

Implementation of Differentiated Learning in PAI Subjects: Optimizing Kurikulum Merdeka in Inclusive Classrooms

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze in depth and practically the planning, implementation, and evaluation of differentiated learning in Islamic Religious Education (*Pendidikan Agama Islam*) subjects in inclusive classrooms, as well as to identify the supporting and inhibiting factors faced by teachers. Using a qualitative descriptive approach with a case study method, this research was conducted at SMP Swasta An-Nisa Sunggal, Jalan Kemiri No. 62/64. Data were collected through classroom observation techniques, in-depth interviews with PAI teachers, the school principal, as well as regular and special needs students, supplemented by the documentation of *Alur Tujuan Pembelajaran* and *Modul Ajar*. Data analysis was performed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, with its validity tested using technical and source triangulation. The results showed that the PAI teacher initiated the learning cycle by conducting initial cognitive and non-cognitive diagnostic assessments to map students' learning readiness, interests, and learning style profiles. At the implementation stage, the teacher successfully integrated the three pillars of differentiation consistently, namely content differentiation through the provision of text-based materials, prophet story audios, animated videos, and physical props; process differentiation through small group discussions, peer tutoring methods, and periodic individual assistance (*scaffolding*); and product differentiation by providing flexible and adaptive freedom to demonstrate religious understanding according to human intellectual capacity (*'ala qadri 'uqulih*). Despite facing obstacles in the form of limited time for instrument preparation and uneven training in inclusive pedagogy for religious teachers, the presence of structural policy support from the school principal became a crucial supporting factor. This study concludes that differentiated learning in PAI subjects is proven effective in increasing student engagement and substantial understanding in inclusive classrooms equitably without any child feeling marginalized.

Keywords: *Differentiated Learning, Pendidikan Agama Islam, Inclusive Classroom, Kurikulum Merdeka, 'Ala Qadri 'Uqulih.*

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Introduction

The ideal condition of the education system in Indonesia today is marked by the birth of Kurikulum Merdeka as a new paradigm oriented toward fulfilling students' learning rights humanistically. This curriculum demands the educational system to accommodate and appreciate the diversity within the classroom, where every student is perceived as having a unique natural disposition, potential, interest, talent, and learning profile that differs from one another. Education no longer positions students as passive and uniform objects, but rather as the primary subjects whose learning needs must be served equitably. In this context, inclusive schools emerge as an ideal setting to unite this diversity, ensuring that all children, including those with developmental challenges, obtain equal and dignified access to instruction without any discrimination. However, field realities in Indonesia currently indicate a considerably wide gap between this ideal condition and daily learning activities, particularly in the subject of Pendidikan Agama Islam. PAI teachers instructing in inclusive classrooms frequently encounter major methodological challenges. The majority of educators remain trapped in the utilization of conventional and generalized classical learning methods. This single approach forces all students in the classroom to follow the same rhythm, use the same reading source, and complete the same form of assignment. The adverse impact of this instructional uniformity is that students with special needs or those with slow learning paces in inclusive classrooms frequently lag behind, lose learning motivation, and fail to attain an optimal understanding of religious materials.

This condition is certainly deeply concerning given the urgency and strategic position of PAI subjects in educational institutions. PAI is not merely a theoretical discipline focused on cognitive transfer or rote memorization, but rather the primary instrument in shaping character, morals, and an inclusive foundation of akhlak for students. PAI carries the mandate to instill the values of compassion (*rahmatan lil 'alamin*), justice (*'adalah*), and tolerance. If its instruction in inclusive classrooms is still delivered rigidly and unadaptively, the true essence of PAI as a moral guide that embraces all groups will be difficult to achieve. Therefore, optimizing differentiated learning in PAI subjects within the era of Kurikulum Merdeka urgently needs to be investigated and practically implemented to bridge the real needs of every student in the inclusive classroom.

Literature Review

The Fundamental Concept of Differentiated Learning in Modern Educational Theory

In the discourse of modern pedagogy, differentiated learning is defined as a systematic, student-centered approach where teachers adjust the curriculum, instructional methods, media, and forms of assessment to meet the diverse individual learning needs of students. The pioneer of this theory, Carol Ann Tomlinson, emphasizes that differentiation does not imply that educators must construct a completely separate lesson plan for every single child in the classroom, but rather how teachers proactively design the classroom environment to provide varied learning pathways to achieve the same learning objectives. This approach strongly rejects the "one-size-fits-all" principle, which has proven to be ineffective in accommodating the diversity of inclusive classrooms.

