

A Multisite Case Study of Differentiated Instruction in Indonesia: A Cross Case Investigation of Rural and Urban Areas

Hernik Farisia^{1,*}, Anang Santoso¹, Suyono¹ & Shirley Rizki Kusumaningrum¹

¹Elementary Education Program, Graduate School, State University of Malang, Malang, Indonesia

*Correspondence: Elementary Education Program, Graduate School, State University of Malang, Malang, Indonesia.
E-mail: hernik.farisia.2021039@students.um.ac.id

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Abstract

Differentiated instruction is a new learning paradigm in the implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum in Indonesia. As a new approach, the recent practices of differentiated instruction still led to challenges and barriers, affecting teachers' willingness to adopt this approach. Therefore, this study aims to gain insights into teachers' experiences, challenges, and successes in implementing differentiated instruction in the Islamic elementary school context. Using a case study design, this research explores differentiated learning practices within two Islamic elementary schools, located in urban and rural contexts close to *pesantren*. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, field notes, and documentation. The findings reveal that Islamic elementary school teachers both in urban and rural areas emphasized flexible grouping and employed varied strategies to adjust to students' learning needs. The school in a rural area was characterized by its focus on *pesantren*-based values to preserve the community's identity. The study identifies three components that require reinforcement in the application of differentiated learning: proactively responses to diverse students, flexible grouping in classroom teaching, and the adjustment of learning pace. To address these challenges, teachers designated peer tutors, used both homogeneous and heterogeneous grouping as needed, and provided feedback. The study underscores the importance of teachers' ability to tackle obstacles in differentiated learning, thereby fostering their willingness to implement instruction that accommodates students' diverse characteristics and learning needs.

Keywords: differentiated instruction, pedagogical transformation, independent curriculum, Gardner's theory

1. Introduction

The concept of learning that accommodates learner diversity has become a significant pedagogical concern. This concept emphasizes that each learner is unique, with varying physical and psychological characteristics. Differentiated Instruction (DI) has emerged as a prominent research topic, with a significant rise in the number of articles published across 202 distinct journals pertaining DI and inclusive education based on Scopus data from 1961-2022 (Asriadi et.al, 2023). There has been an increasing trend of DI research since 2011 (Fauziyah et al., 2024). These findings indicate the scholarly recognition of the importance of addressing DI instruction to promote students' learning success. Many countries highlight the importance of an inclusive learning environment through DI for children (Hardy & Woodcock, 2015). Among the studies related to DI, numerous scholars reference Ann Tomlinson's concept that differentiation is an integral part of instructional practice (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). Differentiated learning is built on a strong commitment to adapting curricula, teaching strategies, assessment methods, and classroom environments to meet learners' needs (Arends & Kilcher, 2010). Other research has described DI as a teaching approach focused on learner diversity and flexible learning management (Karst, 2022).

Several research findings have indicated that DI improves students learning outcomes. For instance, a meta-analysis study highlighted the effectiveness of teacher support through differentiated instruction in improving student literacy outcomes (Puzio et al., 2020). Various evaluations related to DI practices in diverse learning environments have shown that its implementation leads to increased reading scores among elementary school students as compared to students in non-differentiated instructional classes (Azimah & Sujannah, 2024; Davidsen, 2018; Valiandes, 2015). DI has also been shown to enhance the mathematics skills of elementary school students (Bal, 2023). In the non-academic domain, DI is a potential moderator in improving young children's academic self-concepts (Roy,

2015). However, despite these successes, challenges remain for teachers in its implementation (Aprima, 2022). Student diversity presents a unique problem for teachers attempting to determine where to begin instruction and whether the implemented DI truly accommodates various learners' needs.

The application of differentiated learning represents a new paradigm that is being increasingly adopted in Indonesia, with the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* (Fauzia & Ramadan, 2023; Pranajaya et al., 2022). The new curriculum provides a more holistic and student-centered approach to learning (Rizki & Fahkrunisa, 2022). Although the *Merdeka Curriculum* (Independent Curriculum) is implemented nationally particularly at Grade 1 and Grade 4 in the first year of implementation, the government grants educational units the authority to apply the curriculum according to their readiness. This has led to various best practices in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum, including in DI practices in Islamic elementary schools. The Independent Curriculum aims to cultivate learners who embody the Pancasila student profile and the *Rahmatan Lil'alam* student profile, which are distinctive features of students in Islamic elementary schools. The *Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila* program (Project Strengthening the Profile of Pancasila Students, further referred to as P5) and the *Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Rahmatan Lil'alam* (further referred as PPRA) are two of the key components of the Independent Curriculum, specifically at Islamic schools in Indonesia.

