



## Teachers' Challenges in Differentiated Social Studies Learning Implementation in Junior High Schools in Jepara Regency

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### Abstract

The central gap in implementing differentiated learning lies in the mismatch between curriculum demands and practices caused by limited understanding, resources, time, policy support, and adaptive evaluation. This research aimed to identify teacher preparation, analyze the obstacles, and identify teachers' efforts in implementing differentiated social studies learning in the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP Negeri 1 Bangsri and MTS Hasyim Asy'ari. Researchers use qualitative methods which produce qualitative descriptive data through in-depth interviews, observation and documentation. The key informant in the research is the social studies teacher. The findings showed that the teachers' efforts in implementing differentiated learning were by attending training provided by the school and the government and then making teaching modules according to the student's needs. The significant obstacles faced are time limitations, lack of understanding and facilities, and the use of technology that has yet to be optimal. The efforts made by teachers are using various learning strategies, utilizing media and methods in differentiated learning, and selecting effective assessments and evaluations such as summative and formative assessments. This research suggests that increasing teacher training, providing additional facilities at school, and optimizing school support are crucial to ensure the successful implementation of differentiated social studies learning.

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## INTRODUCTION

The curriculum is dynamic as it constantly changes following the times. These changes can occur as an effort to improve the education system. In addition, curriculum changes are also a consequence of changes in the economy, political system, socio-culture, and science and technology in people's lives (Nugraha, 2022).

Curriculum changes can take place to create an active and effective learning atmosphere and learning process (Nasution, 2023). The Merdeka Curriculum began operating in schools in 2022. The short preparation made teachers and schools ill-prepared to apply the Merdeka Curriculum in learning. Therefore, teachers' readiness is the primary factor that can support the proper implementation of the Merdeka Learning Curriculum (Susilo & Sofiarini, 2020).

There is a statement that, in essence, the curriculum is in the hands of the teacher in that, in learning activities, the teacher must adjust the current curriculum (Lestari, 2023). The desired educational goals will be challenging if the teacher needs help understanding the applicable curriculum. Thus, the ability and understanding of teachers is arguably the most essential factor in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum (Karamina, 2019).

Differentiated learning is one of the strategies available for teachers to fulfill the needs of each student in understanding learning materials based on the characteristics, abilities, interests, learning styles, and potential of students in the Merdeka Curriculum (Sulistiyosari, 2022).

Differentiated learning can also motivate students to participate more actively in learning activities. Differentiated learning allows teachers to understand the needs of different students and establish learning strategies that work best for each student (Maulidia & Prafitasari, 2023). It also helps teachers overcome learning gaps and appropriately support each student. Teachers can manage the learning environment and climate and each class's content, process, and product based on student profiles (Yanuarini, 2023).

Teachers are obligated to understand each student's interests through their expertise (Suharini, 2009.). The Merdeka Curriculum allows teachers and students to be innovative in learning and think

creatively. Teachers play a significant role in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, where they must be involved in the curriculum development process to adapt the contents according to the needs of students in the classroom (Rahmatika, 2022). Besides, teachers play a significant role in educating and building students' character, where character education will stick if the teacher organizes activities (Ambarsari, 2023).

Given the significance of the Merdeka Curriculum in shaping the future of education, it is imperative to conduct research on the role of social studies teachers in implementing differentiated social studies learning. This research is not just a mere academic exercise, but a crucial step towards ensuring that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in social studies learning is aligned with the specific goals of promoting critical thinking, civic engagement, and cultural understanding, as well as the policies of the Ministry of Education (Yanti, 2022).

An article by Usman (2022) explains that understanding the independent curriculum is an absolute requirement for every teacher and is the first step that must be fulfilled by those involved in the world of education. This research is the basis for thinking used by researchers as a reference for a teacher's understanding in carrying out differentiated learning in the independent curriculum.

Another research employed as a reference is an article by Arviansyah & Shagena (2022). This article discussed the effectiveness of learning and the role of a teacher, who must have an active, enthusiastic, creative, innovative, and skillful attitude to support themselves as a student facilitator as a manifestation of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Among the 32 junior high schools in the Jepara district, both public and private, some have successfully adopted the Merdeka Curriculum and implemented differentiated social studies learning. SMP Negeri 1 Bangsri and MTS Hasyim Asyari have shown exceptional results. The interaction between teachers and students in these schools is exemplary, with teachers employing diverse and compelling learning methods inspired by the Merdeka Curriculum's principles (Manurung, 2024).

