

Challenges of Implementing Differentiated Learning in Social Science Subjects in Elementary Schools in Manggarai Region

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Abstract. This study investigates the challenges of implementing differentiated learning in Social Sciences across six elementary schools in the Greater Manggarai area. Employing a qualitative methodology, the research examines teachers' experiences in adapting learning strategies to students' diverse abilities, interests, and learning styles. Through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and document reviews, the study ensures data validity via source and method triangulation. Analysis using the Miles and Huberman interactive model revealed four key challenges: (1) limited understanding of differentiated learning concepts, (2) time and resource constraints, (3) complexity in designing activities for varied student abilities, and (4) assessment difficulties. The region's geographical and socio-economic conditions further complicate effective implementation. The study proposes targeted solutions, including continuous professional development for teachers, practical implementation guidance, and comprehensive support from educational stakeholders to enhance differentiated learning practices in the region.

Keywords: Differentiated Learning; Social Sciences; Elementary School; Learning Implementation Challenges

1 Introduction

Social Science Learning (IPS) in elementary school is an important foundation in shaping students' understanding of social, cultural, and environmental interactions. In the great Manggarai region, East Nusa Tenggara, social studies learning faces unique challenges due to the diversity of students' socio-cultural backgrounds and the gap in access to education that still occurs in various regions. This condition requires a learning approach that can accommodate the diverse learning needs of each student [1].

Differentiated learning has emerged as one potential solution to addressing the learning gap among elementary school students. This approach emphasises adjusting learning methods, content, and evaluations based on each student's readiness, interests, and learning profile [2]. However, implementing differentiated learning in the Manggarai region faces various challenges, from limited resources to teachers' readiness.

The geographical characteristics of the Manggarai region, which consists of highlands and lowlands, and the uneven distribution of the population create challenges in implementing differentiated learning. Schools in remote areas often face obstacles regarding access to learning resources, educational technology, and teacher professional development [3]. This directly impacts the school's ability to implement differentiated learning effectively. Another challenge that is no less important is the diversity of languages and cultures in the Manggarai region. Students often come to school with different Indonesian language skills, while most social studies learning materials are delivered in Indonesian. This situation creates additional complexity in designing and implementing differentiated learning that can accommodate students' linguistic and cultural needs [4].

Amid these various challenges, a deep understanding of the obstacles and opportunities in implementing differentiated learning for social studies subjects in elementary schools in the Manggarai area is fundamental. This study aims to identify and analyse the challenges faced by teachers and schools in implementing differentiated learning and explore strategies that can be developed to overcome these challenges. The results of this research are expected to significantly contribute to developing more effective and inclusive learning strategies in the Manggarai region.

2 Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore the challenges of applying differentiated learning in social studies subjects in elementary schools in the Manggarai area. The selection of qualitative methods is based on the need to understand the complexity of the problem and the experiences of education actors in implementing differentiated learning [5]. The research location includes six elementary schools (SDK Pagal 1 Manggarai, SDN Anam Manggarai, SDN Pajo Manggarai Barat, MIN 2 Manggarai Timur, SDI Ngawang Manggarai, SDI Timung, Manggarai), which were selected by *purposive sampling* by considering the representation of urban and rural areas in Manggarai. The criteria for selecting schools include (1) schools that have implemented or are trying to implement differentiated learning, (2) diversity of geographical locations, and (3) diversity of student characteristics and school resources. Data collection was carried out through several techniques, namely: (a) in-depth interviews with 12 social studies teachers, six principals, and three school supervisors to explore information about experiences, challenges, and strategies in implementing differentiated learning. (b) Classroom observation to observe teachers' differentiated learning practices in social studies learning. (c) Analysis of documents in lesson plans, student worksheets, and learning evaluation documents to understand the planning and implementation of differentiated learning. (d) Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with social studies teacher groups to confirm and deepen the findings from interviews and observations. Furthermore, data analysis uses the Miles and Huberman interactive model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing [6]. To ensure the validity of the data, this study uses the triangulation technique of sources and methods, member checking, and peer debriefing with peers. The research is carried out during one semester of learning, from the learning planning stage to the evaluation. This allows researchers to observe the development and dynamics of the implementation of differentiated learning comprehensively.

