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## Social Studies Education, Digital Inequality, and Socio-Economic Justice: Narratives from Senior High Schools in Ternate City

Ni'matuz Zuhroh<sup>1</sup>, Aniek Rahmaniah<sup>2</sup>, Mujtahid<sup>3</sup>, Samsul Susilawati<sup>4</sup>, Ulfi Andrian Sari<sup>5</sup>, Sri Nur Rahmi<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup> Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, Indonesia

<sup>3</sup> Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, Indonesia

<sup>4</sup> Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, Indonesia

<sup>5</sup> Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, Indonesia

<sup>6</sup> Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, Indonesia

### ABSTRACT

**Background.** Digital transformation presents both opportunities and challenges for education in Indonesia, particularly in Eastern Indonesia, including Ternate City. This region faces a persistent digital divide characterized by limited access to digital devices, uneven internet connectivity, and low digital literacy among teachers and students, which negatively affects learning quality, student engagement, and the development of 21st-century competencies such as critical thinking, collaboration, and digital literacy.

**Purpose.** This qualitative study aimed to explore how Social Studies education can contribute to reducing socio-economic inequality and strengthening social inclusion in the context of digital transformation in education.

**Method.** This study employed a qualitative approach, including observations, in-depth interviews, and surveys, to examine the implementation of social studies learning in senior high schools in Ternate City.

**Results.** Findings reveal that social studies education continues to face significant obstacles, including unequal access to digital tools, limited connectivity, and insufficient integration of local content. However, IPS learning has potential to bridge digital and socioeconomic gaps through contextualized content, project-based learning, digital literacy enhancement, and fostering social awareness and economic justice. Effective implementation relies on equitable digital infrastructure, teacher competence in digital pedagogy, and policies responsive to social vulnerabilities.

**Conclusion.** Integrating local wisdom and digital technology enables students to develop analytical, communication, and problem-solving skills while understanding their community's socio-economic realities.

### KEYWORDS

Digitalization, Eastern Indonesia, Economic Justice, Social Inclusion, Social Studies Education

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### Correspondence:

Ni'matuz Zuhroh,  
[zuhroh@pips.uin-malang.ac.id](mailto:zuhroh@pips.uin-malang.ac.id)

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## INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has become a global agenda in education and is seen as a key strategy for improving the quality of learning, expanding participation, and promoting equitable access to education through the use of online platforms, digital content, and more innovative pedagogical approaches (Marchlewska et al., 2019). The digitalization process in schools enables the provision of more flexible, interactive, and contextual learning materials, and allows students to learn independently and collaboratively through various digital media. The implementation of educational technology also has the potential to increase teacher efficiency in delivering materials, providing feedback, and monitoring student learning progress in real time (Srikoon et al., 2026).

However, various studies show that the benefits of digitalization in education are not evenly distributed, particularly in developing countries and regions with limited infrastructure (Kibinda et al., 2025). In Indonesia, particularly in Eastern Indonesia, the digital divide is a major challenge hindering equitable education. This gap includes access to technological devices, internet connectivity, and the quality of telecommunications infrastructure (Sun & Tu, 2023). This disparity is exacerbated by differences in socio-economic conditions between regions, preventing digital transformation from fully implementing its role as an instrument for improving the quality of inclusive learning. This situation has given rise to the phenomenon where schools in urban areas or those with good socio-economic support are able to optimally utilize technology, while schools in remote areas still face fundamental limitations.

Several empirical studies confirm that increasing digital access significantly contributes to educational equity (Chattopadhyay, 2026). Research in the 3T (Disadvantaged, Frontier, and Outermost) regions shows that the adoption of digital technology can close the gap in school participation, especially when supported by adequate family socio-economic conditions (Wang et al., 2026). Government efforts, such as teacher distribution, internet access, and basic infrastructure development, are important instruments for reducing educational disparities between regions (INJOE, 2023). However, policy literature emphasizes that the availability of devices and technology alone is not sufficient to guarantee the success of educational digitalization. Structural barriers such as low teacher digital competence, students' lack of digital literacy, and limited school managerial capacity are significant factors influencing the effectiveness of digital learning implementation, particularly in rural areas and remote islands (Laraia, 2022).

