



Enacting meaningful social studies learning in Indonesian primary classrooms: A multiple-case study in Salo

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Article info	Abstract
Keywords: education, meaningful learning, primary school, qualitative case study, social studies.	Meaningful learning has become a central concern in contemporary primary Education, particularly in Social Studies, to foster students' social understanding and civic awareness rather than mere content acquisition. However, empirical evidence on how meaningful Social Studies learning is enacted in primary classrooms remains limited, especially in Indonesia. This study aims to explore how meaningful Social Studies learning is implemented and experienced in Indonesian primary schools through a qualitative multiple-case study conducted at SD 004 and SD 012 in Salo. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with teachers, students, and principals, and document analysis. In addition, data were analyzed thematically using an interactive qualitative analysis approach. The findings reveal that meaningful Social Studies learning is shaped by the degree of contextualization, student interaction, and teachers' pedagogical interpretations. Schools that integrated local social contexts, inquiry-oriented instruction, and dialogic classroom practices demonstrated higher levels of student engagement, social meaning-making, and perceived relevance of learning. In contrast, teacher-centered instruction constrained opportunities for meaningful engagement and limited learning outcomes to content mastery. This study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that meaningful learning in primary Social Studies is a pedagogical achievement rooted in contextual and interactional practices rather than curriculum policy alone. The findings highlight the essentials of teacher agency and context-responsive pedagogy in strengthening meaningful Social Studies learning.

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1. Introduction

Social Studies plays a strategic role in primary education, as it supports students in developing an understanding of social life, citizenship, and everyday social issues from an early age (National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 2020; OECD, 2018). At the primary school level, Social Studies is expected not only to transmit factual knowledge but also to foster students' ability to interpret social phenomena, participate in classroom dialogue, and relate learning content to their lived experiences. In this sense, the quality of Social Studies learning is closely linked to how learning activities are designed and enacted in classrooms, rather than merely to curriculum objectives or policy intentions.

In recent educational discourse, the concept of meaningful learning has gained increasing attention as a core pedagogical principle. Meaningful learning emphasizes the integration of new knowledge with learners' prior experiences, active engagement in the learning process, and the construction of understanding through interaction and reflection, rather than rote memorization (Ausubel, 1968; Novak, 2010). In Social Studies, meaningful learning is commonly associated with the use of contextualized content, dialogic classroom interaction, and inquiry-oriented tasks that encourage students to actively make sense of social concepts and issues (Mercer et al., 2019; Wegerif, 2018). These perspectives imply that meaningful learning is not a static instructional feature, but an enacted process that unfolds through classroom practices and teacher–student interactions.

In Indonesia, previous studies have drawn attention to ongoing challenges in Social Studies instruction at the primary level, including teacher-centered pedagogical approaches, limited opportunities for student dialogue, and an emphasis on textbook-driven learning (Suyanto et al., 2021; Pratiwi & Nugroho, 2023). Such studies provide valuable insights into systemic conditions and teachers' pedagogical orientations, particularly in relation to curriculum implementation and instructional planning. However, this research relies on policy analysis, curriculum review, or self-reported data, offering limited access to how teaching and learning processes are experienced by teachers and students in classroom settings. As a result, the empirical understanding of meaningful learning as a lived classroom practice in Indonesian primary Social Studies education remains relatively underdeveloped.

Despite the widespread recognition of meaningful learning as a pedagogical ideal, comparatively little is known about how meaningful Social Studies learning is enacted in everyday classroom practices, particularly at the primary school level in Indonesia. Existing studies tend to focus on intended curricula, proposed instructional models, or teachers' stated beliefs, while paying less attention to the interactional and pedagogical processes through which learning becomes meaningful in real contexts. This lack of classroom-based qualitative evidence makes it difficult to understand the mechanisms through which meaningful learning is realized—or constrained—in actual teaching practice, including how teachers contextualize content, facilitate dialogue, and respond to students' participation.

