The Evolution of Thematic and Integrative Approaches in Social Studies Education: A Historical and Conceptual Analysis

Eka Yuliana Rahman[1], Nana Supriatna[2*], Juju Masunah[3], Erlina Wiyanarti[4],
Nur Allan Lasido[5], Moh Fikri Pomalingo[6]

[1,2,3,4]Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Bandung, Indonesia
[5]IAIN Manado, Manado, Indonesia
[6]Okayama University, Okayama, Jepang

*Corresponding E-mail: nanasup@upi.edu

Abstract	Article Info
This article examines thematic and integrated approaches in Social Studies Education through ontological, epistemological, and axiological perspectives. It arises from the limited availability of studies that explore these approaches from historical and developmental perspectives. The purpose of this literature research is to describe the early evolution of thematic and integrated approaches and to explain how educational practices have changed over time. Using the library research method by Both and Williams (2016), the study follows ten stages of data collection, analysis, and reduction based on relevant references. Through the Publish or Perish application, 30 relevant articles were identified using the keywords "pendekatan tematik dan terpadu." The findings reveal that interdisciplinary contexts provide a crucial perspective in Social Studies, emphasizing integration among disciplines as a core principle. These approaches gained prominence in the 20th century, influenced by Bruner's constructivism (1960) and Krathwohl's revision of Bloom's Taxonomy (2002). Models developed by Fogarty (1991) and Jacobs & Borland (1986) demonstrate their practical application, with Indonesian curricula applying integrated, correlated, and separated models across different education levels.	

Introduction

Ontologically, what is the purpose of teaching Social Studies? Moreover, what approaches can be used? It appears that these questions elicit a range of answers, each tied to the ongoing debate surrounding the structure, purpose, and meaning of Social Studies education. According to Woolever and Kathryn P. Scoff (1987), conceptually, Social Studies encompasses a range of social science disciplines, including Anthropology, Economics, Geography, History, Political Science, Psychology, Sociology, and Philosophy (Woolever, R.S., 1987). Meanwhile, the typology proposed by Barr, Barth, and Shermis (1978) provides several guidelines. The question, "What do we teach in the social sciences for?" refers to the idea that teaching Social Studies requires a foundation of moral and ethical commitment. It can be said that what makes this question important is the fact that the social sciences cannot be separated from, and are closely related to, the society they claim to study (Crowe & Cuenca, 2016).

From an epistemological perspective, the interdisciplinary context becomes a way of viewing Social studies education through thematic and integrated approaches that can be implemented through integration. In general, the principle of bridging one scientific field with another is an essential endeavor, not only within the discipline of Social Studies (Siswanto, 2011). Social Studies education has its own distinctive characteristics because the construction of its scientific foundation was initially discussed from various supporting disciplines. Sapriya (2009) explains that the supporting disciplines of Social Studies originate from religion, philosophy, the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities (Sapriya, 2009). According to the NCSS (1992), Social Studies is an integrated study of the social sciences and humanities designed to promote civic competence. In the school curriculum, Social Studies provides a coordinated and systematic study that draws upon various disciplines such as anthropology, archaeology, economics, geography, history, jurisprudence, political science, psychology, religion, and sociology, as well as relevant content from the humanities, mathematics, and natural sciences (NCSS, 1992). The primary goal of the social sciences is to help young generations develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse and democratic society within an interdependent world (Banks, 1990).

From this definitional context, the integrated study of content serves as a foundation for developing appropriate approaches. One approach capable of

accommodating this integration is the thematic and integrated approach (Woolever, R.S., 1987). Therefore, this article seeks to explore and analyze the history and development of the thematic and integrated approaches in Social Studies (IPS). The trend of thematic and integrated approaches has become increasingly widespread across educational practices.

