

Implementation of Differentiated Instruction Under the Merdeka Curriculum to Improve the Quality of Learning in Islamic Religious Education at Smks Zauhari Damuli

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Abstract

Variations in students' readiness for learning call for Islamic Religious Education (PAI) instruction that provides meaningful access to every student. This study analyzes the implementation of differentiated instruction within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum and its contribution to the quality of the learning process at SMKS Zauhari Damuli. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed through the analysis of documentation and interviews with PAI teachers conducted on August 20, 2026. The data were condensed, coded, and grouped into four themes: needs assessment, instructional adaptation, quality of the learning experience, and sustainability of implementation. The findings indicate that teachers used initial assessments to identify differences in students' abilities to read the Qur'an as well as their needs for reading materials and videos, and then adapted instructional materials, instructions, and assignments accordingly. Teachers perceived differences in student motivation and assessed that students' understanding was more deeply ingrained when they were motivated from the outset of the learning process. Time spent preparing instructional materials and managing the classroom emerged as the primary challenges. The analysis indicates that the value of differentiation lies in the precision of the alignment between students' needs and teaching decisions, with implications for access, engagement, and the meaningfulness of learning. The findings represent the perceptions of a single informant and do not measure causal effectiveness. Further development requires adaptive materials, clear success criteria, and documented formative assessments.

Keywords: *Differentiated instruction; Merdeka Curriculum; quality of learning; Islamic Religious Education; vocational high schools.*

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Introduction

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) brings together students with diverse religious experiences and academic readiness. Within a single classroom, students' abilities to comprehend readings, follow explanations, and read the Qur'an may vary. When all students receive the same explanations and assignments, some may be able to keep up with the lesson immediately, while others may require additional assistance. The issue is not merely presenting the same material, but ensuring that every student has an adequate opportunity to understand it.

Differentiated instruction offers a pedagogical foundation for addressing this situation. Tomlinson explains that teachers can adapt content, processes, and products by considering students' readiness, interests, and learning needs [1]. These adaptations maintain a shared direction for learning while providing varied support when needed. Differentiated treatment is justifiable when based on clearly identified learning needs.

Within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum, the discussion of differentiation relates to the connection between learning objectives, learning activities, and assessment. The 2025 revised edition of the Learning and Assessment Guide provides guidelines for planning, implementing, and analyzing assessment results [2]. In practice, information about students' prior knowledge must be translated into instructional decisions. Assessment loses its pedagogical function if its results are merely recorded without influencing the materials, instruction, or support students receive.

Such changes require professional judgment on the part of teachers. Gheysens and colleagues demonstrate the connection between teachers' philosophies regarding diversity and the practice of adapting instruction [3]. This provides a rationale for examining differentiation as a decision-making process. The sheer number of instructional media used does not necessarily indicate the quality of implementation; the more fundamental questions are whose needs are being addressed and what is being improved through those choices.

A number of studies provide relevant context. Jannah and Fuad discuss the implementation of differentiation in Islamic Education (PAI) instruction in elementary schools and report that students find it easier to understand the material when the learning process is tailored to their needs [4]. Fauzia and Hadikusuma Ramadan examine the implementation and barriers to differentiation in the Merdeka Curriculum [5]. Meanwhile, Handiyani and Muhtar's pedagogical-philosophical study situates differentiation within the context of learning motivation [6]. These findings serve as a point of comparison, without assuming that results from other educational levels will directly apply to vocational schools.

SMKS Zauhari Damuli provides context for understanding this issue through the experiences of Islamic Education (PAI) teachers. The teachers' accounts reveal efforts to

identify students' prior knowledge, provide diverse learning materials, and tailor instruction to students' interests. These accounts also highlight the tension between the need for responsive learning and the time available for teacher preparation. Thus, the quality of learning must be considered alongside the feasibility of its implementation in daily teaching practice.