Theoretically, differentiated learning is deeply rooted in modern developmental and cognitive psychology theories, one of which is the Social Constructivism Theory proposed by Lev Vygotsky through the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Vygotsky emphasizes that every child has a distance between their actual developmental level (the ability to solve tasks independently) and their potential developmental level (the ability that can be achieved with the help of guidance or scaffolding). Differentiated learning practically applies this ZPD concept by mapping students' learning readiness through initial diagnostic assessments, allowing teachers to provide the appropriate portion of guidance tailored to the unique needs of each child, including children with special needs and slow learners.

In addition to Vygotsky's theory, the differentiated approach is also supported by the Theory of Multiple Intelligences developed by Howard Gardner. Gardner states that human intelligence is not singular or solely measured through linguistic and logical-mathematical abilities, but instead consists of various dimensions such as visual-spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and kinesthetic intelligences. Based on this foundation of thought, Tomlinson divides the implementation of differentiated learning into three integrated main components in the classroom, namely content differentiation, process differentiation, and product differentiation. Content differentiation involves varying the format of materials or instructional content adjusted to students' readiness and learning profiles, such as providing text-based, audio-recorded, or interactive visual materials. Process differentiation refers to the variation of activities or instructional methods used by students to comprehend the content, such as small group work, peer tutoring, and periodic individual guidance. Product differentiation offers flexibility in performance tasks or forms of final assignments generated by students as evidence of material mastery, which are tailored to their interests and talents. Through the integration of these modern educational theories, differentiated learning positions student diversity in inclusive classrooms not as an obstacle to the curriculum, but as the starting point for designing learning experiences that are meaningful, equitable, and nurturing toward the potential of each individual.

Inclusivity and Differentiation Concepts from an Islamic Perspective: An Analysis of the 'Ala Qadri 'Uqulihim Principle

The concepts of inclusivity and differentiation within the classroom are, in essence, not foreign to the treasury of Islamic education. Long before the modern pedagogical world formulated systems for curriculum adjustment, Islam had already laid down the foundational principles of instruction that respect the diverse intellectual capacities, psychological profiles, and learning readiness of human beings. This theological foundation is rooted in one of the prophetic teaching principles derived from the *hadith* of Prophet Muhammad SAW: "*Khathibun-nasi 'ala qadri 'uqulihim*" (Speak or teach to people according to the capacity of their intellects). This principle asserts that absolute uniformity in instructional methods without considering individual differences contradicts the human *fitrah* (natural disposition) created by Allah SWT in diverse conditions.

In the context of contemporary Islamic curriculum development, Charles Rangkuti, Rustam Ependi, and Nurman Amin (2023) explain that the evaluation and development of memorization and comprehension methods for religious materials in inclusive schools must be based on a multiple intelligences approach. PAI teachers must not demand uniform performance outcomes but must instead be accommodative of the unique development of each child. This thought is reinforced by a philosophical analysis put forward by Soleman Siregar, Muhammad Yunan Harahap, and Charles Rangkuti (2025) concerning the repositioning of the role of religious educators. According to them, the professionalism orientation of PAI teachers as *murabbi*, *muallim*, and *muaddib* in the modern era demands a transformative sensitivity, wherein teachers act as facilitators who nurture the spiritual and cognitive needs of students in an equitable, inclusive, and adaptive manner without discrimination.

The application of inclusivity values rooted in the essence of the Islamic curriculum is aimed at embracing all human dimensions of the students. Rusydi Ananda and Charles Rangkuti (2026) in their study on the dynamics of Islamic education emphasize that modern educational institutions are required to continuously evolve into adaptive, inclusive institutions with global competitiveness. This inclusive religious education is achieved by instilling moderate Islamic values (*wasathiyah*) that respect every difference in background as well as the physical and mental capabilities of students within the classroom. This is in line with research by Ismaraidha, Muhammad Yunan Harahap, and Latifah Hannum (2024), which demonstrates that the formation of children's religious character in schools cannot be separated from the teacher's

strategy in addressing limited interests, variations in motivation, and constraints in student learning time through a contextualized design of literacy culture and guidance.