Method

This study employs a qualitative method with a library research approach, following the framework of Both and Williams (2016). In this study, the sequence of activities involves collecting library data, reading and taking notes, and then processing relevant and necessary information to address the research problems. According to Both and Williams (2016), the steps of library research begin with formulating research questions (Both & Williams, 2016). These questions guide the search process and help identify relevant literature. The next step involves searching for information sources related to the research topic, including books, journal articles, research reports, websites, and library databases. Academic search engines or library catalogs are also used to identify pertinent sources.

The collected sources are then evaluated to ensure their reliability and relevance. Factors such as the author's credibility, research methodology, publication year, and relevance to the research questions are taken into consideration (Creswell, 2018). Upon reviewing the sources, the researcher records key points, findings, or relevant quotations. These notes assist in referencing the gathered information later. After collecting the literature, the data is organized using notes, spreadsheets, or other tools to support systematic arrangement. The researcher then analyzes the collected literature, identifying patterns, trends, differences, or similarities relevant to the research questions. Following the analysis, the literature is synthesized into summaries, key points, or frameworks that align with the research objectives (Zed, 2014).

Finally, the reviewed literature is connected to the current research by examining how it supports or contrasts with the research questions. A conceptual framework is then developed based on the findings of the literature review. All essential bibliographic information, such as author, title, journal or publisher, publication year, and other citation details, is recorded adequately according to the selected citation style.

Therefore, relevant literature was collected by searching with the keywords "thematic and integrated approach in Social Studies and filtering the years between 2018 and 2023, limiting the results to 30 articles using the Publish or Perish application. The collected results were examined and interpreted within the research context, focusing on implementation and challenges through a critical review. Irrelevant search results were excluded to maintain focus and ensure alignment with the study's substance, allowing the management of gathered sources to remain consistent and relevant to the research topic.

Results

The trend of thematic and integrated approaches has developed extensively across nearly all scientific disciplines. Likewise, the growing trend of interdisciplinary understanding and the urgency of its application are increasingly recognized in various fields, reflecting how interdisciplinary approaches are implemented across sectors, including higher education, research, and professional practice. This development also highlights the potential and complexity of interdisciplinarity and how it can be effectively applied (Frodeman, R., Klein, J. T., and Pacheco, R. C. D. S. (Eds.)., 2017).

In the context of Social Studies education, the use of thematic and integrated approaches can be seen through the intersection of historical dynamics in the development of knowledge. As Social Studies evolved in the 20th century, education and instruction were initially conducted separately based on distinct disciplines. However, during the twentieth century, the idea emerged that integration across disciplines could enhance students' understanding (R. Susan et al., 2012). Bruner (1960) advocated for a shift in educational practice, from a focus on rote memorization to a more active engagement in learning. The importance of key concepts in education was first introduced by Bruner (1960).

Table 1. Thematic Approach by Bruner, 1960 (Diagram processed by the Author)

No	Focus of Thematic Approach	Developed Concept
1	Discovery Learning	Students actively explore and construct knowledge, thereby discovering concepts independently.
2	Spiral Curriculum	Topics are revisited at different stages of development, deepening understanding and complexity over time. Themes and issues should be integrated with the structural knowledge of disciplines to build a strong foundation.
3	Thematic Approach	Discovery learning and the spiral curriculum align with thematic teaching. It begins with organizing the curriculum around themes,

		generalizations, and the ability to connect concepts across different fields of study.
4	Influence on Thematic Teaching	Active learning, understanding the structure of a discipline, and reviewing topics and teaching objectives to promote holistic development.
5	Criticism and Further Development	Although impactful, Bruner's ideas have also drawn criticism, prompting educators to carefully consider diverse materials and learning styles.

The development of taxonomy has also significantly influenced thematic and integrative approaches in education. Krathwohl's revision of Bloom's Taxonomy provided a refined framework for categorizing educational objectives. Initially developed by Benjamin Bloom in the 1950s, the taxonomy was designed to classify cognitive goals (Bloom, 1969). Later, Krathwohl and his educational colleagues revised the model to better align with contemporary educational aims, focusing on mental processes in learning and thinking.