Research on the role of teachers in implementing differentiated social studies learning in the Merdeka Curriculum is a unique area that urgently needs to be explored, particularly at the junior high school level in Indonesia (Arviansyah & Shagena, 2022). Most existing studies focus more on implementing the Merdeka Curriculum without centering on the differentiated aspects of social studies learning. In other words, the research focuses on the role of teachers in overcoming the challenges arising in the implementation of differentiated learning, a perspective that is still rare and novel, but crucial for the success of the Merdeka Curriculum.

While SMP Negeri 1 Bangsri and MTS Hasyim Asy'ari have implemented differentiated learning, there are still significant gaps in our understanding of the obstacles faced by teachers in differentiated learning. Therefore, this research strives to fill the gap by identifying teachers' readiness, the difficulties and efforts to overcome the challenges in both schools, as well as practical recommendations for improving the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in these schools. The anticipation for these outcomes is palpable, as they could significantly enhance our understanding and implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. This is what makes the author interested in "Teacher Challenges in Implementing Differentiated Social Studies Learning in Middle Schools in Jepara Regency".

This research aimed to identify teacher preparation, analyze the obstacles, and identify teachers' efforts in implementing differentiated social studies learning in the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP Negeri 1 Bangsri and MTS Hasyim Asy'ari.

## METHOD

Guided by the research questions, this research delved into the crucial roles of teachers in implementing differentiated social studies learning in the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP Negeri 1 Bangsri and MTS Hasyim Asy'ari. The research approach utilized is qualitative.

The robustness of qualitative research methods guided the research journey. These methods, characterized by their dynamic development through open-ended questions, allowed us to process interviews, observations,

documentation, and audio-visual data through textual analysis and emic data (Creswell, 2019).

The research in Jepara Regency focused on SMP Negeri 1 Bangsri and MTs Hasyim Asy'ari. The selection of these schools was purposeful, as they provided a pertinent educational context to observe variations in differentiated learning implementation. SMP Negeri 1 Bangsri was chosen because this school is known to have an innovative learning program that is relevant to the research objectives which want to explore teacher readiness in implementing differentiated learning in a formal school environment that has students with diverse backgrounds. MTs Hasyim Asyari was chosen to provide a different perspective, namely from a religion-based educational institution. This teaching approach that prioritizes religious values in schools provides additional insight into the application of differentiated learning in more diverse educational contexts.

The data sources included informants, documents, and the teaching and learning process (Sugiyono, 2019). The main informant in this research is the MTS social studies teacher Hasyim Asy'ari who has two teachers, namely Mr. Rizwan Fazal S. Pd and Mrs. Herli Nailufar S. Pd. The reason for choosing two teachers is because at MTs Hasyim Asyari, there are only two teachers who are responsible for all learning. The social studies teachers at SMP Negeri 1 Bangsri are Mrs. Sri Nastiti S.Pd, Mrs. Zairina, S.E, Mrs. Sri Retnowati, S.Pd, Mr. Heru Sunowo, S.Pd and Mrs. Sri Koti, S.Pd. The number of main informants in this research was seven social studies teachers. Meanwhile, the supporting informants are the school principal and students.

The data collection techniques were meticulously chosen to ensure comprehensive coverage. These included observation during the learning process, in-depth interviews with primary and supporting informants, and document studies, including teaching modules and Learning Objective Sequences. The meticulousness of the research approach instills confidence in the thoroughness of the research. The validity testing was conducted through triangulation of sources and techniques. The data analysis utilized was data condensation, data presentation, and conclusions drawing.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Teachers' Prevalence in Implementing Differentiated Learning

This research began on July 22, 2024. The research commenced with observations and interviews with social studies teachers in the two research location schools, SMP Negeri 1 Bangsri and MTs Hasyim Asy'ari Jepara Regency. Based on the research findings, teachers in both schools have been well prepared to implement differentiated learning.

Differentiated learning in social studies has been conducted accordingly. Nevertheless, it has yet to be implemented optimally. This condition occurred because teachers still have difficulties in implementing differentiated learning. Teachers still encounter challenges in creating teaching modules suitable for differentiated learning and managing the classroom appropriately to align with the principles of differentiated learning. The driving factor for the implementation of differentiated learning is the school leadership that constantly empowers teachers and provides diverse guidance for teachers through various seminars and internal training activities.