Practically applied in inclusive classrooms, the principle of *'ala qadri 'uqulihim* is translated into equitable differentiation practices. Sulastris A, Charles Rangkuti, Kiki Hardini, and Ulil Amri (2026) through a *tafsir tarbawi* (educational exegesis) study suggest that ideal educational practices must be oriented toward the holistic success of students across cognitive, emotional, and spiritual aspects. Therefore, forcing PAI materials through a single, rigid classical method upon regular children, children with special needs, and slow-learning students within the same inclusive classroom is viewed as inconsistent with the principles of justice (*'adalah*) and compassion (*rahmatan lil 'alamin*). By implementing differentiated learning that originates from mapping children's initial abilities, PAI teachers are, in truth, practicing the sharia mandate to educate human beings according to their *fitrah* and intellectual capacities.

Previous Research on Kurikulum Merdeka and the Research Gap

Studies concerning the implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka and differentiated learning have recently become among the most widely researched topics in Indonesia. Most of the previous studies focus on macro and theoretical realms. For instance, many earlier researchers investigated general school readiness, teachers' perceptions toward the structure of Kurikulum Merdeka, or conceptual analyses regarding the importance of the Profil Pelajar Pancasila. On the other hand, research specifically discussing differentiated learning generally takes place within the context of general subjects such as mathematics, science, or English in regular classrooms, rather than inclusive classrooms. When entering the scope of Pendidikan Agama Islam, existing studies tend to be normative-textual, merely discussing the theoretical concepts of educational justice in Islam without touching upon concrete instructional design aspects in the field. It remains highly rare to find research that deeply and practically dissects how a PAI teacher in an inclusive school manages a classroom simultaneously to serve regular students, students with special needs, and slow learners through the adjustment of PAI learning content, process, and product at the exact same time.

This is precisely the research gap that this thesis research aims to fill. The novelty of this study lies in its specific, practical-applied focus on PAI subjects within inclusive classrooms. This research shifts away from discussing why differentiated learning is important on a theoretical level, and instead investigates how such differentiation is realistically manifested in the classroom. This study unravels the actual actions of the PAI teacher, starting from the execution phase of initial diagnostic assessments (mapping students' initial Quranic reading abilities or understanding of *akidah*), the differentiation of religious material presentation (content), the modification of socio-religious interactions in the classroom (process), to the flexibility of students' performance in demonstrating religious understanding (product) adaptively in the era of Kurikulum Merdeka. Consequently, the output of this research is expected to provide empirical contributions and practical guidelines for PAI educators in Indonesia in managing diversity equitably.

Research Problems and Objectives

Based on the background of the problem, literature review, and the research gap described previously, the focus of this research is directed toward investigating deeply the real field practices regarding the implementation of the new curriculum in inclusive classrooms. Specifically, the problems in this study are formulated into the following research questions: how are the planning, implementation, and evaluation of differentiated learning in *Pendidikan Agama Islam* subjects within inclusive classrooms carried out to optimize *Kurikulum Merdeka*, and what are the supporting and inhibiting factors faced by PAI teachers in implementing differentiated learning in those inclusive classrooms?

Furthermore, to answer the aforementioned scientific questions, this thesis research is designed with a clear direction and purpose. The research objectives to be achieved are to analyze deeply and comprehensively the planning phase (including diagnostic assessments), the implementation process in the classroom (content, process, and product differentiation), and

the evaluation system of differentiated learning in PAI subjects within inclusive classrooms. Additionally, this study aims to identify, classify, and describe various supporting factors (both internal and external to the school) as well as the real inhibiting factors encountered by PAI teachers during the implementation process of differentiated learning in inclusive classrooms.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study utilizes a qualitative descriptive approach with a case study method. The selection of a qualitative descriptive approach is based on the characteristics of the investigated problem, which aims to understand, dissect, and describe in depth the applied phenomena regarding teacher and student activities in the field without any intervention or statistical manipulation of research variables. Through this approach, the researcher can capture hidden meanings, social interactions, and religious dynamics that occur naturally (natural setting) within the classroom when differentiated learning is implemented. The case study method was specifically selected because this design is highly effective for investigating a contemporary case or phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. In this thesis research, the "case" under investigation is the instructional practice of the PAI teacher in managing diversity within inclusive classrooms in the era of Kurikulum Merdeka. By employing a case study design, the researcher can conduct a holistic and deep exploration of the actual phases carried out by the educator, spanning from planning to evaluation, as well as the contextual factors influencing them at the school.

