

Diagnosing or Documenting? Diagnostic Assessment Practice in Primary Social Studies

Erna Mena Niman^{1,*} & Stefanus Divan¹

¹Primary School Teacher Program, Universitas Katolik Indonesia Santu Paulus Ruteng, Indonesia

*Correspondence: Primary School Teacher Program, Universitas Katolik Indonesia Santu Paulus Ruteng, Indonesia. Tel: 62-813-3804-6770. E-mail: ernaniman79@gmail.com

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Abstract

This research aims to explore teachers' understanding, and practices in applying diagnostic assessments to Social Sciences learning in elementary schools, as well as identify challenges and opportunities that arise from the implementation of these assessments. The method used is qualitative descriptive with a case study approach, where data is collected through in-depth interviews, class observations, and documentation studies, then analyzed using thematic analysis techniques with the support of counter prejudice strategies against students' negative assumptions. The findings of the study show that diagnostic assessments are still limited by teachers and tend to be administrative, with suboptimal implementation and rarely used results in learning planning. However, there are positive indications in the form of teachers' efforts to develop assessments that are more contextual and fun, even though they are hit by technical limitations and lack of training. In conclusion, diagnostic assessments have great potential in supporting adaptive and student-centered learning, but require strengthening conceptual understanding, structural support, and teacher professional development on an ongoing basis.

Keywords: diagnostic assessment, social studies, elementary learning

1. Introduction

Social Science Education at the primary school level is one of the important foundations in shaping students' personalities, national insights, and social awareness from an early age. Through social studies learning, students are invited to understand the dynamics of social life, cultural values, history, and the importance of social diversity (Bulan et al., 2025; Larmer, 2018; Samsiyah et al., 2020). In other words, social studies learning not only conveys factual knowledge, but also instills human values and life skills in daily life. In the context of the Independent Curriculum which emphasizes differentiated and student-centered learning, it is very important for teachers to recognize the conditions, needs, and characteristics of students before the learning process takes place. This is where the role of diagnostic assessment becomes crucial.

Diagnostic assessment is a form of assessment that is carried out before learning begins with the aim of identifying the extent of students' learning readiness, understanding the potential, learning style, and even possible learning difficulties they are experiencing (Jang & Wagner, 2013; Sun & Suzuki, 2013). In the context of social studies learning that is multidimensional and demands reflective and contextual thinking skills, diagnostic assessments help teachers adjust teaching methods, approaches, and materials according to the needs of students. Without an initial understanding of who is learning and how they are learning, the learning process becomes vulnerable to inaccurate strategies that ultimately affect students' low learning outcomes.

However, in practice in the field, diagnostic assessments are often not implemented optimally, especially in social studies learning. There are still many teachers who immediately start learning activities without mapping students' initial abilities (Fan et al., 2021; Hopfenbeck, 2024; Rospigliosi, 2024). The initial assessment also tends to be superficial—for example, it is only in the form of multiple-choice questions that do not represent deep cognitive aspects, let alone affective and psychomotor aspects (Alderson et al., 2015; Tsvetkova, 2016). As a result, the learning carried out is not fully responsive to the differences in students' abilities and backgrounds. In students who have learning difficulties or different backgrounds, this can lead to learning lag and even decreased motivation.

This problem is exacerbated by teachers' limited understanding of the actual concept and practice of diagnostic assessment. Most elementary school teachers consider diagnostic assessments to be an administrative formality that is only done at the beginning of the semester and is not further utilized to design meaningful learning. The lack of training or professional development regarding the design and implementation of diagnostic assessments is also a inhibiting factor (Fitrotul Insani et al., 2023; Yusyfia et al., 2025).. In fact, if designed and used appropriately, diagnostic assessments are not only able to provide a portrait of students' initial condition, but also become an important basis for teachers to design learning that is adaptive, contextual, and fun.