Sociocultural factors also complicate the issue of access to digital education. An ethnographic study of schools in remote areas found that social norms, gender roles, and family economic conditions influence the level of technology utilization in learning (Yang et al., 2025). Female students, for example, often face a double burden due to domestic responsibilities, which reduces their time and opportunities to optimally access digital learning (Dwivedi et al., 2022). This confirms that the educational gap is not simply a technical or infrastructural issue, but is also influenced by complex socio-cultural dynamics.

In addition to socio-cultural factors, educational inequality in Indonesia is also influenced by geographic distance, a low number of qualified teachers, and education policies that are not fully contextualized to regional needs. Recent literature analysis shows that educational inequality is not only related to access, but also to the quality and relevance of the curriculum. Curricula that are too uniform and poorly adapted to local conditions risk ignoring students' socio-economic contexts, making it difficult for students in disadvantaged areas to optimally participate in learning (Spadano & Sacco, 2026). The increasing burden of education costs including expenses for digital devices, internet quotas, and other supporting devices also limits low-income families' access to technology based learning (Janc et al., 2026). This situation suggests that digital transformation in education

must be complemented by an inclusive strategy that considers economic capacity, teacher readiness, and social support for students.

In this context, Social Studies plays a strategic role in strengthening social inclusion and economic justice. It not only provides historical, political, and economic knowledge but also fosters critical thinking skills, structural awareness, and sensitivity to issues of injustice (Savas & Yol, 2026). This subject provides students with an analytical framework for understanding social phenomena, economic disparities, and local and national political dynamics. Furthermore, Social Studies provides space for the integration of local wisdom with digital technology, making learning more contextual and able to represent the realities of local life (Atay et al., 2025). This is particularly relevant for Eastern Indonesia, which is rich in socio-cultural diversity but still faces development challenges, including limited digital access and economic disparity.

Despite its significant potential, the implementation of digital-based social studies education in eastern Indonesia still faces complex obstacles. Many students lack stable access to digital devices or the internet (Baffoe & Asamoah, 2026). Social programs such as the Free Nutritional Meal Program (MBG) are not always disseminated evenly, so students from poor families continue to face barriers to educational participation. Teachers' digital pedagogical competencies are also still low, preventing optimal utilization of technology-based learning innovations (Ofem et al., 2026). These findings align with policy research showing that digitalization of education without adequate infrastructure support and teacher capacity building can actually widen social inequality.

Furthermore, effective social studies learning requires the integration of local content with a digital context. However, most teachers still face challenges adapting the national curriculum into learning materials relevant to local socioeconomic and cultural conditions (Harjanti et al., 2026). This gap has the potential to create disparities in learning quality, with students in remote areas receiving less contextualized and more theoretical material. In other words, digital transformation does not automatically guarantee improved educational quality if it is not accompanied by adaptive pedagogical strategies relevant to local conditions.

Theoretically, this research is based on the theoretical framework of social inclusion and economic justice in education. This theory emphasizes that education must provide equal access, equitable learning opportunities, and equitable outcomes for all students, regardless of economic, geographic, or social background (Fakoyede et al., 2026). In the context of social studies, this theory is translated through inclusive digital-based learning, which integrates technology, local content, and social interaction in the classroom. This approach aims not only to increase access but also to foster students' social awareness, empathy, and critical thinking skills in analyzing socio-economic inequalities in their environment. In practice, digital integration in Social Science must consider three main dimensions: Access to technology availability of digital devices, internet networks, and adequate online learning resources for all students, Teacher readiness digital pedagogical competency, curriculum adaptability, and innovation in contextual and relevant learning design and Student socioeconomic conditions family support, availability of learning space, and financial capacity to utilize educational technology (Dhamanti & Salsabila, 2025).

