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The Impact of Integrated Science and Mathematics Instruction on Secondary Student Achievement: A Thematic Synthesis of Evidence-Based Practices

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Gilda N. Salvo,PhD
Denison Middle School, Florida, USA
gildzdms@gmail.com
Rabia Abdulrahim EdD (Cand)
International Leadership of Texas (Liberty High School), USA
rabiaabdulrahim37@gmail.com
Crisel A. Cardona, EdD
North Lakeland Elementary School, Florida USA
cardonacrisel@gmail.com
Gina Lapinig, PhD. SPEd
North Lakeland Elementary, Florida
ginapiejam@gmail.com
Cherryl P. Torres, PhD. SPEd, MAT- Science
Loughman Oaks Elementary School, Florida USA
lianlexi3@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examined the impact of integrated science and mathematics instruction on secondary student achievement through a thematic synthesis of evidence-based practices. The research aimed to identify high-impact instructional approaches that effectively bridge science and mathematics learning within integrated STEM education contexts. A systematic thematic synthesis of existing meta-analytic studies was conducted using established selection heuristics commonly employed in educational psychology research. Eligible studies included meta-analyses involving secondary school students, integrated science and mathematics interventions, and student-level cognitive or academic outcomes. Findings revealed three major themes of effective instructional practice: Inquiry-Based and Problem-Based Learning (PBL), cognitively stimulating strategies, and digital or technology-enhanced learning. Inquiry-oriented approaches demonstrated measurable positive effects on student achievement by promoting problem-solving and interdisciplinary reasoning. Cognitively stimulating strategies such as scaffolding, self-explanation, and comparative analysis enhanced conceptual understanding and higher-order thinking skills. Technology-enhanced learning environments, including simulations and virtual tools, further supported interdisciplinary engagement and scientific literacy. However, methodological heterogeneity across studies complicated direct comparisons of instructional effectiveness. The study concludes that integrated STEM instruction can significantly improve secondary student achievement when implemented through evidence-based, student-centered, and contextually appropriate practices.

Keywords: integrated STEM education, science and mathematics instruction, thematic synthesis, evidence-based practices, inquiry-based learning

Introduction:

The growing global emphasis on evidence-based educational practice has intensified the need for research that provides clear and reliable guidance for effective teaching across specific academic disciplines. In science and mathematics education, international frameworks and curriculum standards consistently outline the competencies students are expected to achieve.

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However, despite the widespread agreement regarding learning goals, there remains a persistent challenge in identifying the most effective instructional strategies for achieving these outcomes in classroom settings. According to Knogler, M., Hetmanek, A., and Seidel, T., educational research must move beyond simply defining standards and instead establish a strong evidence base for teaching practices that demonstrably improve student learning outcomes.

Within this broader educational context, increasing attention has been directed toward the integration of science and mathematics instruction, commonly referred to as integrated STEM education. The integration of these disciplines is rooted in the recognition that scientific inquiry and mathematical reasoning are inherently interconnected in real-world problem-solving. Early studies by Czerniak, C. M. and colleagues emphasized that integrating science and mathematics promotes meaningful learning experiences by enabling students to apply mathematical concepts within scientific contexts. Such interdisciplinary approaches are believed to foster deeper conceptual understanding, improve critical thinking skills, and enhance students' ability to transfer knowledge across domains.

Research further indicates that teacher quality and instructional competence play crucial roles in the successful implementation of integrated STEM education. Bolyard, J. J. and Moyer-Packenham, P. S. highlighted that effective science and mathematics instruction depends heavily on teachers' pedagogical knowledge, content expertise, and capacity to facilitate interdisciplinary learning experiences. However, despite the recognized importance of integration, instructional practices often remain fragmented, with science and mathematics taught as separate subjects using disconnected pedagogical approaches. This fragmentation limits opportunities for students to develop holistic understandings of complex phenomena and authentic problem-solving skills.

Recent developments in educational psychology and instructional research have also emphasized the importance of strategic and cognitively engaging learning approaches in STEM education. Studies such as those conducted by Peng, P. and colleagues demonstrated that strategy-based instruction, particularly in problem-solving contexts, significantly improves student achievement and conceptual understanding. Similarly, theoretical perspectives on evidence combination and decision-making, such as the work of Sentz, K. and Ferson, S., support the value of synthesizing diverse sources of educational evidence to identify high-impact instructional practices. These perspectives reinforce the importance of conducting systematic syntheses that consolidate fragmented findings into coherent instructional themes.

Another important issue surrounding STEM education involves participation and equity within science and mathematics fields. Research by Cheryan, S., Wang, M. T., and Degol, J. L. revealed persistent gender disparities in STEM participation and achievement. These studies suggest that instructional environments, classroom culture, and perceptions of STEM disciplines significantly influence student engagement and career aspirations. Furthermore, Ceci, S. J. and colleagues argued that both sociocultural and educational factors contribute to the underrepresentation of women in several STEM fields. Integrated and student-centered instructional practices may therefore serve as important mechanisms for improving inclusivity and increasing participation among diverse student populations.

