

Differentiated Learning Design in Islamic Early Childhood Education from an Islamic Education Perspective

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Abstract

This study aims to develop a differentiated learning design for Islamic Early Childhood Education (PIAUD) from an Islamic educational perspective. This research employs a qualitative approach using a library research method. Data were collected through documentation from various primary and secondary sources, including educational regulations, learning theory literature, and Islamic education studies. The data were then analyzed using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña model through the stages of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing.

The findings show that differentiated learning in PIAUD is a relevant approach to accommodate the diversity of early childhood learners who differ in learning readiness, interests, language abilities, and social backgrounds. The learning design can be implemented through differentiation of content, process, product, and learning environment while remaining integrated with Islamic values such as tawhid, worship, moral values, and adab (Islamic etiquette). From an Islamic educational perspective, this approach aligns with the principles of fitrah (innate nature), rahmah (mercy), and exemplary modeling, and is further supported by Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development theory and the Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) framework by NAEYC.

In conclusion, differentiated learning in PIAUD can serve as an inclusive, adaptive, and Islamic-value-based instructional strategy in shaping early childhood character that is faithful, moral, and well-mannered.

Keywords: *design, differentiated learning, Islamic education, early childhood education*

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Introduction

Islamic Early Childhood Education (PIAUD) holds a strategic position because it directly engages with the earliest phase of children's personality formation. At this stage, children not only begin to recognize language, symbols, movements, and social habits, but also start to absorb values related to God, self, family, nature, and others. The Islamic educational perspective views children as a trust (*amanah*) and developing individuals who carry an innate nature (*fitrah*). Therefore, the educator's task is not merely to transfer knowledge, but to develop children's potential gradually through affection, role modeling, habituation, and meaningful learning experiences. This direction is in line with QS. An-Nahl verse 78, which emphasizes that humans are born without knowledge and are then endowed by Allah with hearing, sight, and heart as tools for learning and gratitude (Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2019, QS. An-Nahl: 78).

The main challenge in early childhood education today is the increasing diversity of learners in the classroom. Children come with different readiness levels, varying interests, diverse family backgrounds, different language abilities, and religious experiences shaped by their home environment. Within one learning group, some children may already be able to recite daily prayers, others are just beginning to learn prayer movements, some can express their feelings easily, while others require more intensive assistance in social interaction. If all children are treated with the same activities, pace, media, and learning outcomes, the learning process may become unfair. More advanced children may feel unchallenged, while those who need support may feel pressured.

National education policies also show a more flexible direction toward children's developmental diversity. Early Childhood Graduate Competency Standards position PAUD as a reference for developmental achievement rather than merely a preparatory stage for primary education. Content standards define the scope of PAUD learning based on developmental achievement levels, while curriculum regulations emphasize character development, deep learning, and habituation within school culture (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2025a, pp. 1–3; 2025b, pp. 1–6; 2025c, pp. 6–8). Thus, PIAUD needs to design learning that is not uniform, but instead adapts learning experiences to children's needs without losing Islamic values.

Early Childhood Education statistics for 2024/2025 show that national PAUD data includes various types of institutions such as kindergartens, playgroups, childcare centers, and similar early childhood education units, based on DAPODIK data collected as of November 30, 2024 (Pusdatin Kemendikdasmen, 2025). This indicates that PAUD services exist in a highly diverse institutional context. This diversity affects curriculum implementation, teacher resources, school culture, and student characteristics. Therefore, Islamic early childhood learning design must allow flexibility so that it can be implemented across different types of institutions.

Differentiated instruction offers a relevant framework to address this issue. Tomlinson explains that differentiation is a teacher's effort to adjust content, process, product, and learning environment based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles, not by lowering standards, but by providing multiple pathways for learning so that all children can grow (Tomlinson, 2014, pp. 15–22). In early childhood education, differentiation should not be understood as rigid grouping, but as a flexible strategy for designing play-based learning experiences. Children may choose materials, work in small groups, receive appropriate assistance, and demonstrate understanding in different ways.

