

AN INTEGRATIVE AND DISCIPLINARY APPROACH IN JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL SOCIAL STUDIES CURRICULUM: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF INDONESIA AND JAPAN

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to describe and compare the integrative approach in the social studies curriculum of junior high schools in Indonesia and the disciplinary approach in the Shakaika curriculum in Japan, as well as to analyze their implications for strengthening the quality of education. The background of this study is the limited number of comparative studies that systematically examine the differences in social studies curriculum approaches in Asia, even though this issue contributes directly to global literacy and 21st-century competencies. The method used is a literature study with data sources in the form of curriculum documents, scientific articles, and international education reports, which are then analyzed descriptively using a thematic-analytical comparative framework. The results of the study show that the integrative approach in Indonesia offers opportunities for contextual and holistic learning, but is still constrained by conceptual depth, teacher readiness, and evaluation instruments, as reflected in low PISA scores. In contrast, the disciplinary approach in Japan produces solid depth of knowledge and supports analytical skills and civic awareness, as reflected in high PISA, TIMSS, and HDI scores. The conclusion of this study is that the effectiveness of the social studies curriculum in Indonesia can be improved by combining the flexibility of integration with disciplinary depth, supported by increased teacher capacity, the development of contextual modules, and consistency in curriculum policy. Academically, this study enriches the literature on comparative social studies curricula in Asia, and practically offers policy recommendations to improve the relevance and global competitiveness of social studies learning in Indonesia.

INTRODUCTION

The curriculum is the main foundation in the implementation of education because it serves as a guideline for the direction, objectives, and learning process (Uliatunida, 2020). A curriculum that is designed systematically and relevantly is believed to produce superior and competitive human resources in the global era (Mahrus, 2021). A strong curriculum also plays an important role in supporting the sustainable development agenda through the strengthening of 21st-century competencies, which emphasize critical, creative, collaborative, and communicative thinking skills (Bustanul Arifin & Abdul Mu'id, 2024; Susandi et al., 2025). Therefore, the quality of the curriculum will greatly determine a country's success in preparing its young generation to face future challenges.

Japan's success in education is an important reference for many countries, including Indonesia. The main factor supporting this success is the development of a consistent, systematic, and responsive curriculum (Gusriani et al., 2025). International data confirms that Japan consistently ranks at the top in various educational studies (R. Putri et al., 2024). The 2022 PISA scores, for example, show Japan's achievements in reading (516), mathematics (536), and science (547), which are well above the OECD average (OECD, 2023). The 2019 TIMSS results also placed Japan in the excellent category in mathematics and science (TIMSS, 2019). Japan's Human Development Index (HDI) in 2022 was recorded at 0.925, which is very high (UNDP, 2024). These facts confirm that a well-designed curriculum has a direct contribution to the quality of education and the excellence of human resources in Japan.

One of the important subjects in Japanese junior high schools is Shakaika (Social Studies). Based on the Course of Study established by MEXT (MEXT, 2017), Shakaika is designed to foster students' understanding of society, shape democratic attitudes, and instill civic values (Ramli, 2014). The material in Shakaika covers geography, history, and citizenship, which are taught separately so that students can gain in-depth disciplinary knowledge. A number of studies also confirm that Shakaika plays a major role in shaping Japanese citizens who are disciplined, critical, and have a high level of social awareness (Nadilla et al., 2025). Thus, Shakaika not only functions as a medium for knowledge transfer, but also as a means of shaping national character.

Unlike Japan, the implementation of social studies education in Indonesia has its own characteristics. Social studies in junior high school is presented using an integrative approach, which combines various social disciplines such as geography, history, economics, and sociology into one subject (Hidayat, 2020). This approach is expected to provide a comprehensive overview of social phenomena in an integrated manner. However, practice in the field shows that teachers often face difficulties in integrating these various disciplines, so that learning tends to be descriptive and lacking in depth (Rahmawati & Zidni, 2019). International assessment results also show that Indonesia's position is still below the OECD average. Indonesia's 2022 PISA scores, for example, only reached 371 for reading, 379 for mathematics, and 383 for science (OECD, 2023). This condition indicates the need for a critical evaluation of the effectiveness of the social studies curriculum and learning in Indonesia.