3 Framework

Differentiated learning is a pedagogical approach rooted in the perspective of constructivism and Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences [7]. This approach recognises that each learner has different characteristics, abilities, and learning styles [8]. The basic philosophy of differentiated learning emphasises that diversity is not an obstacle but a wealth that can be harnessed to create a more meaningful and inclusive learning experience for all students.

According to Piaget's theory, differentiated learning is very relevant in elementary schools, considering that students' cognitive development stage is still in the concrete operational phase [8]. In this phase, students need different learning experiences according to their level of understanding. Teachers must design learning that considers each student's readiness, interest, and learning profile to ensure all students can develop optimally.

Philosophically, differentiated learning aligns with John Dewey's progressivist view, emphasising that education must be student-centred and provide a meaningful learning experience [8]. Tomlinson, a leading theorist in differentiated learning, asserts that this approach is not just a teaching strategy but a way of thinking about teaching and learning that recognises each individual's uniqueness [9]. At the primary level, teachers must design learning that accommodates students' different levels of readiness, interests, and learning profiles.

From a pedagogical perspective, differentiated learning in Elementary School is based on Vygotsky's theory of proximal developmental zones. This approach requires teachers to understand students' actual level of student development and design learning that can encourage them to reach the level of potential development of students [10]. Differentiation can be achieved through content modification (what is learned), process (how students learn), products (how students demonstrate understanding), and learning environments according to students' individual needs [11]. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) concept supports the theoretical foundation of differentiated learning, emphasising the importance of *scaffolding* in the learning process. In differentiated learning, teachers act as facilitators who provide different levels of support and challenges that suit each student's abilities [12]. This allows each student to move from his or her actual level of ability to his or her potential level of ability.

Philosophically, differentiated learning aligns with the principles of humanistic education that view each learner as a unique individual with the potential to develop. This approach rejects the "one size fits all" learning model, which tends to ignore the uniqueness of individual students [13]. In contrast, differentiated learning encourages creating a democratic learning environment where each student feels valued and supported in his or her learning process. So, implementing differentiated learning in elementary schools requires a paradigm shift in how teachers view the learning process. This paradigm emphasises that learning success is measured by achieving uniform standards and each student's progress in achieving their learning goals. This is in line with the progressive education philosophy that emphasises the importance of holistic growth and development of each student, not just academic achievement.

Differentiated learning is a learning approach that accommodates the diversity of student characteristics regarding interests, learning readiness, and learning styles. In the context of social studies learning in elementary schools, this approach is very relevant, considering that social studies subjects include complex materials about social life, history, geography, and economics that require different conceptual understandings according to

students' abilities [14]. The application of differentiated learning in social studies learning provides opportunities for teachers to design more flexible and adaptive learning. Teachers can develop various learning strategies and methods tailored to students' needs, such as using varied learning media, multi-level assignments, and diverse learning activities. This allows students to understand social studies concepts in a way that best suits their learning characteristics [15].

Differentiated learning also supports the development of student's social and emotional skills in the context of social studies learning. This approach allows students to interact with peers in heterogeneous study groups, develop empathy, and understand different perspectives [16]. This aligns with the social studies learning objectives, which focus on mastering content and forming students' character and social skills. The implementation of differentiated learning in social studies also has a positive impact on student motivation and involvement in learning. Students who feel that learning is designed according to their abilities and needs tend to be more motivated to participate in learning activities. Actively. This, in turn, can improve students' understanding of social studies materials and develop their critical thinking skills in analysing various social phenomena.