Technological innovation has likewise transformed the landscape of science and mathematics instruction. Digital learning environments, simulations, and computational tools have increasingly been utilized to support interdisciplinary STEM learning. For instance, Mikropoulos, T. A. and Natsis, A. emphasized the educational value of virtual learning environments in enhancing student engagement and conceptual understanding. Similarly, simulation-based approaches discussed by Nguyen, A. T. and colleagues demonstrate how technology can support analytical reasoning and problem-solving in complex scientific contexts. The growing emphasis on computational thinking, as discussed by Shute, V. J. and collaborators, further highlights the importance of integrating technology-rich experiences into STEM instruction.

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Despite the growing body of literature supporting integrated STEM education, the research base remains highly diverse in terms of methodologies, instructional models, and educational contexts. Studies frequently differ in how integration is defined, implemented, and assessed, making it difficult to determine which practices consistently produce positive learning outcomes. Moreover, while some interdisciplinary approaches have demonstrated measurable improvements in student achievement, others yield inconsistent findings due to variations in implementation quality, contextual factors, and assessment measures. Drawing from broader perspectives on scientific synthesis and interdisciplinary research, Fortunato, S. and colleagues emphasized the importance of systematically organizing knowledge to better understand emerging scientific and educational trends.

Given these challenges, this study seeks to contribute to the growing evidence base on integrated science and mathematics instruction through a thematic synthesis of evidence-based practices. By systematically reviewing and organizing findings from meta-analytic research, the study aims to identify coherent categories of instructional strategies that effectively bridge science and mathematics learning for secondary students.

Specifically, the research focuses on identifying high-leverage practices that enhance student achievement, conceptual understanding, and interdisciplinary problem-solving skills within integrated STEM contexts. Through this synthesis, the study hopes to provide educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers with clearer guidance regarding effective instructional approaches for integrated science and mathematics education.

Literature Review:

Integrated science and mathematics instruction has emerged as a major focus in contemporary educational research due to the growing demand for interdisciplinary learning and evidence-based teaching practices. The integration of these disciplines is closely associated with the broader goals of STEM education, which emphasize problem-solving, analytical reasoning, and real-world application of knowledge. According to Laugksch, R. C., scientific literacy extends beyond content acquisition and involves the ability to apply scientific and mathematical reasoning in everyday contexts.

This perspective supports the increasing implementation of integrated STEM approaches in secondary education, where students are expected to connect theoretical concepts with practical applications. Research suggests that interdisciplinary instruction strengthens conceptual understanding by allowing learners to recognize relationships among scientific principles, quantitative reasoning, and technological processes.

Student attitudes and engagement also play critical roles in determining the effectiveness of science and mathematics instruction. Osborne, J., Simon, S., and Collins, S. found that students' attitudes toward science significantly influence their motivation, participation, and academic achievement. Negative perceptions of science and mathematics often result in reduced interest and lower performance, particularly among adolescents. Similarly, Bond, M. and colleagues emphasized that student engagement is strongly associated with instructional design, active participation, and the meaningful use of educational technologies. These findings suggest that integrated instructional strategies that promote collaboration, inquiry, and real-world relevance may improve both student attitudes and academic outcomes in STEM-related subjects.

The growing integration of educational technology into STEM instruction has substantially transformed teaching and learning processes. Tamim, R. M. and colleagues conducted a second-order meta-analysis demonstrating that technology-enhanced instruction generally produces positive effects on student learning outcomes. Advances in educational technology have enabled teachers to incorporate simulations, virtual laboratories, computational modeling, and interactive learning environments into science and mathematics classrooms. Furthermore, Wu, H. K. and collaborators highlighted the educational potential of augmented reality applications in promoting visualization, conceptual understanding, and learner engagement. Such technologies are particularly valuable in integrated STEM contexts because they allow students to observe scientific phenomena while simultaneously applying mathematical concepts and computational reasoning.

Recent developments in artificial intelligence and computational systems have further expanded opportunities for interdisciplinary STEM education. Chassignol, M. and colleagues explained that artificial intelligence is increasingly influencing educational systems through adaptive learning, intelligent tutoring systems, and predictive analytics. Similarly, Yin, S. and collaborators discussed the rapid emergence of multimodal large language models capable of integrating text, images, and data to support learning and problem-solving. These technological developments align with broader trends in scientific discovery, where artificial intelligence is increasingly used to analyze complex systems and generate new knowledge, as emphasized by Wang, H. and colleagues. In science and mathematics instruction, AI-supported learning environments may enhance personalized instruction, conceptual understanding, and interdisciplinary exploration among secondary students.

The integration of computational thinking and machine learning into STEM education has also gained substantial attention in recent years. Butler, K. T. and colleagues noted that machine learning techniques are increasingly used in scientific and engineering fields to solve complex analytical problems. Likewise, Tropp, J. A. and Wright, S. J. highlighted the importance of computational methods for solving mathematical optimization and inverse problems. These developments suggest that integrated science and mathematics instruction should not only focus on traditional content knowledge but also develop students' computational reasoning and analytical skills. Integrating computational approaches into secondary STEM education may better prepare students for emerging scientific and technological careers.