The original taxonomy consisted of six hierarchical levels: Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis, and Evaluation. Krathwohl's revision reorganized these levels and replaced the noun-based terms with action verbs to represent cognitive processes more accurately. This revised taxonomy offers educators a more dynamic framework for designing learning objectives and assessments. It emphasizes active engagement, critical thinking, and creativity in the learning process (Krathwohl, D. R., 2002).

The revision reflects a shift toward constructivist principles, emphasizing the importance of students actively constructing understanding, analyzing information, and generating new knowledge (Tabrizi & Rideout, 2017). Krathwohl's updated taxonomy provides educators with a contemporary perspective on the cognitive processes involved in learning. It aligns closely with current educational philosophies that prioritize higher-order thinking skills. Educators can utilize this taxonomy to inform instructional design, establish learning goals that foster critical thinking, and develop assessments that evaluate a range of cognitive processes (Callaghan-Koru & Aqil, 2022). The taxonomy encourages a transition from rote memorization to more active and meaningful learning experiences.

Another significant influence on the development of constructivist views can be traced to the early 20th century, through John Dewey's (1938) emphasis on experience as the foundation of learning. Dewey argued that education should not merely be a process of accumulating knowledge, but rather a meaningful and

experiential learning process. His educational philosophy has been widely associated with pragmatism and constructivism. The pragmatic perspective emphasizes the usefulness of knowledge in practical life applications, while constructivism focuses on learners actively building and applying their own learning (Sofa & Safitri, 2022).

Models of curriculum integration often refer to the framework proposed by Fogarty (1991), which serves as a guide for designing and implementing integrated learning. Fogarty developed a learner-centered approach to curriculum design, providing practical strategies and examples for teachers and school administrators to effectively incorporate curricula. These may include thematic approaches (Joyce, Bruce, & Marsha Weil, 1986). Collaborative projects, or cross-disciplinary learning experiences. The following section outlines the characteristics of integrated learning models according to Fogarty (1991)

Figure 1. Fogarty, R. (1991). The Mindful School: How to Integrate the Curriculum
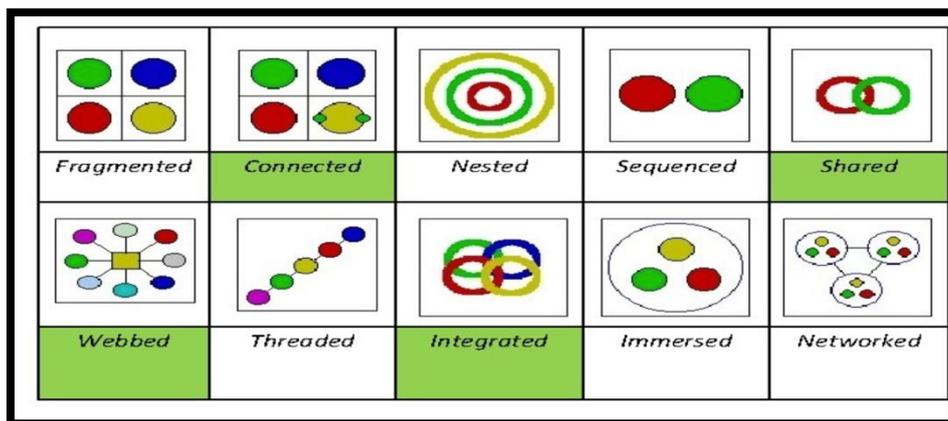
Hilda Taba emphasized that curriculum development is an ever-evolving process. During her era, substantial revisions were undertaken across all subject areas. The overarching goals, instructional methods, teacher styles, types of learning activities, organization and structure of knowledge, as well as systems of assessment and evaluation, were comprehensively reviewed (Taba et al., 1971). These revisions were notably successful within the social sciences, where serious efforts were made in various contexts to articulate broad social and personal objectives in relation to the expected behaviors of students (Conaughy, 1915).