Practically applied, this research design does not aim to formulate broad generalizations across all schools in Indonesia, but rather to provide a rich theoretical and practical overview concerning the successes, obstacles, and concrete solutions in managing inclusive classrooms for PAI subjects. The descriptive data generated from this design will consist of written or spoken words from the informants, as well as behaviors directly observed while the learning process takes place.

Research Setting (Location and Time)

This research was conducted at SMP Swasta An-Nisa Sunggal, located at Jalan Kemiri No. 62/64, Sunggal District, Deli Serdang Regency, North Sumatra Province, Indonesia. The selection of this location was determined purposively based on the specific characteristics of the school, namely its status as one of the private junior high schools that has implemented Kurikulum Merdeka and is committed to providing inclusive education services for students in the Sunggal region. This school possesses a heterogeneous learning ecosystem, where regular students and students with special needs or certain learning challenges are placed together within a single classroom. This context renders it a highly relevant research setting to explore deeply the applied aspects of differentiated learning implementation in Pendidikan Agama Islam subjects. The fieldwork timeframe is scheduled to take place during the even semester of the 2025/2026 Academic Year.

Research Participants

The participants or informants in this qualitative study were determined using a purposive sampling technique, where the selection of informants was based on specific criteria deemed to best understand the information, be directly involved, and possess mastery over the issue being investigated. The characteristics and details of the informants at SMP Swasta An-Nisa Sunggal include the primary informant, who is the PAI subject teacher at SMP Swasta An-Nisa Sunggal handling inclusive classrooms and holding full responsibility for developing Kurikulum Merdeka-based Modul Ajar. The PAI teacher acts as the key informant who elaborates on the technical planning (diagnostic assessment), the teaching process (content, process, and product differentiation), and the evaluation system of religious values in the classroom.

Additionally, supporting informants were involved to enrich the data, consisting of the school principal and the students. The first supporting informant is the Principal of SMP Swasta An-Nisa Sunggal, who was interviewed to obtain macro-level data regarding school policies, the provision of supporting infrastructure for inclusive classrooms, and the forms of structural support or academic supervision provided toward the pedagogical competence of religious teachers. The second group of supporting informants comprises students within the investigated inclusive classroom, who are divided into two main characteristics: regular students and students with special needs. The sample for regular students includes representatives from fast learners and average learners to observe their responses, social interactions, and the effectiveness of the peer tutoring methods applied by the PAI teacher. Meanwhile, the sample for students with special needs consists of Muslim students who have specific learning paces or developmental challenges, aiming to capture their direct experiences regarding the equitable fulfillment of learning rights, the ease of understanding materials, and the flexibility of final assignments (products) they experience in differentiated PAI learning.

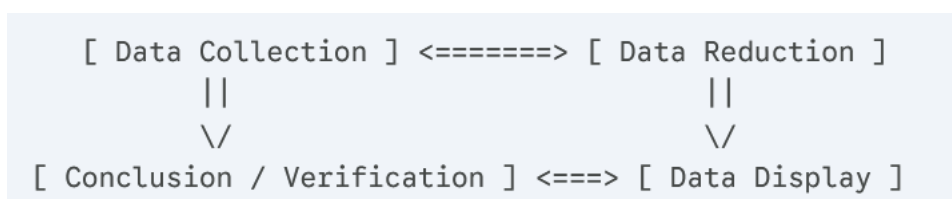
Data Collection Techniques

To obtain valid, comprehensive, and in-depth data regarding the implementation of differentiated learning in PAI subjects within inclusive classrooms, the researcher utilized three complementary data collection techniques (technical triangulation), comprising classroom observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation analysis. For classroom observation, the researcher conducted passive participatory observation within the inclusive classrooms of SMP Swasta An-Nisa Sunggal. This technique was employed to directly observe the entire instructional process carried out by the PAI teacher. The applied aspects observed included how the teacher opened lessons using an inclusive approach, the process of grouping students based on learning readiness, the dynamics of socio-religious interactions between regular students and students with special needs, and how the teacher modified material presentation (content), instructional guidance (process), and assignment submissions (product) in the field.

