

Pedagogical Competence of Islamic Religious Education Teachers in Implementing Differentiated Instruction Under the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP Negeri 5 Binjai

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Abstract

This article analyses the pedagogical competence required by Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers to implement differentiated instruction under the Merdeka Curriculum, with SMP Negeri 5 Binjai as the intended context of application. The study uses a narrative literature review of 25 references comprising regulations, learning guidelines, books, and national and international scholarly articles. The analysis was conducted by grouping themes related to the mapping of students' needs, learning planning, learning-process management, formative assessment, and reflection for instructional improvement. The findings indicate that the pedagogical competence of PAI teachers cannot be understood merely as the ability to prepare teaching documents. It requires teachers to interpret differences in students' learning readiness, interests, religious experiences, and support needs ethically. Teachers must then design common objectives while providing varied access to learning materials, learning activities, support, and forms of performance. Diagnostic and formative assessments function as the basis for decision-making, rather than merely as instruments for measuring final outcomes. This article proposes the DIA-PAI conceptual model, namely Diagnosis, Intervention, Assessment, and Adaptation in PAI Learning. The model positions teachers as instructional decision-makers who respond to evidence of student learning. As this article is based on a literature review, it does not claim to describe the empirical conditions of teachers or students at SMP Negeri 5 Binjai. Field research is still required to examine the suitability of the model, contextual barriers, and its effects on the quality of PAI learning.

Keywords: Pedagogical Competence, Islamic Religious Education Teachers, Differentiated Instruction, Merdeka Curriculum, Formative Assessment.

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Introduction

The Merdeka Curriculum positions learning as a process that must begin with students' actual needs. This orientation shifts teachers' attention from the mere delivery of content toward the design of meaningful, measurable, and adaptive learning experiences. In Islamic Religious Education (PAI), this shift is important because the subject requires not only the acquisition of religious knowledge but also understanding, internalisation, ethical reasoning, and the enactment of values in everyday life. PAI teachers need to connect learning outcomes with students' differing academic readiness, family experiences, interests, and support needs. Uniform learning strategies risk limiting some students' opportunities to attain learning objectives optimally (Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi, 2022; Tomlinson, 2017).

Differentiated instruction offers a framework for responding to such diversity without lowering expected standards. Teachers establish common learning goals and then adjust access to content, learning processes, learning products, and the learning environment on the basis of evidence about students' needs. Differentiation is not the creation of separate lesson plans for every student. Rather, it is a pedagogical decision that proportionately considers students' readiness, interests, and learning responses. In practice, teachers must still maintain clear objectives, high-quality content, orderly classroom management, and equitable learning opportunities (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013; Deunk et al., 2018).

At the junior secondary level, the need for differentiation in PAI becomes more salient when teachers encounter differences in students' ability to read the Qur'an, understand concepts of creed and Islamic jurisprudence, articulate moral reasoning, and relate Islamic values to social situations. Such differences should not be treated as permanent labels attached to students. Teachers should interpret them as provisional data that may change through appropriate support, practice, role modelling, and sufficient learning opportunities. This approach aligns with the view that effective learning provides developmentally appropriate challenge and gradual assistance, enabling students to progress beyond their initial level of competence (Vygotsky, 1978; Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019).

Studies on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in PAI show that curriculum flexibility enables teachers to use contextual learning, projects, values-based discussion, and more varied assessment. Nevertheless, this flexibility also requires stronger mastery of planning, learning management, media use, and evaluation. Research by Siregar and colleagues indicates that the implementation of PAI within the Merdeka Curriculum can be effective, but it still requires enhanced teacher competence and sustained mentoring. Other findings indicate that teachers' skills in using instructional media also vary; thus, the implementation of responsive learning strategies cannot be separated from professional support and school facilities (Siregar et al., 2024; Panggabean et al., 2024).

