


# Differentiated Learning Strategies in Improving Social Skills of Elementary School Students

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## ABSTRACT

Differentiated learning is a strategy that focuses on adjusting subject matter, teaching methods, and assessments to better suit the individual needs, abilities, and interests of students. This study aims to explore the role of differentiated learning strategies in improving students' social skills at the elementary school level. Using a qualitative descriptive approach and literature study method, this study examines various scientific literature published between 2021 and 2025, both from national and international journals that have been indexed in reputable databases such as SINTA, DOAJ, *Scopus*, and *Web of Science*. Differentiated learning strategies are defined as instructional approaches that adjust the learning process, teaching materials, and forms of evaluation according to different characteristics of students, such as learning styles, academic readiness, interests, and other individual needs. This approach is not only aimed at improving academic results, but also proven to be able to create an inclusive and supportive learning environment for the development of students' social skills. The results showed that students who participated in differentiated learning tended to show improvements in communication skills, work in groups, resolve conflicts, and build empathy and confidence. This strategy also helps to form healthy and positive social interactions in the classroom environment. Thus, the application of differentiated learning makes an important contribution to the educational process that not only emphasizes the cognitive aspect, but also supports the formation of students' character and social skills. Differentiated learning has been shown to be effective in improving the social skills of elementary school students by adapting materials, methods, and learning environments to individual needs. This approach not only supports academic achievement, but also shapes character and social abilities such as communication, cooperation, and empathy.

**Keywords:** Learning Strategies, Differentiated Learning, Social Skills, Basic Education

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## INTRODUCTION

Education has a very important role in the formation of individual character and competence, especially in providing students with skills that will be useful for students throughout their lives. At the primary school level, education aims not only to develop students' academic or cognitive abilities, but also to build social skills that are essential for the continuation of their lives going forward. These social skills include the ability to communicate effectively, cooperate with others, solve problems collaboratively, and show empathy for the surrounding environment. All of these skills are essential for students' adaptation processes, both in the context of social interaction at school and in their daily lives. Mastering these skills allows students to build positive relationships, both with peers and with adults, as well as helping them contribute constructively in society (Johnson & Martinez, 2021; Roberts & Kim, 2023)

However, the reality is that in some elementary schools, many students face challenges in developing adequate social skills. This phenomenon is evident in children who have difficulty interacting with their peers, are reluctant to express opinions, or lack confidence when participating in group activities. This problem often stems from a learning approach that focuses more on academic or cognitive achievement and subject matter assignments, but pays less attention to the development of students' social skills. Although the education curriculum

in Indonesia has included the importance of developing social skills in learning, application in the field is often not optimal and seems to be just a formality (Dewi, Maulida, & Prasetya, 2022; Hasanah, 2021)

One of the problems that often occurs in elementary schools is the uniform learning model, where all students are treated equally and are expected to follow learning in an equal way, speed and understanding. In fact, each student has a different learning style, both in terms of understanding the material, interests and in terms of their social skills. The inability to adapt learning to these differences can lead to gaps in social skills development between students. Therefore, a more flexible and responsive approach is needed to the needs of each student, one of which is differentiated learning. This approach allows teaching to be tailored to the characteristics of each student, with the aim of creating a more inclusive and relational learning experience for each individual.

Differentiated learning is a strategy that focuses on adjusting subject matter, teaching methods, and assessments to better suit the individual needs, abilities, and interests of students. This strategy allows students to learn in the way that is most effective for them, whether through variations in the level of difficulty of the material, variations in teaching techniques, or activity choices that are more relevant to each student's learning style (Smith & Lee, 2022). Although the concept of differentiated learning is often associated with improved student academic outcomes, its effect on students' social skills development still requires more in-depth study.

Previous research has shown that differentiated learning can not only improve students' academic achievement, but it can also strengthen their social engagement. Students who engage in learning that pays attention to their individual needs tend to be more confident, more able to adapt to social environments, and more likely to interact constructively in groups (Chandra, Rahman, & Nugroho, 2025; Roberts & Kim, 2023). This shows that by providing a learning experience that is responsive to individual student differences, differentiated learning can create an environment that supports the development of students' social skills, which are critical to their lives in and out of the classroom.

However, although differentiated learning offers great potential in improving students' social skills, there is still a lack of research specializing in the influence of these strategies on students' social skills at the elementary school level. As much of the research as it has been conducted, it has highlighted its influence on academic achievement or the development of students' cognitive aspects, while its impact on social skills is less discussed (Andriani & Yusuf, 2022; Pratama & Widya, 2022). In Indonesia, in particular, there has been no research that has explored more deeply how differentiated learning can be applied to improve students' social skills, as well as how this strategy can be integrated with the existing local social and cultural context.