A new perspective subsequently emerged regarding the nature of content to be taught, emphasizing enduring elements such as key concepts and generalizations rather than merely acquiring factual information (Dwivedi et al., 2022). The central

focus shifted toward identifying fundamental concepts, principles, and methods of inquiry within history and the social sciences, using these as the foundation for organizing the curriculum. This approach also advanced the use of inductive thinking methods as a way of fostering inquiry and reasoning aligned with the procedures of the social sciences. It emphasized adapting teaching and learning conditions, student characteristics, materials, and task criteria to promote meaningful engagement (Little et al., 2007).

Taba's spiral model proposes that, at each level of education, learning becomes more effective when implemented through an integrated approach. The following figure illustrates Hilda Taba's Spiral Approach (1971).

Figure 2. Hilda Taba (1971). The Spiral of Learning Breadth: From Lower to Higher Levels
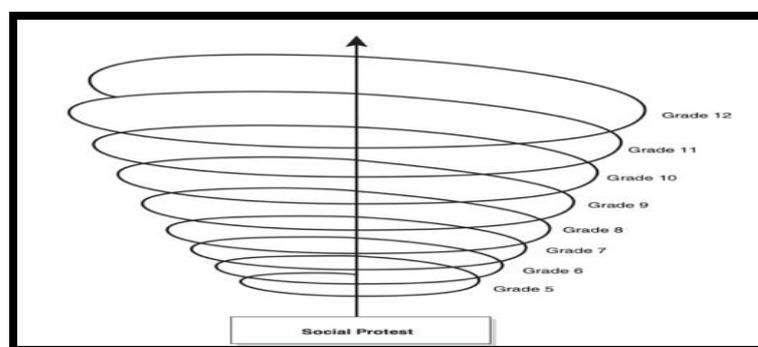
In the social sciences and inquiry-based learning, mastering facts, concepts, and generalizations is crucial for students. However, it is equally, if not more, vital for them to develop proficiency in the processes of gathering and evaluating knowledge, identifying biases and assumptions underlying knowledge claims, and constructing knowledge independently (Kulbert et al., 1968).

The application of thematic and integrated approaches in contemporary education is evident in the development of multicultural curricula. The primary goal is to help students cultivate inquiry and thinking skills (Banks, 2014) such as formulating research questions and problems, developing hypotheses, conceptualizing ideas, collecting and analyzing data, and deriving generalizations and conclusions. In Social Studies inquiry, theory serves as a primary source of meaningful questions. Although theoretical frameworks underpin the fundamental steps of social investigation, the figure illustrates that generalizations in the social sciences

are continuously tested and never regarded as absolute truths. Hence, social inquiry is cyclical rather than linear or fixed (Banks, 2006).