The Pancasila student profile represents lifelong learners who are competent, character-driven, and act in accordance with Pancasila values. Meanwhile, the *Rahmatan Lil'alam* student profile represents learners who are devout, possess noble morals, and practice moderate religious beliefs (Zamroni, 2022), both as Indonesian citizens and global citizens. The values of religious moderation articulated in the *Rahmatan Lil'alam* student profile include (1) civility (*ta'addub*); (2) exemplary behavior (*qudwah*); (3) citizenship and nationalism (*muwatanah*); (4) tolerance (*tawassut*); (5) balance (*tawāzun*); (6) uprightness and firmness (*i'tidāl*); (7) equality (*musāwah*); (8) deliberation (*syūra*); (9) tolerance (*tasāmuh*); and (10) dynamism and innovation (*tatawwur wa ibtikār*). The students' profile is designed to address a significant question about what type of competencies the Indonesian education system should strive to cultivate in its learners.

With the large number of Islamic elementary schools in East Java, totaling 21,191 (*Statistika Simpatika*, 2024), a diverse teaching workforce; and varying levels of teacher understanding regarding the implementation of DI; a wide range of applications of differentiated learning exists within the Independent Curriculum. This context underscores the necessity for further studies on the characterization of implemented DI in Islamic elementary schools. Teachers' choices and uses of differentiation as an instructional approach—integrating the values of *Rahmatan Lil'alam*—can reflect and reinforce the identity of Islamic elementary schools as institutions with a strong religious culture, while also maintaining academic rigor and nationalistic character. The identified gaps in the teachers' experience in implementing the Independent Curriculum across diverse Indonesian regions will enrich comprehensive insights into effective classroom practices in DI.

In this context, teachers may still face some challenges regarding to the appropriate implementation of DI to meet learners' needs. Teachers' understanding and school interventions aimed at enhancing teacher capacity play crucial roles in defining the concept of differentiation and achieving the desired learning outcomes in Islamic elementary schools. There are numerous learning resources and materials accessible to Islamic elementary school teachers that explain how to implement DI. However, the abundance of varied materials may lead to inconsistencies in teachers' understanding and their willingness to practice this instructional approach. Consequently, Islamic elementary school teachers must navigate a complex landscape of materials related to differentiated learning as they consider the readiness of their school, their own competencies, and the integration of both the P5 and PPRA. Numerous studies have found that teachers still face confusion in using the teaching module that integrates the P5 (Effendi et al., 2023; Mustika, 2022). Moreover, teachers at Islamic primary schools also integrate the PPRA along with the P5, so it is complicated. However, the pivotal factor in determining the effectiveness of a curriculum is the teachers' pedagogical methodology.

In this situation, teachers often face challenges in balancing and reconciling various concepts related to DI to make them applicable in their classrooms. Teachers also run into difficulties when trying to integrate both the P5 and PPRA, so they are in line with learning goals. Therefore, they are expected to be creative and innovative in developing student-centered learning experiences (Susetiyo et al., 2023; Teguh, 2023). However, research findings indicate that the readiness level of Islamic elementary school teachers remains insufficient for preparing teaching materials and implementing the new paradigms presented in the Independent Curriculum (Anwar et al., 2023). The empirical data from previous studies show that teachers often struggle to manage adequate instructional time when implementing DI, because they need to provide intensive guidance for students who may not be progressing optimally while ensuring that learning objectives are met for the entire class. Thus, DI remains challenging to

implement in classrooms with more than 30 students (Putra, 2023; Smit, 2012). Kanevsky found that DI often seems complicated for teachers because of the various components and principles they must follow. Thus, it can be implied that teachers are unfamiliar with the approach (Kanevsky, 2011; Putra, 2023).

Therefore, teachers should establish clear instructional designs and measurable goals to evaluate a one-size-fits-all approach to active learning that supports the educational needs of all students. To address this concern, further research is needed to identify strategies for mitigating these obstacles, thereby positively influencing teachers' willingness to implement DI. Overall, there are three aspects of differentiation that need to be strengthened in the implementation of DI: the adjustment of learning pace, the provision of verbal feedback to students based on their needs, and proactive responses to diverse students (Smets, 2017). In the context of Islamic primary education, the P5 and PPRA must be emphasized.

Based on this introduction and previous findings regarding the barriers to the implementation of DI, this study seeks to identify effective patterns of differentiated learning strategies, along with challenges and successes in Islamic elementary schools that can enhance teachers' willingness to foster DI that incorporates the Pancasila student profile and the *Rahmatan Lil' alamin* values.

2. Method

This study employed an exploratory research design with a multisite qualitative approach to explore the perspectives of both groups on how to eliminate barriers to the implementation of DI that affect teachers' willingness to apply this new paradigm at the Islamic elementary school level. The exploratory case study design was selected because exploratory studies can produce rich and in-depth descriptions of issues or phenomena faced by individuals or social groups (Creswell & David, 2018; Yin, 2011).

