



Teachers' Readiness for Differentiated and Social-Emotional Learning in Vocational Schools

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to evaluate teachers' readiness to formulate differentiated learning and social-emotional learning (SEL) at SMKN 1 West Kotaagung in 2024. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through structured interviews with 20 teachers selected using purposive sampling based on teaching experience, educational background, and involvement in professional development activities. The findings indicate that teachers' readiness remains limited across several critical dimensions. Teachers continue to face difficulties in systematically identifying student differences, developing adaptive learning models and instructional media, and enhancing student learning motivation. In addition, the implementation of social-emotional learning has not been consistently integrated into classroom practices. Teachers encounter challenges in fostering positive student interactions, supporting emotional regulation, and strengthening students' awareness of the importance of social-emotional competencies. From an interdisciplinary perspective, these findings suggest that teachers' readiness is influenced by the interaction of pedagogical competence, psychological understanding, and instructional management capacity. The study highlights the need for systematic professional development that integrates differentiated instructional design with social-emotional pedagogy, supported by institutional policies and adequate learning resources. In the context of vocational education, strengthening teachers' readiness is essential to ensure that learning processes not only address academic diversity but also equip students with social-emotional competencies required for successful participation in the workplace and society.

Keywords: *differentiated learning; social-emotional learning; teacher readiness; vocational education; qualitative study*



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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary educational development demands a transformation of instructional approaches that extend beyond academic achievement toward the cultivation of character, psychological well-being, and students' readiness to navigate social dynamics and the workplace. Rapid social change, technological advancement, and increasing diversity in student characteristics require teachers to possess adaptive and reflective pedagogical competencies in designing inclusive and meaningful learning experiences.

Within this context, differentiated learning and social-emotional learning (SEL) have emerged as two complementary instructional approaches. Differentiated learning is grounded in pedagogical theory and cognitive psychology, emphasizing that students vary in their abilities, interests, learning readiness, and learning styles, all of which must be systematically accommodated in instructional planning (Tomlinson, 2019; Tomlinson & Moon, 2019). In parallel, social-emotional learning is rooted in developmental psychology and behavioral sciences, focusing on the development of self-awareness, emotional regulation, social skills, and responsible decision-making as essential competencies for academic and life success (Durlak et al., 2015; Taylor et al., 2020).

A growing body of international research indicates that differentiated learning positively influences student engagement and academic achievement, particularly in heterogeneous classrooms (Bond & Castagno, 2018; Smith et al., 2016). Similarly, systematic implementation of SEL has been shown to enhance students' emotional well-being while simultaneously contributing to improved academic outcomes and a more positive learning climate (Durlak et al., 2015; Oberle et al., 2016). These findings suggest that integrating differentiated learning with SEL has strong potential to foster a holistic and sustainable learning process.

However, the effectiveness of both differentiated learning and SEL is highly dependent on teachers' readiness to understand, design, and operationalize these approaches in an integrated manner. Teacher readiness encompasses not only conceptual understanding but also practical competence in identifying diverse student characteristics, developing adaptive learning models and media, and implementing strategies that strengthen students' social-emotional competencies within classroom settings (Hall & Vue, 2017; Jones & Kahn, 2017).

In vocational education contexts, these challenges become more pronounced. Vocational high schools are expected not only to produce graduates with technical expertise but also individuals who possess adequate social-emotional competencies to succeed in the workforce and society. Consequently, examining teachers' readiness to formulate differentiated and social-emotional learning represents a strategic and timely issue, particularly in light of national education policies that emphasize student-centered and holistic learning approaches.

Based on this rationale, the present study aims to evaluate teachers' readiness to formulate differentiated and social-emotional learning at SMKN 1 West Kotaagung in 2024. From an interdisciplinary perspective, this study integrates insights from educational sciences, educational psychology, and instructional management to provide



empirical evidence regarding the challenges and capacity-building needs of teachers in implementing adaptive and holistic learning practices.

METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to evaluate teachers' readiness to formulate differentiated learning and social-emotional learning (SEL) at SMKN 1 West Kotaagung in 2024. A descriptive qualitative design was selected because the study aims to capture in-depth insights into teachers' perceptions, experiences, and pedagogical readiness within a natural educational context, without manipulating research variables (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research Participants

The participants consisted of 20 teachers teaching at SMKN 1 West Kotaagung. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, based on the following criteria: (1) active teaching experience, (2) educational background relevant to their teaching field, and (3) involvement in professional development activities. This sampling technique was applied to ensure that the selected participants possessed adequate experience and contextual understanding relevant to the objectives of the study (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Data Collection Instrument and Technique

Data were collected through **structured interviews**. The interview instrument was designed as a standardized set of questions administered uniformly to all participants to ensure data consistency and comparability across respondents. The interview questions explored key dimensions of teachers' readiness, including:

1. understanding of differentiated learning and social-emotional learning concepts;
2. ability to identify diverse student characteristics;
3. experience in developing adaptive learning models and instructional media; and
4. strategies employed to foster students' social-emotional competencies.

Structured interviews were considered appropriate for this evaluative study, as they allow focused data collection while maintaining uniformity of information across participants (Turner, 2010).

Research Procedure

The research process was systematically organized to ensure methodological rigor and consistency with the study objectives. Each stage was designed to facilitate the accurate collection and analysis of data related to teachers' readiness in formulating differentiated and social-emotional learning. This structured approach enabled the study to maintain procedural clarity, enhance data reliability, and support the replicability of the research design.

1. Preparation stage, which involved the development of the interview instrument and the selection of research participants;
2. Data collection stage, during which structured interviews were conducted with all participating teachers; and
3. Data processing and analysis stage, carried out after the completion of data collection.



Data Analysis Technique

The interview data were analyzed using **thematic qualitative analysis**. The analysis process involved transcription of interview data, initial coding, categorization of codes into broader categories, and identification of major themes representing teachers' readiness to formulate differentiated and social-emotional learning. This systematic approach enabled the identification of recurring patterns, tendencies, and key challenges in a transparent and replicable manner (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The results of this study were derived from structured interviews with 20 teachers at SMKN 1 West Kotaagung. The findings are presented thematically in accordance with the research objectives, namely to evaluate teachers' readiness to formulate differentiated learning and social-emotional learning.

Challenges in Identifying Student Differences

The findings indicate that most teachers continue to experience difficulties in identifying differences among students, including academic abilities, learning interests, and learning styles. Teachers generally rely on general classroom observations rather than systematic assessment instruments or structured diagnostic techniques. This condition limits teachers' capacity to design learning activities that are closely aligned with individual student needs.

Development of Learning Models and Instructional Media

The results show that teachers encounter constraints in developing learning models and instructional media capable of accommodating student diversity. These challenges are primarily associated with limited mastery of varied instructional strategies and insufficient access to supporting learning resources. Consequently, instructional practices tend to be uniform and have not fully reflected the principles of differentiated learning.

Student Learning Motivation

The findings further reveal that teachers face difficulties in enhancing students' learning motivation. Several teachers reported that the instructional approaches employed were not sufficiently aligned with students' interests and prior experiences. In addition, students' active engagement in the learning process remained limited, which affected their enthusiasm and participation during classroom activities.

Social-Emotional Learning: Student Interaction

With regard to social-emotional learning, the results indicate that teachers encounter challenges in developing strategies to promote positive interactions among students. Learning activities that encourage collaboration, communication, and empathy have not been implemented consistently. As a result, the development of students' social skills has not yet been optimized.

Management of Students' Emotions



The findings also show that teachers experience difficulties in supporting students' emotional management during the learning process. Teachers generally lack structured strategies for addressing students' emotional responses, particularly in situations involving stress or interpersonal conflict. This suggests that emotional regulation has not been systematically integrated into everyday classroom practices.