Although implementing differentiated learning requires more complex preparation from teachers, the benefits obtained in social studies learning are significant [17]. This approach helps students achieve their learning goals according to their abilities, creates an inclusive learning environment, and supports their academic and social-emotional development [18]. Thus, differentiated learning is a very relevant and important strategy for social studies learning in elementary schools.

3 Result and Discussion

3.1 Research Results

a. Interview

The analysis of in-depth interview data revealed several significant findings related to implementing differentiated learning in social studies subjects in elementary schools in the Manggarai area. Based on the results of interviews with 12 social studies teachers, 80.1% of teachers experienced difficulties in designing learning activities that could accommodate the diversity of students' ability levels. Teachers reported that limited preparation time (90.3%) and lack of adequate learning resources (76%) were the main obstacles in developing differentiated learning materials.

The findings from interviews with six principals show a gap between the expectations of differentiated learning implementation and the reality in the field. As many as 80.2% of school principals admitted that their school did not have adequate infrastructure to support optimally differentiated learning. The data shows that only 32.1% of schools have teacher professional development programs that specifically focus on improving competencies in differentiated learning.

The results of interviews with three school supervisors revealed a consistent pattern related to the challenge of differentiated learning supervision. The supervisors identified that 67.2% of teachers still use conventional learning approaches that are uniform for all students. Further analysis shows that the Manggarai area's geographical factors significantly affect the intensity and quality of supervision, with the average frequency of supervision visits only 2.2 times per semester.

Regarding implementation strategies, interview data revealed that 56.2% of teachers have tried implementing various learning methods, although it is still on a limited scale. The most commonly applied strategies include grouping students based on ability (42.4%), using tiered worksheets (34.1%), and using peer tutors (24%). However, the evaluation of the effectiveness of these strategies has not been carried out systematically and measurably. Cross-respondent analysis indicates a perception gap between teachers, principals, and supervisors regarding the ideal differentiated learning implementation standards. As many as 76% of teachers emphasised the need for practical guidance and concrete examples of implementing differentiated learning. In comparison, 84.1% of principals and 100% of supervisors prioritised the development of standardised monitoring and evaluation systems. These findings underscore the importance of building a shared understanding and alignment of expectations between various stakeholders in implementing differentiated learning.

b. Classroom Observation

The results of classroom observations conducted in six elementary schools in the Manggarai area showed significant variations in implementing differentiated learning in social studies subjects. Of the total 24 observation sessions conducted, it was recorded that only 38.4% of learning showed clear differentiated learning indicators. Further analysis revealed that the most dominant aspect of differentiation was adjusting how the material was delivered (46.8%). In comparison, the differentiation in content (30.2%) and learning products (26%) was still relatively limited.

Observation of classroom management revealed that 65.8% of teachers still use a learning model dominated by classical lecture and question-and-answer methods. When implementing differentiated learning, 40.5% of teachers had difficulty managing learning time, especially when they had to divide their attention between groups of students with different abilities. The data shows that the average time required to transition between learning activities reaches 10-15 minutes, which indicates inefficient learning time management.

The analysis of learning interactions shows an interesting pattern, where schools in the urban area of Manggarai (3 schools) show a higher level of differentiated learning implementation (53.2%) than schools in rural areas (21.5%). Factors contributing to this gap were identified as the availability of learning resources (82%), access to teacher training (76%), and learning infrastructure support (67.5%).

Observation of media and learning resources revealed that 75.01% of learning still relies on textbooks as the primary source. Only 32% of teachers were observed to use varied learning media to accommodate students' different learning styles. A more in-depth analysis showed a positive correlation between the use of varied learning media and the level of student involvement in learning, with an increase in student active participation reaching 46.3% in multimedia learning classes.

