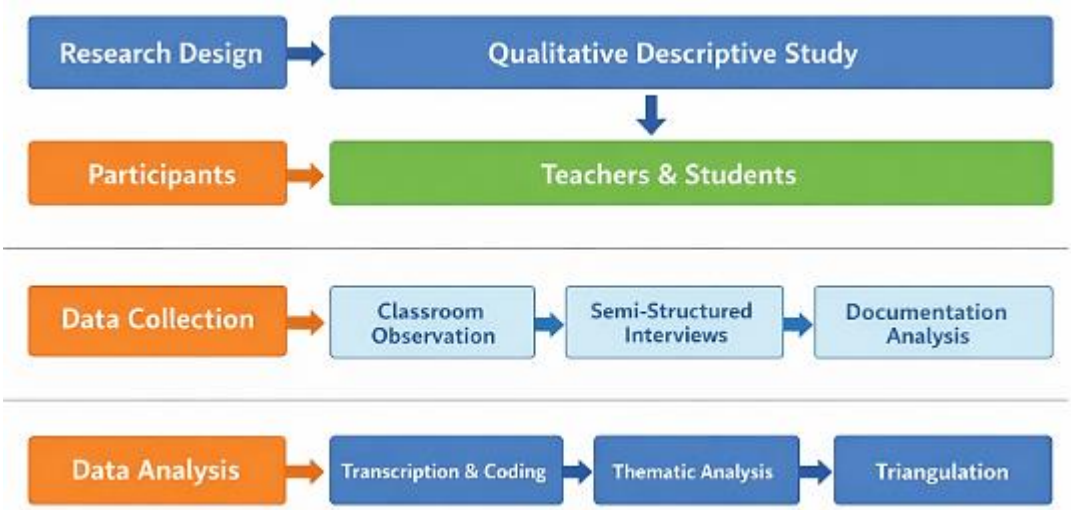

Figure 1. Journal of Learning Spectrum

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

To examine the implementation of innovative learning models in thematic learning in elementary schools, data collected from classroom observations, interviews with teachers and students, and documentation analysis were organized into several key themes. The analysis focused on how innovative learning models were implemented in the classroom, the level of student engagement during learning activities, students' conceptual understanding of thematic content, and the challenges encountered during the implementation process. These themes emerged as the most dominant patterns from the qualitative data obtained during the study. The summary of the findings is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Implementation of Innovative Learning Models in Thematic Learning in Elementary Schools

Implementation Aspect	Indicators Observed	Findings from the Classroom	Educational Implications
Learning Model Implementation	Use of cooperative, problem-based, and contextual thematic learning strategies	Teachers implemented innovative models such as collaborative discussion, problem-solving tasks, and contextual learning activities	Learning activities became more structured and interactive
Student Engagement	Active participation in	Students showed higher enthusiasm	Increased motivation and

	discussion, group activities, and problem-solving tasks	and participation during thematic learning activities	active involvement in learning
Conceptual Understanding	Ability to connect concepts across subjects in thematic topics	Students were able to relate knowledge from different subjects within the same theme	Improved integrated understanding of thematic content
Collaborative Learning	Group investigation, peer discussion, and cooperative task completion	Students frequently shared ideas and supported each other during learning activities	Development of teamwork and communication skills
Implementation Challenges	Limited learning resources, time constraints, and teacher adaptation to new models	Some teachers experienced difficulties in integrating multiple subjects and managing group activities	Need for teacher training and better learning support

The results presented in Table 1 indicate that the implementation of innovative learning models plays a significant role in improving the quality of thematic learning in elementary schools. The findings show that when teachers apply innovative instructional strategies such as cooperative learning and problem-based activities, students become more actively engaged in the learning process. Increased participation during discussions and collaborative tasks suggests that innovative models create more interactive learning environments compared to traditional teaching approaches. In addition, students demonstrated a better ability to connect knowledge across different subjects within thematic topics, indicating improved conceptual understanding. The collaborative nature of these learning models also supported the development of teamwork and communication skills among students. However, the results also reveal several challenges, including limited learning resources and teachers' difficulties in managing integrated thematic instruction. These findings suggest that while innovative learning models have the potential to enhance student engagement and understanding, successful implementation requires adequate teacher preparation, supportive learning resources, and effective classroom management strategies.

3.2. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to analyze the implementation of innovative learning models in thematic learning in elementary schools and to examine how these models influence students' engagement and conceptual understanding. The findings presented in Table 1 indicate that the implementation of innovative learning models contributed to

increased student engagement, improved conceptual understanding of integrated thematic topics, enhanced collaborative learning, and the development of higher-order thinking skills. These findings confirm that thematic learning can become more meaningful and effective when teachers employ innovative instructional strategies that encourage active participation and inquiry. In elementary education, thematic learning requires instructional approaches that allow students to explore relationships among subjects while actively constructing knowledge through meaningful learning activities (Putri et al., 2023).

