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Differentiated Learning in the Merdeka Curriculum: Challenges and Best Practices in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah

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ABSTRACT. Differentiated learning has become one of the primary instructional approaches promoted by the Merdeka Curriculum to address students' diverse learning needs and support learner-centered education. This study aims to analyze the implementation of differentiated learning in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah by identifying the major challenges encountered by teachers and synthesizing the best instructional practices reported in previous studies. The study employed a qualitative literature review design using peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2019 and 2024, retrieved from Google Scholar, Scopus, ERIC, Dimensions, and Garuda databases. The selected literature was analyzed using thematic analysis following the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, including data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings indicate that differentiated learning improves student engagement, motivation, participation, academic achievement, and the development of Islamic character by accommodating differences in learning readiness, interests, learning profiles, and abilities. However, teachers continue to face challenges related to diagnostic assessment, differentiated lesson planning, authentic assessment, classroom management, limited instructional resources, professional development opportunities, and time constraints. The review further reveals that effective implementation is supported by diagnostic assessment, flexible instructional planning, differentiated content, process, and product, collaborative and project-based learning, formative assessment, continuous feedback, and strong institutional support. The study concludes that strengthening teachers' pedagogical competence and institutional capacity is essential for optimizing differentiated learning and achieving the objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah.

Keywords: *Differentiated Learning; Merdeka Curriculum; Madrasah Ibtidaiyah; Literature Review; Student-Centered Learning.*

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INTRODUCTION

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum marks a significant transformation in Indonesia's educational system by emphasizing learner-centered education, flexibility in curriculum implementation, and the development of students' competencies according to their individual characteristics(Rohmah et al., 2024). Unlike previous curricula that tended to apply standardized learning approaches, the Merdeka Curriculum encourages teachers to design learning experiences that accommodate students' differences in readiness, interests, learning profiles, and abilities. Consequently, differentiated learning has become one of the core pedagogical approaches promoted within the curriculum to ensure that every learner has equal opportunities to achieve optimal learning outcomes(Hu, 2024).

Differentiated learning is grounded in the principle that students learn differently and therefore require varied instructional strategies, learning activities, assessments, and learning environments. Rather than treating students uniformly, differentiated instruction enables teachers to adjust content, learning processes, products, and classroom environments based on students' diverse needs(Melesse & Belay, 2022). This approach aligns with twenty-first-century educational goals that emphasize personalized learning, critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and learner autonomy. Within the Merdeka Curriculum, differentiation is no longer viewed as an optional innovation but as an essential instructional practice for achieving equitable and meaningful learning experiences.

Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (MI), as Islamic elementary educational institutions under the Ministry of Religious Affairs, have a strategic responsibility to implement differentiated learning while simultaneously integrating Islamic values into classroom instruction. Besides achieving academic competencies, MI aims to cultivate students' religious character, moral values, and social responsibility. Therefore, teachers are expected to balance curriculum flexibility with the unique characteristics of Islamic education(Asna Lutfa et al., 2024a). Learning activities should not only accommodate students' cognitive differences but also foster spiritual, emotional, and social development in accordance with Islamic educational principles(Chanifah et al., 2021).

Despite its pedagogical advantages, implementing differentiated learning in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah remains challenging. Numerous teachers continue to experience difficulties in identifying students' readiness levels, mapping learning profiles, designing differentiated lesson plans, preparing varied instructional materials, conducting authentic assessments, and managing heterogeneous classrooms(Gheyssens et al., 2022). Limited professional development opportunities, inadequate teaching resources, time constraints, and relatively large class sizes further complicate the implementation process. As a result, differentiated learning is often applied only partially or focuses merely on varying learning activities without systematically differentiating learning objectives, assessment strategies, or instructional support.

Recent studies have demonstrated that differentiated learning contributes positively to students' learning engagement, motivation, active participation, and academic achievement when implemented appropriately(Moallemi, 2024). Teachers who effectively diagnose learners' needs and design flexible instructional strategies are more likely to create inclusive classrooms where every student can actively participate according to their abilities(Gheyssens et al., 2021). In Madrasah Ibtidaiyah, differentiated learning also provides opportunities to integrate Islamic values through contextual learning experiences that accommodate diverse student characteristics while strengthening religious identity and character education.