In preparation for implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, teachers engaged in a series of training sessions and counseling with mentors from educational institutions. These mentors, carefully selected for their expertise, played a pivotal role in guiding and supporting teachers through the preparation process. Their involvement was instrumental in helping teachers grasp the essence of the Merdeka Curriculum. Furthermore, teachers gained detailed insights into the curriculum through the digital platform Merdeka Belajar Platform (PMM), a Ministry of Education and Culture Research Technology initiative launched in 2022 to aid teachers in understanding the Merdeka Curriculum.

One important step in preparation is to design a differentiated learning plan. Findings in the field show that many teachers have difficulty adjusting the lesson plan to the diversity of students. Faiz (2022) research confirms that teachers need special training to integrate differentiation strategies in learning planning.

Starting learning activities by assessing the condition and character of students is a practice that Mrs. Sri Nastiti has consistently implemented. This practice is usually conducted at the beginning of the semester so that students can be classified in each class. By grouping, the teacher will find it easier to manage classroom conditions according to the student's developmental stages. After designing the lesson, the next step is to prepare the equipment and materials needed for learning. Mrs. Herli explained that teachers need diverse learning materials to be innovative. Then, teachers design the assessment, either one assessment or different assessments. After that, the evaluation part of the procedure is essential because the teaching process can vary.

Preparation made by the teacher is evident from the initial planning and implementation until the students' learning assessment. First, social studies teachers at the learning planning stage at SMP Negeri 1 Bangsri and MTs Hasyim Asy'ari make preparations. It begins with understanding or studying the Merdeka Curriculum, accessible through training or seminars provided by the education office and their respective schools. Mr. Rizwan explained that the training was provided to help teachers implement the Merdeka Curriculum in learning. After that, they begin to devise learning activities by determining learning objectives, student achievement, and a sequence of learning objectives that include learning media, resources, and learning approaches aimed at organizing learning activities, which vary in terms of learning activities with a greater focus on basic materials and assessments aligned with different learning concepts.

The results of the interviews with Mrs. Sri Retnowati and Mr. Heru underscore the profound understanding teachers have of differentiated learning. Mrs. Srikoti eloquently described it as a teaching approach tailored to each student's unique needs and characteristics. This understanding is a testament to educators' dedication to comprehending each student's profile and learning style. By doing so, they can design learning experiences that best suit their students' needs and enhance their learning skills.

Teachers often feel that they do not understand enough the basic principles of

differentiation learning. According to Wantiana & Mellisa (2023) this learning requires mastery of concepts such as adjustment of content, processes, and products based on students' needs. The findings were reinforced by the research of Yuliu Andarika & Rofiki (2023) which showed that many teachers were confused in identifying the first steps of implementing this strategy.

### **Challenges Encountered by Teachers in Implementing Differentiated Learning**

Based on the research findings and observations, when teaching in the classroom, teachers inevitably encounter various problems in fulfilling their educator duties. Teaching-learning requires plenty of resources to support teaching, such as knowledge, learning methods, and learning media. Teachers face numerous obstacles and hindrances during the learning process, from external factors such as facilities and other obstructive factors. It is not only teachers who create good learning but also other stakeholders, such as the principal. Based on the results of an interview with Mr. Mualimin as the principal of MTs Hasyim Asy'ari, he said that it starts with improving teacher abilities through group activities or learning communities and then holding discussions to listen to opinions and facilitate effective learning. The principal at SMP Negeri 1 Bangsri and MTs Hasyim Asy'ari support teachers in implementing differentiated learning as he believes that differentiated learning is the responsibility of all teachers.

Internal factors, stemming from the individuals involved in the learning program, and external factors, such as facilities, environment, and student background, can hinder the learning process. The success of teachers in delivering learning materials is heavily influenced by the fulfillment of learning needs, which is why having adequate facilities and infrastructure at school is crucial. A conducive classroom environment or atmosphere can significantly enhance students' comfort in learning from teachers.

While differentiated learning has been well implemented, it still poses many issues. The most challenging obstacle to implementing differentiated learning is adequate infrastructure. This problem is difficult to overcome, considering the differentiated

learning process must cover three things: process, content, and product. Mr. Rizwan mentioned that one of his challenges is the need for LCD projectors in the school, which is the simplest example of the limited facilities and infrastructure. Managing facilities and infrastructure is crucial for every institution, especially schools, as they are vital to the teaching and learning process.