Various previous studies have revealed the importance of diagnostic assessments in improving the quality of learning. Diagnostic assessments can be a cornerstone in differentiated learning that allows teachers to tailor teaching strategies to students' unique needs (Farhady & Selcuk, 2022; Fitrotul Insani et al., 2023; Sun & Suzuki, 2013). This finding is strengthened by Fan et al., (2021) who show that the systematic implementation of initial assessments can increase students' engagement and learning motivation because they feel that the learning carried out is in accordance with their learning conditions and styles. In the context of social studies learning Aulia et al., (2024), Insani et al., (2023), Muliantara, (2024) Nasution, (2023), Syahroh & Reinita (2024), and Yusyfia et al., (2025) emphasized that diagnostic assessments help students in understanding social issues more meaningfully because the material can be related to the socio-cultural background of students.

However, most of the research focuses more on exact subjects such as mathematics or science, and is carried out at the secondary education level. Research that specifically examines the implementation of diagnostic assessments in social studies learning at the elementary school level is still relatively rare. In fact, social studies learning in elementary school has its own peculiarities, where the approach is more narrative, contextual, and demands emotional involvement of students. This creates an important research gap to fill, especially in terms of how elementary school teachers can effectively integrate diagnostic assessments in the social studies learning planning and implementation process. This gap is the main background of this paper, which aims to delve deeper into the concept and practice of diagnostic assessment in the context of social studies learning in elementary schools. As such, the research question of this study is; how do teachers understand and practice diagnostic assessment in the context of primary social studies learning? Accordingly, the objectives of this study are to explore teachers' understanding and practices in applying diagnostic assessments to Social Sciences learning in elementary schools, as well as to identify the challenges and opportunities that arise from the implementation of these assessments.

Furthermore, this article is expected to provide real benefits for various parties. For elementary school teachers, this writing is expected to be a source of inspiration and guidance in designing diagnostic assessments that are relevant to social studies subjects and the characteristics of students in their classes. For prospective educators, this paper is expected to be able to broaden insight into the importance of an assessment approach that favors students from the beginning of learning. Meanwhile, for researchers and policy makers, this paper can be an initial reference in formulating policies to strengthen initial assessments that are not only administrative, but really become an integral part of learning that is oriented towards developing students' potential.

By raising the theme of diagnostic assessment in elementary social studies learning, this paper seeks to emphasize that understanding students from the beginning is the first step to building an effective, inclusive, and meaningful learning process. Only by knowing who our students are, how they learn, and what their needs are, can teachers design learning experiences that are able to answer the challenges of the times and form strong social character from an early age.

2. Method

This study used a descriptive qualitative approach with an instrumental case study design, which aims to explore in depth how diagnostic assessments are applied in Social Sciences learning in elementary schools. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to contextually understand assessment practices in the natural environment, as well as capture the meaning behind teachers' actions in the learning process. The main focus of this research is not on schools as institutions alone, but on how diagnostic assessments are used to understand students' learning readiness and adjust learning to their needs.

Focusing on three teachers on a well- independent managed private school, data collection was carried out through three main techniques, namely participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation studies. The selection of research subjects was carried out purposively based on several criteria, namely: (1) teachers who actively teach Social Sciences at the elementary school level, (2) teachers who have experience in implementing or have been exposed to diagnostic assessment practices, (3) willingness to participate in the research process, and (4)

representation of different teaching experiences to provide varied perspectives. These criteria were applied to ensure that the selected participants were relevant to the research focus and able to provide rich and meaningful data. Observation was carried out directly in the classroom during social studies learning. The researcher observed how teachers carried out diagnostic assessments, either through initial test instruments, open-ended questions, class discussions, and non-formal activities such as educational games or initial reflection. This observation aims to capture the practical reality of the implementation of assessments, including student responses and the dynamics of teacher-student interaction. The data collected was in the form of descriptive and reflective field notes that describe the learning process naturally.

In-depth interviews were conducted with the principal and several classroom teachers who were selected purposively. Interviews were directed to explore their understanding of diagnostic assessment, its implementation objectives, the challenges faced, and its impact on the teaching-learning process. All interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner and recorded for further transcription and analysis purposes. The key framework of the interview questions included: (1) teachers' conceptual understanding of diagnostic assessment; (2) purposes and functions of diagnostic assessment in classroom practice; (3) procedures and strategies used to conduct diagnostic assessment; (4) types of instruments or questions employed to identify students' prior knowledge and learning needs; (5) challenges and constraints in implementing diagnostic assessment; and (6) the use of diagnostic assessment results for instructional planning, including learning differentiation, as well as its perceived impact on student engagement and learning. In the meantime, the documentation study is carried out by examining relevant learning documents, such as Learning Implementation Plans, diagnostic assessment sheets, student work results, and teacher assessment notes. These documents provide additional information and assist in triangulating the data to strengthen the validity of the findings.