From an Islamic educational perspective, the concept of differentiation has a strong philosophical foundation. The Qur'an acknowledges human diversity as part of Allah's will so that people may know one another rather than belittle each other (Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2019, QS. Al-Hujurat: 13). This principle can be translated into

learning as respect for each child's uniqueness. Educators do not require all children to learn at the same pace but guide each child toward goodness according to their developmental stage. Islamic education also emphasizes *adab* (proper conduct). Al-Attas defines education as the process of instilling *adab* that places knowledge, self, and reality in their proper order (Al-Attas, 1980, pp. 22–27). In PIAUD, *adab* cannot be taught only through lectures but must be internalized through daily activities, interactions, role modeling, and concrete experiences.

Developmental theories further support the need for differentiation. Vygotsky introduced the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is the distance between what a child can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance from a more capable person (Vygotsky, 1978, pp. 86–87). This concept is highly relevant in PIAUD because young children learn through interaction with teachers, peers, family, and their environment. Children require appropriate assistance—neither too little nor too much. Differentiated learning can be viewed as a way for teachers to provide gradual support based on each child's actual needs.

The principle of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) also emphasizes that early childhood education should consider three key aspects: shared developmental patterns, individual uniqueness, and socio-cultural context (NAEYC, 2020, pp. 8–11). In PIAUD, socio-cultural context includes family religious practices, daily language use, community traditions, and worship habits introduced at home. Therefore, Islamic early childhood learning design cannot simply consist of memorizing prayers, short surahs, or prophetic stories, but must provide age-appropriate, joyful, and culturally sensitive experiences.

Based on this background, the research questions of this article are: how is the concept of differentiated learning in PIAUD; what are the foundations and direction of differentiated learning in Islamic educational perspective; and how is the design of differentiated learning in PIAUD implemented for early childhood learners. This study is important because many current practices in early childhood Islamic education still rely on uniform memorization-based instruction and worksheets, whereas early childhood learning requires play, exploration, habituation, and meaningful interaction. This article aims to provide a conceptual yet practical academic design that can serve as a reference for students, PIAUD teachers, and Islamic early childhood education institutions.

Theoretically, PIAUD in this article is understood as early childhood education that integrates religious, moral, cognitive, language, socio-emotional, physical-motor, artistic, and independence development within an Islamic value framework. Differentiated learning is understood as an approach that allows children to achieve the same learning goals through different pathways, materials, activities, and forms of expression. Islamic education is understood as a process of developing faith, knowledge, practice, and *adab* in an integrated manner. The synthesis of these three concepts leads to the idea that PIAUD learning design must be child-centered, grounded in *tawhid*, oriented toward *adab*, and flexible toward developmental differences.

Literature Review

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is a foundational stage in human development that significantly influences children's cognitive, social, emotional, and spiritual growth. At this stage, children learn primarily through direct experiences, play, imitation, and social interaction. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2020) emphasizes that developmentally appropriate practice requires learning experiences that are active, meaningful, play-based, and responsive to individual differences. Therefore, early childhood learning must accommodate children's unique developmental needs, interests, and learning profiles.

In the context of Islamic Early Childhood Education (PIAUD), education is not limited to cognitive development but also focuses on the internalization of Islamic values such as *tawhid* (monotheism), *ibadah* (worship), *akhlaq* (morality), and *adab* (etiquette). Islamic

education views children as an amanah (trust) endowed with fitrah that must be developed through love, modeling, habituation, and meaningful experiences. Nata (2016) explains that Islamic education aims to form noble character through continuous internalization of values in daily life practices. Therefore, Islamic learning in early childhood should integrate moral and spiritual values into everyday experiences rather than relying solely on memorization.

One of the major challenges in early childhood classrooms is learner diversity. Children come with varying levels of readiness, interests, language abilities, and socio-cultural backgrounds. In a single classroom, some children may already be able to perform basic religious practices, while others are still developing fundamental social skills. Applying uniform instruction to all learners may result in inequitable learning outcomes, where some children feel unchallenged while others struggle due to insufficient support.

To address this issue, differentiated instruction provides a relevant pedagogical approach. Tomlinson (2014) defines differentiated instruction as a teaching strategy that modifies content, process, product, and learning environment based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles without lowering learning standards. In early childhood education, differentiation is not about separating children rigidly, but about providing flexible learning experiences that allow multiple pathways for understanding and expression.