Although there has been a lot of research showing the positive impact of differentiated learning on academic outcomes, research that addresses its effect on the social skills of elementary school students is limited. Therefore, further research examining the application of differentiated learning in diverse classrooms, as well as its impact on students' social development, is urgently needed. Some studies suggest that although differentiated learning can improve academic achievement, its effect on social interaction and cooperation between students still lacks adequate attention (Lestari, 2024; Putri & Santosa, 2023)

A UNICEF Indonesia report (2021) states that more than 60% of primary school students experience difficulties in social skills such as cooperation, empathy, and communication, especially after the distance learning period. This shows the need for a learning strategy that not only focuses on the academic aspect, but also on strengthening the social-emotional dimension. In line with that, the Ministry of Education and Culture through the Independent Curriculum encourages the application of differentiated learning as an approach that pays attention to differences in students' abilities, interests, and learning styles.

This article aims to identify and analyze differentiated learning strategies and their impact on the social skills of elementary school students based on the existing literature. Based on a review of the existing literature, this article hypothesizes that the consistent application

of differentiated learning can improve students' social skills, including the ability to communicate, work together, and manage conflict more effectively. This hypothesis is supported by findings showing that learning that responsive to students' individual needs can create a more inclusive environment, increase student participation in social activities, and build healthier relationships between students (Lee, Wong, & Chen, 2024; Nuraini, 2023)

This research is expected to make an important contribution to the theory of the use of differentiated learning in the context of students' social skills development. In addition, the study can also provide practical recommendations for educators and policymakers to design learning that is more inclusive and responsive to students' social needs, as well as pay more attention to the balance between academic development and social skills in primary education.

## METHOD

In this study, data collection and analysis steps were carried out systematically to ensure the validity and relevance of the sources used. The process begins by establishing inclusion criteria, namely articles that discuss differentiated learning topics, social skills, and basic education; published between 2021 and 2025; published by an institution or publisher indexed in a database such as SINTA, DOAJ, Scopus, or Web of Science; and has gone through a peer review process and is available in full access. Articles were collected through a search of various scientific databases using keywords such as "differentiated instruction", "social skills", and "elementary education". Each article found is selected based on title, abstract, and content to ensure its fit for the focus of the research.

After the articles are selected, the analysis process is carried out using a thematic analysis approach. The researcher read in depth each article to identify differentiated learning strategies and their impact on students' social skills. Important parts of the article are coded and grouped into key themes such as differentiation strategies (content, processes, products), social skills development (empathy, cooperation, communication), and implementation contexts in primary schools. Furthermore, the data synthesis stage is carried out narratively by comparing and integrating findings between studies to identify patterns, similarities, differences, and contributions of each literature. The results of this synthesis are the basis for compiling conclusions and research recommendations related to the effectiveness of differentiated learning strategies in improving the social skills of elementary school students.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the results of an analysis of fifteen scientific journal articles, both published in national and international journals between 2021 and 2025, it was revealed that differentiated learning strategies have a significant impact on improving students' social skills in elementary school. This approach allows teachers to tailor learning methods and materials to the differences that exist in each individual student, which include interests, learning readiness, learning styles, and other special needs. Thus, learning becomes more inclusive and adaptive, where students feel valued for getting attention that is more in line with their needs and characteristics.

The advantage of this differentiated learning lies in its ability to create a more flexible and open learning atmosphere, which not only focuses on the academic aspect, but also supports the development of students' social skills. In this context, students who previously may have felt marginalized or unable to keep up with the uniform rhythm of the classroom now feel more confident and better able to actively interact with their peers. It also contributes to their increased participation in group discussions, cooperation, and other social activities inside and outside the classroom.

This approach not only focuses on mastering the subject matter, but also builds a social space that supports the development of students' social skills. With various activities that involve cooperation and mutual respect for differences, students are taught to work together with friends from different backgrounds, as well as collaborate to achieve the same goals. This is important, because at the elementary school level, the process of developing children's

character and social identity is at a very critical stage. Therefore, learning that pays attention to the social and emotional aspects of students is essential to support the development of communication, empathy, collaboration, and conflict resolution skills.