In addition, this study carefully considered ethical aspects throughout the research process. Prior to data collection, formal permission was obtained from the school authorities, and all participants were informed about the purpose, procedures, and scope of the study. Participants' confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained by ensuring that no identifiable personal information was disclosed in the research report. The researcher also remained mindful of potential power dynamics and biases, especially during classroom observations and interviews, to ensure that participants felt comfortable and were not disadvantaged in any way. Furthermore, informed consent was obtained from all participants before their involvement in the study. Teachers and the school principal were asked to sign a consent form indicating their voluntary participation, while additional consent procedures were adapted appropriately for classroom observations involving students, with approval from the school. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences. These measures were taken to ensure that the research adhered to ethical standards and respected the rights and well-being of all participants.

Adapted from Darong et al., (2023) and Jemali et al., (2024) data analysis used a thematic analysis approach, which is by identifying meaningful patterns (themes) that emerge from the qualitative data that has been collected. This process involves encoding the data, grouping the code, as well as developing the main themes that represent the field findings. This analysis allowed researchers to find the relationship between the implementation of diagnostic assessments and students' learning readiness and social studies learning planning.

As part of critical reflection, this analysis also used a counter prejudice approach, which is an attempt to challenge assumptions and prejudices that often arise in educational practice, such as the label weak student or underprivileged. By comparing the teacher's view of the student with the results of the assessment and the principal's responses, observation results and documentation studies, the researcher tried to show that many of the students who were considered incapable had actually not been given the appropriate learning approach. Through this analysis strategy, it is hoped that the research can provide a comprehensive and fair picture of how diagnostic assessments can be an important instrument in realizing social studies learning that is student-oriented, socially relevant, and personally meaningful.

3. Results

To understand more deeply the dynamics of the implementation of diagnostic assessments in social studies learning in elementary schools, data collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation studies were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. The results of this analysis produced six main themes that represent important patterns in diagnostic assessment practice, namely: teacher perception, classroom implementation, conceptual understanding, weaknesses faced, technical and structural challenges, and development opportunities. Each theme was equipped with sub-findings and sample teacher responses obtained from field data. The following

table (Table 1) presents a summary of the results of the analysis as a basis for further interpretation.