Research also indicates that effective STEM instruction requires strong methodological and analytical foundations. Statistical and evidence-based approaches are frequently used to evaluate the effectiveness of instructional interventions and educational innovations. For example, Pearl, J. emphasized the importance of causal inference in determining the relationships between educational practices and learning outcomes. Similarly, Chaloner, K. and Verdinelli, I. discussed Bayesian experimental design as a framework for improving decision-making and research precision. In addition, Jolliffe, I. T. and Cadima, J. reviewed the growing applications of principal component analysis in handling large and multidimensional datasets. These methodological perspectives reinforce the value of systematic synthesis and evidence-based evaluation in integrated STEM education research.

Several studies have also examined the cognitive and developmental factors influencing mathematics achievement and STEM learning. Gersten, R. and colleagues emphasized the importance of early identification and intervention for students with mathematics difficulties, noting that foundational mathematical skills significantly influence later academic success. More recently, Bellacicco, R. and collaborators found that active breaks and curriculum-based physical activities contribute positively to executive functioning, mathematics performance, and reductions in mathematics anxiety among learners.

Supporting this perspective, Donnelly, J. E. and colleagues demonstrated that physical activity and fitness are positively associated with cognitive functioning and academic achievement. These findings highlight the importance of holistic and student-centered approaches in STEM instruction that consider cognitive, emotional, and physical dimensions of learning.

Equity and diversity remain significant concerns within science and mathematics education. Research consistently demonstrates achievement differences associated with gender, socioeconomic background, and immigrant status. Voyer, D. and Voyer, S. D. conducted a meta-analysis revealing gender differences in scholastic achievement across various academic domains. Similarly, Duong, M. T. and colleagues examined generational differences in academic achievement among immigrant youth, finding that sociocultural and educational factors significantly affect student performance. These studies suggest that integrated STEM instruction must be inclusive and responsive to diverse learner needs. Student-centered, collaborative, and inquiry-based approaches may help reduce achievement gaps by creating more equitable learning environments that encourage participation from underrepresented groups.

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The use of simulations, modeling, and digital systems has also become increasingly relevant in interdisciplinary education and scientific applications. Faqeer, H. A. and Khajavi, S. H. explored the integration of digital twin systems and computer vision technologies in manufacturing and operations, highlighting the importance of simulation-based analysis and predictive systems. Similarly, simulation-based optimization methods reviewed by Nguyen, A. T. and colleagues demonstrate how computational models can improve analytical decision-making and performance evaluation. These technological and scientific advances reinforce the importance of integrating quantitative reasoning, data interpretation, and scientific modeling into secondary science and mathematics education.

The reviewed literature demonstrates that integrated science and mathematics instruction is supported by diverse theoretical, technological, and empirical perspectives. Existing studies collectively suggest that interdisciplinary teaching strategies, technology-enhanced learning environments, computational approaches, and student-centered pedagogies contribute positively to STEM learning outcomes.

However, the literature also reveals substantial variation in instructional models, implementation contexts, and methodological approaches. Consequently, there remains a need for systematic syntheses that identify coherent categories of evidence-based instructional practices specifically applicable to secondary integrated STEM education. This study addresses that gap by conducting a thematic synthesis of research on integrated science and mathematics instruction to identify high-leverage practices that enhance student achievement and conceptual understanding.

Methodology:

This study employed a systematic thematic synthesis approach to examine evidence-based practices in integrated science and mathematics instruction for secondary students. The methodology was designed to synthesize findings from existing meta-analytic studies and identify instructional strategies that consistently demonstrate positive effects on student achievement and cognitive outcomes. The study followed the selection heuristic commonly used in contemporary educational psychology reviews and evidence-based educational research to ensure methodological rigor, transparency, and reliability.

The study utilized a qualitative thematic synthesis of quantitative meta-analytic findings. This approach enabled the researcher to consolidate diverse empirical evidence from multiple meta-analyses into coherent instructional themes. Thematic synthesis was selected because integrated STEM education research often varies in instructional models, contexts, and terminologies, making direct comparison difficult. By organizing findings into higher-order themes, the study aimed to identify high-leverage instructional practices applicable to integrated science and mathematics education at the secondary level.

A systematic literature search was conducted across major academic databases and scholarly search engines to identify relevant meta-analytic studies. The search process focused on peer-reviewed publications related to integrated science and mathematics instruction, STEM education, instructional strategies, and student achievement. Keywords such as integrated STEM education, science and mathematics instruction, meta-analysis, secondary education, and evidence-based practices were used individually and in combination during the search process.

A bottom-up thematic synthesis approach was employed to analyze and organize the findings from the selected studies. First, relevant information was extracted from each meta-analysis, including instructional strategies, effect sizes, participant characteristics, research contexts, and reported educational outcomes. Particular attention was given to effect sizes and intervention characteristics specifically related to integrated science and mathematics instruction in secondary education.