Building on this issue, this study aims to analyze how teachers map learning needs, describe adjustments to PAI instruction, and examine their contribution to the quality of the learning process. The analysis focuses on the relationship between pedagogical decisions and the learning experiences described by teachers. The contextual contribution of this study lies in its explanation of how differentiation is implemented when diverse religious literacy needs intersect with the demands of lesson preparation in vocational schools. With this focus, the discussion goes beyond merely listing forms of differentiation; it examines the rationale behind these adjustments, their pedagogical significance, and the conditions necessary for their sustainability.

Literature Review

1. Differentiated instruction as a pedagogical response

Within Tomlinson's framework, differentiation governs access to materials, activities designed to foster understanding, and ways of demonstrating learning outcomes [1]. This framework is used as a conceptual lens for examining informants' statements. References to different materials direct the analysis toward content, while changes in instruction direct attention toward process. Evidence of learning outcomes must be examined separately through students' assignments or work [1].

Gheysens and colleagues situate differentiation within the relationship between teachers' perspectives and teaching practices [3]. In this article, that relationship is translated into analytical questions about the rationale behind a particular adjustment. The use of video, for example, only has differentiating significance if there is a need it is intended to address. Engaging media must still be evaluated based on its contribution to understanding the material [3].

2. Quality of the Islamic Education Learning Process

The quality of learning in this study is limited to processes that can be traced through teachers' accounts: access to materials, the appropriateness of assignment requirements, engagement, and the meaningfulness of understanding. These four aspects are the focus of the analysis, not pre-measured quality scores. Setting these boundaries is necessary to ensure that the discussion does not conflate learning experiences, test results, and changes in religious behavior as the same outcome.

Research by Jannah and Fuad provides a comparison regarding the understanding of Islamic Education (PAI) material in differentiated instruction [4]. However, the ability to explain religious concepts and the practice of those concepts requires different evidence. Students may demonstrate good understanding in class, but conclusions about the application of values in daily life require further observation. In this study, the quality of understanding is discussed only to the extent stated by the informants.

3. Motivation as an Explanation of the Learning Experience

Ryan and Deci explain that support for autonomy, competence, and relatedness is linked to the quality of students' motivation [7]. This framework helps interpret the potential relationship between task adaptation and students' willingness to engage in learning. Tasks that can be completed with adequate support have the potential to foster a sense of competence; opportunities for choice can provide the experience of having control over learning activities.

In this analysis, motivation serves as the link between instructional design and student engagement. Meaningful adaptation provides students with a reason to participate in activities, while appropriate support helps them meet the demands of the material. The motivational framework is used to interpret the experiences described by teachers; the primary focus is on how students perceive the learning as accessible and relevant [7].

Research Methodology

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach through the analysis of documentation and interviews with Islamic Education (PAI) teachers at SMKS Zauhari Damuli. This approach was chosen to understand the teachers' considerations in adapting PAI instruction and the meaning of these instructional changes from the practitioners' perspective. The quality of learning was examined through access to materials, the appropriateness of support, student engagement, and the meaningfulness of understanding, rather than through calculations of score improvements.

The primary data consisted of documentation from an interview with Siti Harifah, S.Pd., a PAI teacher. The interview was conducted by Nurcahaya on Thursday, August 20, 2026, on the campus of SMKS Zauhari Damuli. The questions covered the application of differentiation, changes in motivation, understanding of religious values, and implementation challenges. The unit of analysis consists of statements that explain the relationship between student needs, teaching decisions, and learning responses.

The analysis followed the data condensation, presentation, and conclusion-drawing and verification methods outlined by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña [8]. The interview transcript was read repeatedly and transcribed, then initially coded into categories such as diagnostic

assessment, reading ability, media variation, instructional adaptation, interest, motivation, understanding, and preparation workload. These codes were grouped into four themes: needs assessment, learning adaptations, quality of the learning experience, and sustainability of implementation. Each theme was then discussed by linking the informants' statements to the relevant conceptual framework.