The concept of differentiated learning is supported by Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which emphasizes that children learn best when guided by more capable individuals through appropriate scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978). In PIAUD settings, scaffolding is provided through teacher guidance, peer interaction, and structured learning environments. Differentiation ensures that support is aligned with each child's developmental level.

Furthermore, the Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) framework highlights three essential principles: age appropriateness, individual appropriateness, and socio-cultural context (NAEYC, 2020). In Islamic early childhood education, socio-cultural context includes religious practices, family traditions, and community values. This supports the need for learning designs that are both developmentally appropriate and value-based.

From an Islamic perspective, diversity among learners is recognized as part of divine wisdom. The Qur'an states that human beings are created into nations and tribes so that they may know one another (Qur'an 49:13, Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2019). This principle provides a theological foundation for differentiated learning, emphasizing respect for individual uniqueness. Al-Attas (1980) further explains that Islamic education is the process of instilling adab, which involves placing knowledge and behavior in their proper place. Therefore, education in PIAUD must cultivate moral conduct through lived experiences rather than theoretical instruction alone.

Differentiated instruction can be implemented in PIAUD through flexible grouping, varied learning materials, learning centers, and differentiated outcomes. Each learning center can support different developmental needs while still delivering the same Islamic values. For example, worship centers allow children to practice prayer at different levels, while role-play centers enable children to express social and moral behaviors in diverse ways.

Research on center-based learning also supports the relevance of differentiated instruction. The BCCT (Beyond Centers and Circle Time) model provides structured play environments that naturally accommodate differences in children's readiness and interests (Mulyasa, 2017). Studies show that BCCT enhances holistic child development through play-based and experiential learning approaches (Dewi, Rini, & Sofia, 2017; Werdiningsih, 2022; Hendrica, 2023).

In addition, Indonesian education policy supports learner-centered and character-based learning in early childhood education. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (2024) emphasizes the development of children's character, spirituality, and independence through contextual learning. The Ministry of Religious Affairs (2024) also

encourages innovative and contextual learning in Raudhatul Athfal institutions that integrate Islamic values into daily learning practices.

In conclusion, the literature indicates that differentiated instruction is highly relevant in Islamic Early Childhood Education because it accommodates learner diversity while maintaining the integration of Islamic values. By combining developmental theories, Islamic educational principles, and flexible instructional strategies, differentiated learning provides a comprehensive framework for meaningful, inclusive, and value-based early childhood education.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach using a library research design. The qualitative approach was selected because the aim of the article is not to measure statistical relationships between variables, but to understand the meaning, principles, and conceptual construction of differentiated learning design in Islamic Early Childhood Education (PIAUD) from an Islamic education perspective. Creswell and Poth state that qualitative research emphasizes the exploration of meaning, context, interpretation, and in-depth understanding of a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018, pp. 45–47). Therefore, this study is more appropriately categorized as a conceptual-qualitative study that produces a learning design model rather than an experimental or quantitative report.

The data sources in this study consist of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include educational policy documents related to early childhood education and curriculum standards, particularly Permendikdasmen Number 10 of 2025 concerning Graduate Competency Standards, Permendikdasmen Number 12 of 2025 concerning Content Standards, Permendikdasmen Number 13 of 2025 regarding curriculum policy revision, and Decree of the Head of BSKAP Number 046/H/KR/2025 concerning Learning Outcomes. Primary theoretical sources also include Tomlinson's work on differentiated instruction and Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development. In Islamic education, primary sources include the Qur'an, its translation by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and Al-Attas' concept of ta'dib.

Secondary sources include national and international journal articles related to differentiated learning, early childhood education, the Merdeka Curriculum, early childhood assessment, developmentally appropriate practice, and the concept of ta'dib in Islamic education. Several Indonesian studies were used to strengthen the PAUD context, such as research on differentiated learning in the Merdeka Curriculum in Early Childhood Education (Yuniria & Atikah, 2024, pp. 56–66) and teachers' perceptions of differentiated instruction in the Merdeka Curriculum (Karimaliana et al., 2023, pp. 8081–8094). Source selection was based on relevance to the topic, recency, credibility of publication sources, and availability of verifiable links.