These three dimensions are interrelated and determine the success of digital transformation in social studies education. Deficiencies in any one dimension can hinder the achievement of socially inclusive learning and economic justice. Therefore, an in-depth analysis of actual conditions in schools is crucial for formulating targeted intervention strategies. Based on this background, this research aims to achieve three main objectives: Analyze the current state of social studies education in senior high schools in Ternate City, Including digital access, technological literacy, and the integration of local socio-economic content. This analysis aims to understand the reality of social

studies learning, including the barriers and opportunities for utilizing digitalization in education, Map the factors inhibiting social inclusion and economic justice in social studies learning in the digital era. This identification includes structural, socio-cultural, and economic factors, as well as teacher and school capacity that influence student engagement in learning and Formulate a digital- and local-based strategy for strengthening social studies education, with the aim of increasing social inclusion and economic justice in schools in areas facing infrastructure and socio-economic challenges. This strategy is expected to provide policy recommendations that are implementable and relevant to the local context.

In other words, this research is not merely descriptive but also oriented toward practical solutions, namely how social studies learning can be utilized as an instrument for strengthening students' socio-economic capacities through inclusive digital transformation. This research is expected to make a significant contribution to the literature on digital education in Eastern Indonesia, while also offering recommendations for policymakers and education practitioners in designing locally context-based interventions.

Furthermore, this research strengthens understanding of how digital technology can be integrated with social studies content to foster critical social and economic awareness. This aligns with the principles of 21st-century education, which emphasize digital literacy competencies, critical thinking skills, collaboration, and global-social awareness (Pantaruk et al., 2026). By integrating digital literacy and local wisdom, social studies learning can become a vehicle for social transformation that strengthens economic justice, social inclusion, and citizen capacity building.

Taking into account the local context of Ternate City, where socioeconomic disparities and access to technology remain major obstacles, this research is relevant to addressing educational challenges in remote and middle-income areas. The findings are expected to inform the development of inclusive digital education policies, the planning of school-based intervention programs, and strategies for improving teacher capacity in implementing digital-based social studies learning.

In conclusion, this research focuses on the interaction between digital transformation, social studies education, and local socioeconomic conditions, thus providing a comprehensive overview of the opportunities and challenges of inclusive education in the digital era. This focus is crucial to ensure that digitalization in education not only expands technical access but also fosters social and economic equity for all students, particularly in areas facing structural and economic disparities.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to deeply understand the practice of Social Studies (IPS) learning and the dynamics of social inclusion and economic justice in high schools in Ternate City. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to capture the meanings, experiences, and social realities experienced by research subjects in the educational context, thereby obtaining a holistic picture of the phenomenon being studied (Tikka et al., 2023). Descriptive qualitative research emphasizes the collection of rich and detailed data, interpretation of the social context, and understanding the relationship between structural factors, policies, and educational practices in the field.

The research was conducted at three high schools in Ternate City: SMAN 1 Ternate, SMAN 10 Ternate, and SMAS Muhammadiyah Ternate. School selection was based on representative criteria in terms of access to social programs, digital infrastructure, and the diversity of students' socio-economic backgrounds. SMAN 1 Ternate was chosen because it has a student body with the highest level of socio-economic vulnerability. SMAN 10 Ternate represents a school with better access to social programs, including the Free Nutritional Meal Program (MBG). Meanwhile, SMAS

Muhammadiyah Ternate was selected as a private school implementing a locality-based curriculum innovation.

The research subjects consisted of social studies teachers, school program managers, and students. Informants were selected through purposive sampling, selecting subjects based on their involvement in the learning process and their relevance to the research. Social studies teachers were chosen for their strategic role in designing and implementing the curriculum and integrating technology into learning. School program managers were selected to provide perspectives on social program policy and distribution. Students were selected to represent a range of socio-economic conditions and digital access, ensuring that the data collected reflects diverse learning experiences.