The accuracy of the interpretation is ensured by reviewing the interview transcripts, considering the context of the questions, and distinguishing findings from recommendations for improvement. Informants' statements are presented through paraphrases that preserve the substance of their remarks. Conclusions focus on teachers' experiences and perceptions within the context of the schools under study. The scope of the data is specifically addressed following the discussion of the findings.

Results

1. Needs assessment as a basis for teaching decisions

The discussion at SMKS Zauhari Damuli focused on the experiences of Islamic Education (PAI) teachers in addressing diverse learning needs in the classroom. This context was used to examine the relationship between students' readiness, the types of support selected, and the teachers' considerations in conducting instruction. The analysis of the results focused on the practices described by the informants and their implications for the quality of the learning process.

The practice of differentiation, as described by the teachers, begins with an assessment of students' initial abilities. Before introducing new material—such as zakat or Islamic history—teachers conduct an initial assessment to gauge students' readiness. This step demonstrates attention to the demands of the material to be studied. Teachers strive to identify the necessary support before determining instructional materials and activity guidelines.

This assessment reveals diverse needs. Some students grasp reading material more quickly, some require video assistance, and some still struggle to read the Qur'an fluently. These findings contain two layers of information. The details regarding reading and video relate to access to explanations, while fluency in reading the Qur'an indicates a foundational skill that requires specific attention. This differentiation helps teachers avoid the assumption that a single difficulty represents the entirety of a student's abilities.

In this case, the initial assessment serves as the basis for instructional decisions. A student who struggles to read religious texts may require a more step-by-step explanation, while another student may need the opportunity to engage with material at a different level of challenge. Adaptations become relevant when they are targeted at identified barriers. It is this

relationship that explains why needs assessment precedes the selection of materials and instruction. In a study of secondary education, Smale-Jacobse and colleagues demonstrated that an evaluation of the benefits of differentiation must consider the diversity of intervention types as well as the strength of the research evidence [9]. Therefore, implementation in this school is discussed through traceable teacher decisions, without assuming that all forms of accommodation yield the same results.

These findings reveal a shift in teachers' focus: from delivering content to assessing students' readiness to engage with the material. In the context of Islamic Education (PAI), this shift is significant because learning does not always begin from a common religious background. A single class may include students with varying levels of fluency in reading the Qur'an, mastery of terminology, and religious learning experiences. Pedagogical responses to these differences determine the extent to which students have the opportunity to participate in lessons. This interpretation is consistent with van Geel and colleagues, who view differentiation as a complex teaching skill involving planning, decision-making during instruction, and evaluation [10]. This framework helps explain why readiness assessments need to be linked to subsequent teaching actions.

2. Adapting materials and instructions in Islamic Education (PAI) instruction

Information about students' needs is then followed by adjustments to instruction. The teacher explains that instructional materials and instructions are differentiated according to students' needs. This explanation links the results of student assessment to teaching practices. This practice is most clearly evident in the materials students access and the guidance they receive; thus, the analysis of implementation focuses primarily on the differentiation of content and process.

The use of reading materials and videos broadens the ways in which students engage with the material. The pedagogical value lies in the opportunity to receive explanations that are easier to follow. Students who have not yet grasped written explanations can be aided by alternative representations, while students capable of working through reading materials have a pathway to process information. These needs must be interpreted flexibly: the benefits of a particular medium may vary depending on the material and task, so the choice of medium should not become a permanent label for students. At a fundamental level, UNESCO identifies the reduction of barriers to participation as a component of inclusive education [11]. In this discussion, this principle serves as the basis for assessing access to material, not as evidence that all barriers to learning in school have been overcome.

Adjustments to instructions also affect how students understand what they are supposed to do. Instructions that are too general can make it difficult for students who need more

structured steps. Conversely, instructions that allow for growth can present challenges for students who are more prepared. According to the informants, differences in materials and instructions are ways of responding to classroom situations. Their appropriateness must be considered in terms of the relationship between identified needs and the support provided. The Universal Design for Learning guidelines also emphasize clarity of language, diversity of representations, and progressive support in learning [12]. These principles can be used to design instructions that are easier to follow without categorizing student needs as fixed categories.