Not all schools provide adequate facilities or tools to support differentiated learning. Research Yuliu Andarika & Rofiki (2023) shows that school support, including training and provision of supporting tools, has an important role in the success of teachers implementing this strategy.

Apart from the obstacles in implementing differentiated learning, in both junior high schools, the principals play a crucial role in supporting the implementation of differentiated learning. This is based on several interviews conducted by researchers. Based on an interview with Mrs. Zaerina, she stated that the school principal really supports the implementation of differentiated learning, this is proven by providing facilities and infrastructure to support learning. This shows the principal's commitment to supporting innovative teaching methods.

Mrs. Herli Nailufar also said that the school principal at MTS Hasyim Asy'ari supports differentiated learning and leaves everything to the teacher. However, they must still note whether the students object or not and can also arrange the learning schedule. According to the results of the interview, other than internal obstacles, teachers also experience external challenges in implementing differentiated learning in the classroom. The obstacle to implementing differentiated learning is that it takes time and effort. Differentiated learning forces teachers to devote more attention to students who struggle to understand the material. In contrast, those who understand quickly want the teaching to proceed, which requires teachers to be more creative in learning variations despite the limited time.

Teachers often find it difficult because the time available for designing differentiated learning is very limited. This is compounded by the demands of a dense curriculum. The results of the research of Faiz (2022) mentioned that the allocation of time is

one of the main obstacles in the implementation of this strategy.

Based on the results of the interview with Mrs. Sri Retnowati, the different conditions each student faces in understanding the lesson become an obstacle or challenge for the teacher while on the job. As a result, teachers must put in extra work to deliver the subject matter so that students can understand it. The obstacle is particularly true if there are children with special needs in the class who require more attention than the average child. Teachers must provide various methods, media, and learning resources to design varied learning methods to meet students' learning styles. Implementing differentiated learning is an extra challenge as each school has set time allocations for each teacher and their respective subjects, so they require more time to prepare them.

Diversity of the needs of students in the classroom often makes teachers overwhelmed. Each student has a different learning style, abilities, and interests. Research Nisa (2019) shows that teachers need specific strategies to deal with this situation, but not all teachers feel ready.

Implementing differentiated learning is not just a pedagogical challenge but also a financial one. Schools must have access to various teaching materials and resources to adequately cater to each student's education and differentiated learning media to fulfill each student's learning needs. Moreover, schools must be able to provide ongoing financial support, which may be a challenge for many schools, highlighting the need for sustainable funding in education.

According to Mr. Rizwan Fazal, one of the obstacles faced in differentiated learning is that the learning material is quite packed, and sometimes, the time needed for learning still needs to be improved. At MTS Hasyim Asy'ari, several classes still need LCD projectors because they are broken, which hinders the effective delivery of differentiated learning. Furthermore, according to Mr. Rizwan, the main challenge is the preparation of the teachers who were still overshadowed by Curriculum 13. In this differentiated learning, teachers must elevate grades for students who have not achieved the desired learning outcomes.

Furthermore, teachers need help with technology. There is no doubt that technology plays a significant role in the implementation of differentiated learning. Mrs. Sri Nastiti mentioned the dominant challenge teachers encounter is technology in the modern era; teachers must refrain from dissociating from the pressure to use technology to reinforce their professionalism. IT is essential for differentiated learning as it provides access to different types of information, offers learning tools adaptable to students' individual needs, and enforces collaboration between students and teachers. However, many teachers need to utilize technology. Many still need help to keep up with the development of learning technology in the digital era. They also should have capitalized on applications that can support the learning process.

The obstacles teachers face in implementing differentiated learning are not the only ones. Students also have their own struggles, such as managing time, understanding the material, and actively participating in discussions during class. For instance, one student found managing their study time challenging, resulting in less-than-optimal productivity. Another student expressed that they often had trouble understanding the material covered and needed more time to comprehend the learning material fully. Similarly, some need help to actively participate in group activities, affecting their engagement in learning. It is common to find students who need help understanding the learning objectives, ultimately making them less active in the learning process. These challenges show the obstacles that students encounter in achieving maximum learning, providing a comprehensive view of the challenges in differentiated learning.