Subject selection was carried out with attention to the principle of heterogeneity, so that the analysis could capture the variety of experiences and perceptions that exist within the context of social studies education in Ternate City. The number of informants was determined based on the principle of saturation point, namely the point at which the researcher no longer obtains new information from interviews or observations, so that the data is considered sufficient to describe the phenomenon comprehensively (Barrella et al., 2025).

Data collection was conducted using three main techniques: observation, in-depth interviews, and student surveys. This combination of techniques enabled data triangulation, increased the validity of the findings, and provided a comprehensive picture of learning practices and socio-economic dynamics in the school.

Data analysis was conducted using a thematic coding approach, which allows for the identification of key patterns, categories, and themes from qualitative data (Ahmed et al., 2025). The analysis stages include: Interview transcriptions, observation notes, and survey results were analyzed to identify units of meaning, namely pieces of data relevant to the phenomenon under study, such as digital access, learning barriers, and teachers' perceptions of social policy. Similar units of meaning were grouped into thematic categories, for example: a). Technology access and utilization, b). Social and economic inequality, c). Teacher readiness and digital pedagogy, d). Integration of local issues into the social studies curriculum. This stage helped researchers connect emerging concepts to the broader social context and educational policy.

From the thematic categories, researchers compiled main themes that illustrate patterns of inequality, challenges, and opportunities for strengthening social studies education based on social inclusion and economic justice. This stage resulted in a comprehensive narrative regarding the relationship between social access, digitalization, and learning quality.

The analysis was conducted iteratively, re-examining the data and findings to ensure consistency, relevance, and validity of interpretations. Furthermore, researchers triangulated sources and techniques, comparing the results of observations, interviews, and surveys to enhance credibility and accuracy of the findings.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Observations, interviews, and surveys revealed significant inequalities in student access to the Free Nutritional Meal Program (MBG) in senior high schools in Ternate City. Of the three sample schools, only SMAN 10 Ternate regularly received the MBG program, while SMAN 1 Ternate which has a student body with the highest level of socio-economic vulnerability was not targeted by the program. This discrepancy reflects a lack of vulnerability-based needs mapping, which should be a key principle in designing social education policies. These findings align with the report by (Harjanti et al., 2026) and research by (Dhamanti & Salsabila, 2025), which emphasize the need for precise

needs assessments for Eastern Indonesia. This inequality is not simply an administrative issue, but rather a structural issue with direct implications for educational effectiveness.

The impact of this unequal access to social studies learning is very real. Student survey data shows that 62% experience difficulty concentrating due to hunger during class hours, while 49% report limited access to basic learning resources, such as stationery, supporting books, and stable electricity access at home. These conditions directly impact students' cognitive abilities and engagement in the teaching and learning process. On the teacher side, only 38% of social studies teachers have received training related to inclusive education. The combination of student limitations and suboptimal teacher competency creates a vicious cycle: Socioeconomic limitations weaken learning readiness → low learning readiness reduces pedagogical effectiveness → learning outcomes decline → educational inequality widens. Studies by (Fakoyede et al., 2026) emphasize that unequal access to social programs has direct implications for the quality of learning, particularly in marginalized areas.

In this context, social programs such as the MBG (Student-Based Social Studies) are not merely supplementary assistance but also serve as a structural foundation that determines the success of social studies education. Social studies demands critical thinking skills, social analysis, and active student involvement. All of this is difficult to achieve if students' basic needs, such as nutrition and learning resources, are not met. Therefore, equitable access to social programs is an absolute prerequisite for realizing inclusive, equitable social studies learning that supports the development of students' critical thinking skills.

This inequality reflects the need for integrated social and educational policies. The MBG program, for example, should ideally not only be distributed as food assistance but also include assistance with economic and health literacy. Research by (Tikka et al., 2023) shows that social welfare programs integrated with family literacy can improve children's learning readiness and educational resilience. From this perspective, MBG can serve as an entry point to strengthen family capacity, increase parental involvement, and prepare students for active participation in social studies learning.