The principal issue addressed in this article concerns how the pedagogical competence of PAI teachers may be conceptualised and operationalised to implement differentiated instruction under the Merdeka Curriculum. This article aims to: first, explain the relationship between pedagogical competence and differentiated instruction; second, map the core practices that PAI teachers need to undertake; and third, offer a conceptual model for adaptive PAI learning. This focus positions SMP Negeri 5 Binjai as an intended application context that requires further empirical investigation. This article does not claim that the review findings represent the actual conditions of the school, its teachers, or its students.

Literature Review

1. Pedagogical Competence of PAI Teachers

Pedagogical competence is the capacity of teachers to understand students' characteristics, design learning, conduct educational learning processes, assess learning outcomes, and use assessment results for improvement. Teacher competency standards in Indonesia identify pedagogical competence as one of the core competencies that teachers must master. In the

context of PAI, this competence must be translated into the ability to manage learning that integrates knowledge, attitudes, skills, and the enactment of Islamic values. PAI teachers should ensure that learning does not end with the memorisation of concepts, but provides space for reasoning, dialogue, reflection, and habits relevant to students' lives (Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 14 Tahun 2005; Peraturan Menteri Pendidikan Nasional Republik Indonesia Nomor 16 Tahun 2007).

Pedagogical competence is closely related to the ability to collect and use evidence of learning. Competent teachers do not assess students only at the end of a unit; they identify prior understanding, monitor progress during the learning process, and adjust strategies in response to the information obtained. The constructive alignment framework highlights the importance of coherence among outcomes, activities, and assessment. Such alignment helps teachers select activities that genuinely direct students toward intended learning outcomes, rather than merely producing engaging but unmeasurable activities (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

For PAI teachers, pedagogical competence also relates to the ability to select methods that are appropriate to the nature of the content. Aqidah Akhlak learning may use case studies and moral dialogue; Qur'an-Hadith learning may use talaqqi, guided reading, meaning mapping, and reflective projects; whereas Fiqh learning may use simulations of decision-making in everyday situations. This methodological variation is not intended to increase teachers' workload; rather, it provides learning pathways that correspond to the demands of the content and the needs of students. Research on contextual learning in Aqidah Akhlak shows that connecting content to students' lived situations can strengthen their understanding of Islamic values (Salsabila et al., 2026; Abrianto et al., 2018).

2. Differentiated Instruction in the Merdeka Curriculum

Differentiated instruction is a proactive effort to adapt learning design to students' needs. Tomlinson divides the areas of differentiation into content, process, product, and learning environment. Content concerns how students access core ideas or learning resources. Process concerns activities that enable them to understand and process content. Product concerns how students demonstrate attainment, while the learning environment concerns the physical, social, and emotional conditions that support participation. These four areas must be managed systematically so that differentiation does not become a random selection of activities (Tomlinson, 2017; Subban, 2006).

The Merdeka Curriculum provides room for teachers to design learning in accordance with students' developmental stages and contexts. The learning and assessment guidelines emphasise diagnostic assessment, formative assessment, feedback, and planning based on learning outcomes. Curriculum regulations reinforce the need for student-centred learning; however, these policies generate change only when teachers can translate them into classroom decisions. In other words, curriculum policy must be supported by pedagogical competence, instructional leadership, professional learning communities, and school support systems (Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi, 2022; Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi, 2024).

The literature suggests that differentiated instruction may improve students' engagement and understanding, but success is not automatic. Teachers often experience difficulties in managing heterogeneous classes, developing informative assessments, allocating time, and preparing suitable learning resources. Accordingly, differentiation should be implemented gradually, initially focusing on one or two adjustments that are most relevant. Ongoing practicebased professional support, reinforced through teacher collaboration, is more likely to produce consistent changes in instruction (Suprayogi et al., 2017; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Table 1. Domains of PAI Teachers' Pedagogical Competence for Differentiated Instruction