Figure 3. James A. Banks (1999). Model of Social Inquiry
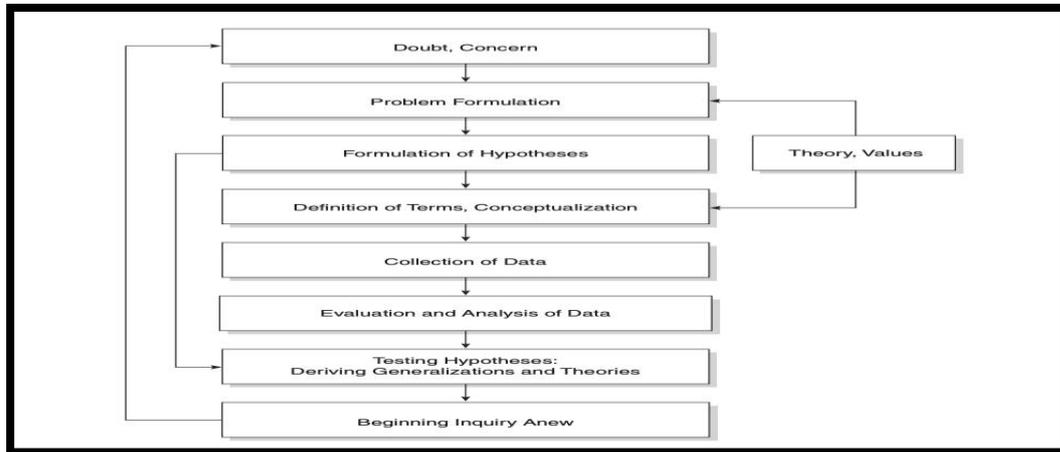
A conceptual framework for the integrated approach must take into account both its goals and objectives by examining the Social Studies curriculum in terms of its content and subject matter (Cox, 1922). The integration approach also considers Social Studies through its methods, skills, attitudes, and values, with the intended outcomes being effectiveness in teaching and learning, independence, productivity, and the cultivation of empowered citizens, as well as national development and various skill advancements (Alsaleh, 2020). This perspective highlights that curriculum integration is not merely a structural combination of subjects, but a pedagogical strategy that aligns educational goals with societal needs. From the researcher's perspective, this approach offers a more holistic direction for Social Studies education, ensuring that learning outcomes directly contribute to civic competence and social responsibility. A detailed illustration of this concept is shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Conceptual Framework of the Integrated Approach
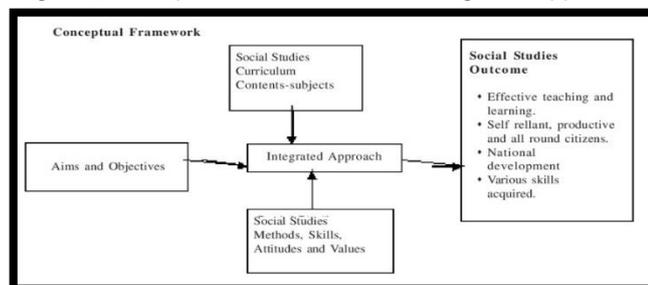
From an axiological perspective, the thematic and integrated approach can be observed through its capacity to utilize and organize learning based on the themes to be explored within social studies. The development of the thematic and integrated approach by Jacobs and Borland (1986) provides an illustrative framework, which is evident in Figures 5 and 6.

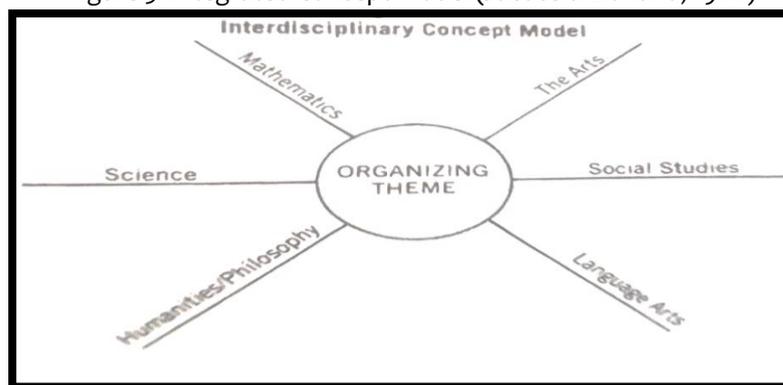Figure 5. Integrated Concept Model (Jacobs & Borland, 1986)

Figure 6. Model of Thematic-Based Integrated Approach (Jacobs & Borland, 1986)
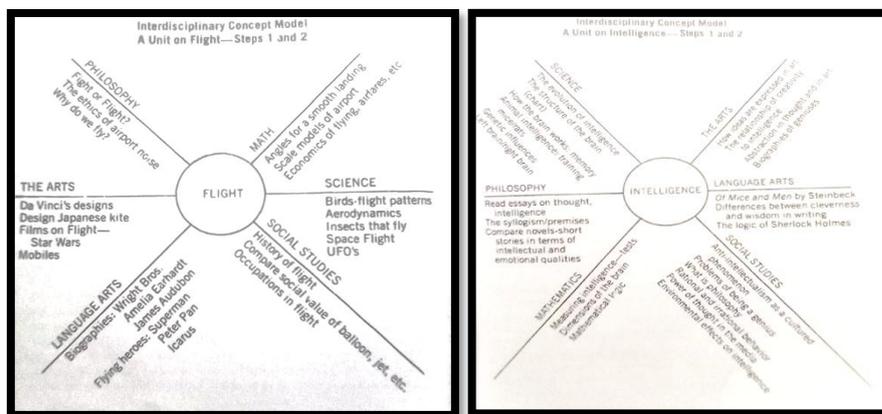
The main objective of this interdisciplinary model is to unify the perspectives of various disciplines and focus them on the exploration of a specific theme, issue, or target problem. The concept of interdisciplinarity proposed by Jacobs and Borland (1986) aims to promote a comprehensive understanding of interdisciplinary concepts, enabling students to recognize the connections between disciplines as they investigate subject matter. The primary task within this approach is the selection of a topic (Jacobs, H. H, 1989).