Data collection was conducted through documentation techniques, namely searching, reading, recording, and classifying information from policy documents, books, journals, and official websites. The data collection procedure was carried out in four steps. First, the researcher determined keywords such as PIAUD, differentiated learning, Islamic education, early childhood education, Merdeka Curriculum, ta'dib, and authentic assessment. Second, relevant sources were selected based on their alignment with the research objectives. Third, thematic notes were developed regarding principles, concepts, and learning practices. Fourth, synthesis was conducted to formulate a learning design model.

Data analysis followed the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña model, consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles et al., 2014, pp. 31–33). Data condensation involved selecting key ideas related to differentiation, child development, Islamic values, curriculum regulations, and assessment. Data display was presented in narrative

form and design matrices. Conclusions were drawn by formulating the most relevant principles and design steps for PIAUD. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation, comparing policy documents, educational theories, Islamic studies, and previous research. Referential adequacy was also applied by including accessible links for verification.

The limitation of this study must be clearly stated. This article does not present classroom observation data, teacher interviews, or direct measurement of child development. Therefore, the findings are presented in the form of a conceptual design derived from literature and policy review. If this article is used as part of a thesis or field-based research, the findings section can be further developed using observational data, interviews, teaching module documentation, and children's portfolios from specific PIAUD institutions. Despite this limitation, the study still provides academic contribution by offering a conceptual framework that can be tested, adapted, and implemented in real educational settings.

Results

The findings of this study indicate that differentiated learning design in Islamic Early Childhood Education (PIAUD) is a conceptually relevant and contextually appropriate approach to addressing learner diversity while integrating Islamic values into the learning process. The diversity of early childhood learners is reflected in differences in readiness levels, interests, learning styles, language abilities, and religious experiences gained from the family environment. These conditions suggest that uniform instructional approaches are no longer sufficient in PIAUD contexts, as they may fail to accommodate individual learning needs effectively.

From an Islamic educational perspective, such diversity is understood as part of human fitrah (innate nature). This is emphasized in Qur'an 49:13, which explains that humanity was created into nations and tribes so that they may know one another. This principle reinforces that differentiation in learning does not contradict Islamic values; rather, it represents an application of rahmah (mercy) in education by providing appropriate learning services according to each child's needs.

4.1. Differentiation as an Adaptive Framework in PIAUD

The findings show that differentiated learning in PIAUD can be understood through four main components: content, process, product, and learning environment. In terms of content, Islamic materials such as daily prayers, prophetic stories, moral values, and basic worship practices are not delivered uniformly, but are adapted to children's developmental levels. Children at early stages are introduced to Islamic concepts through visual aids, songs, and simple storytelling, while more advanced learners are guided toward deeper understanding and practice.

In terms of process, learning activities are implemented through varied approaches such as role-play, simple discussion, demonstration, exploration, and hands-on activities. This variation allows children to learn according to their preferred learning styles—visual, auditory, or kinesthetic. Consequently, learning becomes more child-centered, where children actively construct knowledge through meaningful experiences rather than passively receiving information from the teacher.

Regarding product differentiation, children are given flexibility in demonstrating their understanding. Learning outcomes may take the form of drawings, oral explanations, simple

performances, craft products, or observable behaviors in daily life. This approach indicates that assessment in differentiated PIAUD emphasizes learning processes and developmental progress rather than standardized outcomes.

Meanwhile, learning environment differentiation involves creating flexible and stimulating classroom settings. The classroom is organized into various learning centers that support children's exploration of Islamic values in contextual and meaningful ways. This arrangement enables children to choose activities based on their interests while still achieving the intended learning objectives.

4.2. Link to Child Development Theory

The findings also reveal a strong connection between differentiated learning and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD explains that children achieve optimal development when provided with appropriate assistance from more capable individuals. In PIAUD settings, this assistance is manifested through teacher scaffolding, including guidance, questioning, modeling, and gradual reinforcement of values.

Scaffolding in differentiated learning is not delivered uniformly but is adjusted according to each child's developmental needs. Children who are still at early developmental stages receive more intensive support, while more independent learners are given greater opportunities for exploration. This demonstrates that differentiation is a practical application of developmental theory within Islamic early childhood education.