Recent research shows that the implementation of an integrative approach in social studies learning in Indonesia still faces various practical obstacles. Teachers often find it difficult to connect interdisciplinary concepts such as geography, history, economics, and sociology in depth, so that learning tends to be superficial and thematic (Mutiani et al., 2025). Pedagogical limitations in designing authentic assessments and social analysis-based activities also weaken its effectiveness (Nadalina et al., 2025). Although the Merdeka Curriculum has opened up space for integrative innovation, its implementation has not been optimal due to limited learning resources and teacher training (Rohmah et al., 2025). This condition confirms the gap between the idealism of the curriculum and learning practices in the field, making research on integrative social studies learning important to strengthen the empirical basis for improving the quality of education in Indonesia.

A comparison of quantitative data between Indonesia and Japan reveals a significant gap in the quality of education. Japan ranks among the top three in the 2022 PISA results, while Indonesia still ranks below the OECD

average (OECD, 2023). TIMSS results also indicate that Indonesian students' achievements are relatively low compared to Japan (TIMSS, 2019). This difference is also reflected in the Human Development Index, where Japan is in the very high category (0.925), while Indonesia only reaches 0.705 or the medium category (UNDP, 2024). This fact underscores the difference in the quality of curriculum and learning, which has a direct implication on the quality of human resources in both countries.

One factor that distinguishes the social studies curriculum between Indonesia and Japan lies in the approach used. Indonesia uses an integrative approach that combines various social disciplines into one subject, while Japan applies a disciplinary approach that separates geography, history, and civics into Shakaika (Kemendikdasmen, 2025a; MEXT, 2017). Both approaches have their own advantages and disadvantages. The integrative approach in Indonesia allows students to understand social phenomena holistically, but risks being conceptually superficial. Conversely, the disciplinary approach in Japan provides depth of analysis, but risks fragmenting knowledge (Gusriani et al., 2025). This difference is important to examine further in the context of curriculum comparison.

Based on this description, there appears to be a relevant research gap to be explored. A number of previous studies have discussed the social studies curriculum in Indonesia and Shakaika in Japan separately, but comparative studies that explore the differences between integrative and disciplinary approaches are still rare. Therefore, this study aims to: (1) describe and compare the integrative approach in Indonesia and the disciplinary approach in Japan in junior high school social studies curricula, and (2) identify the implications of these differences for strengthening the quality of education. Thus, this study is expected to contribute academically and practically to the development of a more effective social studies curriculum.

METHOD

This study was conducted using a literature review method (Snyder, 2019). The research data was sourced from Indonesian and Japanese social studies curriculum documents, scientific articles, and relevant international education reports. The literature was selected based on criteria of relevance, validity, and recency. The collected data were then analyzed descriptively using a thematic-analytical comparative framework to compare the integrative approach in Indonesia and the disciplinary approach in Japan in social studies learning (Saldana, 2015). This framework was chosen because it allows for an in-depth analysis of the conceptual and implicative meanings of the two learning approaches in a comparative context. The results of the analysis are directed at answering the research objectives, namely to describe the differences between the two approaches and to identify their implications for strengthening the quality of education.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

An Integrative Approach in Junior High School Social Studies Curriculum in Indonesia

The integrative approach in the Merdeka Curriculum in junior high school social studies is designed to provide holistic learning by combining geography, history, economics, and sociology so that students understand social phenomena comprehensively (Kemendikbudristek, 2024; Kemendikdasmen, 2025a). Through the integration of various disciplines, learning becomes more contextual and relevant to students' daily lives (Hasanah, 2022). Research in the field of Social Studies Education shows that interdisciplinary integration can foster students' social awareness and strengthen their ability to analyze social issues (S. Putri et al., 2024). However, teachers often face obstacles in developing integrative teaching materials due to limited learning resources and training (Khairunisa et al., 2024). This situation is increasingly urgent to address, given that Indonesia's 2022 PISA scores remain low, at 366 points in mathematics and 359 points in reading, far below the OECD average (OECD, 2023), which indicates the need to strengthen the quality of social studies learning to make it more meaningful.