Furthermore, few studies have employed a qualitative multiple-case approach to examine variations in the enactment of Social Studies learning within the same local context. Consequently, there is a constrained empirical understanding of why meaningful learning may be more strongly evident in numerous primary classrooms than in others, even when schools operate under similar curricular frameworks and policy expectations. Within-context comparative analysis is therefore crucial for identifying pedagogical and contextual factors that enable or constrain meaningful learning at the classroom level, and for moving beyond generalized claims about teaching quality toward more nuanced, practice-oriented explanations.

Addressing these gaps, the present study investigates how meaningful Social Studies learning is enacted in two Indonesian primary schools through a qualitative multiple-case design. By drawing on classroom observations, interviews with teachers and students, and document analysis, this study focuses on the pedagogical processes through which meaningful learning is constructed in practice. Specifically, the study examines how teachers interpret and implement meaningful learning principles, how classroom interactions support or limit students' engagement, and how contextual conditions shape similarities and differences in pedagogical enactment across schools. Through this approach, the study contributes to empirically grounded insights into research on primary Social Studies education and to inform teacher professional development focused on classroom-based instructional improvement.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to examine how meaningful Social Studies learning is enacted in Indonesian primary classrooms through a qualitative multiple-case study. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions, namely (1) How is meaningful Social Studies learning enacted in primary school classrooms at SD 004 and SD 012 in Salo? (2) What pedagogical practices and classroom interactions characterize meaningful Social Studies learning in each school? and (3) What contextual and pedagogical factors help explain similarities and differences in the enactment of meaningful Social Studies learning across the two schools?

2. Method

2.1 Research approach and design

This study employed a qualitative multiple-case study design to examine the enactment of meaningful Social Studies learning in primary school classrooms. A multiple-case approach was selected to enable an in-depth exploration of pedagogical processes within each case and allow for systematic comparison across cases (Miles et al., 2020). This design is particularly appropriate for investigating how pedagogical principles are interpreted and enacted in practice, as it captures classroom interactions, teacher decision-making, and contextual influences that cannot be adequately examined through survey-based or experimental approaches.

The two cases consisted of SD 004 and SD 012 in Salo. Both were located in the same sub-district and operated under the same national curriculum and policy framework. By selecting two schools within a shared local context, the study sought to minimize macro-level policy variation while foregrounding differences in classroom enactment and pedagogical practice.

2.2 Research setting and participants

The research was conducted at SD 004 and SD 012 in Salo, which serve students from similar socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Both implement the national primary curriculum and offer Social Studies as a compulsory subject. Despite these similarities, preliminary observations and discussions with school administrators indicated differences in instructional routines, classroom interaction patterns, and teachers' pedagogical approaches, making the two schools analytically useful for comparative case analysis.

Research participants included four primary school teachers who taught Social Studies, 24 students from upper primary grades, and two school principals. Teachers were selected based on their direct involvement in Social Studies instruction, while students were purposively selected to reflect variation in gender and academic performance, as identified by classroom

teachers. School principals were included to provide contextual and organizational perspectives on instructional practices.

2.3 Data collection

Data were collected over a period of six weeks using three primary methods: classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. The use of multiple data sources enabled methodological triangulation and enhanced the credibility of the findings.

2.4 Classroom observations

Classroom observations focused on capturing instructional practices and teacher–student interactions during Social Studies lessons. Each participating classroom was observed on multiple occasions, resulting in a total of 12 classroom observation sessions across the two schools. Observations emphasized lesson structure, instructional strategies, use of contextual examples, patterns of classroom interaction, and students’ engagement during learning activities. Field notes were recorded in detail during each session and expanded immediately after observations to preserve contextual and interactional nuances.