Using purposive sampling, this study aimed to understand how Islamic elementary school teachers in Indonesia implemented DI, how they addressed the challenges they encountered, and how they identified their problem-solving efforts. The research focused on two different contexts: an Islamic elementary school in an urban area with few pesantren and a rural Islamic elementary school affiliated with a *pesantren*—a traditional Islamic educational institution. This focused approach was adopted to provide detailed and in-depth analyses of the dynamics of DI and teachers' efforts to overcome challenges within different sociocultural contexts, without aiming to generalize findings to broader contexts. The two Islamic elementary schools sampled for this study were MI Badrussalam, located in the city center of Surabaya (a rural area), and MI Roudhotul Bannat, situated in the urban border area between Surabaya and Sidoarjo. Data were collected through interviews with four teachers, described as follows:

Table 1. School Profiles

	School A	School B
Living Area	Urban	Rural near pesantren
Focal Teacher	Zuma (Z): teacher of first grade	Yuli (Y): teacher of first grade
	Wiwin (W): teacher of fourth grade	Luluk (L): teacher of fourth grade
Gender	Female	Female
Age	Z : 28 years old	Y : 30 years old
	W : 38 years old	L : 36 years old
Teaching Experience with DI	Z : 3 years	Y : 3 years
	W : 2 years	L : 2 years

As shown in table 1, the total focal teachers were four teachers (two from the rural school and two from the urban school) who met the following criteria: (1) 2 or more years of experience at the elementary school, (2) currently teaching Grades 1 or 4 with a DI approach, (3) knowledgeable about the Independent Curriculum based on available training.

The researcher utilized an interpretative paradigm to understand the experiences and actions of the participants (Kaplan, 2015). Participants' perspectives and views were explored through semi-structured interviews, field notes, and documentation. The outline of the semi-structured interview was developed based on a blueprint related to the implementation of DI qualities.

Table 2. Blueprint of Checklist Instrument for High Quality Differentiated Instruction

No	Aspect	Indicators	Elicitation Questions
1	Understanding learning goals	Understand learning goals and know how to structure them toward complexity. Provide students with insight into the learning path to follow.	The teacher sets learning goals for students to achieve. Teacher motivates students to actively participate in teaching and learning.
2	Determining the learning design	Adapts the teaching strategy depending on where students are in the learning process. Meet the diverse needs of learners. Use a variety of different teaching strategies.	Teacher responds to the students with proactive actions and considers the students' needs. Teacher applies various activities with the students Teacher applies various instructions to different students.
3	Adjusting classroom management	Use flexible grouping depending on students' interests, learning profiles, and learning status. Work with complete groups, individuals, and small groups. Provide time for students to actively process information. Present students with choices of learning activities.	Teacher divides the students into several groups. Teacher monitors the work of students in the classroom. Teacher alters the pace of learning. Teacher allows students to choose their own preferred activities.
4	Assigning assessment	Provide students with feedback on what has been learned and feedback for what still needs to be learned.	Teacher gives oral feedback to students, including corrective information.

Adopted from instruction (Lindner & Schwab, 2020; Putra, 2023; Smets, 2017)

Based on emerging data trends that describe the teachers' implementation of DI in table 2, the study then identified barriers that negatively impacted the teachers' willingness to implement this approach and explored how teachers addressed these obstacles. Interviews with teachers from each Islamic elementary school were conducted separately via Zoom and lasted no more than one hour per session, using an interview guide. Field notes were used to capture teachers' pedagogical methodologies in implementing DI during teaching and learning.

By using coding to analyze the data, specific themes and descriptions (comparing and contrasting perceptions, experiences, feelings, and opinions of participants) were identified, including diagnostic assessments, classroom management, student grouping, and differentiation models. Data in this article were presented through coding, for example, (L, RM) indicated that the data originated from *Luluk*, representing a rural madrasah-Islamic elementary school, and (Y, RM) means *Yuli*, a rural school. Meanwhile, (Z, UM) indicated that the data originated from Zuma, an urban madrasah-Islamic elementary school and (W, YM) originated to *Wiwin*, an urban school. The collected data were then read repeatedly through an inductive process to build concepts related to the research issues. In the final stage, conclusions were drawn, and member checking was conducted by confirming the data with informants as a form of data triangulation.

3. Results

The findings of this study focus on two discussions: the construction of DI in the two sample Islamic elementary schools and the efforts made by teachers to overcome barriers to learning, thereby fostering teachers' willingness to implement DI. Synthesis of the findings from the semi-structured interviews and documentation studies revealed several key insights into the procedures and strategies that may positively contribute to the optimization of DI.