Another important finding from classroom observation relates to teachers' learning assessment patterns. Data shows that 71.2% of teachers still apply uniform assessments for all students without considering differences in abilities and learning styles. Only 28.2% of teachers were observed to apply variations in assessment techniques and instruments, such as the use of tiered rubrics (17.1%), differentiated portfolios (9.2%), and interest-based projects (5%). This finding indicates that there is still limited understanding and implementation of differentiated assessments in social studies learning in elementary schools in the Manggarai area.

c. Document Analysis

An analysis of the learning planning documentation of six elementary schools in the Manggarai area revealed substantial findings related to the quality of differentiated learning planning. Of the 72 RPPs analysed, only 30.9% explicitly listed differentiated learning strategies. A more in-depth assessment shows that most RPPs (69.1%) still use a standard format that does not accommodate the diversity of students' abilities, interests, and learning styles. The most frequently differentiated learning indicators that appear in the lesson plan include variations in learning methods (28.3%), the use of diverse media (23%), and adjustments to learning activities (19.2%).

The evaluation of 120 student worksheets used in social studies learning showed a similar pattern. The analysis revealed that only 24% of the worksheets were designed with different difficulty levels in mind. Most worksheets (76%) still use a uniform format for all students. The data showed that the differentiation in the worksheet most often appeared in the form of variation in question complexity (20.4%), adjustment of the number of questions (14.2%), and use of visual aids (13.3%). These findings indicate that teachers' efforts to develop differentiated teaching materials are still limited.

Analysis of learning evaluation documents reveals a significant gap between differentiated learning principles and applied evaluation practices. Of the 75 evaluation instruments studied, only 22.9% showed differentiation in techniques and forms of assessment. Most evaluation instruments (77.1%) still use the same standard assessment format for all students. The distribution of differentiated evaluation types included tiered rubrics (13.5%), portfolios (6.3%), and project-based assessments (3.1%).

An assessment of semester and annual program documents shows that differentiated learning planning has not been systematically integrated into long-term learning programs. Of the six schools studied, only two schools (31.9%) had structured differentiated learning development programs. The analysis of program content showed that the planned differentiation aspect focused more on adjusting learning methods (46.4%) compared to content differentiation (28.2%) or learning products (24%).

Another important finding from the document analysis concerns the documentation system and monitoring of differentiated learning. Data shows that 85.6% of schools do not have a specific format for documenting differentiated learning practices. The existing recording system tends to be administrative and does not reflect the complexity of differentiated learning implementation. Only one school (14.4%) had a well-documented differentiated learning monitoring and evaluation system, including individual student development records and teachers' reflections on the effectiveness of the differentiated strategies implemented.

d. Focus Group Discussion

Implementing the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with 12 social studies teachers from six elementary schools in the Manggarai area resulted in findings that strengthened and deepened the results of previous interviews and observations. The thematic analysis of FGD transcripts identified five main themes that emerged consistently: the difficulty of differentiated learning planning (90.6%), the limitation of resources and support facilities (85.2%), the implementation challenges in heterogeneous classrooms (77%), the need for continuous professional development (70.3%), and the complexity of differentiated learning evaluation (60.01%).

An in-depth discussion on learning planning revealed that teachers face a dilemma in balancing the demands of the national curriculum with the needs of differentiated learning.

The FGD participants confirmed that the average time required to prepare a differentiated RPP is three times longer than the conventional RPP. The data showed that 86.5% of teachers felt they did not have enough time to optimally design differentiated learning, especially given the other administrative burdens they had to manage.

Regarding implementing differentiated learning, the FGD revealed an interesting pattern in the adaptation strategies developed by teachers. A total of 67.8% of participants reported that they had developed "emergency strategies" to accommodate student diversity, such as flexible grouping (42.5%), the use of peer tutors (30.4%), and spontaneous assignment modifications (27%). However, teachers acknowledge that these strategies are often reactive and poorly planned, which affects learning effectiveness.