One of the most significant findings of this study relates to the role of innovative learning models in enhancing students' engagement during thematic learning. The results show that when teachers implement active learning strategies such as problem-solving activities, collaborative discussions, and contextual tasks, students demonstrate greater enthusiasm and participation in classroom activities. Students become more actively involved in group discussions, ask questions more frequently, and show greater curiosity toward thematic learning topics. This finding supports previous research indicating that innovative learning models can transform passive classroom environments into active learning spaces where students become central participants in the learning process (Tryas & Hashim, 2025).

The increased engagement observed in this study is closely related to the application of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) within thematic learning contexts. PBL allows students to explore real-world problems related to the thematic topic, which encourages them to actively investigate solutions using knowledge from multiple subject areas. Through contextual problem scenarios and project-based tasks, students are encouraged to analyze situations, gather information, and collaboratively develop solutions. Studies show that the implementation of PBL in thematic learning significantly improves students' learning outcomes, creativity, and higher-order thinking skills because students actively construct knowledge while solving authentic problems (Yuswantoro & Winanto, 2022).

In addition to improving learning outcomes, PBL also provides opportunities for differentiated instruction that accommodates students' diverse learning needs. In thematic learning environments, students may possess different levels of readiness, interests, and learning styles. By integrating differentiated tasks within PBL activities, teachers can provide varied learning experiences that enable all students to participate according to their abilities. Previous research indicates that differentiated PBL approaches can increase students' motivation and engagement because learning activities are adapted to students' individual characteristics and interests (Dewi et al., 2025).

Another innovative instructional strategy identified in this study is the use of Discovery Learning in thematic instruction. Discovery Learning encourages students to explore concepts independently through observation, questioning, experimentation, and reflection. In thematic learning environments, this model allows students to discover relationships between concepts from different subjects by engaging in investigative activities. The findings of this study align with previous research showing that the implementation of Discovery Learning improves both teacher instructional practices and students' learning activities, resulting in improved knowledge and skill development in thematic learning contexts (Putra & Abidin, 2023).

The effectiveness of Discovery Learning in thematic instruction can be explained by its emphasis on inquiry-based exploration. Instead of receiving information passively from the teacher, students are encouraged to investigate problems and construct their own understanding through learning activities. This process promotes deeper conceptual understanding because students actively engage with learning materials and develop cognitive connections between different thematic concepts. Such learning experiences support meaningful learning processes where students develop long-term understanding rather than temporary memorization of information (Putra & Abidin, 2023).

Another model that contributes to the effectiveness of thematic learning is Inquiry Learning. Inquiry-based approaches emphasize students' active involvement in exploring questions, conducting investigations, and interpreting findings. Within thematic learning contexts, inquiry learning enables students to investigate interdisciplinary problems that integrate knowledge from various subjects. Previous systematic reviews have shown that inquiry learning consistently improves students' thematic learning outcomes because students become actively engaged in investigating problems and constructing explanations based on evidence (Yofamella & Taufik, 2023).

The implementation of inquiry learning in thematic classrooms also encourages students to develop scientific reasoning and critical thinking skills. Through investigative activities, students learn how to formulate questions, collect relevant information, analyze evidence, and present conclusions. These processes promote intellectual curiosity and analytical thinking, which are essential competencies for modern education. By engaging in inquiry-based thematic learning activities, students develop not only academic knowledge but also the ability to think critically and solve problems systematically (Yofamella & Taufik, 2023).

Collaborative learning models also played an important role in the implementation of innovative learning strategies in this study. Cooperative learning approaches such as Group Investigation and Jigsaw were implemented to encourage students to work together in exploring thematic topics. Through collaborative learning activities, students shared ideas, discussed concepts, and supported each other in understanding complex thematic content. Previous research indicates that cooperative learning models significantly improve students' academic achievement, social interaction, and collaborative skills in thematic learning environments (Alfateza et al., 2025).

The collaborative nature of cooperative learning models also enhances students' social competencies and communication skills. When students work in groups, they learn to negotiate ideas, express opinions, and listen to different perspectives. These interactions contribute to the development of teamwork and interpersonal skills that are essential for twenty-first century learning. Studies have shown that collaborative learning environments not only improve academic outcomes but also strengthen students' ability to work effectively with others in solving problems (Karina et al., 2024).

In addition to these commonly used instructional models, the findings of this study also highlight the importance of integrating digital media and contextual learning materials in thematic instruction. Digital resources such as e-modules, interactive flipbooks, and multimedia learning materials can enhance students' motivation and engagement by

presenting thematic content in more interactive formats. Digital learning tools also allow teachers to present information visually and contextually, which helps students understand abstract concepts more easily. Research indicates that the use of digital thematic learning media can significantly improve students' motivation and conceptual understanding (Avandra et al., 2023).