Furthermore, the in-depth interview technique was executed in a semi-structured manner by posing open-ended questions to the informants. The focus of these in-depth interviews was directed toward the PAI teacher to explore their conceptual understanding as well as the theoretical-practical reasons behind the development of the designed differentiated Modul Ajar. Additionally, interviews were conducted with the school principal to ascertain policy support, and with the students (both regular and those with special needs) to capture their responses, psychological challenges, and the convenience they felt during the differentiated PAI learning process. Lastly, documentation analysis was carried out by collecting, examining, and critically analyzing official academic documents that serve as the administrative foundation and authentic evidence of Kurikulum Merdeka implementation at SMP Swasta An-Nisa Sunggal. The analyzed documents encompassed the Alur Tujuan Pembelajaran for PAI subjects, PAI Modul Ajar containing differentiation components, recapitulation files of students' initial diagnostic assessment results (learning style profiles and Quranic reading readiness), and photographic documentation of the students' religious performance outcomes (products).

Data Analysis

The data processing and analysis procedures in this qualitative study refer to the interactive analysis model developed by Miles and Huberman. This model consists of three stages that run simultaneously before, during, and after the data collection process in the field, which include data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification.



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Data Reduction All raw data obtained from the results of interview transcripts with the PAI teacher, field notes from classroom observations, and document collections are strictly grouped and sorted. The researcher conducts a coding process (*coding*) to select data relevant to the research problems (planning, implementation, evaluation, supporting factors, and inhibiting factors) and discards unnecessary data.

Data Display The reduced data are then systematically presented in the form of structured descriptive narrative text. The presentation of data is organized based on the research findings sub-chapters, which expound empirical findings regarding diagnostic assessment activities, as well as content, process, and product differentiation models in PAI subjects at SMP Swasta An-Nisa Sunggal so that it is easy to read and its interrelations are clearly understood.

Conclusion Drawing and Verification The final stage is drawing preliminary conclusions regarding the effectiveness and applied challenges of this differentiated PAI learning. These conclusions are tentative and are continuously verified as the research progresses by cross-checking them back with field notes and valid documentary evidence until solid and scientifically robust conclusions are obtained to answer all research questions.

Data Trustworthiness Testing To guarantee the validity and objectivity of the data presented in the thesis, the researcher applies Triangulation techniques:

- **Source Triangulation:** Comparing the consistency of data regarding a phenomenon from different sources (for example, comparing the PAI Teacher's statements concerning product differentiation with the direct accounts of special needs students and confirmation from the School Principal).
- **Technical Triangulation:** Comparing the consistency of data acquired using different data collection methods (for example, testing whether the process differentiation plan written in the *Modul Ajar* document is proven to be genuinely executed during Classroom Observation within the instructional space).

Results

Research Findings: Implementation of PAI Differentiation

Initial Diagnostic Assessment Based on the results of classroom observations and in-depth interviews conducted at SMP Swasta An-Nisa Sunggal, research findings indicate that the implementation of differentiated learning in Pendidikan Agama Islam subjects begins with the execution of an initial diagnostic assessment. This step is carried out by the PAI teacher as an absolute instrument to map three crucial aspects of students before teaching and learning activities commence, namely learning readiness, student interests, and student profiles or learning styles in the inclusive classroom.

Practically applied, the PAI teacher at SMP Swasta An-Nisa Sunggal executes this diagnostic assessment in two realms:

- **Cognitive Diagnostic Assessment (Learning Readiness):** The PAI teacher maps students' initial religious capabilities, particularly regarding fluency in reading the Quran, basic understanding of akidah, and procedures of worship (fikih). For regular students, testing is conducted through short oral tests or interactive digital quizzes. Meanwhile, for students with special needs or slow learners, the teacher provides time extensions and a more humanistic personal approach to measure the extent to which basic religious material has been absorbed.
- **Non-Cognitive Diagnostic Assessment (Interests and Learning Profiles):** The PAI teacher collaborates with the Guidance and Counseling teacher and utilizes the school's medical or psychological records to identify students' dominant learning styles (whether they tend to be visual, auditory, or kinesthetic) as well as to identify the types of developmental challenges faced by special needs students in that classroom.