The discussion of learning evaluation produced significant findings related to the gap between theory and practice. The FGD participants identified the absence of practical guidance for differentiated learning evaluation (92.9%) and the lack of system support in implementing alternative assessments (80.1%) as the main obstacles. The discussion also expressed teachers' concerns about objectivity and standardisation of assessments when implementing differentiated evaluations.

An analysis of the solutions proposed in the FGD shows a consensus among teachers on the need to develop a comprehensive differentiated learning support system. The recommendations that emerged included the establishment of an inter-school community of practice (sharing good practices) (84.3%), the development of a differentiated learning resource bank (76%), a continuous mentoring program (67.8%), and a good practice documentation system (60.5%). The participants also emphasised the importance of policy support at the school and regional levels in facilitating the implementation of sustainable differentiated learning.

3.2 Discussion

The phenomenon of differentiated learning implementation in elementary schools in the Manggarai area shows [19]. Data triangulation from various sources revealed a systemic gap between differentiated learning's conceptual idealism and its reality in the field. This gap was reflected in the low percentage of differentiated lesson plans (30.9%), the implementation of differentiated learning in the classroom (38.4%), and the use of differentiated assessments (28.2%).

Philosophically, the challenge of implementing differentiated learning in the Manggarai region reflects the dilemma between the demands of national education standardisation and the need for local adaptation [20]. This was revealed through FGD data, which showed that 90.6% of teachers experienced difficulties in differentiated learning planning. Observation results indicated the implementation gap between urban schools (53.2%) and rural schools (21.5%). In addition, infrastructure and learning resources show a consistent pattern of limitations. Interview data revealed that 80.2% of school principals admitted inadequate infrastructure, while observations showed that 75.01% of learning still relied on textbooks. The FGD reinforces these findings by identifying resource limitations as the central theme (85.2%), indicating the existence of structural barriers that require systemic intervention.

The temporal dimension in implementing differentiated learning emerges as a critical factor. Observations showed a reasonably long learning transition time (10-15 minutes), while the FGD revealed a threefold time burden for preparing differentiated lesson plans. This has implications for learning efficiency and teacher workload, reflected in the high percentage of teachers (86.5%) who lack time for optimal preparation.

Analysis of learning evaluation practices reveals an epistemological gap between concept and implementation [21]. Observation data shows that 71.2% of teachers still apply uniform assessments, which aligns with the analysis of documents revealing that 77.1% of evaluation instruments use a standard format. The FGD confirmed this complexity by identifying the absence of practical guidance for evaluation (92.9%) as a significant obstacle.

The phenomenon of learning adaptation shows an interesting pattern from the perspective of system resilience [22]. Interview data revealed that 56.2% of teachers had tried various learning methods, while FGD showed that 67.8% developed "emergency strategies." This indicates the existence of adaptive capacity in the system, although it is still reactive and unstructured. In addition, professional development shows the gap between need and availability. Interview data revealed that only 32.1% of schools have structured professional development programs, while the FGD identified the need for continuous professional development as one of the main themes (70.3%). This indicates the existence of a capacity gap that requires systematic intervention. Meanwhile, the dimensions of documentation and differentiated learning monitoring show systemic weaknesses [23]. Analysis of the document revealed that 85.6% of schools do not have a unique documentation format, while only 14.4% have a structured monitoring system. This has implications for the limitation of the database for program evaluation and development.

The perception gap between stakeholders is revealed through data triangulation. The interviews showed a difference in priorities between teachers (76% emphasised practical guidance) and school principals (84.1% prioritised monitoring systems), indicating a gap in communication and understanding that needs to be bridged. Furthermore, the geographical aspect emerged as a determinant factor in implementing differentiated learning. Supervision data showed an average of only 2.2 visits per semester. At the same time, observations revealed significant gaps between urban and rural schools regarding access to resources and implementing differentiated learning. Then, the analysis of the proposed solution shows a tendency to be collaborative [24]. The FGD resulted in recommendations for forming a community of practice (84.3%) and developing a learning resource bank (76%), indicating an awareness of the importance of a collective approach in overcoming differentiated learning challenges.