Following data extraction, instructional practices were coded according to their dominant pedagogical characteristics. Initial codes included categories such as inquiry-based learning, problem-based learning, collaborative learning, cognitively stimulating strategies, technology-enhanced instruction, and simulation-based

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learning. The coding process was iterative and flexible, allowing similar instructional approaches to emerge naturally from the data.

The identified codes were then grouped into broader thematic categories representing evidence-based instructional practices. These higher-order themes were analyzed to determine recurring patterns, similarities, and differences across studies. The synthesis emphasized instructional approaches that consistently demonstrated positive effects on student achievement and conceptual understanding in integrated STEM contexts.

To ensure the reliability and methodological soundness of the evidence base, the included meta-analyses were evaluated using a comprehensive quality assessment framework consisting of 37 criteria. These criteria examined several dimensions of research quality, including transparency of literature search procedures, inclusion and exclusion criteria, statistical rigor, treatment of bias, effect size computation, and adherence to open science practices.

The quality assessment also evaluated whether studies clearly reported sampling procedures, publication bias analyses, heterogeneity statistics, and reliability measures. Studies with stronger methodological rigor and transparent reporting were given greater consideration during the interpretation of findings. This quality evaluation process strengthened the validity of the thematic synthesis and ensured that the resulting conclusions were grounded in reliable and evidence-based research.

Findings and Discussion:

Inquiry-Based and Problem-Based Learning (PBL)

Inquiry-Based and Problem-Based Learning (PBL) emerged as one of the most effective instructional approaches in integrated science and mathematics education. Consistent with findings from individual subject domains, inquiry-oriented strategies in interdisciplinary settings provide measurable advantages over traditional teacher-centered instruction. According to Knogler, M., Hetmanek, A., and Seidel, T., evidence-based instructional approaches that actively engage students in problem-solving and conceptual exploration significantly improve learning outcomes in science and mathematics. In integrated STEM contexts, these approaches encourage students to investigate authentic problems while simultaneously applying mathematical reasoning to scientific phenomena.

Integrated inquiry projects that incorporate mathematical modeling within scientific investigations have demonstrated moderate to substantial positive effects on student achievement, with several studies reporting effect sizes around: $d=0.50$

These findings suggest that students benefit from opportunities to explore scientific concepts through experimentation, quantitative reasoning, and evidence-based analysis. Inquiry-based learning environments also promote deeper conceptual understanding by allowing learners to construct knowledge actively rather than passively receiving information from instructors.

The integration of science and mathematics through inquiry-based approaches aligns closely with earlier literature on interdisciplinary education. Czerniak, C. M. and colleagues emphasized that integrated science and mathematics instruction enables students to recognize meaningful relationships between abstract mathematical principles and scientific applications. Such integration supports the development of higher-order thinking skills, including analytical reasoning, hypothesis testing, and evidence evaluation. Furthermore, inquiry-oriented instruction creates opportunities for students to engage in authentic learning experiences that mirror real-world scientific investigations and engineering processes.

Problem-Based Learning also emphasizes collaboration, exploration, and student-centered inquiry. Rather than relying on memorization or procedural instruction, students are presented with complex problems that require interdisciplinary thinking and cooperative learning. Research by Peng, P. and colleagues demonstrated that strategy-based problem-solving instruction significantly enhances students' ability to solve mathematical and contextualized problems. These findings suggest that integrating structured problem-solving strategies within science instruction strengthens both conceptual understanding and mathematical proficiency among secondary learners.

The effectiveness of inquiry-based and problem-based approaches is further enhanced through the use of digital simulations and computational tools. Rutten, N., Van Joolingen, W. R., and Van Der Veen, J. T. found that computer simulations positively influence science learning by allowing students to manipulate variables, visualize scientific processes, and test hypotheses in interactive environments. These digital tools provide meaningful opportunities for students to integrate mathematical modeling and scientific reasoning while engaging in inquiry-driven learning experiences. Similarly, simulation systems discussed by Hutter, J. and colleagues illustrate how computational simulations can support analytical thinking and problem-solving in scientific contexts.

Inquiry-based learning also reflects broader cognitive and perceptual theories related to knowledge integration and meaning-making. Ernst, M. O. and Bülthoff, H. H. explained that human learning involves the integration of multiple sensory and informational inputs to construct robust understanding. In STEM education, inquiry activities that combine visual representations, experimentation, mathematical reasoning, and collaborative discussion enable students to synthesize information from multiple sources. Such multimodal learning experiences contribute to stronger conceptual retention and improved transfer of knowledge across disciplines.

Several studies also highlight the importance of methodological rigor and analytical reasoning within inquiry-based instruction. For example, Mohammadi, S. A. and Prasanna, B. M. demonstrated how statistical analysis and evidence interpretation are essential components of scientific investigation. Similarly, Bolton, R. J. and Hand, D. J. emphasized the role of analytical techniques in detecting patterns and evaluating evidence within complex datasets. These perspectives reinforce the value of integrating data analysis, mathematical reasoning, and evidence evaluation into science instruction through inquiry-based approaches.

