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Desain Kurikulum Berdiferensiasi sebagai Instrumen Keadilan Sosial di Kelas Multikultural dan Inklusif

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Abstract: *Educational diversity is no longer a peripheral condition but a defining characteristic of contemporary classrooms, where differences in culture, language, ability, socioeconomic background, readiness, and learning preferences interact with unequal opportunities to participate and succeed. This study examines differentiated curriculum design as an instrument of social justice in multicultural and inclusive classrooms. Using an integrative literature review, peer-reviewed studies published between 2022 and 2025 were synthesized alongside established methodological references to identify principles, implementation patterns, and equity implications of differentiated instruction, Universal Design for Learning, culturally responsive pedagogy, and inclusive pedagogy. The synthesis shows that equitable differentiation requires more than varying tasks by ability. It depends on common high expectations, flexible pathways to learning, ongoing formative assessment, culturally and linguistically responsive content, accessible participation structures, student choice, and assessment options that recognize different ways of demonstrating competence. The findings also reveal risks: fixed grouping may reproduce labels, individualized workloads can overburden teachers, and differentiation can become remedial tracking when cultural and structural inequities are ignored. A socially just differentiated curriculum therefore combines universal accessibility with targeted adaptation, treats learner variability as an asset, and distributes support without lowering intellectual demand. The study proposes a design logic linking learner evidence, shared outcomes, flexible content and processes, multimodal products, and reflective equity checks. This framework positions differentiation as a curriculum-level commitment to participation, recognition, and meaningful achievement for all learners rather than as an isolated classroom technique across diverse educational contexts worldwide.*

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary classrooms are increasingly shaped by intersecting forms of diversity, including language, culture, disability, socioeconomic position, academic readiness, gendered experience, migration history, and different patterns of participation. Treating this diversity as an exception encourages curriculum designs built around an imagined average learner, leaving many students to adapt themselves to inflexible content, pacing, and assessment. Differentiated instruction offers an alternative by proactively adjusting learning opportunities to learner readiness, interests, and profiles while preserving common curricular purposes (Kahmann et al., 2022).

The social-justice significance of differentiation becomes clearer when inclusion is understood as participation, recognition, and achievement rather than physical placement alone. Inclusive classrooms may enroll diverse students while still reproducing exclusion

through inaccessible texts, deficit expectations, inflexible assessment, or ability labels. Porta et al. (2022) found that teachers can value differentiated instruction while simultaneously doubting their capacity to implement it effectively, illustrating the gap between normative commitment and pedagogical enactment. This gap matters because students who are culturally, linguistically, or cognitively outside dominant classroom norms often bear the cost of standardized teaching.

Multicultural education adds a crucial dimension by asking whose knowledge, histories, identities, and communicative practices are legitimized in the curriculum. Differentiation that focuses only on readiness can unintentionally individualize problems that are also cultural and structural. Culturally and linguistically responsive instruction instead requires teachers to examine examples, texts, interaction patterns, and assessment conventions for hidden assumptions about legitimate language and cultural capital. Kim (2024) emphasizes that inclusive learning environments for culturally and linguistically diverse students depend on curriculum and assessment designs that value students' prior knowledge and experiences.

Inclusive education also challenges the assumption that difference is located solely within individual students. Universal Design for Learning reframes accessibility by asking how curriculum design itself creates or removes barriers. Evidence from systematic review and meta-analysis indicates that UDL can support diverse learners when multiple means of engagement, representation, and action are integrated into instructional design. This universal orientation complements differentiation: UDL anticipates variability before instruction begins, while differentiation uses emerging evidence to provide targeted adjustments during learning (Almeqdad et al., 2023).

The interaction between UDL and differentiated instruction has received renewed empirical attention. Cai et al. (2024) show that growth mindset, ongoing assessment, and flexible grouping help explain how UDL-oriented beliefs and practices relate to differentiated instruction. These mediating mechanisms are significant because they move curriculum design from static planning to a continuous process of noticing and responding. Formative evidence can reveal which students have access to a concept, whose voices are absent from discussion, whether language demands obscure disciplinary understanding, and when grouping patterns reproduce status hierarchies.

Research on inclusive pedagogy further cautions against deficit-based interpretations of learner variability. Cook (2024) argues that narrow conceptions of neurodiversity can inhibit teachers' willingness and capacity to adopt inclusive strategies, even when they endorse inclusion in principle. This concern extends beyond disability: culturally minoritized, multilingual, and economically marginalized learners are also frequently described through what they lack rather than through the resources they bring. Differentiated curriculum design can either reproduce or contest such narratives.

