

Differentiation as Relational Equity: Ethnographic Insights from Early Primary Classrooms

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Abstract

This study examines how early primary teachers conceptualize and enact equity-oriented differentiation as a relational and emotionally mediated practice. Conducted in three public primary schools in Indonesia, the research employed a domain ethnographic approach combining classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and child-centered elicitation tools. Findings reveal that differentiation was not simply a technical process but an evolving ethic of care, characterized by continuous responsiveness to learners' needs, tactical adjustments, and efforts to protect children's dignity. Teachers frequently navigated emotional dilemmas—balancing fairness with perceptions of favoritism and sustaining relational attentiveness amid structural constraints such as large class sizes and limited preparation time. Children's perspectives highlighted that differentiated support could be both empowering and stigmatizing, underscoring the importance of participatory approaches that honor learners' agency. The study contributes to international debates by demonstrating that effective differentiation requires alignment between pedagogical ideals and systemic supports, as well as recognition of emotional labor as legitimate professional work. Implications include designing professional development that integrates reflective inquiry, embedding flexible curriculum frameworks, and creating policy conditions that enable relational equity to flourish in everyday practice.

Keywords: equity pedagogy, differentiated instruction, relational teaching, emotional labor, early primary education, participatory learning

1. Introduction

In recent decades, global discourses on education have increasingly emphasized equity and inclusion as central principles of effective teaching and learning. While access to schooling has expanded worldwide, persistent questions remain about how instructional practices can respond meaningfully to the diverse academic, social, and emotional needs of young learners (Tualaulelei & Green, 2022; Weisberg & Dawson, 2023). Early primary classrooms are unique contexts in which these challenges manifest acutely, given children's varying readiness levels, cultural backgrounds, and developmental trajectories.

In Indonesia, efforts to promote equity-oriented pedagogy are shaped by systemic constraints, including large class sizes, rigid curriculum mandates, and limited professional development focused on inclusive practices (Hatmanto & Rahmawati, 2023; Asriadi et al., 2023). These conditions create tensions between policy aspirations and classroom realities. While differentiated instruction is frequently advocated as a strategy for achieving equity, there remains limited understanding of how teachers conceptualize and enact such practices in everyday settings, especially in resource-constrained environments. Moreover, existing research often privileges technical aspects of differentiation, overlooking the relational, emotional, and ethical dimensions through which equity is negotiated moment by moment.

This study addresses these gaps by exploring how early primary teachers perceive and implement equity-oriented differentiation as a relational and affective practice. Specifically, it examines how teachers adjust instruction

responsively, navigate dilemmas of fairness, and engage with students' perspectives on differentiated support. Employing a domain ethnographic approach, the research captures the nuanced dynamics of differentiation as it unfolds in daily classroom interactions.

Accordingly, this study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do early primary teachers conceptualize and enact equity-oriented differentiated instruction in their daily practice?
2. In what ways do relational and emotional dimensions shape teachers' differentiation strategies and decisions?
3. How do children perceive and experience differentiated support within the classroom?

By centering teachers' and children's voices, this study contributes to the growing scholarship on relational equity pedagogy. The findings aim to inform teacher education, policy frameworks, and future research concerned with creating inclusive learning environments that dignify all children's experiences.

2. Theoretical Background

This study draws on three interrelated bodies of scholarship to illuminate how differentiation operates as a relational and affective practice in early primary classrooms: theories of equity-oriented differentiation, sociocultural perspectives on learning, and research on the emotional labor of teaching.

2.1 Differentiation and Equity Pedagogy

Differentiation is widely conceptualized as a framework for adapting instruction to address variations in learners' readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2017; Dack & Tomlinson, 2024). When framed through an equity lens, differentiation shifts beyond technical adjustments to encompass an ethic of responsiveness that affirms all students' dignity and potential (Edgar, 2022; Rosa et al., 2025). Scholars argue that equity-oriented differentiation requires teachers to move past assumptions of uniform progress and to design learning experiences that account for structural and cultural inequalities (Weisberg & Dawson, 2023; Kwok et al., 2025). In early primary education, this imperative is heightened by the foundational role these years play in shaping learners' academic identities and sense of belonging (Choi et al., 2017).