Domain	Operational Indicators	Examples in PAI Learning
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Student Mapping	Identifying readiness, interests, prior experiences, and support needs through simple data.	Checking initial ability to read verses, conceptual understanding, and responses to moral cases.
Domain	Operational Indicators	Examples in PAI Learning
Planning	Formulating objectives, success criteria, strategies, and activity options that remain academically equivalent.	Preparing tiered verse texts, concept cards, case studies, and reflective assignments.
Learning Process Facilitation	Providing clear instructions, scaffolding, prompting questions, and flexible grouping.	Small-group talaqqi, case discussion, peer tutoring, and guided support.
Assessment and Feedback	Using diagnostic, formative, and summative assessment for instructional decision-making.	Rubrics for worship practice, reflective journals, brief quizzes, and performance tasks.
Adaptive Reflection	Evaluating strategy effectiveness and revising plans based on evidence of learning.	Reviewing common tajwid errors or Fiqh misconceptions for the subsequent lesson.

Research Methodology

This article employs a narrative literature review with a conceptual analytic orientation. Sources were selected through searches of policy documents, academic books, journal articles, and conference proceedings addressing pedagogical competence, differentiated instruction, the Merdeka Curriculum, assessment, and PAI learning. A total of 25 references were synthesised. The sources include international scholarship on differentiation theory and the effectiveness of instructional practice, Indonesian education regulations, and national publications relevant to Islamic education and the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Five or more references were selected from the works of Bahtiar Siregar, Danny Abrianto, Hadi Saputra Panggabean, Mhd. Habibu Rahman, Charles Rangkuti, and Muhammad Yunan Harahap to strengthen the connection between this review and local academic discourse on PAI.

Analysis was undertaken in four stages. First, the primary concepts in each reference were identified: pedagogical competence, learning-needs mapping, differentiation design, assessment, and classroom management. Second, the content was coded according to thematic similarities and differences in emphasis across sources. Third, a relational matrix was developed between the requirements of the Merdeka Curriculum and the pedagogical actions of PAI teachers. Fourth, the DIA-PAI conceptual model was formulated as the outcome of the synthesis. The literature review allows this article to explain a framework for practice, but it cannot generate generalisations about conditions at SMP Negeri 5 Binjai. Therefore, the article is positioned as a conceptual foundation for subsequent field research (Dewey, 1938; Hattie, 2009).

Results

1. Mapping Learning Needs as the Starting Point for Differentiation

PAI teachers' pedagogical competence in differentiated instruction begins with the ability to read students' learning conditions. Mapping need not take the form of a complex instrument. Teachers may use prompting questions, preliminary quizzes, observations of Qur'an reading, analysis of assignment results, brief conversations, or reflective journals. The purpose of mapping is to obtain an overview of what students have understood, which aspects remain difficult, and what support is needed to achieve learning objectives. These data help teachers avoid two common errors: assigning tasks that are too easy for some students and too

demanding for others (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013; Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi, 2022).

In PAI, initial mapping needs to include cognitive aspects, skills, and learning attitudes. In tajwid instruction, for example, teachers can observe the accuracy of pronunciation, the ability to identify recitation rules, and students' readiness to practise in front of peers. In moral education, teachers can map the ability to identify problems, provide reasons, and propose actions that align with Islamic values. Such data should not be used to embarrass students or place them in permanent groups. Teachers can establish flexible groups that change according to the objectives of each session, thereby ensuring that every student still has opportunities to learn with diverse peers (Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2020).

2. Planning Shared Goals and Diverse Learning Pathways

Differentiation planning must preserve the principle of shared goals. PAI teachers need to determine the core outcomes that all students must master and then develop several pathways to achieve them. In learning Q.S. Al-Hujurat verse 13, for instance, the core objective may be the ability to explain the message of human fraternity and apply it to peer-interaction issues at school. Some students may read translations and annotations of key words, another group may analyse case studies, while students ready for greater challenge may design a classroom antibullying campaign. The activities differ, but all move toward understanding the same value (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005; Siregar et al., 2024).