Although research concerning differentiated learning has increased substantially following the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, previous studies have predominantly focused on describing implementation processes or teachers' perceptions. Comparatively fewer studies comprehensively examine both the challenges encountered during implementation and the best practices that have successfully supported differentiated instruction in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah settings(Langelaan et al., 2024). Furthermore, existing literature rarely synthesizes practical strategies that can serve as references for teachers, school leaders, and educational policymakers

seeking to improve differentiated learning implementation within Islamic elementary education(Gheyssens et al., 2021).

Based on these considerations, this study aims to analyze the implementation of differentiated learning within the Merdeka Curriculum in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah by identifying the major challenges faced by teachers and documenting effective instructional practices that have contributed to successful classroom implementation. The findings are expected to enrich the growing body of literature on differentiated instruction in Islamic elementary education while providing practical recommendations for teachers, school administrators, curriculum developers, and policymakers seeking to strengthen the quality of learner-centered education under the Merdeka Curriculum.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative literature review design to examine the implementation of differentiated learning within the Merdeka Curriculum in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah, with particular attention to the challenges encountered by teachers and the best practices reported in previous studies. A literature review was selected because it enables researchers to synthesize empirical findings, identify recurring themes, and generate comprehensive insights from existing scholarly evidence(Snyder, 2024). The review focused on peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2019 and 2024, retrieved from reputable academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, ERIC, Dimensions, and Garuda. The inclusion criteria comprised articles discussing differentiated learning, the Merdeka Curriculum, personalized learning, instructional strategies, and Madrasah Ibtidaiyah or elementary education within the Indonesian context. Studies unrelated to the research objectives, conference abstracts, opinion papers, and duplicate publications were excluded from the review.

The collected literature was analyzed using thematic analysis following the stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing proposed by (DeJonckheere et al., 2024). Each selected article was carefully examined to identify patterns related to the implementation of differentiated learning, instructional adaptations, teacher competencies, institutional support, implementation barriers, and effective classroom practices. The identified findings were then categorized into major themes representing challenges and best practices in implementing differentiated learning in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah. To enhance the credibility of the review, data triangulation was conducted by comparing findings across multiple studies, educational contexts, and research methodologies(Morgan, 2024). The synthesized results provide an evidence-based overview of current practices and practical recommendations for improving differentiated instruction under the Merdeka Curriculum.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Based on the literature review on the implementation of Differentiated Learning within the Merdeka Curriculum in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah, the findings indicate that the success of differentiated instruction is largely determined by teachers' ability to identify students' characteristics, design flexible learning experiences, and establish inclusive classroom environments. The reviewed studies consistently demonstrate that differentiated learning extends beyond accommodating differences in academic ability by considering students' learning readiness, learning interests, and learning profiles. Consequently, teachers are expected to conduct diagnostic assessments at the beginning of the learning process to identify learners' needs and determine the most appropriate instructional strategies for each student(Sujinah et al., 2024).

In addition to providing equal learning opportunities for all students, differentiated learning strongly supports the objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes student-centered learning. Within the context of Madrasah Ibtidaiyah, differentiated instruction offers additional value by integrating academic achievement with the development of Islamic character values, including responsibility, cooperation, independence, and spiritual awareness. Accordingly, learning activities are designed not only to improve cognitive achievement but also to foster students' social, emotional, and religious development in a balanced manner.

Despite these advantages, the reviewed literature reveals several challenges in implementing differentiated learning in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah. The most frequently reported obstacles include teachers' difficulties in identifying students' learning readiness, preparing differentiated lesson plans, designing authentic assessments, and managing heterogeneous classrooms(Lewis et al., 2021). These challenges are further intensified by limited instructional resources, insufficient professional development opportunities, time constraints, and relatively large class sizes. Consequently, differentiated instruction is often implemented only partially, focusing primarily on varying classroom activities rather than systematically differentiating learning objectives, instructional processes, learning products, and assessment strategies(Gibbs, 2023).