Teachers also link instructions and tasks to students' interests. At this point, differentiation bridges academic needs with the relevance of learning activities. Religious studies material becomes more accessible when students discover a connection between the task and something meaningful to them. However, interests must still be directed toward the lesson's objectives. Engagement in activities becomes valuable when it helps students explain concepts, weigh reasons, or understand the religious messages being discussed [1], [7].

The existence of task adjustments does not in itself explain the nature of product differentiation. Informants' explanations provide stronger insights into the reasons for modifying instructions than the details of the required work products. This distinction helps accurately assess the progress of implementation: teachers have demonstrated a student-responsive approach, while the equivalence of requirements and assessments across alternative tasks is an aspect that needs to be clarified in future development.

In practice, adaptations can be designed while maintaining shared success indicators. As an example of such development, in the topic of zakat, students can demonstrate their understanding of the purpose and recipients of zakat through written descriptions or oral explanations. Both forms can be assessed based on the accuracy of the concepts and the reasoning presented. This example represents a design implication derived from the analysis, not an activity reported to have taken place in schools. The formulation of indicators and the assessment of understanding can be guided by the principles of formative assessment—that is, the use of learning information to determine the next instructional steps [13]. Thus, the suitability of alternative tasks must be evaluated in conjunction with the evidence of understanding they generate.

3. From the relevance of activities to the meaningfulness of the learning experience

Changes in the quality of the learning experience were evident in the way teachers compared their previous practices with the adjustments they subsequently made. Teachers noted a difference in student motivation when instructions and assignments were tailored to students' interests. In lessons that relied more heavily on one-way lectures and uniform activities, teachers observed students dozing off, playing on their cell phones, or leaving the

classroom for extended periods. These experiences influenced their decision to design activities that students could more easily engage with.

These accounts indicate that teachers understand the issue of motivation in relation to lesson design. Disengagement from learning activities is linked to learning experiences perceived as boring. Thus, students' responses serve as reflective feedback for teachers to assess the appropriateness of their teaching methods. The focus of improvement centers on how activities can provide stronger reasons for students to engage.

The relationship between relevant tasks and the willingness to learn can be explained through students' experiences with the demands of the lesson. When instructions are difficult to follow or activities do not allow for engagement, students are more likely to lose their connection to the material. Adjustments that help them get started on their work have the potential to improve that experience. Within the motivational framework used, a sense of competence and scope for engagement provide a plausible explanation for the teachers' positive evaluations, even though the underlying mechanisms were not measured directly [7].

Explanations regarding understanding broaden the meaning of this change. According to teachers, motivation from the very beginning of the learning process helps students understand religious material in a more lasting way. This assessment reveals the relationship between readiness to participate in activities and acceptance of the material from the informants' perspective. A more lasting understanding is still interpreted as the teachers' perception, not as the result of memory tests or changes in religious behavior.

Interpretatively, motivation serves as a bridge between access to learning and the meaningfulness of understanding. Material that is easier to follow provides an entry point; relevant assignments help maintain a connection to the lesson; and engagement offers opportunities to process the messages being learned. This flowchart illustrates the potential contribution of differentiation to the PAI learning process. Each relationship within the flowchart refers to the experiences narrated by the informants, so the conclusions pertain to perceptions of process improvement [7].

These findings enrich the discussion of learning quality by positioning student responses as part of the evaluation of instructional design. Quality cannot be adequately described solely by the smooth delivery of material by the teacher. Another question that needs to be asked is whether students can engage in the activities, understand the requirements, and find meaning in the material. In the context under study, differentiation is an effort to improve these three relationships through decisions that are more attuned to students' needs.

4. The burden of preparation and sustaining implementation

The pedagogical benefits perceived by teachers go hand in hand with increasing job demands. Informants cited the time required to prepare teaching materials and manage the classroom as major challenges. Providing different materials or modules for a single session was perceived as requiring additional effort, especially at the beginning of implementation. These observations highlight sustainability as a key issue: a responsive design must remain feasible within the available time and resources.