2.5 Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participating teachers, selected students, and school principals. Each teacher participated in two interview sessions, while students were interviewed in small groups to encourage comfort and open discussion. Interview questions explored participants’ experiences of Social Studies learning, perceptions of meaningful learning, instructional strategies, and challenges encountered during classroom implementation. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants’ consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

2.6 Document analysis

Document analysis was conducted to complement observation and interview data. Documents included lesson plans, teaching materials, and selected student worksheets related to Social Studies instruction. These documents were examined to identify how meaningful learning principles were articulated in planning documents and how they aligned with observed classroom practices.

Table 1. Research instruments and analytical focus

Data Sources	Instruments	Core Analytical Indicators	Relevances to Meaningful Social Studies Learning
Classroom Observation	Observation guide and field notes	Use of local social issues, inquiry-based activities, student interaction, teacher scaffolding	Identifies how meaningful learning is enacted through classroom practice
Teacher Interview	Semi-structured interview guide	Pedagogical beliefs, curriculum interpretation, instructional challenges	Explores teachers’ understanding and implementation of meaningful IPS learning
Student Interview	Semi-structured interview guide	Perceived relevance, engagement, understanding of social concepts	Captures students’ lived experiences of meaningful learning
Document Analysis	Document analysis protocol	Alignment between objectives, activities, and assessment	Examines consistency between intended and enacted Social

2.7 Data analysis

Data analysis followed an interactive thematic analysis approach (Miles et al., 2020). Analysis proceeded through several systematic stages to ensure analytic transparency and rigor. First, all data sources (observation field notes, interview transcripts, and documents) were read repeatedly to develop familiarity with the data. Initial coding was conducted using a combination of inductive and deductive approaches, with deductive codes informed by key concepts in meaningful learning (e.g., contextualization, dialogue, student engagement), while inductive codes emerged from the data.

Second, codes were compared and grouped into broader categories based on conceptual similarity. Through iterative comparison, categories were refined and developed into overarching themes that captured patterns within each case. Third, a cross-case analysis was conducted by systematically comparing themes across SD 004 and SD 012 Salo. This process involved the use of comparative matrices to identify similarities and differences in pedagogical enactment and to explore contextual factors that contributed to these variations. Throughout the analysis, analytic memos were maintained to document interpretive decisions and emerging insights, providing an audit trail that supported the credibility and dependability of the findings.

2.8 Trustworthiness

To enhance trustworthiness, several strategies were employed. Credibility was supported through data triangulation across observations, interviews, and documents, as well as through member checking with participating teachers. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with teachers and inviting feedback on the accuracy and resonance of the findings. Dependability was addressed by maintaining detailed documentation of research procedures and analytic steps, enabling transparency in the research process. Confirmability was enhanced through reflexive memo writing and peer discussion of emerging themes, while transferability was supported by providing rich descriptions of the research context and classroom practices.

2.9 Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards for research involving human participants, particularly children. Formal permission to conduct the research was obtained from school principals prior to data collection. Written informed consent was obtained from teachers and school principals, as well as from parents or legal guardians of participating students. In addition, verbal assent was obtained from all student participants prior to their involvement in the study. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without consequences. All data were anonymized using pseudonyms, and identifying information was removed to protect participants' confidentiality.

3. Results

3.1 Enactment of meaningful social studies learning in classroom practice

Classroom observations revealed clear differences in how meaningful Social Studies learning was enacted in SD 004 and SD 012 Salo. In SD 004, Social Studies lessons were consistently structured around contextualized topics drawn from students' immediate social environment, such as local markets, village governance, and community cooperation. Teachers

frequently began lessons by inviting students to share personal experiences related to the topic. For example, during a lesson on economic activities, the teacher asked students to describe their parents' occupations and daily transactions observed in their neighbourhood.

"When I talk about buying and selling, I usually start by asking them where they have seen it. Many of them help their parents at small shops; they thus already understand the situation" (Teacher, SD 004).

Observations indicated that such contextual prompts encouraged students to participate actively and to connect abstract concepts with lived experience. Students were observed responding enthusiastically, offering examples, asking questions, and building on peers' contributions, indicating that learning was experienced as meaningful rather than procedural.