The collaborative nature of inquiry-based and problem-based learning also parallels research on networks and community interaction. Harenberg, S. and colleagues noted that knowledge development within complex systems often emerges through interaction, collaboration, and interconnected structures. In classroom settings, collaborative inquiry activities encourage students to communicate ideas, justify reasoning, and collectively solve interdisciplinary problems. Such collaborative environments not only strengthen academic performance but also support the development of communication, teamwork, and critical thinking skills that are essential in STEM-related fields.

The literature strongly supports Inquiry-Based and Problem-Based Learning as high-impact instructional approaches within integrated science and mathematics education. These strategies promote active engagement, interdisciplinary reasoning, conceptual understanding, and collaborative problem-solving among secondary students. By integrating scientific inquiry with mathematical modeling, evidence analysis, and digital technologies, inquiry-based approaches provide meaningful and authentic learning experiences that extend beyond traditional instructional methods. Consequently, these practices represent essential evidence-based strategies for improving achievement and fostering deeper learning in integrated STEM education.

Cognitively Stimulating Strategies

Cognitively stimulating strategies emerged as another major theme in integrated science and mathematics instruction. These approaches include instructional techniques such as self-explanation, scaffolding, reflective questioning, analogical reasoning, and the use of similarities and differences. Such strategies encourage students to engage actively with concepts rather than merely memorizing information.

In integrated STEM contexts, cognitively stimulating instruction helps learners connect mathematical representations with scientific phenomena, thereby strengthening conceptual understanding and interdisciplinary

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reasoning. These approaches are particularly important in secondary education, where students are expected to interpret abstract concepts and apply them to authentic scientific and mathematical problems.

One of the most effective cognitively stimulating strategies identified in the literature is self-explanation. Self-explanation encourages learners to verbalize their reasoning processes, justify solutions, and clarify conceptual relationships. Through this process, students become more aware of their own thinking and are better able to identify misconceptions or gaps in understanding. In integrated science and mathematics instruction, self-explanation enables learners to connect mathematical functions, graphs, and equations with scientific observations and experimental data. This strategy promotes deeper cognitive processing and supports long-term retention of knowledge by requiring students to actively construct meaning from instructional experiences.

Scaffolding also plays a central role in supporting integrated STEM learning. Scaffolding involves providing structured guidance that gradually decreases as students develop independence and competence. In science and mathematics integration, scaffolding may include guided inquiry tasks, structured problem-solving frameworks, visual representations, or teacher prompts that help students connect quantitative reasoning with scientific inquiry. According to Gersten, R. and colleagues, scaffolded interventions are especially beneficial for students experiencing difficulties in mathematics because they reduce cognitive overload while strengthening foundational reasoning skills. These supports allow learners to engage with complex interdisciplinary tasks more effectively and confidently.

The use of similarities and differences is another cognitively stimulating strategy that enhances conceptual understanding in integrated STEM contexts. By comparing scientific phenomena, mathematical models, and problem-solving approaches, students develop stronger analytical and reasoning abilities. Such comparative thinking helps learners identify patterns, relationships, and underlying principles across disciplines.

This process aligns with broader analytical methods used in scientific and statistical inquiry. For instance, Jolliffe, I. T. and Cadima, J. discussed how principal component analysis simplifies complex multidimensional relationships by identifying meaningful patterns within datasets. Similarly, classroom strategies that encourage students to recognize conceptual similarities and differences promote more organized and interconnected knowledge structures.

Digital and virtual learning environments further strengthen cognitively stimulating instructional approaches. Mikropoulos, T. A. and Natsis, A. found that educational virtual environments enhance conceptual understanding by enabling students to visualize abstract scientific and mathematical concepts in interactive ways. Virtual simulations, modeling tools, and immersive environments allow learners to manipulate variables, test hypotheses, and observe relationships between mathematical and scientific systems. These technologies support cognitive engagement by encouraging active exploration and deeper analysis rather than passive learning.

The growing integration of computational thinking within STEM education also complements cognitively stimulating strategies. Shute, V. J. and colleagues described computational thinking as a problem-solving process involving logical reasoning, pattern recognition, abstraction, and algorithmic thinking. These cognitive skills are highly relevant in integrated science and mathematics instruction because they require students to organize information systematically and solve interdisciplinary problems. Simulation-based optimization methods discussed by Nguyen, A. T. and colleagues further illustrate how analytical reasoning and modeling techniques can support complex decision-making and scientific analysis. Integrating computational thinking into classroom instruction therefore strengthens students' higher-order cognitive abilities and interdisciplinary problem-solving skills.

Research also suggests that cognitively stimulating learning environments positively influence student motivation, attitudes, and engagement in STEM disciplines. Osborne, J., Simon, S., and Collins, S. emphasized that students' attitudes toward science significantly affect their willingness to participate in and persist with STEM learning. Likewise, Bond, M. and colleagues found that student engagement increases when instructional activities involve active participation, collaboration, and meaningful interaction with technology. Cognitively stimulating instructional practices therefore not only enhance academic achievement but also foster positive learning experiences and sustained interest in STEM subjects.