The Merdeka Curriculum also emphasizes the importance of 21st-century skills, so the integration of social studies is expected to support critical thinking, communication, and collaboration skills (Ahmad et al., 2025). Research results show that project-based integrative learning can increase student engagement in social and environmental issues (Thohiroh et al., 2024). In this context, teachers are required not only to master the material, but also to develop active learning strategies that are relevant to the local context (Humam & Hanif, 2025). However, the integration of contemporary issues such as sustainability and data literacy is not yet evenly distributed across schools, depending on teacher readiness and supporting facilities (Rofi'ah et al., 2024). The low PISA scores reinforce the argument that improving the quality of teacher training and implementing integrative learning strategies are urgent needs if Indonesian students are to be able to compete globally (OECD, 2023).

In practical terms, an integrative approach in junior high school social studies provides a great opportunity to develop relevant and meaningful learning for students. Interdisciplinary connections enable students to see social realities comprehensively, while relating them to everyday challenges (Nadilla et al., 2025). However, these opportunities can only be realized if education policies support the development of integrative modules, provide ongoing teacher training, and ensure evaluations that measure critical thinking and social skills (Azzahra et al., 2025). Several studies emphasize the need to give teachers room for creativity so that they can adapt the material to their respective local contexts (Raihan, 2025). By using PISA results as a turning point, education policies and practices can be directed towards strengthening the integration of social studies so that it does not stop at concepts, but actually improves student competence in the classroom (Kemendikdasmen, 2025a; OECD, 2023).

The Disciplinary Approach in Japan's Shakaika Curriculum

Japan's success in achieving high educational attainment, as seen in its PISA and TIMSS scores and high HDI, cannot be separated from the consistency of its systematic curriculum design oriented towards developing excellent human resources (Auliya' & Widjajanti, 2023; Ekasuci et al., 2025). One important implementation of the curriculum is Shakaika, a core subject in junior high school designed to build a comprehensive understanding of society and strengthen national character (MEXT, 2017). Shakaika consists of geography, history, and civics, which are taught separately so that students gain a deep understanding of each discipline (Ramli, 2014). This learning model ensures that students not only master factual knowledge but also have analytical skills in accordance with the characteristics of each discipline. Thus, Japan's consistently high educational achievements can be understood as the result of a well-structured disciplinary curriculum.

The depth of material in Shakaika enables students to become accustomed to systematic, critical, and data-based thinking, both in analyzing historical phenomena and understanding the dynamics of contemporary citizenship (Ramli, 2014). This disciplinary approach provides space for students to master the fundamentals of social sciences in depth before relating them to everyday life. Research shows that disciplinary learning in Shakaika encourages the formation of democratic, disciplined citizens with high social awareness (Nadilla et al., 2025). The civic values instilled also prepare students to actively participate in Japan's modern democratic society (MEXT, 2017). Therefore, Shakaika is not merely a vehicle for mastering knowledge, but also an important instrument in national character education.

The connection between the consistency of the Shakaika curriculum and the quality of Japanese human resources is clearly evident in international indicators. Japan's PISA scores, which are well above the OECD average, confirm the effectiveness of disciplinary education in improving students' literacy, numeracy, and scientific understanding (OECD, 2023b). On the other hand, Japan's HDI, which is in the very high category, reinforces the evidence that curriculum quality contributes directly to human resource development (UNDP, 2024). The stability of curriculum policy is also supported by ongoing teacher training and teaching material development, ensuring consistent learning quality over time (Asriyanti & Musgamy, 2025). Thus, the disciplinary approach in Shakaika can

be seen as one of the pillars explaining Japan's success in building quality education and producing globally competitive human resources.

Comparison of Indonesian and Japanese Social Studies Curricula

The main difference between the Indonesian social studies curriculum and the Japanese Shakaika curriculum lies in their structural approaches: Indonesia adopts an integrative model that combines geography, history, economics, and sociology into one subject, while Japan positions each field as a separate discipline to achieve conceptual depth (Kemendikdasmen, 2025a; MEXT, 2017). This difference directly affects the design of learning, where integrative learning requires cross-topic activities and contextual tasks, while disciplinary learning requires the study of sources and specific methods for each field (Gusriani et al., 2025; Hidayat, 2020). In terms of assessment, the integrative approach tends to require authentic assessment and multidimensional rubrics, while the disciplinary approach is easily measured through specific competency indicators per discipline. Therefore, the choice of curriculum model is not only a matter of content, but also the ability of the education system to provide appropriate materials, teacher training, and assessment instruments. By understanding these structural differences, comparative analysis can assess not only the form of the curriculum, but also the ability of the system to implement it effectively (Gusriani et al., 2025).