4.3. Integration of Islamic Values in Differentiated Learning

The study further shows that differentiated learning in PIAUD effectively facilitates the internalization of Islamic values. Values such as tawhid (monotheism), ibadah (worship), akhlaq (morality), social etiquette (adab), responsibility, independence, and compassion are embedded across all learning activities. Internalization occurs not through theoretical instruction alone but through meaningful and experiential learning.

For example, moral values such as honesty and politeness are developed through role-play activities; responsibility is cultivated through tidying learning materials; and worship-related values are introduced through habituation of prayers before and after activities. This integration indicates that Islamic education in PIAUD is not treated as a separate subject but is embedded holistically within all learning experiences.

4.4. The Role of Teachers in Differentiated PIAUD Learning

The findings emphasize that teachers play a central role in the success of differentiated learning in PIAUD. Teachers are not only knowledge transmitters but also learning designers, facilitators, developmental observers, and moral role models (uswah hasanah). In Islamic early childhood education, teacher modeling is crucial because children learn primarily through imitation rather than verbal instruction.

Teachers are required to understand individual learner characteristics, identify learning needs, and design flexible instructional strategies. In addition, teachers must ensure that Islamic values are consistently embedded in all learning activities so that education contributes not only to cognitive development but also to character and moral formation.

4.5. Conceptual Implications of Differentiated Learning in PIAUD

Overall, the findings indicate that differentiated learning in PIAUD represents an integration of modern educational theory and Islamic educational values. This approach not only addresses learner diversity in early childhood classrooms but also strengthens Islamic educational principles emphasizing compassion, justice, and character development.

Therefore, differentiated learning in PIAUD can be understood as a pedagogical strategy that is not only instructional but also spiritual and moral in nature. It reflects the principle of *rahmatan lil 'alamin*, offering inclusive, flexible, and meaningful education that respects each child's developmental potential.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the literature review presented, it can be concluded that the design of differentiated learning in Islamic Early Childhood Education (PIAUD) from an Islamic educational perspective is a relevant approach to addressing the diversity of early childhood characteristics. Children differ in their learning readiness, interests, language abilities, family backgrounds, and religious experiences. Therefore, learning in Islamic Early Childhood Education cannot be implemented uniformly but must be designed flexibly so that each child can obtain learning experiences that are appropriate to their developmental stage.

Differentiated learning in PIAUD can be implemented through the adjustment of content, process, product, and learning environment. Islamic materials such as *tawhid*, worship, moral values, *adab*, prayers, and exemplary stories can be delivered in various ways that suit children's needs. Learning processes can be carried out through play, storytelling, hands-on practice, exploration, habituation, and social interaction. Children's learning outcomes do not need to be presented in a uniform form, but may be expressed through behavior, creative work, verbal expression, movement, or positive daily habits.

From an Islamic educational perspective, differentiated learning is aligned with the principles of *fitrah* (innate nature), *rahmah* (compassion), *adab* (proper conduct), and exemplary modeling. Children are viewed as a trust (*amanah*) with unique potential that must be developed gradually through compassionate guidance. Teachers play an essential role as learning designers, facilitators, developmental observers, and role models for children. The success of learning is not only measured by cognitive achievement but also by the formation of faith, morality, *adab*, independence, responsibility, and social awareness from an early age.

Thus, differentiated learning design in PIAUD can serve as an inclusive, contextual, and Islamic-value-based learning strategy. This approach provides space for each child to learn according to their potential and needs without losing the core direction of Islamic education, namely forming individuals who are faithful, well-mannered, and possess noble character. This study is expected to serve as a reference for teachers, students, PIAUD institutions, and future researchers in developing more adaptive, humanistic, and Islamic-value-oriented learning practices.

This study still has limitations because it is based on a literature review and has not directly tested the learning design in real PIAUD classroom settings. Therefore, future research is recommended to develop this study further through field research, classroom observations, teacher interviews, analysis of teaching modules, and children's learning portfolios. In this way, the differentiated learning design in PIAUD can be empirically tested and refined according to real needs in Islamic early childhood education settings.

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