Inequality in access to social programs also has psychosocial consequences. Students from vulnerable families report feelings of marginalization and low self-esteem due to not receiving the same facilities as their peers. This impacts learning motivation, class participation, and social interactions among students. In the long term, this inequality can reinforce the reproduction of social injustice, where students from low-income families continue to be marginalized, while students from more prosperous families have greater opportunities for academic success.

Therefore, strategies to increase access to social programs must be holistic. In addition to distributing food or material assistance, schools need to ensure integration with education policies, teacher training, and ongoing monitoring. Such initiatives will create a more inclusive learning environment, strengthen the quality of social studies pedagogy, and enable students from all socioeconomic backgrounds to optimally develop critical thinking skills.

### **The Digital Divide and Its Implications for Economic Justice**

In addition to social inequality, research findings indicate a significant digital divide in senior high schools in Ternate City. Telecommunication infrastructure and digital facilities across schools are unevenly distributed. SMAN 10 has relatively stable internet access, while SMAN 1 Ternate and SMAS Muhammadiyah frequently experience connection issues. Two schools do not even have proper computer labs. These barriers are exacerbated by students' limited device availability: the majority do not have personal devices and rely on devices provided by parents or siblings. This

situation limits participation in online learning, project-based assignments, and exploration of digital learning materials.

This digital divide reinforces educational and economic inequalities. Research (Baffoe & Asamoah, 2026) and (Sun & Tu, 2023) confirm that the digital divide in non-urban areas reinforces structural inequalities. In the context of social studies, limited digital access impacts students' limited ability to access contemporary learning resources, such as digital maps, ethnographic videos, news portals, and geospatial applications. Social studies teachers tend to use basic media, such as PowerPoint and YouTube videos, without in-depth integration of local and contextual issues. This contradicts the potential of digital technology to enhance critical literacy, social analysis, and understanding of complex issues surrounding students.

Beyond academic impacts, the digital divide is closely linked to economic justice. Students from low-income families tend to be unable to afford devices or internet data, thus falling behind in digital learning and technology-based projects. This situation creates a new cycle of inequality: limited digital access → low digital literacy → reduced opportunities for social mobility. (Chattopadhyay, 2026) emphasized that the digital divide is not simply a technological issue, but a structural one that reinforces economic inequality between social groups. Therefore, digital-based education must be accompanied by policies on device distribution, teacher capacity building, and mentoring for students from vulnerable groups.

The digital divide also impacts teachers' ability to implement innovative pedagogy. Teachers with limited access or limited digital competence tend to use conventional methods, making students' learning experiences less interactive and less likely to stimulate critical thinking skills. This impacts the quality of social studies learning, which demands social analysis, contextual understanding, and evaluative skills. In other words, digital technology is not only a tool but also a medium for transforming learning. If not equally available, it will widen educational inequality.

In an economic context, the digital divide can have long-term impacts on opportunities for social mobility. Students with high digital literacy are better prepared to access job information, entrepreneurial opportunities, and professional competencies relevant to the digital economy. Conversely, students who lag behind in digital literacy tend to face significant barriers to achieving future economic opportunities. Therefore, the digital divide is not only an educational issue but also an economic justice issue that requires integrated interventions between the education, technology, and social policy sectors.

### **Opportunities for Transformation: Integrating Digital and Local-Based Social Studies**

Despite numerous structural obstacles, this study found significant potential for social studies as a medium for social transformation in Ternate City. Teachers and students demonstrated high enthusiasm for the use of locally based teaching materials, such as maritime issues, inter-island trade, coastal economics, and the cultural wisdom of North Maluku. Integrating local contexts has been shown to increase the relevance of the material, facilitate understanding of social phenomena, and foster active student engagement. These findings align with research by (Afnan et al., 2025), which demonstrated the effectiveness of local-based education in empowering communities.

Integrating local-based learning with digital technology has even greater potential for transformation. The use of digital maps and Geographical Information Systems (GIS) can enrich students' understanding of socio-geographic dynamics, demonstrate the relationship between economic and cultural phenomena, and hone critical analysis skills. However, this potential has not been maximized in Ternate City Senior High Schools, in the context of underdeveloped, frontier, and outermost (3T) areas.