Table 2. Steps and Descriptions of Activities in the Interdisciplinary Model

No	Activity Steps	Explanation
1	Selecting the Organizing Center	The organizing center serves as the focus for curriculum development. The topic may take the form of a subject, event, issue, or problem, with careful consideration needed when determining the central focus. Students select the topic. The topic is expanded based on various perspectives.
2	Brainstorming Associations	Teachers use graphic organizers. The disciplines represented include standard school subjects such as Mathematics, Language Arts, Social Studies, Humanities, Philosophy, and Science. Conduct an introductory activity (*apersepsi*) before brainstorming. Brainstorming is an open-ended technique for generating ideas. Osborne (1963) outlines the following principles: (1) Criticism is deferred during the session, (2) Freewheeling is encouraged, (3) Evaluation follows later, (4) Two ideas may be combined to form a better one.
3	Establishing Guiding Questions to Serve as Scope and Sequence	Students are introduced to the learning unit. The framework for investigating the organizing center is established.
4	Designing Activities for Implementation	One principle of effective planning is that teachers should stimulate critical and creative thinking in students' daily learning plans. Bloom's Taxonomy (1956) serves as a guide for creating learning units and solving problems creatively. This model structures learning activities systematically.

Each region has its own concept and development of the curriculum, as well as different levels of schooling. In the United States, which is widely regarded as a reference in Social Studies, the K–12 framework is well known for the materials developed within the field. Discussing Social Studies in Indonesia in relation to curriculum development, under the 2013 Curriculum (K13). Educational levels structure Social Studies education. In Elementary Schools (SD/MI), Social Studies is taught in an integrated form, combining various social science disciplines (History, Geography, Economics, Sociology). In Junior High Schools (SMP/MTs), Social Studies is delivered in a correlated form, as an integrated subject. In Senior High Schools (SMA/MA), Social Studies is presented in a separate form, where each social science discipline is taught independently (Hasan, 1996)

Since Social Studies as a school subject borrows concepts, generalizations, and theories from other social sciences, not all materials from the social sciences are included in the Social Studies curriculum (Saputra, 2016). The selection is made according to the needs of teaching and education. The inclusion of Social Studies as a mandatory subject for students stems from the shared goal among social science scholars to develop citizens who are responsible and engaged members of their

societies and countries. Delivering content in Social Studies, therefore, requires specific skills and approaches.

The variety of approaches in Social Studies learning, as proposed by Robert Barr, Shermis, and Barth (Barr, R.D., Barth, J. L., & Shermis, S.S., 1977), can be seen in Table 3:

Table 3. Varieties of Approaches in Social Studies Learning According to Barr, Barth, & Shermis (1977) and Teaching Patterns