With the application of differentiated learning strategies, students not only learn academic material, but also gain social experiences that enrich their skills in interacting with others. Learning that adapts to students' social and emotional needs has great potential in forming good character and healthy social relationships among students. Below is a table that illustrates the relationship between the components of differentiated learning strategies and social skills developed in elementary school students based on the results of various scientific articles that have been conducted:

Table 1. The Relationship of Differentiated Learning Strategies with Students' Social Skills

Differentiation Components	Implementation in Learning	Evolving Social Skills	Reference Articles
Content Differentiation	Provide materials tailored to students' interests or readiness	Communication, self-confidence	(Lee, Wong, & Chen, 2024; Putri & Santosa, 2023; Smith & Lee (2022); Pratama & Widya, 2022)
Process Differentiation	Using a variety of learning methods (group discussions, simulations, collaborative projects)	Cooperation, tolerance, empathy	(Johnson & Martinez, 2021; Nuraini, 2023; Zhang & Liu, 2023).
Product Differentiation	Provide a selection of final projects (presentations, posters, reports, videos) according to the student's learning style	Initiative, social responsibility, creativity	(Chandra, Rahman, & Nugroho, 2025; Dewi, Maulida, & Prasetya, 2022; Tomlinson, 2021)
Environmental Differentiation	Creating a comfortable and flexible learning space (physical and social)	Social adaptation, respect for differences	(Hasanah, 2021; Sari, Anggraeni, & Hidayat, 2021)

The results described in the table show that content differentiation can be understood as a learning approach that adapts the teaching material to the interests, readiness, and level of understanding of students. This adjustment is realized through the provision of diverse materials, both in terms of form and level of difficulty, such as the use of visual, audio, and multi-level assignments. The main goal of this strategy is so that each student can learn according to their developmental stage, so that the learning process becomes more optimal. When students acquire material that is relevant to their interests and abilities, motivation to learn increases and participation in learning activities becomes more active. This involvement also encourages increased confidence in conveying ideas, asking questions, and discussing. Thus, students' communication skills develop because they feel more secure and confident when interacting, both with teachers and classmates. Overall, the implementation of content differentiation not only strengthens students' academic understanding, but also contributes to the development of social skills, especially in terms of effective communication in a collaborative learning environment (Putri & Santosa, 2023; Smith & Lee, 2022; Pratama & Widya, 2022).

Process differentiation is an approach in learning that adjusts the method of delivering material to the learning style and needs of each student. This strategy involves using a variety of learning methods, such as group discussions, collaborative projects, and problem-solving activities, so that students can understand the material in a way that works best for them. Through an interactive and collaboration-based approach, students not only gain academic understanding, but also have the opportunity to develop social skills, such as working in a

team, showing tolerance, and fostering empathy. When engaging in group work, they learn to build effective communication, accept disagreements, and work together to complete tasks with mutual respect. The application of process differentiation not only promotes improved learning outcomes, but also strengthens the social and emotional aspects of students, equipping them with good interaction skills in daily life (Johnson & Martinez, 2021; Nuraini, 2023; Zhang & Liu, 2023).

Product differentiation is a learning approach that provides students with the opportunity to determine the form of the final result of the assignment that best suits their interests and learning style, such as in the form of presentations, posters, written reports, or videos. This option encourages students to be more responsible, independent, and show creativity in completing tasks. Through this strategy, students not only complete tasks based on personal preferences, but are also invited to work together in teams, so they learn to divide responsibilities, manage time, and bring ideas together to achieve common goals. This process indirectly fosters initiative and social awareness. Overall, product differentiation plays an important role in honing independence, creative thinking skills, and collaborative skills that are needed in the modern world of education (Chandra, Rahman, & Nugroho, 2025; Dewi, Maulida, & Prasetya, 2022; Tomlinson, 2021).

Environmental differentiation is a learning strategy that focuses on creating a learning environment that is comfortable, safe, and supportive, both physically and socially. This includes flexible classroom layouts such as varied seating arrangements and access to learning resources as well as the establishment of an inclusive and welcoming classroom climate for all students. A positive learning environment helps students feel accepted and valued, making them more adaptable and socially engaged. This contributes to their improved ability to communicate, work together, and appreciate differences, which is an important part of social-emotional learning. Environmental differentiation not only supports learning comfort, but also encourages the growth of students' social character and interpersonal skills (Hasanah, 2021; Sari, Anggraeni, & Hidayat, 2021).