Equity considerations also highlight the importance of cognitively stimulating instruction in integrated STEM education. Research by Wang, M. T. and Degol, J. L. identified persistent gender gaps in STEM participation and achievement, often influenced by classroom experiences, instructional environments, and sociocultural expectations. Similarly, Ceci, S. J. and colleagues argued that educational practices and social perceptions contribute significantly to women's underrepresentation in several STEM fields. Student-centered and cognitively engaging instructional approaches may help address these disparities by creating more inclusive and supportive learning environments where diverse learners can actively participate and develop confidence in science and mathematics.

Cognitively stimulating strategies align with broader trends in interdisciplinary research and scientific innovation. Fortunato, S. and colleagues emphasized that modern scientific advancement increasingly depends on the integration of diverse forms of knowledge, collaboration, and analytical reasoning. Emerging technologies such as digital twins and computer vision systems, discussed by Faqeer, H. A. and Khajavi, S. H., further demonstrate the importance of interdisciplinary thinking and data-driven analysis in contemporary scientific practice. Additionally, studies by Bellacicco, R. and colleagues, as well as Donnelly, J. E. and collaborators, highlight the relationship between cognitive functioning, active learning, and academic achievement. Collectively, these findings support the conclusion that cognitively stimulating instructional strategies are essential for promoting deeper understanding, critical thinking, and sustained engagement in integrated science and mathematics education.

Digital and Technology-Enhanced Learning

Digital and technology-enhanced learning emerged as another major theme in integrated science and mathematics instruction. The use of digital tools such as simulations, virtual laboratories, data-logging technologies, computational software, and interactive learning platforms represents a significant portion of the evidence base supporting integrated STEM education. These technologies enable students to visualize abstract concepts, manipulate variables, and analyze real-time data, thereby strengthening the connection between scientific inquiry and mathematical reasoning. Unlike general educational technology applications, technology-enhanced STEM interventions often demonstrate context-specific effectiveness because they are directly tied to interdisciplinary problem-solving and authentic scientific exploration.

Research consistently indicates that digital technologies positively influence student achievement and engagement in science and mathematics education. Tamim, R. M. and colleagues conducted a second-order meta-analysis demonstrating that technology-enhanced instruction generally produces positive effects on learning outcomes across educational settings. However, in integrated STEM contexts, the impact of digital tools extends beyond content delivery. These technologies provide learners with opportunities to engage in inquiry, experimentation, modeling, and analytical reasoning, which are central to interdisciplinary learning. Consequently, technology-enhanced instruction supports both conceptual understanding and the practical application of scientific and mathematical knowledge.

One of the most widely studied forms of digital learning in STEM education involves the use of computer simulations. Rutten, N., Van Joolingen, W. R., and Van Der Veen, J. T. found that simulations significantly improve science learning by enabling students to manipulate experimental conditions, observe outcomes, and test hypotheses within interactive environments. These tools are especially effective in integrated science and mathematics instruction because they allow students to connect numerical data, graphical representations, and scientific processes simultaneously. Similarly, atomistic simulation systems discussed by Hutter, J. and colleagues demonstrate the broader scientific importance of simulation technologies in analyzing complex systems and modeling real-world phenomena.

Augmented reality and immersive virtual environments also contribute significantly to technology-enhanced STEM learning. Wu, H. K. and collaborators highlighted the opportunities provided by augmented reality applications in supporting visualization, interaction, and conceptual understanding within educational contexts. Likewise, Ernst, M. O. and Bülthoff, H. H. explained that learning becomes more robust when multiple sensory inputs are integrated into the learning process. In science and mathematics instruction, augmented and virtual learning environments enable students to interact with abstract concepts through visual, spatial, and experiential representations. Such multimodal experiences improve comprehension and support deeper cognitive engagement.

Artificial intelligence and machine learning technologies are increasingly transforming science and mathematics education. Chassignol, M. and colleagues described the growing role of artificial intelligence in adaptive learning systems, intelligent tutoring, and personalized instruction. More recently, Yin, S. and collaborators discussed the rapid advancement of multimodal large language models capable of integrating text, images, data, and computational reasoning.

These emerging technologies have the potential to support interdisciplinary STEM instruction by providing students with dynamic feedback, personalized problem-solving assistance, and interactive learning experiences. In addition, Wang, H. and colleagues emphasized that artificial intelligence is increasingly reshaping scientific discovery itself, further highlighting the importance of preparing students to engage with AI-supported scientific and mathematical practices.

The integration of machine learning and computational methods into STEM instruction also reflects broader developments in scientific and engineering research. Butler, K. T. and colleagues demonstrated how machine learning techniques are applied to solve complex problems in molecular and materials science. Similarly, Tropp, J. A. and Wright, S. J. emphasized the importance of computational methods for solving mathematical optimization and inverse problems. These developments suggest that integrated STEM education should incorporate computational reasoning, data analysis, and algorithmic thinking to prepare students for modern scientific and technological environments. Technology-enhanced learning environments therefore serve as essential platforms for developing higher-order analytical and computational skills.