Analysis of the advantages of the integrative approach shows that this model excels in contextualization and the development of transfer learning skills so that students can relate local phenomena to cross-disciplinary concepts (Mutiani et al., 2025; Nur et al., 2025). However, empirical research shows its weaknesses when interdisciplinary synergy is weak and teachers' pedagogical understanding is limited (Mutiani et al., 2025). Social studies teachers still find it difficult to connect geography, economics, history, and sociology concepts in depth, while authentic assessments are not yet able to comprehensively measure students' analytical abilities (Nadalina et al., 2025). Limited training and learning resources are also major obstacles to the implementation of integrative learning in schools (Rohmah et al., 2025). International evidence shows that Indonesia's relatively low PISA scores indicate that contextual learning is not directly proportional to an increase in students' higher-order thinking skills (Siregar et al., 2024). Therefore, the effectiveness of the integrative approach depends on strengthening teachers' pedagogical capacity, appropriate assessments, and learning resources that encourage critical-reflective thinking.

Meanwhile, a disciplinary approach to social studies learning allows for conceptual depth and methodological rigor that supports students' analytical skills, as reflected in Japan's PISA and TIMSS scores, which exceed the OECD average (Siregar et al., 2024). In Shakaika, students are trained to analyze social data through inquiry and value reflection activities to strengthen conceptual reasoning (Nadilla et al., 2025). Curriculum consistency and ongoing teacher training are key factors in maintaining depth of thinking and quality of classroom interaction (Ramli, 2014). These strengths also encourage long-term human resource capacity building, as reflected in Japan's very high human development index (HDI) (UNDP, 2024). However, a disciplinary approach still has the potential to cause fragmentation of knowledge if it is not balanced with cross-topic linking strategies in the curriculum (MEXT, 2017). Therefore, the conceptual depth produced needs to be accompanied by learning experiences that connect disciplinary concepts with social issues so that the relevance of learning is maintained.

Based on various empirical studies and education policy reports, the difference in the effectiveness of the integrative approach in Indonesia and the disciplinary approach in Japan is not only due to curriculum design, but also to structural, cultural, and pedagogical factors. Structurally, the Indonesian education system is still characterized by frequent curriculum changes that are not fully accompanied by the strengthening of teacher competencies (Kemendikdasmen, 2025a). In contrast, Japan has a stable national curriculum supported by continuous teacher training that ensures consistency in learning implementation (MEXT, 2017). Culturally, Japan's learning culture emphasizes discipline, collective responsibility, and self-reflection, which supports the application of deep learning (Nadilla et al., 2025). Meanwhile, in Indonesia, the learning culture still tends to be oriented towards final results and

completion of material, so that analytical exploration is underdeveloped (Mutiani et al., 2025). Pedagogically, teacher training in Japan emphasizes reflective and analytical skills, while in Indonesia the focus is still on administration and content, so that integrative learning practices have not yet produced the expected depth of thinking (Rohmah et al., 2025).

Based on the above findings, comparative research is important because few studies have systematically examined how differences in curriculum structure (integrative vs. disciplinary) impact learning outcomes and human resource development policies in the context of Southeast Asia and East Asia. The pragmatic recommendation that emerges from the analysis is an adaptive model: combining disciplinary depth on core topics that require in-depth analysis and thematic integrative units for local/contemporary issues, accompanied by reformulation of assessment, development of cross-disciplinary teaching materials, and continuous teacher training programs as catalysts for implementation (Muhsinin et al., 2019). The implementation of these recommendations should be tested through further studies combining document analysis, school case studies, and learning outcome evaluations to ensure strong empirical evidence before being presented to policymakers. With such an approach, countries can reduce the trade-off between holism and depth so that the social studies curriculum truly supports the development of relevant and resilient student competencies.