By contrast, Social Studies lessons in SD 012 were more frequently organized around textbook explanations and teacher-led instruction. Lessons typically began with the teacher reading or explaining definitions, followed by students completing written exercises individually. While students remained orderly and attentive, opportunities for students to relate content to their own experiences or to engage in extended discussion were limited.

"Usually we listen first, then answer the questions from the book," (Student, SD 012).

These patterns imply that meaningful learning was enacted more explicitly and consistently in SD 004, whereas in SD 012, learning tended to emphasize content coverage and task completion.

3.2 Pedagogical practices and classroom interaction patterns

Differences in pedagogical practices were particularly evident in classroom interaction patterns. In SD 004, classroom discourse was characterized by dialogic interaction, with teachers frequently using open-ended questions and follow-up prompts to extend students' thinking. Observations documented multiple instances in which students responded to one another's ideas rather than only to the teacher.

"I try not to give the answer directly. I ask again so they can think and explain in their own words," (Teacher, SD 004).

During one observed lesson, a discussion about community rules evolved into a debate among students about fairness and responsibility, with the teacher acting primarily as a facilitator. Such interactional patterns allowed students to negotiate meaning collectively, indicating a dialogic approach to Social Studies learning.

The interaction in SD 012, in comparison, was predominantly teacher–student and evaluative in nature. Questions posed by the teacher were often closed-ended and aimed at confirming factual understanding. Students' responses were typically brief and directed toward providing correct answers.

"If we answer correctly, the teacher says it is right, and we continue," (Student, SD 012).

Although these practices supported classroom order and efficiency, they provided fewer opportunities for students to articulate reasoning, engage with peers' perspectives, or develop deeper conceptual understanding.

3.3 Contextual and pedagogical factors shaping differences across schools

Analysis of interview and observation data indicates that differences in enactment were influenced by a combination of pedagogical beliefs and contextual conditions. Teachers in SD 004 expressed a strong belief that Social Studies learning should be closely connected to students' daily lives and social realities, even if this required adapting lesson plans during instruction.

“Sometimes I don’t follow the lesson plan exactly, because the students’ responses lead us to different discussions,” (Teacher, SD 004).

In contrast, teachers in SD 012 emphasized curriculum completion and assessment preparation as primary instructional priorities. Time constraints and concern about meeting administrative requirements were frequently cited as reasons for maintaining structured, teacher-centered lessons.

“We have to finish the material according to the schedule; hence, it is difficult to have long discussions,” (Teacher, SD 012).

School-level factors also played a role. SD 004 demonstrated greater flexibility in instructional supervision, allowing teachers autonomy to experiment with interactive strategies, whereas SD 012 maintained more standardized instructional routines. These contextual differences contributed to variations in how meaningful learning principles were interpreted and enacted in practice. Table 2 summarizes key differences in the enactment of meaningful Social Studies learning across the two schools.

Table 2. Summary of key differences

Aspects	SD 004 Salo	SD 012 Salo
Content Approach	Contextualized, Experience-Based	Textbook-Centred
Classroom Interaction	Dialogic, Student-Centred	Teacher-Led, Evaluative
Student Engagement	Active Participation and Discussion	Attentive but Limited Interaction
Pedagogical Flexibility	High	Limited

Overall, the findings indicate that meaningful Social Studies learning is not uniformly enacted across classrooms, even within the same local context. Rather, it emerges through specific pedagogical practices, interactional patterns, and contextual conditions that shape teachers’ instructional decisions.

4. Discussion

This study sets out to examine how meaningful Social Studies learning is enacted in Indonesian primary school classrooms and to explore similarities and differences across two schools within the same local context. The findings elucidate that meaningful learning is not an automatic outcome of curriculum implementation, but rather an enacted pedagogical achievement shaped by teachers’ instructional decisions, classroom interaction patterns, and contextual conditions. This section discusses the findings by focusing on the mechanisms through which meaningful learning emerged in SD 004 and why such mechanisms were less evident in SD 012.