### **Teachers' Efforts in Implementing Differentiated Learning**

Teachers should create a good classroom atmosphere to create a class that can produce meaningful and effective learning for students. Class management will improve if the teacher utilizes the potential of the class optimally by providing equal opportunities for each student so that the learning process will take place significantly. In implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, teachers must understand each learning

objective and create a learning strategy that fits the material to be delivered so that students can receive it well. Mrs. Srikoti emphasized that in implementing differentiated learning, teachers can provide learning materials by adjusting to the teaching modules prepared and adapted to the students in the class. Consequently, students can take the time to understand the material delivered so that the teacher can assess the student's abilities. The teacher can do or make inquiry questions to see the students' readiness.

In implementing differentiated learning, teachers can employ various learning methods using the same learning materials. This approach is inherently student-centered, as it allows the learning process to be tailored to each student's unique characteristics. Teachers must know their students' profiles, learning styles, interests, challenges, and educational needs. Mr. Rizwan Fazal suggests that differentiated learning strategies can be implemented using physical activities, such as audio and visual aids, to meet students' needs. In social studies, many materials relate to daily life, allowing teachers to bring learning to life. Teachers can also utilize various learning strategies to cater to students' needs and learning styles. Research has shown that teachers often encourage small-group cooperation, allowing some students to process learning activities as learning progresses.

Differentiated learning is an approach used by teachers to meet student needs. According to interviews conducted by researchers with Mrs. Sri Retnowati, namely the Social Sciences Teacher at SMP Negeri 1 Bangsri, differentiated learning is learning that is based on student characteristics because students tend to be different from one another. One of the strategies and methods used is problem solving because so that students have critical thinking skills, then there are inquiry methods and also discovery learning adapted to the conditions of each class.

On the other hand, according to Mrs. Herli Nailufar, the methods she adopts in implementing differentiated learning depend on the material. She also more often utilizes projects (PjBL), where students will be given an assignment and then present it in front of the class so that she can assess

the extent of students' understanding of the material she has provided.

Moreover, the insights from Mr. Rizwan Fazal, a key figure in the differentiated learning implementation, underscore the increased student engagement and creativity these strategies can foster. However, providing facilities and infrastructure remains crucial for effective learning facilitation. The presence of supporting equipment significantly aids students in comprehending the material being taught. This emphasis on the positive outcomes of differentiated learning strategies can inspire and motivate the audience to implement them in their classrooms.

Teachers also try various methods and learning media to create a more interesting and relevant learning atmosphere. ResearchSarie (2022) shows that variations in learning methods, such as project-based learning or small group discussions, can help students with different needs to achieve optimal learning outcomes.

The success of the learning process is determined through assessment. Formative and summative assessments are employed in this assessment. Social studies teachers at MTS Hasyim Asy'ari conduct formative assessments before or after lessons to assess students' readiness or understanding of the learning material. A summative assessment is performed at the end of the lesson by doing projects or writing tests to determine how well students achieve learning objectives. The statement is in line with that of Mr. Heru Sunowo.

There are various methods to assess the effectiveness of differentiated learning, such as observations of students' participation, understanding of the material, assignment results, and student feedback. It's worth noting that Mrs. Sri Retnowati's provision of LKPD for students to do according to the material learned on that day is a significant contribution. The assessment is organized using both similar and different approaches. Tests are utilized to measure the understanding of the theory, where although the material remains the same, the delivery and explanation are modified to the needs of each student.

Assessment in differentiated social studies learning is crucial for creating a more equitable and inclusive learning environment. It individually assesses students' abilities and development by considering their needs, interests, and learning styles. The assessment is conducted through various formative and summative methods and involves assessment instruments appropriate to the student's level of difficulty (TaRL) and interest. According to Ms. Zairina, student assessment is centered on the end result and the learning process by providing constructive feedback. This assessment can help create more equitable, inclusive, and meaningful learning experiences for students, underscoring the importance of the audience's role in student development.

## CONCLUSION

This study reveals that differentiated learning in Social Studies at SMP Negeri 1 Bangsri and MTs Hasyim Asy'ari has been implemented, but it is not yet optimal. Research by Usman (2022) and Arviansyah & Shagena (2022) emphasizes the importance of understanding differentiated learning and the active, creative, and innovative abilities of teachers. However, this research places greater emphasis on practical challenges at the junior high school level, particularly in addressing the needs of students from diverse backgrounds. This comparison indicates that while many studies highlight the importance of teacher preparation and training, gaps remain in understanding and overcoming contextual obstacles such as time management and infrastructure, which are more pronounced in schools with limited resources. Thus, the recommendations of this research align with other studies but provide additional insights that technical support and school policies are essential to overcoming these specific challenges.

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