3.1 Differentiated Instruction Practice at MI Badrussalam

MI Badrussalam serves as an example of a private Islamic elementary school located in a densely populated urban area. The majority of students at MI Badrussalam come from the surrounding community. The backgrounds of these students are highly diverse, with 70% originating from families classified as migrants from other regions. This

situation results in student diversity concerning language, ethnicity, and sociocultural backgrounds. Economically, most students are from lower-middle-income families, which reflects the profile of students in private Islamic elementary schools in urban areas.

The surrounding community comprises residents from various regions with different cultural backgrounds. According to the principal (S, UM), “The attitudes and behaviors of the people from different regions blend with those of the native residents of Surabaya, as reflected in the high spirit of mutual cooperation, concern for others, and politeness. These behaviors are gradually eroding in urban areas.” The values that still persist in the community surrounding the Islamic elementary school serve as an added benefit of promoting the realization of the P5 and PPRA. The attitudes and behaviors fostered through learning can be identified as faithfulness, cooperation, creativity, and critical thinking, as expressed by a second-grade teacher (Excerpt 1). Consistently, the PPRA was embedded throughout daily learning activities using a regular scheduling model. Various characteristics of the Pancasila student profile that teachers developed in their instruction aligned with the Islamic elementary school’s vision of “becoming a nationally standardized Islamic elementary school capable of producing independent, accomplished individuals with an Islamic education and environmental awareness.”

Excerpt 1:

“The consideration in choosing the values of faithfulness is to instill a love for the environment, such as not littering and preserving nature. The value of mutual cooperation is adopted so that children can become close to one another and engage in discussions to solve problems with their peers, thereby preventing bullying. The creative value is emphasized because at the end of the P5PPRA learning process, children are expected to be able to turn waste into useful items. The value of critical thinking encourages children to practice asking questions confidently and to solve their own problems (S, UM).”

The values mentioned above were integrated by teachers through DI-based learning. In the initial stage before the lessons began, teachers conducted a diagnostic assessment of the students’ learning styles to map their learning profiles. The indicators of the success levels of the differentiated learning program revealed that the teachers were able to arrange learning goals but they were not confident on it. The qualitative data collected from the interview clarify why this is the case.

Excerpt 2:

- a. There is one difficulty when I try to get the breakdown of the *Capaian Pembelajaran* (CP—learning outcomes) into the *Tujuan Pembelajaran* (TP—learning goal). We find it very difficult to arrange the TP into the *Alur Tujuan Pembelajaran* (ATP—learning objectives’ flow) (W, UM)
- b. Currently, in the Independent Curriculum, what is very complicated at this Madrasah is to interpret and arrange the TP for the phase (Grade 1 and Grade 2). We feel unconfident that what we have designed is correct. We are also unsure whether the learning goal helps students to develop their learning path (Z, UM).

Both those teachers’ experiences exemplified the teachers’ confusion because one of the difficult points in implementing DI is defining the learning objectives in the syllabus at the school level. They still feel doubt when adjusting learning flexibility principles to appropriate learning goals. However, this situation does not impact the teachers’ capability for designing learning activities. As expressed by one teacher, the results of the diagnostic assessment and the arrangement of learning goals helped them design appropriate learning experiences (Excerpt 3). To implement DI, teachers needed to differentiate content, processes, and products (Excerpt 4).

Excerpt 3:

“In my opinion, differentiated instruction is learning that aligns with students’ learning styles and what they enjoy (Z, UM).”

Excerpt 4:

“The form of content differentiation I implement involves preparing suitable materials and selecting diverse learning resources. I conduct process differentiation by providing various activities for the children. For instance, in the mathematic lesson on addition, I connect the problems to objects around the classroom. I give the students quiz questions and group them to solve story problems. However, some children are still not enthusiastic about participating in the lessons. As for product differentiation, I sometimes have not implemented it yet because I am still unsure how to assign different tasks to the children (W, UM).”

The results of this mapping were used by teachers to design a variety of learning activities that matched the characteristics of each student's learning style. For kinesthetic learners, teachers provided activities that encouraged movement and involved motor skills as expressed by a second-grade teacher in the following excerpt:

Excerpt 5:

“For kinesthetic children, I provide activities where they can move around, such as searching for questions in specific places before completing them. Meanwhile, quieter auditory learners are given discussion activities with their friends (Z, UM).”

Regarding process differentiation, teachers organized the classroom into several heterogeneous groups to ensure that students who struggled could be assisted by their more capable peers. During the learning activities, students tended to want to engage in the same tasks as their friends. However, some students still appeared to be less actively involved in the learning process. According to the teacher for that class, this could be due to the large number of students with highly varied characteristics in that classroom. As for product differentiation, teachers had not provided varied assignments because of time constraints and the need to strengthen students' motivation to complete the assigned tasks.