Approach Category	Type of Approach	Learning Focus or Orientation
Social Studies Approach according to Barr, Barth & Shermis (1977)	Experiential	Learning is based on students' direct experiences of social realities.
	Activity-Based	Students' activities become the central focus of the learning process.
	Conceptual	Emphasis is placed on the systematic formation concepts.
	Spiral	Learning materials are developed repeatedly at increasing levels of complexity.
	Correlation	Connecting various social concepts and relevant disciplines.
	Integration	Combining various fields of social sciences cohesively within the learning process.
	Progressive	Learning is directed toward developing critical thinking skills and fostering social change.
	Problem-Based	Focuses on addressing real-world social problems faced by students.
	Thematic	Learning materials are organized around specific, contextual social themes.
	Topical	Learning is structured around specific and relevant social topics.
	Conceptual	Instilling fundamental concepts of social life and societal values.
Approach Based on Teaching Patterns	Objective	Learning success is measured based on the achievement of predetermined goals.
	Process-Oriented	Emphasizes students' learning experiences and ways of thinking, rather than merely focusing on outcomes.
	Programming	Learning is systematically structured, either in a classical or individualized manner, according to learners' needs.

The substance of the social sciences comprises perspectives, themes, topics, phenomena, facts, events, procedures, concepts, generalizations, and theories, traditionally referred to as the curriculum. Meanwhile, the curriculum itself encompasses the processes, procedures, and steps that students must undertake in studying that substance, while the approach represents the method used to effectively deliver the material (Saxe, S. W, 1991).

Curriculum materials developed from various disciplines are selected based on their relevance to the intended learning objectives (Sapriya & Nurdin, 2006). The more substantial the relevance, the greater the likelihood that the material will be included in the curriculum (Skinner, B. F., 1958). For Social Studies Education, each discipline contributes to the development of curriculum materials. The extent of this contribution depends on the curriculum development approach employed, whether it adopts a disciplinary, separate, correlative, or integrative approach (Trefil & Hazen, 2023).

Conclusion

Social Studies education plays a crucial role in shaping students' understanding of social life and the values that sustain society. In this regard, various perspectives have emerged concerning its structure, objectives, and philosophical foundations. Woolever and Scoff (1987) explain that conceptually, Social Studies encompasses multiple social science disciplines, including anthropology, economics, geography, history, political science, psychology, sociology, and philosophy. Likewise, Barr, Barth, and Shermis (1978) developed a typology of Social Studies instruction that emphasizes the importance of understanding the essence of teaching the social sciences, not merely as the transmission of factual knowledge but as a process of instilling moral and ethical values for comprehending social life. Hence, the social sciences within educational contexts remain inseparable from the society that serves as both their subject and their living environment.

Ontologically, Social Studies education is oriented toward developing students' ability to understand the integration between social and pedagogical sciences. This complexity is accommodated through the application of thematic and integrated approaches that align Social Studies with its conceptual and disciplinary foundations. From an epistemological standpoint, the interdisciplinary context provides a means to examine Social Studies through the synthesis of diverse perspectives realized in thematic and integrative learning. Meanwhile, from an

axiological perspective, these approaches emphasize the value dimension of Social Studies education, particularly in the implementation of thematic and integrated methods that foster meaningful, contextual learning experiences and support the development of students' character and civic awareness.

Analytical studies on the development of these approaches mark the 20th century as a period of massive progress not only in Social Studies but across nearly all fields of knowledge. The thematic approach proposed by Bruner began with discovery learning, followed by the spiral curriculum development previously introduced by Hilda Taba, who employed a thematic approach. Krathwohl's revision of Bloom's Taxonomy transformed the levels from nouns to verbs and introduced higher-order thinking skills.

The model commonly used to implement thematic and integrated approaches is that of Fogarty (1991), which identifies ten forms: fragmented, connected, nested, sequenced, shared, webbed, threaded, integrated, immersed, and networked. James Banks (1999) emphasized that generalizations in the social sciences are continually tested and never considered absolute; therefore, cyclical patterns are necessary in material development. Jacobs & Borland (1986) provided an illustration of the Integrated Approach Based on Themes. In Indonesia, the development of thematic and integrated approaches, in addition to considering facts, generalizations, and conceptual aspects of the material, must also take into account the level of education. Social Studies content at the elementary school level is generally referred to as integrated, at the junior high school level as correlated, and at the senior high school level as separated.

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