One central mechanism supporting meaningful learning in SD 004 was the consistent use of contextualization as an entry point to instruction. By grounding Social Studies concepts in students’ everyday experiences—such as local economic activities and community practices—teachers enabled students to connect new information with prior knowledge. This finding aligns with perspectives on meaningful learning that emphasize cognitive anchoring and relevance as prerequisites for deep understanding (Ausubel, 1968; Novak, 2010). Rather than treating context as a supplementary example, teachers in SD 004 used students’ lived experiences as a

core pedagogical resource, allowing learning activities to evolve in response to students' contributions.

In addition to contextualization, dialogic classroom interaction emerged as a key mechanism through which meaning was co-constructed. The findings indicate that open-ended questioning, follow-up prompts, and opportunities for peer response enabled students to articulate ideas, negotiate interpretations, and reflect on social issues collaboratively. This pattern is consistent with dialogic learning theory, which emphasizes the role of dialogue in supporting meaning-making and conceptual development (Mercer et al., 2019; Wegerif, 2018). Importantly, dialogue in SD 004 was not merely conversational, but pedagogically purposeful, as teachers actively facilitated discussion to extend students' thinking rather than to elicit predetermined answers.

By contrast, the relative absence of sustained dialogue in SD 012 helps explain why meaningful learning was less evident in that setting. Instructional practices in SD 012 were characterized by teacher-led explanations and closed-ended questioning, which prioritized correctness and task completion. While such practices supported classroom order and curriculum coverage, they limited opportunities for students to engage in extended reasoning, to relate content to personal experience, or to learn from peers' perspectives. This finding implies that meaningful learning may be constrained when instructional routines emphasize efficiency and assessment alignment over interaction and exploration.

Differences between the two schools were subsequently shaped by teachers' pedagogical beliefs and perceptions of contextual constraints. Teachers in SD 004 viewed flexibility and responsiveness as integral to effective Social Studies teaching, even when this meant deviating from lesson plans. In contrast, teachers in SD 012 expressed stronger concerns about time pressure, curriculum pacing, and administrative demands. These concerns appeared to narrow pedagogical choices and reduce teachers' willingness to experiment with dialogic or inquiry-oriented strategies. This pattern resonates with research highlighting the influence of teacher agency and contextual conditions on instructional practice, indicating that pedagogical enactment is shaped not only by knowledge of teaching strategies but also by perceived institutional expectations.

The within-context comparison provided by this study offers essential insight into why meaningful learning varies across classrooms operating under similar curricular frameworks. The findings indicate that differences cannot be explained solely by policy or curriculum design, but must be understood in relation to how teachers interpret pedagogical principles and negotiate contextual pressures in their daily practice. Meaningful learning, therefore, emerges from the interaction between pedagogical intent, classroom interaction, and local school culture, rather than from the presence of particular instructional strategies alone.

At the same time, the findings should be interpreted cautiously. Although students in SD 004 appeared more engaged and participatory, the study does not claim direct measurement of learning outcomes or long-term impacts such as civic competence. Instead, the findings indicate perceived and observed differences in classroom processes that are commonly associated with meaningful learning. Such cautious interpretation is crucial to avoid overclaiming and to remain grounded in the qualitative scope of the study.

In terms of practical implications, the findings elucidate several directions for improving primary Social Studies instruction. For teachers, the study highlights the value of designing lessons that begin with students' everyday social experiences and that incorporate structured opportunities for dialogue. Simple strategies—such as open-ended questioning, peer discussion routines, and the use of local issues as learning resources—can support meaningful

engagement without requiring extensive curricular change. For teacher education and professional development programs, the findings underscore the essentials of focusing on classroom interactional practices and pedagogical decision-making, rather than solely on lesson planning or content delivery. Collaborative approaches such as lesson study or reflective peer discussion may provide supportive spaces for teachers to develop and sustain meaningful learning practices.