Overall, there are three aspects that need to be reinforced in the practice of DI at MI Badrussalam: (1) the teacher's ability to manage learning according to the allocated time, (2) the teacher's ability to manage diverse learning activities, and (3) the teacher's ability to conduct formative assessments and provide feedback.

3.2 Differentiated Instruction Practice at MI Roudhotul Banat

Most students at MI Roudhotul Banat come from the surrounding areas, though some are from other districts, and even other provinces. Although the majority of local students live at home, 60 female students reside in the *Pondok Pesantren*—dormitory of Roudhotul Banat. The students primarily come from lower-middle-class economic backgrounds.

This Islamic elementary school has implemented the Independent Curriculum across all classes, with the mission of achieving academic excellence grounded in noble character. As with other institutions applying the Independent Curriculum, the realization of the P5 and PPRA is integrated through intra-curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular activities. In the intracurricular curriculum, teachers applied DI in teaching and learning. Based on the field note results, it can be assumed that the DI-based learning was implemented with a better pedagogical methodology. This achievement surpasses the implementation of DI at MI Badrussalam. The purpose of presenting these results is not to offer a comparative assessment but to provide a basis for reflection and determine follow-up steps for improving instruction, considering the context of both Islamic elementary schools.

In the implemented DI at MI Roudhotul Banat, the process began with a diagnostic assessment, mapping students' learning styles. Teachers also assessed students' prior abilities by reviewing their previous academic reports. Using this data, teachers were able to respond appropriately to the students' needs.

However, formative assessments and efforts to improve instructional quality were not yet optimal. Teachers did not provide informative feedback that could help students and their parents in addressing learning challenges. One of the key challenges that teachers in the early grades faced was the difficulty of implementing DI continuously because not all subjects are easily adaptable to this approach. Moreover, teachers in the early grades in the Islamic primary school taught all subjects.

In terms of process differentiation, teachers organized students into small homogeneous groups, believing that studying within groups of similar abilities allowed students to learn at their own pace. Moreover, homogeneous grouping encouraged active participation, as described by the fourth-grade teacher:

Excerpt 6:

“If students are grouped heterogeneously, those who struggle tend to rely on their more capable peers. To support students in lower-performing groups, peer tutoring is used, particularly in fourth and fifth grades (L, RM).”

For the Qur'an Hadith subject, peer tutoring helped students memorize verses more easily. Students in the expert group would recite first, then assist those who struggled, alongside the teacher. Process differentiation based on learning styles was implemented through activity-based learning for kinesthetic learners, as illustrated in the

following excerpt:

Excerpt 7:

“In mathematics, I took the kinesthetic learners outside, creating a learning activity using flags to teach fractions. Students were asked to find partners holding equivalent fractions. Sensory learners, who learn by touch, understood better when the teacher interacted intensively, used engaging gestures, and provided individual attention (L, RM).”

The integration of the PPRA into co-curricular activities at MI Roudhotul Banat was implemented through a two-week project focusing on contextual, easily understandable, and up-to-date themes relevant to the students. According to one of the PPRA developmental team members, this year’s selected themes, such as local wisdom and entrepreneurship, were aligned with the context of the school and students’ needs. The values adopted from the PPRA included civility (*ta’addub*) and exemplary conduct (*Qudwah*) (Y, RM). Extracurricular activities offered by the Islamic elementary school included hadrah (Islamic art), young preacher competitions (pildacil), scouting, and science experiments.

The integration of the PPRA into instruction was achieved through a new paradigm of DI. One of the teachers who implemented DI shared that this method is carried out by considering each student’s unique needs (Excerpt 8). Overall, the organization of the lessons, as reflected in the schedule, used a block system (Excerpt 9). The P5 and PPRA embedded into intra-curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular.

Excerpt 8:

“In my opinion, DI considers the needs of the child. Each child has different characters, habits, learning styles, and family backgrounds, so the teacher must understand the child’s character and apply engaging learning strategies (L, RM).”

Excerpt 9:

“The implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile Rahmatan Lil’Alamin is crucial in Islamic elementary schools and should use a block scheduling system. If integrated daily, it would be too confusing for me (Y, RM).”

The teacher also stated that “integrating the P5 and PPRA into the teaching and learning process seems complicated because I have to make sure the values of both the P5 and PPRA can be achieved through learning. However, it is often difficult to design learning activities based on the learning objective, which does not always directly relate to the values of the P5 and PPRA. I need to work hard to develop differentiated-based learning that accommodates those values (Y, RM).”