This burden stems from the need to juggle multiple tasks simultaneously. Teachers must identify students' difficulties, select appropriate resources, formulate instructions, and ensure that activities remain aligned with lesson objectives. Providing diverse materials is only one part of this work. When students engage with activities in different ways, teachers must also allocate their attention and support to ensure the entire class maintains a clear direction. Research by Suprayogi, Valcke, and Godwin highlights teacher professional development as a key focus in supporting the implementation of differentiation [14]. In this context, support efforts can be directed toward the tasks described by informants, particularly the development of materials and the organization of activities.

Therefore, recommendations for development should be based on planned simplification. A few alternatives selected based on core needs will be easier to manage than numerous tools that are difficult to monitor. Teachers can reuse relevant materials, prepare brief instructions, and note frequently encountered difficulties. This kind of simplification maintains flexibility while reducing repetitive work in each session [10], [14].

School support can be directed toward opportunities for collaboration, the exchange of materials, and the review of assignments among educators. A learning resource bank will be more useful if it includes information on the targeted competencies, the needs it serves, and methods for assessing understanding. Thus, institutional support is directly linked to the teaching work described by the informants. These recommendations serve as a direction for development; this study does not assess the availability or adequacy of the support currently provided by schools. The study by Pozas, Letzel, and Schneider on differentiation practices provides a foundation for examining how teachers respond to student diversity in the classroom [15]. The recommendations for collaboration in this study are intended to aid in these teaching decisions and do not constitute an evaluation of school support programs.

5. Pedagogical Contributions and Implications for Development

A synthesis of the findings reveals a relationship between needs assessment, instructional adaptation, and learning experiences perceived as more meaningful. The key contribution is the explanation that differentiation works through the accuracy of teachers'

decisions in responding to students' circumstances. Diverse materials gain meaning when they address barriers to access, while task modifications gain value when they help students connect with lesson objectives.

The context of Islamic Education (PAI) in vocational schools places special emphasis on the relationship between basic religious competencies and methods of accessing the material. Difficulties in reading the Qur'an cannot be resolved simply by making activities more engaging; these needs require appropriate support. At the same time, the relevance of tasks remains crucial to ensure students are willing to participate in learning. These findings highlight the need to consider readiness and interest simultaneously without equating the two.

The implication is the need for a clearly traceable work cycle: teachers identify needs, select accommodations, assess responses, and then refine the next lesson plan. Documentation can be kept concise by noting competencies that have not yet been mastered, the support provided, and the results of the work following that support. Such notes help teachers assess the benefits of adjustments over time while providing a stronger foundation for discussing quality improvement [2], [13].

Conclusion

The implementation of differentiated instruction within the Merdeka Curriculum framework for Islamic Education (PAI) at SMKS Zauhari Damuli is characterized by the assessment of students' prior knowledge, the adaptation of materials and instruction, and the alignment of assignments with students' interests. Teacher observations indicate that differentiation is primarily applied in terms of access to content and the process of participating in activities. Differences in Quran reading ability, as well as the need for reading materials and videos, were taken into consideration when determining adjustments.

The contribution to the quality of learning lies in efforts to improve the alignment between students' needs and the demands of the curriculum. Teachers perceived that differences in motivation and assessments of understanding had a more lasting impact when students were motivated from the outset. This relationship provides a foundation for understanding differentiation as a pedagogical practice with the potential to strengthen access, engagement, and the meaningfulness of learning. This conclusion is contextual, based on the informants' accounts.

The time required to prepare instructional materials and manage the classroom poses a challenge to sustainability. Development priorities include adaptive, reusable instructional materials; alternative assignments with clear success criteria; and documentation of student responses. Collaborative support from the school and formative assessment will help teachers

continuously evaluate the appropriateness of their adjustments. Future research should involve students and examine both the learning process and learning outcomes so that the perceived contributions can be examined more thoroughly.

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