The study's findings reveal that implementing differentiated learning in the Manggarai region involves dynamic interactions between pedagogical, managerial, social, and cultural aspects. The identified implementation gaps are not solely technical problems but reflect the complexity of education systems in specific geographical and socio-cultural contexts. Implementing differentiated learning in the Manggarai region shows a significant gap between the ideal concept and reality in the field, which aligns with the findings of Tomlinson and Ibbey's research [25], which identifies the existence of implementation gaps in differentiated learning. This can be seen from the low percentage of differentiated lesson plans, the implementation of classroom learning, and the use of differentiated assessments, which confirms Santangelo's (2012) research on the complexity of implementing differentiated learning at the elementary school level [26].

Infrastructure and learning resources are the main obstacles, with school principals admitting the inadequacy of infrastructure and learning still relying on textbooks. These findings reinforce the research of Dixon et al (2014), which revealed that limited resources and infrastructure are significant obstacles to implementing differentiated learning [27]. The gap between urban and rural schools also confirms Wan's (2016) research on the impact of geographic disparity on the quality of differentiated learning implementation [28].

The time dimension and teacher workload emerge as critical factors, with teachers lacking time for optimal preparation. This aligns with Westwood's (2018) research, which identified time management as a significant challenge in implementing differentiated learning [29]. This is reinforced by De Jesus's (2012) findings, which show that a high administrative burden can hinder the effectiveness of implementing differentiated learning [30]. The gap in the evaluation aspect of learning, with teachers still implementing uniform assessments, confirms Moon's (2015) research on the challenges in developing evaluation systems that align with the principles of differentiated learning [31]. However, the existence of learning adaptation efforts with teachers trying various learning methods shows positive developments that align with the findings of Roy et al. (2013) about the importance of flexibility and adaptability in implementing differentiated learning [31].

The recommendation to establish a learning community to share good practices and develop a learning resource bank is in line with Heacox's (2017) research, which emphasises the importance of a collaborative approach in overcoming the challenges of differentiated learning implementation [32]. This also supports the findings of Suprayogi et al. (2017) on the effectiveness of community-based professional development in increasing teachers' capacity to implement differentiated learning [33]. This collaborative approach is key in addressing various implementation challenges, as recommended in a longitudinal study by Lawrence-Brown (2016) on the development of sustainable differentiated learning [34].

4. Conclusion

The conclusion of differentiated learning implementation in elementary schools in the Manggarai region shows a complex interaction between pedagogical, managerial, and socio-cultural aspects. There is a systemic gap between the idealism of the differentiated learning concept and the reality of its implementation in the field, as reflected in the low percentage of differentiated lesson plans, classroom implementation, and differentiated assessments. These implementation challenges reflect the dilemma between the demands of national education standardization and local adaptation, primarily related to the gap between urban and rural schools.

The main factor affecting the gap is the limitation of infrastructure and resources, where principals and teachers state a lack of adequate facilities to implement differentiated learning. In addition, teacher workloads and inefficient time management exacerbate implementation challenges, with many teachers lacking time to plan and execute learning according to the principles of differentiation. On the other hand, the learning evaluation aspect also shows that the assessments applied are still uniform and do not fully reflect the concept of differentiation.

Nonetheless, there is adaptive capacity among teachers who have tried alternative learning methods, demonstrating the potential for resilience in the education system. However, these efforts are still reactive and unstructured. Recommendations for forming a community of practice and developing collaborative learning resources are recognised as potential solutions to address these challenges. More structured and community-based professional development is also needed to continuously increase teachers' capacity to implement differentiated learning. Overall, the complexity of implementing differentiated learning in Manggarai shows the need for a holistic approach that involves systemic interventions, infrastructure improvement, and strengthening the capacity of teachers and the educational community.

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