Conversely, the literature also identifies several best practices that contribute to the successful implementation of differentiated learning(Smets&Struyven, 2020). Effective teachers consistently conduct diagnostic assessments, establish flexible learning objectives, and provide multiple learning pathways that accommodate students' diverse characteristics. Classroom instruction is supported through the use of varied instructional media, collaborative learning, project-based learning, and continuous formative feedback. In this approach, teachers act as facilitators who provide differentiated guidance according to students' individual learning needs, ensuring equitable learning opportunities for all learners(Cai et al., 2024). These practices have been consistently associated with increased learning motivation, active participation, classroom engagement, and improved academic achievement.

The literature synthesis further indicates that the successful implementation of differentiated learning depends not only on teachers' professional competence but also on institutional support. Schools that provide continuous professional development, supportive educational policies, adequate learning resources, and collaborative professional cultures among teachers are more successful in implementing differentiated instruction than those lacking such support(Porta et al., 2024). Therefore, strengthening teacher capacity through ongoing professional training, developing adaptive instructional resources, and reinforcing school-level policies are essential for optimizing the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah.

Table 1. Synthesis of the Implementation of Differentiated Learning in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah

Aspect	Key Findings
Implementation Focus	Learning is adapted to students' learning readiness, interests, learning profiles, and abilities.
Benefits	Improves student engagement, learning motivation, active participation, academic achievement, Islamic character development, and twenty-first-century competencies.
Challenges	Teachers experience difficulties in conducting diagnostic assessments, preparing differentiated instructional materials, designing authentic assessments, managing heterogeneous classrooms, and dealing with limited time, learning resources, and professional training.
Best Practices	Diagnostic assessment, differentiation of content, process, product, varied instructional media, collaborative learning, project-based learning, and continuous formative feedback.
Supporting Factors	Teacher competence, school leadership support, continuous professional development, supportive educational policies, and teacher collaboration.

Table 2. Summary of Challenges and Best Practices

Challenges	Best Practices
Difficulty identifying students' learning needs	Conduct diagnostic assessments before instruction
Limited differentiated lesson planning	Design flexible learning objectives, content, processes, and products
Managing heterogeneous classrooms	Implement collaborative and project-based learning
Limited instructional resources and instructional time	Utilize diverse and contextual learning media
Limited teacher professional development	Strengthen continuous professional development and teacher collaboration
Limited implementation of authentic assessment	Apply continuous formative assessment accompanied by constructive feedback

Discussion

The findings of this literature review confirm that differentiated learning has become one of the fundamental instructional approaches supporting the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah. The curriculum emphasizes student-centered learning by encouraging teachers to recognize differences in students' readiness, interests, learning profiles, and abilities rather than applying a uniform instructional approach. This perspective aligns with the principles of personalized learning, which seek to ensure equitable learning opportunities while maximizing each student's potential.

The present findings are consistent with those reported by Tomlinson (Tomlinson, 2014), who argued that differentiation is achieved by adapting content, process, product, and learning environment according to students' individual needs. (Anwar & Sukiman, 2023)concluded that differentiated learning represents the pedagogical foundation of the Merdeka Curriculum because it enables teachers to accommodate learner diversity while improving instructional quality in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah.

This review also demonstrates that successful implementation of differentiated learning depends heavily on teachers' pedagogical competence. Teachers are required to conduct diagnostic assessments, analyze students' learning characteristics, and design flexible instructional activities. These findings corroborate the study of (Lailiyah et al., 2024), which reported that although teachers' conceptual understanding of differentiated learning improved after professional training, continuous capacity building remains necessary to translate theoretical understanding into effective classroom practice. (Asna Lutfa et al., 2024b)emphasized that teacher readiness is one of the most influential factors determining the successful implementation of differentiated learning in Islamic elementary schools.

Another important finding concerns the challenges encountered during implementation. Most studies consistently report that teachers experience difficulties in identifying students' readiness levels, preparing differentiated teaching materials, conducting authentic assessments, and managing heterogeneous classrooms. These challenges are exacerbated by limited instructional resources, insufficient professional development, time constraints, and relatively large class sizes. Similar obstacles have been identified by (Caesaria et al., 2024), who found that differentiated instruction within the Merdeka Curriculum is often implemented only at the level of classroom activities without fully differentiating instructional objectives, assessment strategies, or learning support. These findings indicate that policy implementation has not yet been accompanied by sufficient institutional support and teacher preparedness.