Technology-enhanced instruction also supports the development of scientific literacy and evidence-based reasoning. According to Laugksch, R. C., scientific literacy involves the ability to interpret scientific information, evaluate evidence, and apply scientific reasoning in real-world contexts. Digital tools such as data-logging systems, modeling software, and visualization platforms enable students to engage directly with data interpretation and evidence analysis. Research by Pearl, J. further emphasized the importance of causal inference in understanding relationships within scientific investigations. Likewise, studies by Bolton, R. J. and Hand, D. J. highlighted how analytical and statistical techniques can identify patterns, anomalies, and meaningful relationships within large datasets. These perspectives reinforce the value of digital technologies in promoting evidence-based scientific and mathematical thinking.

Collaborative digital environments and network-based technologies also strengthen interdisciplinary learning and knowledge construction. Harenberg, S. and colleagues explained that complex systems often rely on interconnected structures and collaborative networks for information exchange and problem-solving.

In educational settings, digital collaboration platforms encourage students to work collectively on scientific and mathematical tasks, share ideas, and evaluate evidence collaboratively. Furthermore, technology-enhanced environments may support more inclusive learning experiences among diverse student populations. Duong, M. T. and colleagues found that sociocultural and contextual factors significantly influence academic achievement among immigrant youth. Technology-supported instruction may therefore help reduce barriers to participation by providing flexible, interactive, and accessible learning opportunities for diverse learners.

The effectiveness of digital and technology-enhanced learning depends heavily on instructional design, methodological rigor, and appropriate implementation. Rahi, S. emphasized the importance of systematic research

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design and methodological consistency in evaluating educational interventions. Similarly, Mohammadi, S. A. and Prasanna, B. M. highlighted the importance of analytical precision and evidence interpretation in scientific research.

These perspectives suggest that technology alone does not guarantee improved learning outcomes; rather, its effectiveness depends on how digital tools are integrated into meaningful, student-centered instructional practices. Overall, the literature strongly supports digital and technology-enhanced learning as a powerful and evidence-based approach for strengthening integrated science and mathematics education, particularly when aligned with inquiry, collaboration, computational reasoning, and authentic problem-solving experiences.

Methodological Heterogeneity and Bridging Research and Practice

One of the major challenges identified in the synthesis of integrated science and mathematics instruction is methodological heterogeneity. The concept of "integrated teaching" is defined and implemented differently across studies, educational systems, and research traditions. Some investigations define integration as the simple alignment of science and mathematics content, while others emphasize interdisciplinary problem-solving, project-based learning, computational thinking, or technology-enhanced inquiry. Because of these varying interpretations, comparing findings across studies becomes increasingly difficult. The absence of a universally accepted framework for integrated STEM instruction complicates efforts to determine which instructional approaches are consistently most effective for improving student achievement and conceptual understanding.

The methodological diversity observed in integrated STEM research also extends to research designs, assessment tools, and outcome measures. Studies frequently employ different indicators of success, including academic achievement, conceptual understanding, engagement, motivation, collaboration, or problem-solving ability. Such variation limits the ability to directly compare effect sizes or establish a clear rank-ordering of instructional strategies. According to Chaloner, K. and Verdinelli, I., methodological consistency and carefully designed evaluation systems are essential for generating reliable evidence and meaningful comparisons across research contexts. Without standardized measures and clearer conceptual definitions, synthesizing evidence across integrated STEM studies remains a significant challenge.

Another issue associated with methodological heterogeneity involves the complexity of analyzing interdisciplinary educational data. Integrated science and mathematics instruction often involves multiple interacting variables, including teacher quality, technology integration, student engagement, classroom culture, and contextual learning factors. Statistical approaches discussed by Jolliffe, I. T. and Cadima, J. highlight the difficulty of reducing complex multidimensional educational data into simplified conclusions. As a result, researchers must carefully interpret findings while acknowledging that the effectiveness of instructional strategies may vary depending on context, implementation quality, and learner characteristics.

The growing complexity of educational research mirrors broader scientific trends identified by Fortunato, S. and colleagues, who emphasized that modern scientific inquiry increasingly depends on interdisciplinary collaboration, networked knowledge systems, and large-scale evidence synthesis. In integrated STEM education, this complexity is amplified because instructional practices involve the interaction of multiple disciplines, technologies, and cognitive processes. Consequently, future research should prioritize methodological transparency, clearer operational definitions, and stronger theoretical frameworks to improve the comparability and reliability of integrated teaching studies.

Despite these methodological challenges, the research base on integrated science and mathematics instruction continues to expand significantly. However, another important concern involves the gap between research findings and classroom practice. Many meta-analytic and systematic review studies present findings using technical language, advanced statistical terminology, and complex theoretical models that may be difficult for classroom teachers to interpret and apply. Translating research evidence into accessible and practical recommendations is therefore essential for ensuring that evidence-based instructional practices can effectively influence day-to-day teaching and learning in secondary classrooms.