In Indonesia, differentiated learning has become strongly associated with the Merdeka Curriculum, which encourages instruction responsive to student diversity. Studies in elementary settings show teachers differentiating content, process, and products while also reporting constraints related to planning, assessment, time, and pedagogical understanding. Teachers' conceptual understanding of differentiated learning also remains uneven, reinforcing the need for sustained professional learning and clearer design guidance. These findings make the Indonesian context particularly relevant for examining the equity implications of differentiation. Curriculum flexibility creates opportunities for

more responsive teaching, yet flexibility alone does not guarantee justice (Hasanah & Sukartono, 2024; Lailiyah et al., 2024; Witraguna et al., 2024).

This study addresses that challenge by critically synthesizing recent literature on differentiated instruction, inclusive pedagogy, Universal Design for Learning, and culturally responsive education published from 2022 to 2025. Recent research continues to position differentiation as a promising route toward inclusive participation while warning against fixed categories and inequitable expectations (Ardenlid et al., 2025; Romadani, 2025). The guiding question is: how can differentiated curriculum design operate as an instrument of social justice in multicultural and inclusive classrooms? The analysis focuses on five dimensions: access to curriculum, recognition of cultural and learner identities, participation in classroom activity, distribution of instructional support, and opportunities to demonstrate achievement. Rather than testing a single intervention, the article develops a conceptual design logic from converging research findings.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Differentiated curriculum design in this study is grounded in the principle that common educational goals do not require identical learning pathways. Tomlinson's differentiation tradition conceptualizes responsive teaching through adjustments to content, process, product, and learning environment according to readiness, interest, and learner profile. Recent research strengthens this view by emphasizing that differentiation works through dynamic evidence rather than fixed learner categories. This interpretation is consistent with Ardenlid et al. (2025).

Social justice provides the normative criterion for deciding whether such flexibility is educationally legitimate. A differentiated design is socially just when it expands access to valued knowledge, preserves dignity, recognizes cultural and linguistic resources, and prevents support from becoming a marker of lesser status. Inclusive pedagogy contributes the principle that learner difference should be anticipated within ordinary teaching rather than treated as a problem belonging only to particular students.

Universal Design for Learning supplies a complementary design logic by promoting multiple means of engagement, representation, and action or expression from the outset. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that UDL-based instruction can produce a moderate positive effect on academic achievement when compared with business-as-usual conditions (King-Sears et al., 2023). Differentiation then operates responsively when formative evidence shows that universal options are insufficient for some learners or when particular students need additional challenge, scaffolding, language support, pacing, or feedback. The combination avoids two extremes: a rigid one-size-fits-all curriculum and an unmanageable model in which every learner receives an entirely separate curriculum.

RESEARCH METHOD

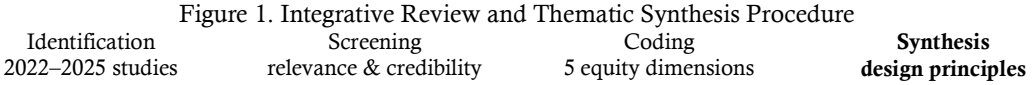
This study employed an integrative literature review with qualitative thematic synthesis. The design was selected because the research question concerns the conceptual relationship among differentiated curriculum design, social justice, multicultural education, and inclusive pedagogy rather than the effect of a single classroom intervention. Consistent with Indonesian qualitative research guidance, interpretation emphasized meaning, context, comparison, and patterned relationships across documentary evidence (Sugiyono, 2022). The search focused on peer-reviewed journal articles published from 2022 to 2025, with priority given to Scopus-indexed journals and SINTA-accredited

Indonesian journals whose publication data, authorship, and DOI could be verified through publisher or journal records.

Selection followed four stages: identification, relevance screening, credibility checking, and thematic coding. Sources were included when they directly addressed learner diversity, curriculum or instructional differentiation, inclusive education, culturally or linguistically responsive pedagogy, Universal Design for Learning, teacher capacity, or equity implications. Duplicate records, non-scholarly commentary, publications outside the 2022–2025 core journal window, and studies unrelated to curriculum or classroom practice were excluded. This staged procedure reflects the systematic logic of educational research in which problems, evidence, analytic procedures, and reporting criteria must be aligned transparently so that conclusions can be traced to the data examined (Wicaksono, 2022).