Awareness of the Importance of Social-Emotional Competencies

The results indicate that students' awareness of the importance of social-emotional competencies remains relatively low. Teachers reported that students have not fully recognized the relevance of social-emotional skills for academic success and future employment. This finding highlights the ongoing challenge of strengthening students' awareness of the strategic value of social-emotional competencies within the learning process.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that teachers' readiness to formulate differentiated learning and social-emotional learning at SMKN 1 West Kotaagung remains limited across several key dimensions. Difficulties in identifying student differences suggest that teachers have not yet systematically translated the principles of differentiated learning into diagnostic classroom practices. Previous studies emphasize that effective differentiation requires structured assessment of students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles rather than reliance on general observation alone (Tomlinson & Moon, 2019; Bond & Castagno, 2018). The absence of systematic identification mechanisms may therefore constrain teachers' ability to design instruction that meaningfully responds to learner diversity.

Challenges in developing adaptive learning models and instructional media further reinforce this condition. Consistent with prior research, limited pedagogical variation and constrained access to learning resources often result in uniform instructional practices that undermine the core objectives of differentiated learning (Smith et al., 2016; Hall & Vue, 2017). In vocational education contexts, where classrooms are typically heterogeneous in both academic and practical competencies, such limitations may reduce instructional relevance and learning effectiveness.

The findings related to student learning motivation also align with existing literature, which highlights the strong relationship between instructional relevance, student engagement, and motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020). When learning activities are insufficiently connected to students' interests and real-world experiences, particularly in vocational settings, students' intrinsic motivation may decline. This suggests that teachers' limited readiness in implementing differentiated strategies may indirectly affect motivational outcomes.

In terms of social-emotional learning, the results reveal that teachers face persistent challenges in fostering positive student interaction, emotional regulation, and awareness of social-emotional competencies. These findings are consistent with studies indicating that SEL implementation often remains fragmented when teachers lack



targeted training and structured integration within instructional practices (Durlak et al., 2015; Oberle et al., 2016). Without deliberate instructional strategies, social-emotional competencies tend to be treated as implicit outcomes rather than explicit learning objectives.

From an interdisciplinary perspective, these findings highlight the intersection of pedagogical competence, psychological understanding, and instructional management. Teachers' readiness to integrate differentiated learning and SEL is not solely a matter of pedagogical knowledge but also involves emotional intelligence, classroom management skills, and institutional support systems. As emphasized by Jones and Kahn (2017), sustainable integration of SEL requires alignment between teacher capacity, school culture, and instructional policy.

Overall, the results suggest that strengthening teachers' readiness requires systematic professional development focused on both differentiated instructional design and social-emotional pedagogy. Such efforts are particularly critical in vocational education, where academic learning must be closely aligned with social-emotional competencies to prepare students for workplace demands and social integration. The findings of this study therefore contribute empirical evidence to the growing body of research advocating for holistic, student-centered learning models that integrate cognitive and socio-emotional dimensions.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that teachers' readiness to formulate differentiated learning and social-emotional learning at SMKN 1 West Kotaagung remains insufficient across several essential dimensions. Teachers continue to face challenges in systematically identifying student differences, developing adaptive learning models and instructional media, and enhancing student learning motivation. These limitations indicate that the principles of differentiated learning have not yet been fully operationalized in classroom practice.

In addition, the implementation of social-emotional learning has not been consistently integrated into instructional processes. Teachers experience difficulties in fostering positive student interactions, supporting emotional regulation, and strengthening students' awareness of the importance of social-emotional competencies. As a result, social-emotional learning tends to function implicitly rather than as a structured and intentional component of teaching and learning activities.

From an interdisciplinary perspective, the findings highlight that teachers' readiness is shaped by the interplay of pedagogical competence, psychological understanding, and instructional management capacity. Strengthening readiness therefore requires systematic professional development that integrates differentiated instructional design with social-emotional pedagogy, supported by institutional policies and learning resources. In the context of vocational education, such integration is particularly critical to ensure that students are equipped not only with technical skills but



also with the social-emotional competencies necessary for successful participation in the workplace and society.

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