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Research on student engagement and instructional effectiveness further reinforces the importance of making educational evidence understandable and applicable to practitioners. Bond, M. and colleagues emphasized that educational innovations become more effective when teachers clearly understand how to implement them within authentic classroom environments. Similarly, Osborne, J., Simon, S., and Collins, S. found that classroom experiences, instructional approaches, and teacher practices significantly influence students' attitudes toward science learning. These findings suggest that research should not only identify effective instructional strategies but also provide practical guidance that educators can realistically implement in diverse educational settings.

Furthermore, emerging educational technologies and interdisciplinary innovations require teachers to continuously adapt their instructional practices. Studies by Faqeer, H. A. and Khajavi, S. H. demonstrate how advanced technologies such as digital twins and computer vision systems are increasingly shaping scientific and technical fields. Likewise, research by Bellacicco, R. and colleagues, as well as Voyer, D. and Voyer, S. D., highlights the importance of addressing cognitive, emotional, and demographic factors that influence student learning outcomes. These evolving educational demands reinforce the need to bridge research and practice by providing teachers with clear, evidence-based, and context-sensitive instructional guidance. Ultimately, strengthening the connection between educational research and classroom implementation is essential for maximizing the effectiveness of integrated science and mathematics instruction in secondary education.

Conclusion:

This thematic synthesis established a focused and evidence-based understanding of integrated science and mathematics instruction in secondary education. By systematically examining findings from existing meta-analytic and interdisciplinary research, the study identified several high-impact instructional approaches that consistently contribute to improved student achievement, conceptual understanding, and interdisciplinary problem-solving skills.

Specifically, inquiry-based and problem-based learning, cognitively stimulating instructional strategies, and digital or technology-enhanced learning emerged as the most prominent evidence-based practices supporting integrated STEM education. These approaches collectively demonstrate that meaningful integration between science and mathematics can promote deeper learning experiences that extend beyond traditional subject-based instruction.

The findings of this study further reinforce the importance of student-centered and active learning approaches in integrated STEM classrooms. Inquiry-driven instruction encourages learners to engage in experimentation, investigation, and evidence-based reasoning, while cognitively stimulating strategies such as scaffolding, self-explanation, and comparative analysis strengthen higher-order thinking and conceptual connections between disciplines. Likewise, digital and technology-enhanced learning environments provide students with opportunities to visualize abstract concepts, interact with simulations, analyze real-time data, and engage in authentic interdisciplinary problem-solving tasks. Together, these strategies support not only academic achievement but also the development of critical thinking, collaboration, computational reasoning, and scientific literacy skills that are increasingly necessary in contemporary educational and professional settings.

Despite these positive findings, the synthesis also revealed substantial methodological heterogeneity within the research literature on integrated science and mathematics instruction. Studies frequently differed in their definitions of integrated teaching, implementation procedures, assessment methods, and reported outcome measures. Such variation complicates direct comparisons among studies and limits the ability to determine universally superior instructional approaches.

In many cases, the effectiveness of integrated STEM strategies appeared highly dependent on contextual factors such as grade level, teacher preparation, classroom environment, access to technology, and the quality of instructional implementation. Consequently, the findings suggest that integrated STEM education should not be

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viewed as a single standardized model but rather as a flexible instructional framework that requires careful adaptation to local educational contexts.

Another important implication of this study involves the continuing gap between educational research and classroom practice. Although the evidence base for integrated STEM instruction continues to grow, many research findings remain inaccessible to classroom practitioners because they are presented in highly technical or statistical forms. Teachers often require practical, understandable, and context-sensitive guidance that can be realistically implemented within diverse educational environments.

Therefore, translating meta-analytic findings into clear instructional recommendations remains essential for improving local teaching effectiveness and ensuring that evidence-based practices reach actual classrooms. Bridging the divide between research and practice will require stronger collaboration among researchers, educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers.

Furthermore, the rapid advancement of educational technologies and artificial intelligence continues to reshape science and mathematics education. Emerging tools such as simulations, augmented reality, adaptive learning systems, computational modeling platforms, and AI-supported instructional environments provide new opportunities for interdisciplinary learning and personalized instruction.

However, these technologies must be implemented thoughtfully and purposefully to ensure that they enhance—not replace—meaningful student engagement, inquiry, and critical thinking. Effective technology integration depends not only on access to digital tools but also on teacher preparedness, pedagogical design, and the alignment of technology with learning objectives.

Hence, this thematic synthesis confirms that integrated science and mathematics instruction possesses strong potential to improve secondary student learning when implemented using evidence-based, student-centered, and contextually appropriate practices. While many innovative instructional strategies demonstrate greater effectiveness than conventional “business-as-usual” teaching approaches, continued efforts are necessary to strengthen the quality, consistency, and applicability of research in integrated STEM education.

Future studies should prioritize methodological rigor, longitudinal investigation, clearer operational definitions, and context-specific analyses to better determine how integrated instructional approaches influence diverse student populations. Ultimately, sustained commitment to high-quality research and effective classroom implementation will be essential in ensuring that integrated STEM education leads to meaningful and lasting gains in student achievement, scientific literacy, and interdisciplinary competence.

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