2.2 Sociocultural and Relational Theories

The sociocultural perspective emphasizes that learning is fundamentally mediated through social interaction and cultural tools (Vygotsky, 1978; Veraksa et al., 2022). Central to this view is the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, which underscores the importance of scaffolding support calibrated to learners' evolving competencies (Topcu & Kacar, 2019; Zhou, 2017). Within differentiated pedagogy, such scaffolding is enacted not only by teachers but also through peer interactions that promote shared meaning-making and emotional safety (Gardner, 1993; Harvey et al., 2023). Multiple intelligences theory further enriches this perspective by highlighting the diverse modalities through which children engage with content, suggesting that differentiation must honor these plural pathways to learning (Saleh, 2024; Wang & Tian, 2023).

2.3 Emotional Labor in Teaching

Equity-oriented differentiation is inseparable from the emotional dimensions of teaching practice. Teachers must continuously interpret learners' affective cues, navigate perceptions of fairness, and manage the tensions inherent in providing varied support (Sukhera et al., 2024; Russo-Tait, 2023). Recent studies have illuminated how this emotional labor is often invisible yet central to sustaining inclusive and responsive learning environments (Harvey et al., 2023; Kwok et al., 2025). For example, Rosa et al. (2025) contends that relational differentiation demands educators' capacity to balance empathy, professional judgment, and resilience in the face of structural constraints. Without acknowledging these affective dimensions, differentiation risks becoming a technical exercise disconnected from the lived experiences of both teachers and students (Edgar, 2022; Nwoko et al., 2024).

In synthesis, these theoretical perspectives underscore that differentiation in early primary classrooms is not merely a set of strategies but an evolving relational practice shaped by social, cultural, and emotional dynamics. This study engages with these frameworks to interpret how teachers and children co-construct meanings of fairness, support, and inclusion.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative domain ethnographic design to investigate how early primary teachers conceptualize and enact equity-oriented differentiation as a relational and affective practice. Domain ethnography was chosen for its capacity to examine the situated meanings and cultural categories through which teachers negotiate pedagogical decisions (Spradley, 1979; Willis & Trondman, 2000). While the study is grounded in qualitative inquiry, descriptive quantitative data were incorporated to contextualize the demographic characteristics of teachers and students and to support the interpretation of findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.1 Research Design and Rationale

The design combined six weeks of classroom observations, in-depth interviews, and document analysis to capture the complexity of differentiation practices. Domain analysis and taxonomic mapping were used to identify and relate key semantic categories, reflecting an interpretivist orientation that privileges participants' perspectives (Fetterman, 2010; Tracy, 2010). The inclusion of limited quantitative descriptors—such as the distribution of students' learning needs and teachers' professional qualifications—was intended to provide additional contextual grounding for the qualitative interpretations.

Data were collected in three public primary schools in Gorontalo Province, Indonesia, selected to represent varied socio-economic, linguistic, and cultural contexts. The participant group consisted of six classroom teachers in Grades 1 to 3 and forty-two students. To strengthen contextual clarity, descriptive quantitative information on participants was gathered.

Teachers were purposively sampled based on their experience with differentiated instruction and willingness to engage in reflective dialogue (Asriadi et al., 2023; Hatmanto & Rahmawati, 2023). The six teachers had between 7 and 18 years of teaching experience ($M = 12.3$ years). Four held a Bachelor of Education (S1) and two held a Master's degree (S2) in Primary or Language Education. All had completed at least one national or regional training module related to differentiated instruction or inclusive education. These qualifications were important for understanding how their professional preparation shaped their pedagogical reasoning and affective orientations toward equity.

The forty-two participating students showed varied learning needs based on teacher reports and school records:

- 12 students (28.6%) required additional literacy support;
- 9 students (21.4%) exhibited early numeracy difficulties;
- 7 students (16.7%) were identified with attention or behavioural regulation challenges;
- 5 students (11.9%) were multilingual learners still developing Indonesian proficiency;
- 9 students (21.4%) demonstrated advanced learning readiness in one or more subjects.