This practice of mapping initial abilities is in line with Kurikulum Merdeka guidelines and is reinforced by the theoretical foundations of educational experts in Indonesia. The thoughts of Soleman Siregar, Muhammad Yunan Harahap, and Charles Rangkuti (2025) assert that the professionalism orientation of PAI teachers in the modern era demands a transformative sensitivity, where teachers must act as facilitators who nurture the spiritual and cognitive needs of students in an equitable, inclusive, and adaptive manner without discrimination. By conducting diagnostic assessments, the PAI teacher at SMP Swasta An-Nisa Sunggal has demonstrated this role to avoid rigid uniformity of methods. In addition, collecting initial data on student learning styles is vital for detecting a child's unique potential. As put forward by Charles Rangkuti, Rustam Ependi, and Nurman Amin (2023), the evaluation and development of memorization and comprehension methods for religious materials in inclusive schools must be based on a multiple intelligences approach. Through non-cognitive diagnostic assessments, the PAI teacher can identify which students possess visual intelligence (easier to learn via pictures/videos) or auditory intelligence (faster to grasp via oral explanations and verse recitations), so that differentiation strategies can be accurately designed from the outset.

The preventive measures taken by the PAI teacher in mapping variations in student conditions are also key to successful character building in inclusive classrooms. This is reinforced by the research results of Ismaraidha, Muhammad Yunan Harahap, and Latifah Hannum (2024), which show that the formation of children's religious character in schools cannot be separated from the teacher's strategy in addressing limited interests, variations in motivation, and student learning time constraints through contextually conditioned guidance culture designs. The interview results reveal that the data from this diagnostic assessment serves as a compass for the PAI teacher in developing diversity-friendly Modul Ajar, ensuring that no single child, whether regular or with special needs, feels neglected or left behind in following Islamic religious lessons at SMP Swasta An-Nisa Sunggal.

Content Differentiation

Research findings at SMP Swasta An-Nisa Sunggal indicate that after conducting mapping through diagnostic assessments, the PAI teacher modifies the aspects of content or religious learning materials. The teacher no longer relies on a single printed textbook for all students, but instead provides variations in material formats adapted to the needs, learning styles, and limitations of learners in the inclusive classroom.

Practically applied, the variations of PAI learning materials prepared by the teacher include:

- Text-Based Materials: Intended for regular students with a visual learning style or normal reading ability, in the form of digital modules, concise articles, and *Kurikulum Merdeka* PAI textbooks.
- Audio-Based Materials: In the form of voice recordings of the prophets' stories, *tartil* recitations of the holy verses of the Quran, or religious podcasts to facilitate students with an auditory learning style as well as students with visual impairments.
- Animated Video-Based Materials: The teacher utilizes interactive video screenings from YouTube equipped with translated subtitles to explain concrete materials such as the procedures of Hajj or the history of Islamic culture. This medium is highly effective for attracting the interest of regular students while simultaneously aiding the comprehension of slow learners.
- Physical Prop-Based Materials: The teacher provides concrete media, such as replicas of the ihram clothing, wudu props, or raised/braille hijaiyah letter cards if there are Children with Special Needs who require tactile stimulation.

This practice of content differentiation is highly relevant to contemporary Islamic education quality development theory in Indonesia. As asserted by Rusydi Ananda and Charles Rangkuti (2026) in their study on the dynamics of Islamic education, modern educational institutions are required to continuously develop into institutions that are adaptive, inclusive,

and globally competitive. Through the provision of varied and non-rigid materials, SMP Swasta An-Nisa Sunggal proves itself capable of adapting to the demands of the era in serving students' learning rights inclusively.

In addition, the provision of this diversity-friendly content becomes an important foundation for the formation of children's religious character. This is in line with the views of Sulastri A, Charles Rangkuti, Kiki Hardini, and Ulil Amri (2026) who suggest that ideal educational practices must be oriented toward the overall success of students, encompassing cognitive, emotional, and spiritual aspects. By presenting a variety of content accessible to all categories of children, the PAI teacher has manifested the aspect of material justice, so that the moral message of character development (*akhlak*) within the PAI curriculum can be fully conveyed without any students being discriminated against by their physical limitations.

Process Differentiation

In the aspect of classroom implementation, research findings reveal that the PAI teacher at SMP Swasta An-Nisa Sunggal applies flexible and dynamic teaching strategies through process differentiation. The teacher no longer dominates the classroom with long classical lecture methods, but instead designs varied learning activity flows to activate all students based on their learning readiness.