Implications of Different Approaches to Education Quality

The difference between the integrative approach in Indonesia and the disciplinary approach in Japan has significant practical consequences for the development of the Indonesian social studies curriculum. The integrative approach does indeed provide great opportunities to deliver holistic learning that is relevant to everyday life and capable of establishing connections between social phenomena (Rohmah et al., 2025). However, without the right strategy, this approach risks producing only a superficial descriptive understanding and failing to encourage students' analytical skills (Zendrato et al., 2024). Therefore, the development of the social studies curriculum in Indonesia needs to pay attention to a design that does not merely combine disciplines, but also creates meaningful and systematic integration (Kemendikdasmen, 2025a). This implication confirms that curriculum reform must go hand in hand with pedagogical reform in order to truly improve the quality of learning.

The biggest challenge in implementing an integrative curriculum in Indonesia is ensuring that teachers have the capacity to manage the integration of material. Limited training and learning resources often trap teachers in rote teaching patterns and prevent them from exploring students' critical thinking skills (Nadalina et al., 2025). Deep learning strategies can be a solution to avoid superficiality, as they require students not only to understand the content, but also to explore the meaning and interrelationships between social issues (Kemendikdasmen, 2025b). This requires support in the form of improving teacher competence through continuous training programs, developing contextual modules, and evaluations that assess students' analytical skills (Azzahra et al., 2025). Thus, an integrative approach can be implemented optimally and not stop at the surface level.

Japan's experience with the Shakaika disciplinary curriculum provides important lessons about curriculum consistency and depth. The focus on geography, history, and civics enables Japanese students to master in-depth knowledge that supports critical thinking skills and civic awareness (Nadilla et al., 2025; Ramli, 2014). Consistency in education policy is also a key factor in Japan's consistent excellence in international studies such as PISA and TIMSS (OECD, 2023; TIMSS, 2019). This success shows that depth of content and consistency in curriculum implementation are crucial in building the quality of human resources. Indonesia can draw inspiration from Japan to design long-term, stable curriculum policies that are in line with global needs.

From an academic perspective, comparative analysis between Indonesia and Japan contributes significantly to enriching the literature on social curricula in Asia. Such studies are still rarely conducted systematically, so the results of this research can fill the gap in critical comparative studies. From a practical perspective, this discussion provides

concrete recommendations for Indonesia, namely the need to strengthen integration strategies, improve teacher capacity, and maintain consistency in curriculum policy. The implications of Japan's disciplinary approach emphasize the importance of depth of material and curriculum stability as the foundation for mastery of critical thinking and strong citizenship (Asriyanti & Musgamy, 2025). By combining the advantages of integration and disciplinary depth, social studies in Indonesia has the potential to develop into a curriculum that is not only contextual but also in-depth, thereby truly equipping students to face global challenges (UNDP, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study shows that there is a fundamental difference between the integrative approach in the Indonesian junior high school social studies curriculum and the disciplinary approach in the Japanese social studies curriculum. The Indonesian curriculum tends to combine various social sciences, thereby providing a broad perspective, but often stops at a superficial descriptive level. In contrast, Japan emphasizes consistency and depth through a disciplinary approach, thereby enabling more systematic training in critical thinking skills. This comparison shows that Indonesia can learn from Japan in terms of consistency and depth of material, while Japan can learn from the flexibility of the integrative approach. Thus, the description and comparison of these two models enriches the perspective on how social studies are taught in Asia, especially in the context of different curriculum paradigms.

The implications of these two different approaches point to a clear direction for strengthening the quality of education in Indonesia. An integrative approach will only be effective if it is supported by in-depth learning strategies, adequate teacher competence, and an evaluation system that encourages critical analysis rather than mere memorization. Indonesia can learn from Japan that consistency in the curriculum and an emphasis on critical thinking can improve the quality of student learning outcomes. Academically, this research contributes to the literature on comparative social studies curricula in Asia, while practically offering concrete recommendations for improving the Indonesian social studies curriculum to make it more effective. Thus, this research fulfills the objective of not only understanding the differences in approach, but also identifying their implications for strengthening the quality of education at the junior high school level.

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