Table 1. Thematic Analysis on the Employment of Diagnostic Assessment

Theme	Sub-findings	Descriptions	Extracts
Perception	Assessment as a formality	Some teachers view diagnostic assessments as an administrative obligation at the beginning of the semester, not an ongoing learning strategy.	<i>Usually we make pretest questions at the beginning of the semester because we are asked for supervision, but after that we rarely use the results.</i>
Implementation	Assessments are considered important but difficult to implement	Teachers are aware of the importance of initial assessments, but admit that they find it difficult to apply them optimally due to limited time and large classes.	<i>I know it's important, but if the students are more than 30, I'm confused about whether they want to do an in-depth one-on-one assessment.</i>
	Simple written test is dominant	Teachers tend to use a simple form of test (multiple choice/short filling) for initial assessment, without exploring other approaches	<i>I usually use only 10 numbers, that's the fastest. The important thing is to have an overview, even if it's not too deep.</i>
Understanding	Minimal variation of techniques	Assessment techniques have not changed; Not many teachers use methods such as Q&A, initial discussion, or non-formal observation.	<i>I have never tried to assess using discussion or reflection. I'm more comfortable with the test.</i>
	Focus only on the cognitive aspect	Diagnostic assessments only measure memorization or initial knowledge, without touching on aspects of the student's motivation, interests, or experience.	<i>I have never asked my children how they feel or experience social studies before studying. My focus is on the initial score.</i>
	Not yet understanding the function of assessment for learning differentiation	Teachers do not understand that the results of the assessment can be used as a basis for adjusting strategies and learning materials.	<i>Usually I don't use pretest scores to change the way I teach. I just move on to the material.</i>
Debilitation	Inconsistency in timing	Initial assessments are carried out inconsistently between classes or between teachers; Sometimes it depends on the readiness of the teacher at that time.	<i>Last year I had forgotten the initial assessment because I was busy with other activities, so I just started the lesson.</i>
	Results are not utilized to the fullest	Assessment data is not used further in learning, only stored as a report.	<i>I keep the value, but I rarely see it again. Only when the new report is checked.</i>
Challenge	No special training	Teachers do not receive technical training on the preparation of appropriate and contextual diagnostic assessments.	<i>So far there has been no training on initial assessment. We learn from last year's example.</i>
	Large classes make in-depth assessments difficult	Many students in one class make it difficult for teachers to do individual mapping of learning readiness in detail.	<i>If there are only 15 students, maybe they can focus more, but now one class can reach 35, so it's difficult.</i>
Chance	Potential for personalization of learning	Some teachers who tried diagnostic assessments with a reflective approach managed to adapt the material to the student's condition.	<i>I once asked them about their experience of living in a village or city, and then I adjusted the social material according to that background.</i>
	Students are more responsive to non-test assessments	Students show higher enthusiasm if the initial assessment uses a fun discussion or game method	<i>When I invited them to guess the picture of the profession, they were enthusiastic. More alive than test.</i>

Based on the findings in the table, it can be interpreted that the application of diagnostic assessments in social studies learning in elementary schools is still at the surface stage. Teachers tend to understand early assessments as an administrative obligation rather than as a pedagogical strategy to design learning that suits students' needs. The dominance of the use of simple written tests shows that the approach used is still purely cognitive and has not touched the affective aspects and learning experiences of students. In fact, in the context of social studies which is full of values, social experiences, and reflection, a deep understanding of students' conditions is needed. The minimal utilization of assessment results and the lack of technical training also reinforce that there is still a gap between teachers' theoretical understanding and practical implementation in the classroom.

However, the data also shows promising opportunities. Some teachers are beginning to realize that diagnostic assessments conducted in a reflective and contextual manner can trigger more active student engagement, especially if packaged in a non-test form such as discussions or games. In addition, teachers who use a student experience-based approach in the initial assessment can craft more relevant and meaningful learning. These findings indicate that if teachers are provided with adequate training and support, diagnostic assessments can be a powerful tool for creating more inclusive and student-centered social studies learning. This interpretation also challenges the long-held assumption that students who perform low at the beginning are not able to keep up with the material, because in fact the problem often lies in non-contextual methods of assessment and learning.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study provide a fairly clear picture of how diagnostic assessments are understood and implemented in Social Sciences learning in elementary schools. Through thematic analysis of interview data, classroom observations, and learning documents, six main themes emerged: teacher perception, assessment implementation, conceptual understanding, implementation weaknesses, field challenges, and development opportunities. Each of these themes opens up a space for reflection on the reality in the field while showing the distance between the idealism of diagnostic assessment and daily practice in the classroom.

In terms of perception, many teachers consider diagnostic assessments as part of their administrative obligations. This practice can be seen in the tendency of teachers to carry out initial assessments because of the demands of supervision or the need for documents, not because of a deep belief that the assessment is important for designing learning. One teacher mentioned that they usually only make pretest questions because they are asked by the school supervisor, without following up on the results in the teaching process. This shows that teachers' perceptions of assessment are still formal and have not been fully integrated in their pedagogical awareness. This finding is in line with Darong & Niman (2021), Saputra (2018), Syahroh & Reinita (2024) and Compernelle & Zhang (2014) who have confirmed that teachers' perceptions of initial assessments tend to be formalistic and have not been based on a strong pedagogical understanding. However, there is a contrast when compared to the findings of Fitrotul Insani et al., (2023), who noted that some schools have made diagnostic assessments the basis for differentiated learning. This inconsistency confirms that teachers' perceptions of assessments are highly dependent on the institutional context, school culture, and the professional support they receive.