5. Conclusion and implications

This study examines how meaningful Social Studies learning is enacted in two Indonesian primary schools through a qualitative multiple-case study. The findings indicate that meaningful learning is not an automatic outcome of curriculum implementation, but an enacted pedagogical process shaped by teachers' instructional decisions, classroom interaction patterns, and contextual conditions. In response to the first research question, the study reveals that meaningful Social Studies learning was enacted more explicitly in SD 004 through contextualized content, dialogic interaction, and flexible pedagogical practices. Learning in SD 012, meanwhile, was more strongly oriented toward textbook-based instruction and curriculum coverage.

Addressing the second research question, the study highlights that the pedagogical practices supporting meaningful learning include the use of students' everyday social experiences as learning resources, open-ended questioning, and opportunities for student dialogue. These practices enable students to actively engage with social concepts and to participate in collective meaning-making. In contrast, instructional routines that prioritize teacher explanation and closed-ended questioning provide fewer opportunities for such engagement.

In relation to the third research question, the comparative analysis underscores that differences in enactment were influenced by teachers' pedagogical beliefs, perceptions of instructional flexibility, and school-level expectations regarding curriculum pacing and assessment. Even within the same local and policy context, variations in how teachers interpreted and negotiated these conditions resulted in differing classroom experiences. These findings indicate the essentials of examining classroom-level processes and teacher agency when seeking to understand the quality of Social Studies learning in primary education.

Implications for practice and teacher education

The research findings offer several practical implications for primary Social Studies instruction. For classroom teachers, the results elucidate that meaningful learning can be supported by designing lessons that begin with students' lived experiences and by intentionally creating space for dialogue and discussion. Strategies such as posing open-ended questions, encouraging peer responses, and using local social issues as instructional contexts can be implemented within existing curricular structures.

For teacher education and professional development programs, the study highlights the need to focus on pedagogical enactment rather than solely on lesson planning or content mastery. Professional learning activities that emphasize classroom interactional practices—such as lesson study, collaborative reflection on teaching videos, or peer observation—may help teachers develop greater confidence in facilitating dialogue and adapting instruction responsively. At the school level, instructional leadership that allows flexibility and supports

pedagogical experimentation may further enable teachers to enact meaningful learning practices consistently.

Limitations and future research

Several research limitations should be acknowledged. First, as a qualitative multiple-case study conducted in two primary schools, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable. Instead, they provide in-depth, contextually grounded insights into classroom processes associated with meaningful Social Studies learning. Moreover, the presence of the researcher during classroom observations may have influenced teachers' and students' behavior, although efforts were made to minimize reactivity through repeated observations over time.

Furthermore, the study was conducted within a limited time frame, which constrained the ability to examine changes in pedagogical practices or student engagement over longer periods. In addition, students' perspectives were gathered through interviews appropriate to their age, which may limit the depth of reflection compared to adult participants. Future research is possible to extend this work by conducting longitudinal classroom studies, incorporating additional school contexts, or combining qualitative classroom observation with other forms of evidence to further explore how meaningful Social Studies learning develops and is sustained over time.

Credit authorship contribution statement

The author does not provide information about contributions.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Because the data include human participant information, they are not publicly available to protect participant privacy.

Ethical Declaration

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards for research involving human participants. Formal permission to conduct the study was obtained from the principals of SD 004 Salo and SD 012 Salo. Written informed consent was obtained from all participating teachers and school administrators, as well as from parents or legal guardians of participating students. In addition, verbal assent was obtained from all student participants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. All data were anonymized using pseudonyms, and identifying information was removed to ensure confidentiality.

Declaration of AI statement

The authors declare that generative artificial intelligence tools were used solely to assist with language editing. All AI-assisted outputs were critically reviewed and substantively revised by the authors, who take full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

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