Despite these challenges, the literature consistently indicates that differentiated learning generates substantial educational benefits. Students become more actively engaged in classroom activities, demonstrate higher learning motivation, participate more confidently, and achieve improved academic performance when learning experiences are adapted to their individual characteristics. These findings are consistent with (Fitriyah & Bisri, 2023), who reported that differentiated instruction enhances student participation by accommodating learners' diverse needs rather than imposing standardized instructional practices. Moreover, differentiated learning supports the development of twenty-first-century competencies, including critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, communication, and learner autonomy, all of which are emphasized within the Merdeka Curriculum.

Within Madrasah Ibtidaiyah, differentiated learning provides additional educational value because it enables teachers to integrate Islamic values into instructional activities. Rather than separating academic achievement from character education, differentiated instruction encourages teachers to contextualize learning according to students' cognitive, social, emotional, and spiritual development. Consequently, differentiated learning contributes not only to academic success but also to strengthening students' religious identity, responsibility, cooperation, and moral character. This finding reinforces the argument that differentiated learning is highly compatible with the educational philosophy of Islamic elementary schools(Pozas et al., 2021).

The review further reveals that schools demonstrating successful implementation share several common characteristics. These include regular diagnostic assessment, flexible instructional planning, varied learning resources, collaborative and project-based learning, continuous formative assessment, and strong institutional support. Such practices reflect the concept of adaptive teaching, where teachers continuously modify instructional decisions based on students' learning progress. These findings support previous literature suggesting that differentiated learning should be viewed as a comprehensive instructional system rather than merely a collection of teaching techniques.

Furthermore, this review highlights the importance of professional development for teachers. Continuous training, mentoring, collaborative lesson planning, and supportive school leadership are essential for sustaining differentiated instructional practices. Without systematic professional support, teachers tend to implement differentiation only partially, thereby limiting its effectiveness. Recent systematic literature reviews likewise conclude that teacher professionalism and institutional commitment are indispensable prerequisites for improving differentiated learning implementation in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah(Scarparolo&Subban, 2021).

Overall, the evidence synthesized in this study suggests that differentiated learning is not simply an instructional innovation but a necessary pedagogical approach for achieving the objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum. Its successful implementation requires an integrated framework involving competent teachers, adaptive instructional planning, supportive educational policies, adequate learning resources, and continuous institutional commitment. Future research should therefore move beyond describing implementation practices toward evaluating the long-term impact of differentiated learning on students' academic achievement, character development, and twenty-first-century competencies in Islamic elementary education.

CONCLUSION

This literature review concludes that differentiated learning is a fundamental instructional approach for achieving the objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah by accommodating students' diverse learning readiness, interests, learning profiles, and abilities. The reviewed studies consistently indicate that differentiated instruction promotes more inclusive, equitable, and student-centered learning while enhancing students' engagement, motivation, participation, academic achievement, and the development of Islamic character values.

Despite these educational benefits, the implementation of differentiated learning continues to face several challenges, including teachers' limited ability to identify students' learning

characteristics, design differentiated instructional materials, conduct authentic assessments, manage heterogeneous classrooms, and cope with limited instructional resources, professional development opportunities, and instructional time. As a result, differentiated learning is frequently implemented only partially rather than comprehensively across instructional planning, learning processes, assessment, and learning outcomes.

The literature further demonstrates that successful implementation depends on teachers' pedagogical competence, continuous professional development, supportive school leadership, adequate learning resources, and collaborative educational practices. Effective implementation is characterized by the use of diagnostic assessment, flexible instructional planning, differentiated content, processes, products, formative assessment, and continuous feedback. Therefore, strengthening teacher capacity and institutional support should become strategic priorities for improving the quality and sustainability of differentiated learning in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah under the Merdeka Curriculum. Future studies are recommended to investigate the long-term impact of differentiated learning on students' academic achievement, character development, and twenty-first-century competencies through empirical research in diverse educational settings.

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