In addition, the MBG program can serve as an entrance to family empowerment through economic and digital literacy emphasizing that social welfare programs integrated with digital literacy can increase family educational resilience. With the right strategy, such programs can be a catalyst for improving the quality of social studies learning, particularly in the context of social and economic justice.

Strengthening the local and digital-based social studies curriculum also promotes social inclusion. Students from vulnerable backgrounds can engage in learning relevant to their lives, thereby increasing motivation, participation, and conceptual understanding. This aligns with Freire's principles of critical education, which emphasize that education must empower learners to understand and transform their own social conditions.

This transformation requires multi-level support: from local governments in equitable digital infrastructure, technology-based teacher training and contextual pedagogy, to social policies that adapt to student vulnerabilities. With this combination, social studies education can not only address digital and socioeconomic inequalities but also serve as an instrument for community empowerment, building critical capacity, and promoting sustainable economic justice.

Overall, this study confirms that social studies education in senior high schools in Ternate City has strategic potential in reducing socio-economic and digital inequalities. Existing structural barriers can be addressed through the integration of social policies, inclusive digitalization, and strengthening the local context in learning. If these steps are implemented consistently, social studies will not only improve academic quality but also serve as a medium for inclusive and equitable social transformation.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Social Studies (IPS) education in high schools in Ternate City plays a strategic role in addressing the digital and socioeconomic divide, despite still facing a number of significant structural obstacles. Inequitable access to social programs, such as the Nutritious Meal Program (MBG), limited digital facilities in schools, low student ownership of personal devices, and teachers' inadequate digital pedagogical competencies are key obstacles to achieving an optimal learning experience. These conditions indicate that digitalization of education without adequate infrastructure support and strengthening human resource capacity has the potential to widen socioeconomic disparities, reduce critical literacy, and limit opportunities for social mobility for students from vulnerable families. Thus, the primary challenge lies not only in the provision of technology, but also in the ability of the education system and social policies to reach the neediest groups in a fair, targeted, and sustainable manner, thereby creating an inclusive and empowering education.

Furthermore, this study confirms that social studies education has great potential as a medium for community empowerment and the reconstruction of social justice, particularly when digital integration is carried out in a local-based manner and sensitive to the socio-cultural context. Utilizing local issues, such as maritime affairs, coastal economics, and North Maluku culture, has been proven to increase the relevance, meaning, and effectiveness of learning, while encouraging the development of critical literacy and social awareness in students. This approach makes the digital-based social studies curriculum a bridge between formal education and community empowerment, as well as a means to strengthen social inclusion, economic justice, and cultural identity. The successful implementation of this model depends heavily on local government support through equitable digital infrastructure, teacher capacity building, and social policies that adapt to student vulnerabilities. In the context of Ternate City, social studies education has the potential to be an important instrument

for strengthening equal opportunities and community capacity in facing the challenges of digitalization.

The results of this study indicate that social studies education in senior high schools in Ternate City has a dual role: as a means to address the digital and socio-economic divide, and as a locally-based empowerment medium that strengthens the relevance of learning and social inclusion. The main challenges remain limited infrastructure, low digital device ownership, and teachers' pedagogical competencies, which need to be improved. However, through a locally sensitive approach and supported by appropriate policies, social studies education can improve critical literacy, strengthen cultural identity, and open opportunities for socio-economic mobility for students, especially those from vulnerable groups. These findings emphasize that the success of digitalization in education is determined not only by the availability of technology, but also by the ability of the education system to create equitable, inclusive, and empowering learning experiences for all students, enabling them to play an active role in local community and economic development.

## **DECLARATION OF AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS**

During the preparation of this work the authors used ChatGPT in order to translate and correct spelling. After using this tool/service, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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## **AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION**

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

Author 4: Formal analysis; Methodology; Writing - original draft.

Author 5: Supervision; Validation.

Author 6: Other contribution; Resources; Visuali-zation; Writing - original draft.

## **DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST**

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

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