The final analysis used a coding matrix organized around five equity dimensions: access, recognition, participation, distribution of support, and achievement. Each selected study was examined for reported practices, enabling conditions, risks, and implications for curriculum design. Codes were compared iteratively and clustered into recurring themes, including high expectations, flexible pathways, formative assessment, cultural responsiveness, universal accessibility, student agency, flexible grouping, teacher learning, institutional capacity, and anti-labeling safeguards. The synthesis did not calculate pooled effect sizes because the included studies used heterogeneous designs and outcomes. Instead, convergence and tension were interpreted to construct a design framework, consistent with educational methodology that links analytic procedures to the characteristics and purposes of the evidence base (Elfrianto & Lesmana, 2022).

Figure 1. Integrative Review and Thematic Synthesis Procedure



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first theme is that differentiation becomes an equity instrument only when it preserves shared, ambitious learning goals. Social justice is undermined when curricular adaptation quietly lowers intellectual demand for students perceived as less capable. Ardenlid et al. (2025) show that inclusive differentiation can combine a shared goal with varied tasks, supports, pacing, questions, and opportunities for challenge. This distinction is central: differentiation should alter routes, resources, and scaffolds more readily than it alters entitlement to powerful knowledge. In multicultural classrooms, shared goals also create a common academic community, while flexible pathways reduce the advantage enjoyed by learners whose language, background knowledge, or prior schooling already match dominant expectations. Justice depends on maintaining rigor while redistributing access, support, and opportunity.

A second finding concerns the relationship between universal accessibility and targeted adaptation. UDL research suggests that many barriers can be removed before they are experienced by providing multiple representations, accessible materials, choices for engagement, and different forms of expression. Almeqdad et al. (2023) found generally positive effects of UDL-oriented interventions across varied educational contexts, although implementation quality and study design differed. For differentiated curriculum design, the implication is practical and ethical: teachers should not individualize what can be universally designed. Captions, visual supports, clear learning intentions, flexible response formats, vocabulary scaffolds, and structured peer interaction can be available to all

students. Targeted differentiation is then reserved for needs requiring additional intensity or specificity. This sequencing makes differentiation sustainable and equitable.

Third, formative assessment is the informational engine of just differentiation. Without ongoing evidence, teachers may differentiate on the basis of stereotypes, previous labels, perceived ability, or generalized cultural assumptions. Cai et al. (2024) identify ongoing assessment as a key practice linking inclusive design orientations with differentiated instruction. Formative evidence can include brief written responses, student explanations, observation, questioning, self-assessment, language samples, and analysis of work products. The purpose is not to rank learners but to identify current access points, misconceptions, strengths, and emerging readiness. In multicultural settings, evidence should be interpreted carefully because unfamiliar language, interaction norms, or assessment formats can mask conceptual understanding. Equitable assessment therefore distinguishes genuine learning needs from barriers created by language, culture, format, or opportunity.

Fourth, flexible grouping is beneficial only when it remains genuinely flexible. Fixed ability groups can become institutionalized labels that shape peer status, teacher expectations, task complexity, and future opportunity. Adam and Porta (2025) found that teachers may interpret differentiation through stable ability levels, illustrating how an apparently responsive strategy can drift toward categorization. A more equitable design groups students temporarily by purpose: common misconception, topic interest, language support need, preferred collaboration mode, or readiness for extension. Students should move among groups as evidence changes, and heterogeneous grouping should remain prominent so that learners encounter diverse perspectives and expertise. Such movement prevents grouping from hardening into status hierarchies and keeps peer diversity available as an intellectual and social resource for everyone.

Fifth, culturally and linguistically responsive differentiation expands the concept of access beyond cognitive difficulty. Kim (2024) argues that inclusive instruction for culturally and linguistically diverse learners requires curriculum and assessment to value students' knowledge, experiences, and language resources. This means that teachers can differentiate examples, texts, cases, and discussion prompts so that students encounter both familiar cultural references and perspectives beyond their own communities. Language objectives should accompany content objectives when disciplinary learning depends on specialized vocabulary or genres. Multilingual brainstorming, visual representation, structured talk, and strategic use of home-language resources can support conceptual participation without reducing academic expectations. Importantly, cultural responsiveness should avoid essentializing students by assigning materials based solely on ethnicity or language. Cultural responsiveness must remain student-informed.

Sixth, inclusive differentiation requires teachers to challenge deficit narratives about disability and neurodiversity. Cook (2024) notes that teachers may endorse inclusion while retaining assumptions that frame neurodivergent learners primarily through impairment. Such assumptions can influence curriculum decisions before any evidence of learning is gathered. Socially just differentiation instead starts from the expectation that all learners can participate in meaningful disciplinary activity when barriers are addressed appropriately. This may involve sensory options, explicit routines, assistive technologies, alternative communication modes, chunked instructions, additional processing time, or reduced extraneous demands. These supports should not be confused with reducing conceptual complexity. The curriculum should separate the essential intellectual goal from

incidental barriers created by presentation, timing, handwriting, speech, or conventional participation. Rigor remains essential.