The applied strategies executed by the PAI teacher in this process differentiation are divided into three main forms:

- Small Group Discussion: The teacher divides the classroom into several heterogeneous small groups. These groups are formed based on a balanced level of understanding to discuss contextual religious problems in Indonesia (for example, Islamic social media ethics).
- Peer Tutoring Method: For materials requiring specific skills such as reading the Quran (tajwid) or practicing prayer (salat) movements, the teacher assigns regular students with fast learning abilities (fast learners) to assist their peers experiencing learning delays (slow learners) or having special needs. This strategy is proven effective in building social empathy and student self-confidence.
- Periodic Individual Guidance: While the peer tutoring process is running, the PAI teacher focuses their energy on providing direct guidance, special attention, and personal intervention to Students with Special Needs who require step-by-step guidance so as not to fall behind the learning targets of that day.

The PAI teacher's step in conditioning this adaptive learning process is in line with the research results of Ismaraidha, Muhammad Yunan Harahap, and Latifah Hannum (2024), which highlight that the formation of children's religious character in schools cannot be separated from the teacher's strategy in addressing limited interests, variations in motivation, and student learning time constraints through contextually conditioned guidance culture designs. By dividing the teaching process into peer tutoring and individual guidance, the PAI teacher successfully bridges the limitations of motivation and learning time possessed by children with special needs.

Furthermore, the socio-religious interaction model built through this process differentiation strengthens the cultivation of inclusivity values from an early age. The thoughts of Soleman Siregar, Muhammad Yunan Harahap, and Charles Rangkuti (2025) remind us that the role of religious educators as murabbi and muallim requires a transformative sensitivity that nurtures students' needs equitably and inclusively. Through designing a learning process of mutual assistance and respecting differences in thinking rhythms within the classroom, the PAI teacher at SMP Swasta An-Nisa Sunggal has tangibly practiced the principles of educational justice commanded in Islamic Sharia.

Product Differentiation

Research findings at the final stage of the learning cycle at SMP Swasta An-Nisa Sunggal indicate that the PAI teacher implements product differentiation as an adaptive and flexible form of demonstrating students' religious understanding. The teacher no longer imposes a single type of evaluation or uniform final assignment format for all student categories in the inclusive classroom. Instead, learners are granted the autonomy to choose the type of assignment product that best suits their interests, talents, as well as their physical and mental capacities. For regular students who possess linguistic and visual intelligence, they tend to choose to submit assignments in the form of creative material summaries such as mind maps or short article drafts. Meanwhile, students with auditory intelligence are given the freedom to recite memorized Quranic verses directly or send audio recordings of their material resumes to the teacher. This flexibility is also highly beneficial for Students with Special Needs or slow learners, who are permitted to practice prayer movements or retell exemplary stories of the prophets orally in a simplified manner, with adjusted assessment indicators without reducing the essence of the basic competencies to be achieved. This practice of providing freedom in demonstrating learning outcomes is in line with contemporary assessment theories developing in Indonesia. The thoughts of Charles Rangkuti, Rustam Ependi, and Nurman Amin (2023) suggest that the development of methods for understanding religious materials in inclusive schools must always be based on a multiple intelligences approach. By opening space for various assignment product variations, the PAI teacher at SMP Swasta An-Nisa Sunggal has successfully appreciated the diversity of children's intelligence tangibly in the field. This step is also a concrete manifestation of the principle of educational justice (*tarbawi*), as explained by Sulastris A, Charles Rangkuti, Kiki Hardini, and Ulil Amri (2026) that ideal educational practices must be oriented toward the overall success of students from cognitive, emotional, and spiritual aspects. Through varied products tailored to the children's profiles, every student receives an equal right to celebrate their learning success without feeling insecure or discriminated against by the limitations they possess.

Analytical Discussion

Based on the empirical findings obtained in the field, the implementation of differentiated learning in PAI subjects at SMP Swasta An-Nisa Sunggal has generally run well and is relevant to the technical guidelines of *Kurikulum Merdeka* published by the government. The key to the success of optimizing this curriculum lies in the teacher's commitment to integrating the three pillars of content, process, and product differentiation consistently after conducting psychological and cognitive mapping at the beginning of the material. This pattern proves that classroom management in inclusive religious subjects no longer needs to be trapped in rigid conventional classical methods. This inclusive teaching model is highly crucial in Indonesia today to demonstrate that private Islam-based institutions are also capable of competing and being adaptive. This phenomenon is in line with the study by Rusydi Ananda and Charles Rangkuti (2026), which asserts that modern educational institutions today are indeed required to continuously develop into institutions that are adaptive, inclusive, and globally competitive.