Several articles assert that students who learn in differentiated learning environments show improvements in communication, cooperation, empathy, and conflict resolution skills constructively (Roberts & Kim, 2023; Nuraini, 2023). When students are given space to learn in a way that is most comfortable for them, they become more confident in participating in group discussions, helping each other in collaborative activities, and more open to expressing opinions assertively while still respecting others (Nuraini, 2023; Roberts & Kim, 2023).

In general, this strategy is seen as a pedagogical approach that is not only oriented to academic results, but also to the formation of student character. Differentiated learning encourages an inclusive classroom atmosphere, encourages healthy interactions between students, and strengthens positive emotional connections between students and teachers (Chandra, Rahman, & Nugroho, 2025; Tomlinson, 2021). This is especially important at the elementary school level, where children are in a period of intense social and emotional growth.

The effectiveness of this strategy has been widely supported by the literature, its implementation in elementary schools still faces challenges. Many teachers do not have sufficient understanding or skills to design differentiated learning effectively. In addition, limited resources, large number of students, and lack of policy support are often obstacles (Lestar, 2024; Putri & Santosa, 2023). Therefore, continuous professional training for teachers is essential, so that they can understand the basic principles of differentiated learning and apply them in diverse classroom contexts. In order for differentiated learning strategies to be widely and sustainably implemented, there needs to be support from schools and the government. This includes integration in the curriculum, the provision of learning support facilities, and process-based assessments that allow teachers to evaluate students' social skills development, not just academic aspects. This support will strengthen the position of differentiated learning as an integral part of a basic education system that is responsive to the needs of students.

Differentiated learning strategies are also in line with the demands of 21st century education, which emphasizes the importance of mastering collaboration, empathy,

communication, and leadership skills. In the midst of rapid social change and the need for human beings with strong and adaptive characters, social skills are an important foundation that must be developed from an early age. Therefore, the implementation of this strategy not only supports the current learning process, but also equips students with competencies for the future.

The application of differentiated learning strategies makes a significant contribution to the development of students' social skills. This approach not only focuses on the academic and cognitive aspects of students, but also creates a learning environment that supports their social growth. By tailoring learning according to individual students' needs, they become more confident, more actively interact with peers, and are better able to work together in completing group assignments. This approach also assists students in managing differences of opinion and conflict, as well as improving their communication skills and empathy towards others. As a result, students can develop invaluable social skills, which are not only beneficial in the school environment, but also in their social life outside of school. Therefore, differentiated learning strategies not only contribute to the improvement of students' academic achievement, but also play an important role in facilitating the development of social skills that are essential for the formation of their character and adaptability in society.

Based on an analysis of fifteen articles in national and international scientific journals published between 2021 and 2025, it can be concluded that the implementation of differentiated learning strategies has a significant impact on improving students' social skills at the elementary school level. This approach allows for more inclusive and flexible learning by tailoring materials, methods, and learning environments based on the individual diversity of students. With learning tailored to their interests, learning styles, and social needs, students become more active, confident, and engaged in social interactions with their peers.

Differentiated learning does not only focus on academic or cognitive achievement, but also plays an important role in shaping students' social skills. Skills such as communication, cooperation, empathy, and conflict resolution develop as students experience working together and appreciating differences within groups. This approach, which pays attention to the social and emotional aspects of learning, creates an environment that supports children's character development, especially at the elementary school level, as their social identity formation process takes place.

Overall, differentiated learning offers an effective approach to creating a more inclusive classroom environment, where each student is given the opportunity to thrive both academically and socially. This approach has great potential to prepare students with the skills necessary to interact positively and productively in society in the future.

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on an analysis of fifteen articles in national and international scientific journals published between 2021 and 2025, it can be concluded that the implementation of differentiated learning strategies has a significant impact on improving students' social skills at the elementary school level. This approach allows for more inclusive and flexible learning by adapting materials, methods, and learning environments based on the diversity of individual students, so that students become more active, confident, and engaged in social interactions. Differentiated learning not only focuses on academic achievement, but also plays an important role in shaping social skills such as communication, cooperation, empathy, and conflict resolution, which develop through the experience of working together and respecting differences within the group. By paying attention to social and emotional aspects, this approach creates an environment that supports the development of children's character, especially during the formation of social identity at the elementary school level. Overall, differentiated learning offers an effective approach to creating an inclusive classroom and giving each student the opportunity to develop academically and socially, as well as preparing them with the skills to interact positively and productively in society. Therefore, this strategy is recommended to be implemented more widely in primary schools and be a focus in teacher

training, as well as supported by follow-up research of an empirical nature in various contexts to test its effectiveness directly and in-depth in improving students' social skills.

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