Seventh, teacher capacity is a structural condition of equitable differentiation, not an individual moral attribute. Kahmann et al. (2022) report that professional development in differentiated instruction can improve teacher knowledge, attitudes, and practices, particularly when development is connected to subject-specific work. However, gains in teacher learning do not automatically translate into improved student outcomes. This finding cautions against policy approaches that simply instruct teachers to differentiate without providing time, collaborative planning, diagnostic tools, exemplars, and sustained coaching. In multicultural and inclusive classrooms, effective design demands knowledge of subject matter, assessment, language development, disability, culture, and classroom management. No individual teacher can improvise all of these dimensions continuously. Schools therefore need shared resource banks, co-planning routines, specialist collaboration, and leadership support.

Eighth, teacher beliefs mediate whether differentiation becomes inclusive or exclusionary. Letzel et al. (2023) identified distinct teacher attitude profiles toward differentiated instruction, showing that educators may value differentiation while also experiencing it as challenging and resource-intensive. Such ambivalence matters because beliefs influence which students are viewed as capable of complex work and which adaptations are considered feasible. Low confidence can encourage superficial variation, such as assigning different quantities of work, while leaving assessment, questioning, grouping, and representation unchanged. Conversely, enthusiasm without critical reflection can reproduce assumptions about who is 'high,' 'average,' or 'low.' Professional learning should therefore examine beliefs about intelligence, language, disability, culture, and merit alongside practical design routines. Critical reflection converts confidence into equitable instructional judgment and action.

Ninth, Indonesian evidence shows that differentiated learning is becoming embedded in curriculum practice but remains uneven in depth. Hasanah and Sukartono (2024) describe implementation of differentiated learning in elementary science and social science contexts through planning, content, process, and product adaptations. Such practices align well with the flexibility envisioned by the Merdeka Curriculum, yet their equity value depends on how decisions are made. Differentiation based on authentic readiness evidence can widen access, while differentiation based on assumed "learning styles" or static categories can narrow it. Curriculum guidance should therefore clarify that learner profiles are multidimensional and change over time. Teachers need simple diagnostic routines that are workable in large classes, and schools need to protect planning time. Both sustain equity.

Tenth, professional learning in the Indonesian context must move beyond one-off awareness training. Lailiyah et al. (2024) found that differentiated-learning training improved teachers' conceptual understanding, while quantitative gains were limited, suggesting that short training does not automatically produce robust mastery. For curriculum design, this means teachers need repeated cycles of planning, enactment, evidence collection, reflection, and revision. Collaborative lesson study can be particularly useful because educators can jointly identify barriers, anticipate learner variability, and examine whether specific supports actually expand participation. Training should include examples from multilingual, multicultural, disability-inclusive, and mixed-readiness classrooms rather than presenting differentiation as a generic technique. It should also help

teachers distinguish between reasonable flexibility and unsustainable individualization. Sustained coaching remains essential for durable pedagogical change.

Eleventh, curriculum materials themselves must become objects of equity analysis. Jackson-Summers et al. (2024) show that inclusive pedagogy involves not only communication practices but also the design of inclusive curricula. A differentiated curriculum review should therefore ask whose knowledge appears in examples and readings, which assumptions are embedded in tasks, what language proficiency is required, whether visual or digital resources are accessible, and which forms of participation are rewarded. Teachers can then redesign materials by adding alternative representations, contextual bridges, glossaries, audio or visual versions, culturally varied cases, and optional extension paths. This process is more efficient than creating separate materials for every student because it improves the baseline curriculum for the entire class. Equity begins with the baseline curriculum.

Twelfth, student agency is both a means and an outcome of equitable differentiation. When teachers make every adaptive decision privately, students remain objects of differentiation rather than participants in learning design. Differentiated curricula can instead offer bounded choices in topics, resources, collaboration, pacing, and product formats while keeping essential outcomes stable. Obrovská et al. (2024) demonstrate that addressing pupil diversity requires more than positive attitudes; teacher preparation must support practical, experience-based responsiveness to diverse needs. Student voice provides one source of that practical knowledge. Learners can identify cultural misrepresentation, inaccessible task features, unhelpful grouping patterns, or preferred ways to receive feedback. Shared decision-making also strengthens metacognition, belonging, and responsibility by positioning learners as knowledgeable partners in equitable curriculum design processes.