Conclusion

Based on the results of data analysis and empirical discussion regarding the implementation of differentiated learning in Pendidikan Agama Islam subjects at SMP Swasta An-Nisa Sunggal, it can be concluded that the application of this method has successfully answered the research problems comprehensively. The planning phase initiated by the execution of diagnostic assessments is proven to be an accurate foundation for the teacher in mapping the learning readiness, interests, and psychological profiles of students in the inclusive classroom. The teacher's commitment to integrating the three pillars of differentiation—encompassing variations of digital and physical learning materials in content, modification of learning methods based on peer tutoring and individual guidance in process, to granting flexibility in demonstrating religious understanding in product—is proven capable of deeply

increasing student engagement and substantial comprehension. Although PAI teachers in the field are still faced with several inhibiting factors, such as time constraints in developing instruments and the uneven distribution of special competencies for managing inclusive classrooms, the presence of macro policy support from the school principal and the collaborative spirit of the school community serve as crucial supporting factors. Overall, this applied research confirms that the differentiated learning model in PAI subjects is highly effective in optimizing Kurikulum Merdeka achievements in inclusive schools. This approach successfully manifests genuine educational justice in the classroom, where all learners, both regular students and students with special needs, can celebrate their learning success together without a single child feeling isolated or discriminated against by the limitations they possess.

Research Limitations

The researcher realizes that the writing of this scientific article is not free from several limitations in scope that need to be acknowledged objectively to maintain the validity of the interpretation of findings. The primary limitation in this thesis research lies in the locus or geographical scope of the study, which was only conducted at one private school, namely SMP Swasta An-Nisa Sunggal, with a specific focus on the Junior High School (SMP) level. This condition causes the empirical findings regarding classroom management models, socio-religious dynamics, and differentiation patterns successfully identified to not necessarily be completely generalizable to other inclusive schools in Indonesia, particularly public schools or schools at the elementary and senior high education levels which have different environmental characteristics and management policies. In addition to the locus factor, another limitation relates to the boundaries of the research subjects or informants. The focus of deep observation in this research relies on the instructional interactions of the PAI teacher within the inclusive classroom without broader exploration regarding the involvement or religious guidance carried out by the parents of special needs learners within the family environment. External factors such as the socio-economic background of the family and the availability of supporting facilities at home have not been deeply examined, even though these aspects also influence the continuity of comprehension of Islamic values that students have learned through the differentiated approach at school. These objective limitations are expected to serve as important notes for readers while simultaneously opening spaces for research novelty for future researchers.

Suggestions and Recommendations

Based on the conclusions and research limitations described previously, the researcher formulates several practical suggestions and recommendations expected to provide a tangible contribution to improving the quality of inclusive education in the field. For PAI Teachers at SMP Swasta An-Nisa Sunggal as well as other inclusive schools, it is suggested to conduct periodic and continuous diagnostic assessments, not only at the beginning of the semester but also at every turn of a new material chapter in order to monitor the dynamic development of students' learning readiness. In addition, PAI teachers are required to continuously enrich the variations of digital-based learning media accessible to children with special needs, such as the utilization of interactive audio, religious animated videos equipped with translated subtitles, and adaptive quiz applications, to maintain students' emotional and cognitive engagement in the classroom. For School Principals and policymakers at the institutional level, recommendations are directed at the importance of facilitating and organizing specialized training or periodic workshops regarding inclusive classroom management and adaptive pedagogy targeting the cluster of religious education teachers. This structural support is highly crucial considering that the methodological challenges faced by religious teachers differ from those of general subject teachers, so providing inclusion competency certification will increase educators' self-confidence in designing equitable lesson modules. School principals are also expected to continuously optimize the fulfillment of supporting facilities and infrastructure, such as religious tactile props or learning resource rooms, to support the smooth execution of

content and process differentiation designed by teachers. Lastly, for future researchers interested in studying similar issues, it is suggested to expand the scope of research beyond the qualitative descriptive boundaries existing in this study. Future researchers can develop experimental-based research to test the effectiveness of specific differentiation models on students' socio-religious learning outcomes, or utilize a Research and Development (R&D) approach to create and validate products in the form of nationally standardized differentiated PAI Modul Ajar. The development of research toward this macro direction is expected to bring forth instructional guidelines that are more applicable, rigid, and mass-implementable across various levels of inclusive education in Indonesia.

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