Content may be varied through equivalent learning resources with different levels of support. Teachers can provide Qur'anic texts with transliteration, translations, concise exegesis, murottal audio, infographics, or explanatory videos. Process may be varied through brief direct instruction, paired discussions, learning stations, concept maps, and guided practice. Product may be varied by allowing students to demonstrate understanding through summaries, posters, recorded explanations, simulations, or presentations. Product choices must remain anchored to the same rubric so that success criteria remain transparent and equitable (Tomlinson, 2017; Rahman et al., 2020; Rangkuti et al., 2023).

Table 2. Examples of Differentiated Design in PAI Learning

Component	Differentiation Options	Success Criteria
Content	Tiered verses and translations, murottal audio, term infographics, or concise exegesis texts.	Students can accurately explain the central idea of a verse or hadith.
Process	Case discussion, concept cards, small-group talaqqi, learning stations, or peer tutoring.	Students actively process information and can justify their answers.
Product	Concept map, poster, oral presentation, reflective note, short video, or simulation.	Products demonstrate conceptual understanding and application to real situations.
Environment	Flexible grouping, quiet learning corner, discussion rules, and peer support.	Each student can participate safely, orderly, and meaningfully.

3. Facilitating Responsive PAI Learning

The implementation of differentiation requires teachers to manage the classroom with both clarity and flexibility. At the beginning of a lesson, teachers need to communicate learning objectives, the sequence of activities, time allocation, and success criteria. Clear instructions

reduce confusion when students engage in different activities. Teachers can use station rotation, tiered worksheets, and flexible groups to organise variations in learning activities. However, such variation must not eliminate whole-class interaction. Teachers still need to provide a common forum to connect each group's findings, correct misconceptions, and reaffirm the Islamic values that constitute the focus of learning (Siregar et al., 2025; Panggabean et al., 2024).

Scaffolding is an important element of pedagogical competence. Teachers may provide guiding questions, sample answers, cue cards, vocabulary grouping, or models for completing tasks. Support is provided as needed and then gradually withdrawn as students become more independent. In Fiqh learning, for example, teachers can provide a problem-analysis sequence containing facts, relevant principles, alternative actions, and reasons. This structure helps students understand that religious decisions must be grounded in an understanding of religious evidence, context, and ethical considerations, rather than merely copying answers (Vygotsky, 1978; Dewey, 1938).

The selection of media should likewise be based on its pedagogical value. Digital presentations, videos, quiz applications, or murottal audio are useful when they help students access content, focus attention, or receive prompt feedback. Media do not replace teacher-student interaction. Studies on PAI teachers' ability to use media indicate that basic mastery of media can support content delivery and student engagement, although facilities and technical skills remain challenges. Schools therefore need to develop training that directly addresses the needs of PAI instruction, rather than providing only general application training (Panggabean et al., 2024; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

4. Formative Assessment and Feedback as Drivers of Adaptation

Formative assessment functions as a bridge between planning and corrective action. PAI teachers need to gather evidence of learning regularly to determine whether designed activities genuinely help students attain the objectives. Evidence may be derived from oral questions, exit tickets, observation of discussions, brief understanding checks, self-assessment, or performance rubrics. Teachers then use such evidence to determine who needs reinforcement, who is ready for greater challenge, and which parts of the content require re-explanation. The central function of formative assessment is to direct instructional improvement, not to increase the number of grades (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013; Rahman et al., 2020).

Effective feedback is specific, actionable, and directly related to success criteria. During Qur'an-reading practice, teachers can provide feedback on one or two priority aspects, such as vowel length and the articulation of particular letters. In moral-analysis tasks, teachers can comment on the strength of reasoning, the appropriateness of supporting evidence, and the clarity of alternative actions. Feedback need not be lengthy, but it must help students identify the next step. In this way, differentiation does not end with varying activities; rather, it becomes a cycle of adjustment based on students' learning responses (Hattie, 2009; Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi, 2022).