Thirteenth, differentiation should be evaluated through equity indicators rather than activity variety. A lesson may contain many options yet still produce unequal participation, status, or access to complex thinking. Gibbs (2023) reports that teachers and school leaders experience substantial barriers to implementing differentiated instruction, including time and organizational pressures. Under such conditions, visible variation can become a compliance exercise. A more useful evaluation asks: Who speaks and who remains silent? Which students receive higher-order questions? Who receives teacher feedback? Which groups encounter extension rather than repetition? Are multilingual and disabled students represented in valued classroom roles? Do assessment options measure the same core constructs? These questions convert social justice from an abstract aspiration into observable curriculum evidence. Evidence guides revision.

Fourteenth, differentiated curriculum design must balance feasibility with responsiveness. Dulfer et al. (2025) show that class composition influences how teachers enact differentiation, but simplistic assumptions about class size alone do not capture the complexity of implementation. Teachers work within schedules, prescribed content, assessment systems, resource limits, and mixed levels of support. A socially just model should therefore emphasize high-leverage routines: clear common goals, a small repertoire of flexible scaffolds, formative checks, purposeful grouping, accessible resources, and reusable choice structures. Digital tools can assist by providing multimodal content and differentiated practice, but technology should not substitute for pedagogical judgment or deepen inequities in access. Feasibility matters because unsustainable practices cannot

produce durable equity across diverse classrooms, schools, and instructional contexts consistently.

Fifteenth, the synthesis supports a five-part design logic for socially just differentiation: define shared high-value outcomes, anticipate barriers universally, gather evidence continuously, adapt flexibly, and conduct equity checks. These steps connect instructional responsiveness with multicultural recognition and inclusive participation. The model is consistent with recent Indonesian work showing that differentiated instruction can support curriculum targets when learner diversity is treated as a planning premise rather than a disruption (Romadani, 2025). It also aligns with culturally sustaining approaches that place local arts and cultural knowledge within meaningful curriculum experiences (Martadi & Sampurno, 2025). The central implication is that differentiation is not inherently just. It becomes just only when every adaptation expands access, recognition, participation, and achievement without reducing intellectual entitlement or dignity.

CONCLUSION

Desain kurikulum berdiferensiasi dapat berfungsi sebagai instrumen keadilan sosial apabila diarahkan pada pemerataan akses terhadap tujuan belajar yang sama-sama bermakna dan menantang, bukan pada pengelompokan kemampuan yang bersifat tetap. Sintesis literatur menunjukkan bahwa diferensiasi yang berkeadilan memadukan aksesibilitas universal dengan penyesuaian yang terarah, asesmen formatif, pengelompokan fleksibel, materi yang responsif terhadap keragaman budaya dan bahasa, kesempatan bagi peserta didik untuk mengambil keputusan, serta beragam cara yang sah untuk menunjukkan kompetensi. Dengan demikian, keragaman peserta didik diposisikan sebagai kondisi normal dalam perancangan kurikulum, bukan sebagai penyimpangan yang harus diseragamkan.

Hasil kajian juga menunjukkan bahwa diferensiasi dapat menghasilkan ketidakadilan baru apabila guru menurunkan ekspektasi akademik, mempertahankan label kemampuan, menggunakan stereotip budaya, atau memberikan variasi aktivitas tanpa menjamin akses terhadap pengetahuan yang bernilai. Oleh karena itu, penerapan yang berkeadilan membutuhkan tujuan inti yang sama, profil peserta didik yang bersifat sementara dan dapat berubah, kriteria penyesuaian yang transparan, perpindahan kelompok yang dinamis, serta evaluasi terhadap pola partisipasi dan asesmen. Kapasitas guru juga perlu didukung secara kelembagaan melalui pengembangan profesional berkelanjutan, perencanaan kolaboratif, sumber belajar yang aksesibel, dukungan tenaga ahli, dan pengelolaan beban kerja yang realistis.

Penelitian selanjutnya perlu menguji kerangka desain yang dihasilkan pada berbagai jenjang, mata pelajaran, dan konteks sekolah multikultural di Indonesia dengan menggunakan metode campuran. Evaluasi tidak cukup hanya mengukur hasil belajar, tetapi juga perlu menilai siapa yang semakin aktif berpartisipasi, apakah tuntutan intelektual tetap setara pada berbagai jalur pembelajaran, bagaimana peserta didik mengalami pengakuan dan rasa memiliki, serta kondisi sekolah apa yang memungkinkan praktik tersebut berkelanjutan. Secara praktis, prinsip utama yang direkomendasikan adalah merancang akses secara universal sejauh mungkin, melakukan diferensiasi secara responsif ketika diperlukan, dan menilai setiap penyesuaian berdasarkan kemampuannya memperluas partisipasi yang bermartabat dalam pembelajaran yang bernilai.

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