Furthermore, diagnostic assessments in social studies classes are generally carried out in the form of simple written tests, such as multiple choice or short filling. Teachers feel that this form is easiest to implement and evaluate, especially with a large number of students. However, such an approach does not sufficiently capture the affective, social, or reflective dimensions of students that are actually very relevant in social studies learning. It also reflects a narrow understanding of assessment that focuses only on the early cognitive aspects of students. This condition reinforces the findings of Bouwer et al., (2015) and Sun & Suzuki, (2013) who stated that assessments in tend to ignore students' social backgrounds and personal experiences. On the contrary, social studies requires an assessment approach that can explore students' understanding of their own social environment (Hidayah et al., 2025; Pahor & Nicholls, 2025). This is where the novelty of this study lies- that is, it shows that diagnostic assessments in social studies in elementary school have not been directed to capture the contextual dimension that is very important in this lesson.

In terms of conceptual understanding, the interview results showed that some teachers had not seen the relationship between diagnostic assessments and differentiated learning. They consider initial assessment scores to be informational only, not as a tool for designing teaching strategies that are responsive to students' needs. In fact, some teachers admitted that they had never used the assessment results to adjust the material or learning methods. This shows that there is a gap between curriculum policies that encourage adaptive learning and the reality of teachers in the field who still use a homogeneous approach. This finding reflects the findings of Darling-Hammond (2016),

Salleh & Laxman (2014), Sawaki et al., (2013) and Singh et al., (2023), saying that many teachers have not been able to associate the results of the initial assessment with learning planning. However, this study adds a new layer to the discourse, namely that teachers' misconceptions of the function of assessment are often not because they reject innovation, but because they do not have access to training and good practices. This means that teachers do not completely reject the idea of assessment as a pedagogical tool, but they do not yet have enough capacity to implement it effectively.

One of the glaring weaknesses of the identified diagnostic assessment practices is that the results are rarely used to the fullest. In some cases, the scores of the assessment results are only stored as part of the report and are not used as a basis for changing or adjusting learning (Alhaded et al., 2022; Fidalgo et al., 2014; Herdlein & Zurner, 2015; Tung, 2017). This results in the disconnection of the assessment function as a bridge between students' initial potential and the appropriate learning process. Assessments do not function as learning aids, but simply become numbers without pedagogical meaning (Farhady & Selcuk, 2022; Simon et al., 2025). In this regard, Mc Namara & Mc Cauley (2025), Richmond et al., (2019) and Sánchez-Mendiola et al., (2023) highlighted that assessments that are not followed up actually lose their functional power as a mapping tool. They underline the importance of reflective teaching, where teachers not only collect data, but also analyse and use it for decision-making in learning. This research is in line with this idea, but contributes further by highlighting that the failure to utilize assessment is not just a technical problem, but also a reflection of an educational culture that lacks supportive reflective practices.

The challenges that arise from the practice of diagnostic assessment in elementary schools are quite complex. Large student numbers, limited time, and lack of formal training are the main obstacles that teachers feel. In a class filled with more than 30 students, teachers admitted that it was difficult to conduct in-depth assessments one by one. In addition, there has never been any specific training on how to compile and utilize diagnostic assessments in the context of social studies. This makes teachers tend to use old formats or imitate approaches from previous years. Therefore, Tung (2017) and Bordeos (2021) noted that technical challenges such as large class loads and time constraints are the dominant factors that affect the effectiveness of assessments in elementary schools. However, this study adds a new dimension, namely cultural challenges, namely the lack of a culture of reflection and data-based decision-making in teachers' daily practices. This shows that assessment innovation requires structural support and a professional development that encourages teachers to teach sustainably. (Syah, 2016)

To date, the findings of this study emphatically highlight the dichotomy between diagnosing and documenting in the practice of diagnostic assessment in social studies learning in elementary schools. The findings in the table show that the majority of teachers still position diagnostic assessments as a purely administrative activity- documenting- that is carried out to meet the demands of reporting or supervision, rather than as a diagnostic process that aims to understand the initial conditions and learning needs of students in depth. Although there are indications that some teachers are beginning to show awareness of the importance of contextual and reflective assessments, in general assessments have not been used as a tool to build differentiated and student-centered learning strategies. Thus, the illusion that diagnostic assessments have been effectively carried out need to be dismantled; not because teachers reject innovation, but because the practice that takes place is still far from its true meaning as a diagnostic instrument that lives in pedagogical practice.