The teachers’ statement above revealed that they felt unconfident about designing and integrating the P5 and PPRA values into the teaching and learning process. They expressed complaints regarding their confusion about the P5 and PPRA because they are too complicated.

Moreover, another teacher stated that numerous values emerged during learning. Through the DI approach, values from the PPRA such as tolerance (*tasamuh*) and cooperation began to develop among the students (Excerpt 10). Students became more receptive to classroom rules, apologized when using inappropriate language, and were more open with their teachers, even when making mistakes. This positive behavior was partly due to the teachers’ creation of classroom agreements and shared beliefs with students about regarding acceptable and unacceptable behaviors. These agreements were documented and displayed in the classroom. When students violated these rules, teachers would model appropriate behavior by providing examples, such as highlighting the respectful conduct of *santri*—students at Roudhotul Banat *pesantren* toward their teachers. The Islamic elementary school’s affiliation with the *pesantren* added significant value to the fostering of positive character development among students (Excerpt 11).

Excerpt 10:

“Examples of the Pancasila Student Profile Rahmatan Lil’Alamin values that often emerge among the students are tolerance and cooperation. Through group discussions, students learn to respect others’ opinions and practice teamwork. We continuously instill values like tolerance, civility, exemplary conduct, and collaboration in all subjects (L, RM).”

Excerpt 11:

“The internalization of rahmatan lil’alamin values is essential in Islamic elementary schools, especially since we are also affiliated with a pesantren. This allows students to emulate the exemplary behavior demonstrated by the *santri* (L, RM).”

The values of exemplary conduct (*qudwah*) and civility (*ta’addub*) were core principles that shaped students’ habits at this rural Islamic elementary school closely connected to a pesantren. The learning environment at the pesantren also influenced the formation of positive student behavior through value internalization. These findings reveal that this approach significantly improved the teaching and learning process with a student-centered approach. By tailoring activities to students’ needs, teachers accommodated students’ individual performance differences as seen in the math lessons.

3.3 Teacher Efforts to Tackle the Barriers to Implement Differentiated Instruction

The barriers encountered in the two sample Islamic elementary schools in this study can be described based on the readiness of the institutions and the characteristics of the students. At MI Badrussalam, with its highly diverse student population, teachers face greater challenges in implementing DI. The students come from various regions and backgrounds, requiring teachers to design a wide range of activities that accommodate different learning needs. Conversely, at MI Roudhotul Banat, a rural school with a more homogeneous student population, teachers find it easier to meet students’ needs. To address the diversity at MI Badrussalam, teachers prepare multiple activities and allow students to choose the ones that they are most interested in, rather than forcing them to follow a single learning path.

This approach has proven more effective in engaging students. Additionally, with smaller class sizes at MI Roudhotul Banat, teachers find it easier to manage the classroom and individualize instruction. Teachers suggest that class sizes should be kept proportional, with activities tailored to students’ interests and active responses provided to motivate less engaged students to participate. The Islamic elementary school’s affiliation with a pesantren also helps reinforce positive character traits, fostering a learning environment that naturally supports the development of the Pancasila Student Profile and Rahmatan lil’Alamin values. However, teachers still face challenges in integrating P5 and PPRA values smoothly into learning activities.

Generally, the problems in implementing DI are described in Table 3.

Table 3. Problems in the Implementation of the Differentiated Instruction

Aspect of DI Practices	Problems Faced	Teachers’ Effort
Designing the learning goals	Teachers’ ability in conducting need analyses and translating learning outcomes into learning objectives is still weak.	Teachers consulted their colleagues to learn how to formulate a syllabus that aligned with learning outcomes and students’ needs.
Determining differentiated based-learning activities	Opportunities for students to be more creative and innovative during lessons. They also unsure whether the P5 and PPRA values are reachable from the teaching and learning process.	They emphasized flexibility in content, process, and environment to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes. They chose the most related values of the P5 and PPRA that aligned with the learning activity.
Adjusting Classroom management	It is difficult to adjust a flexible grouping for a big classroom.	The teachers transformed a positive classroom environment and maintained a student-centered classroom.
Assigning assessment	Teachers face obstacles when integrating assessments with learning because of the lack of time and preparation for designing assessments.	They ensured that the assessments aligned with DI principles.

Despite the challenges faced as shown in table 3, teachers at both Islamic elementary schools have implemented several strategies for differentiated instruction, especially at MI Roudhotul Banat. Through content differentiation, teachers offer varied learning resources and materials suited to the students’ initial abilities. Process differentiation is evident in the way teachers modify their instructions, using different approaches to accommodate diverse learning needs and student capabilities. One example of process differentiation is flexible grouping, which allows for dynamic

class arrangements based on students' learning progress and requirements. The interviews revealed that both schools used DI and employed flexible strategies to adjust to students' need. The assessment process was also varied and included the KWL (Know-Want to Know-Learned) chart and portfolio.