The integration of contextual thematic learning materials is particularly important in elementary education because students tend to learn more effectively when concepts are connected to their daily experiences. Contextual learning allows students to relate academic knowledge to real-life situations, making learning more meaningful and relevant. When students can see how thematic concepts apply to their everyday lives, they become more motivated to engage with learning activities and explore new ideas (Hanafi et al., 2024).

Despite the many benefits of innovative learning models identified in this study, several challenges were also observed during the implementation process. One major challenge relates to teachers' readiness and ability to implement innovative instructional strategies effectively. Implementing models such as PBL, inquiry learning, and cooperative learning requires teachers to possess strong pedagogical knowledge and classroom management skills. Without adequate training and professional development opportunities, teachers may struggle to design effective thematic learning activities that integrate multiple subject areas (Yofamella & Taufik, 2023).

Another challenge identified in this study concerns the integration of thematic content across different subject areas. Teachers often find it difficult to design integrated lesson plans that effectively combine concepts from multiple disciplines while maintaining coherence in learning objectives. Such difficulties can result in fragmented learning experiences where thematic connections are not clearly established. Previous research also highlights that teachers frequently encounter difficulties in designing integrated thematic lesson plans and developing appropriate assessment strategies for interdisciplinary learning (Putri et al., 2023).

Limited access to learning resources and digital media also represents a significant barrier to the effective implementation of innovative learning models. In some schools, teachers may lack access to technological resources or digital learning materials that support interactive learning activities. This limitation can restrict teachers' ability to implement innovative instructional strategies that rely on digital tools or multimedia resources. Consequently, improving educational infrastructure and providing teachers with adequate learning resources are essential for supporting the implementation of innovative learning models (Avandra et al., 2023).

Another important challenge relates to the diversity of students' learning needs in elementary classrooms. Students possess different levels of academic readiness, learning styles, and interests, which require teachers to implement differentiated instruction strategies. Without appropriate differentiation, some students may struggle to follow complex learning activities, while others may not feel sufficiently challenged. Therefore, innovative learning models must be adapted to accommodate students' diverse learning needs in order to ensure inclusive and effective learning environments (Nisa et al., 2023).

Despite these challenges, the overall findings of this study demonstrate that the implementation of innovative learning models can significantly improve the quality of thematic learning in elementary schools. By integrating instructional strategies such as PBL, discovery learning, inquiry learning, cooperative learning, and digital media, teachers can create more interactive and meaningful learning environments. These approaches encourage students to actively participate in learning activities, develop critical thinking skills, and construct knowledge through collaborative inquiry processes (Tryas & Hashim, 2025).

Furthermore, innovative learning models contribute to the development of holistic student competencies that extend beyond cognitive achievement. Through thematic learning activities, students develop social skills, communication abilities, creativity, and problem-solving competencies that are essential for their future academic and professional development. These competencies reflect the goals of contemporary education systems that emphasize the development of twenty-first century skills alongside academic knowledge (Tryas & Hashim, 2025).

Overall, this study highlights the importance of examining the implementation of innovative learning models in real classroom contexts. While previous studies have primarily focused on learning outcomes, this research emphasizes the practical processes through which innovative instructional strategies are applied in thematic learning environments. Understanding these implementation processes provides valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers seeking to improve the quality of elementary education.

In conclusion, the findings of this study indicate that innovative learning models play a crucial role in improving student engagement, conceptual understanding, and collaborative learning in thematic education. However, successful implementation requires adequate teacher preparation, sufficient learning resources, and effective instructional planning. Future research should further explore how different innovative learning models can be integrated within thematic learning frameworks to create more comprehensive and inclusive learning experiences for elementary school students.

4. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to analyze the implementation of innovative learning models in thematic learning in elementary schools and to examine how these models influence students' engagement and conceptual understanding. The findings indicate that the implementation of innovative learning models such as Problem-Based Learning, Discovery Learning, Inquiry Learning, cooperative learning strategies, and the integration of digital learning media contributes significantly to improving the quality of thematic learning. These models encourage active student participation, strengthen collaborative interactions, and support the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills within integrated thematic contexts. In addition, innovative instructional strategies help students connect concepts across different subjects, resulting in deeper conceptual understanding and more meaningful learning experiences. However, the implementation process also faces several challenges, including teachers' readiness to apply innovative strategies, difficulties in integrating thematic content across subjects, and limitations in learning resources and digital

support. Overall, the findings demonstrate that innovative learning models play an important role in enhancing student engagement and understanding in thematic learning, while also highlighting the need for adequate teacher preparation and supportive learning environments to ensure effective implementation in elementary schools.

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