More importantly, this study also found positive gaps in the form of opportunities for the development of more contextual and enjoyable assessments. Some teachers try alternative approaches, such as initial discussions, interactive games, or reflective questions related to the student's experience. Interestingly, students showed a much more positive response and were actively involved when assessments were conducted in non-formal and humanistic ways. This suggests that assessments don't always have to be in the form of tests, but can be part of a dialogue process between teachers and students. In addition, another reflective aspect raised in this study is an attempt to challenge prejudice against students who are considered "incapable" simply because their initial grades are low. In observations and interviews, it was found that students who initially seemed passive or under capable, were actually able to demonstrate good understanding when given the appropriate approach and the context they understood. In other words, a student's ability is not something fixed, but it depends heavily on how the teacher frames learning from the beginning. This effort is part of an important counter prejudice strategy in the context of fair and inclusive education. He rejects the deterministic view of student intelligence and invites teachers to see students' potential more broadly, through appropriate assessments and meaningful learning. In the context of social studies which is very close to real life and social diversity, this approach becomes very relevant to be applied.

This study contributes novel insights to the discourse on diagnostic assessment in primary social studies by clearly revealing the gap between the theoretical purpose of diagnostic assessments and their practical implementation in

elementary classrooms. Unlike previous studies that primarily focus on the technical or procedural aspects of assessment, this research highlights that many teachers still treat diagnostic assessments as administrative documentation rather than as pedagogical tools for understanding students' initial conditions. By combining thematic analysis of interviews, classroom observations, and learning documents, the study demonstrates that the illusion of effective assessment persists not because teachers resist innovation, but because the current practices remain superficial, cognitively focused, and detached from students' social experiences. This perspective exposes a critical but often overlooked dimension: the cultural and structural factors that shape how assessments are perceived and conducted in daily classroom practices.

Furthermore, this research adds a new layer of novelty by identifying opportunities for reflective, contextual, and student-centered diagnostic practices that challenge deterministic views of student ability. The study shows that when teachers adopt alternative approaches such as interactive discussions, reflective questioning, or experience-based activities, students previously perceived as low-performing demonstrate significant understanding and engagement. This finding emphasizes that student potential is dynamic and highly influenced by assessment design and teacher framing, offering practical implications for promoting inclusive and adaptive learning in social studies. By integrating a counter-prejudice perspective, the study not only critiques current practices but also provides a constructive framework for reorienting diagnostic assessments as tools for meaningful pedagogical decision-making rather than mere documentation.

5. Conclusion

This study shows that the practice of diagnostic assessment in social studies learning in elementary schools still faces various challenges, both in terms of teacher understanding, technical limitations, to the lack of utilization of assessment results to design adaptive learning. Teachers tend to interpret the initial assessment as an administrative obligation, not as a pedagogical instrument. However, this study also identifies positive initiatives from some teachers who are starting to apply a more contextual and fun assessment approach. The empirical contribution of this study lies in the detailed mapping of teachers' practices and perceptions of diagnostic assessments in the context of elementary social studies learning, while theoretically, this study expands the horizon of assessment by emphasizing the importance of social and reflective approaches that have been undertouched in assessment studies in primary education. Thus, assessment activities are really meaningful and diagnose students' abilities; It is not only documentation and administrative activities.

However, this study has limitations on the relatively small number of participants and limited location coverage, so it does not represent the overall national condition. In addition, the dominant focus on the teacher's perspective has not captured the students' experiences and perceptions as learning subjects. Therefore, follow-up research is recommended to be conducted in a broader context and involve more educational actors, including students and principals. Future research can also develop contextual and applicative diagnostic assessment models, as well as test its effectiveness directly in improving the quality of social studies learning. In this way, diagnostic assessments are not only an initial evaluation tool, but also a strategic instrument to build more inclusive, reflective and student-centered learning.

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