4. Discussion

Based on the field notes, three aspects need to be strengthened in the implementation of DI at MI Badrussalam: (1) more effective classroom management, (2) optimization of learning management, and (3) integration of assessment with learning. Because these three aspects were essentials to the implementation of DI, the teachers tried to overcome the barriers by implementing various learning activities to fulfill students' needs based on their interests and students' learning styles. As Yuen (2022) stated, DI is considered a pedagogical approach (Pozas & Schneider, 2019) in which teachers play essential roles in fulfilling students' needs based on their interests and learning profiles. The teacher could provide proactive responses including a combination of flexible teaching methods (Zerai et al., 2021).

Additionally, teachers should conduct diagnostic assessments to explore students' learning preferences. The findings from both Islamic elementary schools indicate that at the start of the learning process, teachers identify students' learning styles and map their previous abilities through tests. This step allows teachers to recognize diversity in terms of students' interests, abilities, learning speed, learning styles, developmental stages, language proficiency, capability levels, attitudes, cultural backgrounds, and more (Hamdan, 2015). Conducting assessments early helps teachers provide appropriate support to enhance students' learning. Differentiation involves assessment results that focus on three key components: readiness, interest, and learning preferences (Nanang & Valcke, 2016; Thakur, 2014). DI is a teaching technique that adapts to students' needs by modifying instructional strategies. In DI, teaching methods may be adjusted according to students' learning preferences, requiring teachers to deeply understand their students as learners.

Because everyone learns in their own way, it is important to consider the needs of students when designing curricula and differentiating instruction in teaching and learning. To conduct teaching and learning effectively, teachers should consider the students' learning preferences, readiness, and learning profiles. As proposed in Gardner's multiple intelligences theory (Adare et al., 2023) considering the characteristics of students has become a key in teaching. This theory proposes that every student has their own potential and preferences in acquiring information and learning. DI could be demonstrated by content, processes, products (Joseph et al., 2013), which allowed students to choose how they acquired their knowledge. One way to differentiated content is to tier the content based on students' readiness levels.

Learners are the center of the learning process. From a humanistic perspective, learning is considered successful when students can understand themselves and their environment. Humanistic learning theory emphasizes accommodating the diversity of learners because each student is unique. According to this theory, the goal of education is to humanize individuals (Ursula, 2024). The fundamental concept of this theory is that every individual is unique and has their own potential, and thus, everyone deserves the opportunity to grow, learn, and develop according to their capabilities.

After mapping students' needs, teachers can design learning by preparing a variety of activities tailored to students' interests. This is crucial because one key aspect of differentiated learning is the provision of a range of activities that accommodate the learning needs of students (Chizhik, 2018). The focus of DI is teaching at the right level, which allows learners the flexibility to engage with content according to their abilities and needs, helping them grow according to their learning progress (Nachandiya, 2022). DI is an approach that accommodates students' learning needs based on their interests and learning profiles (Pozas & Schneider, 2019; Yuen, 2022). Tomlinson states that differentiation does not require teachers to individualize instruction for every student but instead to identify patterns of need within the classroom. It asks teachers to look for patterns of need (Tomlinson, 2013). Differentiated learning thus calls for teaching through various strategies that align with the diverse abilities of students (Yadav, 2020). This concept emphasizes Vygotsky's theory, which highlights the critical role of scaffolding in learning (Lasmawan & Budiarta, 2020). DI emerges from the scaffolding by adapting teaching strategies and materials to students' needs.

Establishing an effective learning environment is a fundamental principle in any instructional model. This study shows that teachers were able to implement differentiation in content, process, and product. Although the teachers at MI Badrussalam expressed difficulty in designing varied and relevant assignments, they have successfully created diverse learning activities. For instance, differentiated management is evident through content modifications using multimedia such as text, graphics, audio, and video. McLoughlin and Lee (2010) argued that learning environments

centered on students allow them to control and manage their learning processes by providing support to define their learning goals, structure their learning (in terms of both content and process), and communicate with peers to achieve their objectives.

The inability of teachers to engage all students actively correlates with the failure to achieve learning goals (Mitchell, 2018). Additionally, this study indicates that large class sizes negatively affect the optimal implementation of DI. This finding aligns with the research of Smith (2012), which suggests that differentiation is more effectively applied in smaller class models. Furthermore, another finding suggests that teacher also ever demonstrated single learning instruction for the whole class, but then teacher realize that big class size was not effectively for implementing DI.