5. Implementation Barriers and Support Systems

Barriers to implementing differentiated instruction may emerge at the teacher, classroom, school, and family levels. At the teacher level, barriers may include an incomplete understanding of the concept, limited planning time, or difficulty using assessment data. At the classroom level, barriers relate to student numbers, variation in ability, and the need to maintain discipline. At the school level, barriers may include the availability of instructional media, assessment policies, a culture of collaboration, and opportunities for professional development. Accordingly, responsibility for implementation cannot rest entirely with PAI teachers. School principals and professional learning communities need to provide spaces for sharing teaching materials, peer observation, and evidence-based reflection (Suprayogi et al., 2017; Siregar et al., 2023).

PAI learning also requires proportionate family involvement. Families can help create a learning environment that supports the habituation of values, but this role should not replace

the school's responsibility to provide structured learning. Teacher communication with families needs to focus on specific learning progress, such as Qur'an-reading habits, emotional regulation, or the development of responsibility. This approach can strengthen the consistency of values education without reducing students' family backgrounds to simplistic judgments (Harahap & Harahap, 2025).

6. The DIA-PAI Conceptual Model

Based on the literature synthesis, this article proposes the DIA-PAI model as an operational framework for PAI teachers. DIA-PAI comprises four iterative stages. Diagnosis is undertaken through initial assessment and observations of learning needs. Intervention includes the design of objectives, activity options, media, grouping, and scaffolding. Assessment is conducted during and after the learning process using evidence appropriate to the intended outcomes. Adaptation is undertaken through teacher reflection to improve content, strategies, and support in subsequent meetings. This model is not a standardised, validated procedure but a conceptual framework that can be examined in field research at SMP Negeri 5 Binjai.

Table 3. The DIA-PAI Conceptual Model

Stage	Teacher's Key Questions	Pedagogical Decision
Diagnosis	What have students understood? Who needs support or additional challenge?	Develop a provisional learning-needs map.
Intervention	Which learning pathway best fits without altering the core objective?	Prepare variations in content, process, product, media, and scaffolding.
Assessment	What evidence demonstrates progress in understanding, skills, and learning attitudes?	Use understanding checks, observation, rubrics, and reflection.
Adaptation	What needs to be improved in the next lesson?	Adjust pace, groups, media, explanation, or follow-up tasks.

The DIA-PAI model avoids two tendencies that require careful attention. First, differentiation must not be reduced to the number of worksheets or task variations used without an assessment basis. Second, differentiation must not become fixed grouping that restricts students' access to learning challenges. Teachers need to use data as the basis for decisionmaking while retaining the belief that students' capacities can develop. This perspective aligns with inclusive, equitable, and growth-oriented education (UNESCO, 2020; Deunk et al., 2018).

Conclusion

The pedagogical competence of PAI teachers in implementing differentiated instruction under the Merdeka Curriculum encompasses the ability to diagnose learning needs, design flexible objectives and activities, facilitate processes with graduated support, use formative assessment, and reflect on learning to make adaptations. This competence requires teachers to maintain common learning objectives while providing equivalent pathways through which students can access, process, and demonstrate understanding of PAI content. Effective differentiated instruction does not dilute standards; it broadens access to learning in an equitable manner.

The DIA-PAI model can be used as an initial framework for PAI teachers and schools to design responsive learning. Its implementation requires support through teacher learning communities, practice-based training, the availability of media, time for reflection, and school policies that allow space for formative assessment. In the context of SMP Negeri 5 Binjai, field research should be conducted through observations of learning, interviews with teachers and students, analysis of teaching modules, and examination of assessment results. Such research

can test the suitability of the DIA-PAI model, identify school-specific barriers, and formulate more operational recommendations for improving the quality of PAI learning.

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