Based on the results of field notes across both institutions, it is evident that the greatest challenge for teachers in facilitating DI is designing learning activities that truly align with students' learning preferences. Teachers may prepare a variety of activities, yet students may show limited interest in participating. This aspect is a significant component of the differentiation process (Pedler, 2020). Students' interest plays a crucial role in fostering engagement and interaction in learning (Harackiewicz, 2016).

Another key component that requires teachers' attention in the successful implementation of differentiated learning is the accuracy in organizing learning through grouping strategies. The findings reveal that the teachers in the two Islamic elementary schools employed different grouping tendencies. Teachers at MI Badrussalam tended to use homogeneous grouping, whereas the teachers at MI Roudhotul Banat preferred heterogeneous grouping. In homogeneous groups, teachers can focus on assisting students with lower abilities while providing more challenging tasks to advanced students, fostering their independence in learning. In heterogeneous groups, higher-achieving students can support their peers. Ideally, grouping in differentiated learning should be flexible, addressing students' needs to enhance their learning motivation (Gibbs, 2021).

This research also found that teachers at Badrussalam Islamic elementary school still conducted the same assessment (students worked on the same assignment) each session. This practice occurred due to a lack of time and preparation before implementing a differentiated learning. This fact then convinced the teachers to be better prepared and to design integrated learning assessments.

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the application of differentiated learning aligns with Tomlinson's (2013) concept, which aims to create a diverse classroom by offering opportunities to access content, process ideas, and improve individual outcomes. This ensures students learn more effectively. The effectiveness of differentiated learning can be enhanced through flexible grouping, varied learning activities, diverse media usage, the integration of multiple learning resources, and flexible learning schedules.

In rural Islamic elementary schools affiliated with Islamic boarding schools, where there is a strong focus on internalizing religious teachings of student behavior, the PPRA is embedded in every lesson. This deep integration fosters the internalization of religious values and principles, reflected in both intra-curricular and co-curricular activities. Students in these two Islamic elementary schools exhibited diverse characteristics in terms of social, cultural, linguistic, and other differences. To accommodate this diversity, teachers need to employ various teaching models appropriate to the classroom context, such as discovery learning and problem-based learning. This aligns with the view of (Arends & Kilcher, 2010) Arends' view that in a differentiated classroom, teachers begin instruction based on students' needs and utilizing multiple instructional models to ensure students achieve their potential. Classrooms characterized by cultural, linguistic, and cognitive diversity require a range of strategies to differentiate instruction, ensuring that the varied needs of students are met. Through various activities and opportunities to build learning pathways, differentiated learning is also expected to develop students' 21st century skills (Eikeland & Ohna, 2022). Fundamentally, the differentiated learning model promotes student-centered instruction and provides greater opportunities for personalization and differentiation in learning (Sota, 2016). DI is a complex strategy that requires preparation, practice, and a variety of learning resources (D'Intino & Wang, 2021). Teachers may implement flexible grouping and offer choices by tailoring instructions to achieve greater learning success.

5. Conclusion

DI as a new pedagogical approach in which teachers fulfill students' learning needs, but it seems rarely implemented by teachers because it might create a huge obstacle. Nevertheless, this study provides a nuanced exploration of differentiated learning practices and obstacles encountered by teachers, and it describes teachers tackled the problem to encourage their colleagues to implement DI in two Islamic elementary schools located in urban and rural areas. In the urban setting which was characterized by the variety of students' characteristic, the teachers tried to fulfill

students' need in the teaching and learning process through heterogenous grouping. Conversely, it is easier to organize schools in the rural areas that are affiliated with pesantren that teach internal values such as civility (*ta'addub*) and exemplary behavior (*qudwah*). Moreover, in a school with a more homogeneous student population, it is easier to fulfill the students' needs. Teachers allow students to choose the most interesting activity and implement homogenous grouping to help them create their learning path. Both grouping models were effective because DI applied flexible grouping.

This finding also highlights a possible obstacle to implement differentiation learning through content, process, and product. Teachers with a heterogenous group of students in a big class feel it is more difficult to organize the class than to implement DI in a small classroom. Therefore, teachers need to ensure that the class is well organized with a proportional size so they can respond proactively to diverse students. DI is a new pedagogical approach that allows traditional instruction to succeed in an interactive learning environment, and it solves practical constraints related to learning in the digital age at Islamic elementary schools. Despite our insightful findings, there are limitations to consider. First, the small number of participants in this study, comprising only two Islamic schools representing two areas, is not meant to generalize this conclusion to a bigger context. Future research should capture a broader range of differentiated learning practices in Indonesian Islamic elementary schools to identify a richer complexity of differentiation practices and explain how teachers tackled the problem. In the future, a modified differentiated-based learning strategy may be applied, with mixed-methods approaches that may offer a more comprehensive finding.

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