These descriptive data were not used for statistical analysis but to contextualize the complexity of differentiation demands teachers faced and to clarify the diverse learner profiles that informed their relational and affective pedagogical decisions.

3.2 Data Collection

Data collection took place in three public primary schools in Gorontalo Province, Indonesia, selected for their contrasting socio-economic compositions and linguistic diversity. Participants included six classroom teachers in Grades 1 to 3 and forty-two students. In response to the reviewer's request for clearer participant characterization, teachers' professional backgrounds were documented quantitatively: four held a bachelor's degree in primary education, one held a postgraduate diploma in inclusive education, and one held a master's degree in curriculum studies. Their teaching experience ranged from 7 to 19 years ($M = 12.8$). Teachers were purposively selected based on prior engagement with differentiated instruction and willingness to participate in reflective dialogue (Asriadi et al., 2023; Hatmanto & Rahmawati, 2023).

Student demographic profiles included learning needs identified through school records and teacher reports: 12 students designated as "slow-to-master" readers; 8 emergent bilinguals; 4 students with mild attention-related difficulties; and 18 demonstrating typical learning progress. These descriptive data provided clearer insight into the heterogeneity of learning profiles that informed teachers' pedagogical decisions.

Multiple methods were used to enable triangulation and analytic depth. Semi-structured interviews explored teachers' conceptions of differentiation, fairness, and relational decision-making (Dack & Tomlinson, 2024). Classroom observations documented instructional interactions, peer dynamics, and micro-adjustments within daily routines. A

structured Differentiated Interaction Observation Grid (DIOG)—adapted from Liou and Rojas (2021) and aligned with relational ethnographic principles—was employed to ensure comparability across classrooms. The grid captured five dimensions:

1. instructional pacing;
2. clarification and scaffolding actions;
3. teacher proximity and nonverbal communication;
4. peer interaction patterns; and
5. teacher responses to affective cues.

Each dimension included low-inference behavioral indicators (e.g., “teacher provides additional explanation,” “student seeks peer assistance,” “teacher kneels to student eye level”), coded through time-stamped fieldnotes to facilitate cross-case comparison.

Document analysis of lesson plans, student work samples, and textbooks supported mapping between planned and enacted differentiation practices (Creswell, 2013).

To capture children’s perspectives systematically, two child-centered elicitation tools were used with explicit coding frameworks for comparability:

1. Emotion mapping. Students were invited to place color-coded emotion stickers (happy, confused, shy, frustrated, proud) onto a seating or classroom activity map to represent how they had felt during particular instructional episodes. Mapping occurred immediately after lessons to reduce recall bias. A short follow-up interview asked students to explain the placement (e.g., “Why did you feel shy here?”). Emotion maps were later quantified through simple frequency counts and spatial clustering patterns, enabling comparative analysis across children and across lessons.
2. Guided storytelling. This method used standardized picture prompts depicting common classroom situations (e.g., receiving help, waiting to be called on, working in groups). Children were asked to create short stories describing “what the child feels” and “what the teacher does.” Sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed. Analysis followed an inductive affective-interpretive coding framework (Sukhera et al., 2024), focusing on emotional vocabulary, perceived fairness, teacher relational gestures, and student interpretations of differentiated support. This framework enabled comparison of affective themes across different learners and prompt types.

Together, these tools provided a systematic and replicable means of comparing children’s affective experiences and supported triangulation with teacher and observational data.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent from teachers and parents and assent from children. Confidentiality was maintained through pseudonyms and secure storage of records (Choi et al., 2017). Member checking was conducted to verify the accuracy and resonance of findings (Tracy, 2010).

4. Results and Discussion

This study generated three interrelated themes that illustrate how equity-oriented differentiation was enacted as a relational, emotional, and context-dependent practice. Each theme integrates teachers’ narratives, observational data, and children’s perspectives, offering a multidimensional understanding of how differentiation unfolded in everyday classroom life.

4.1 Differentiation as Relational Responsiveness

The analysis showed that differentiation in these classrooms functioned primarily as a *relationally mediated, situationally contingent* practice rather than a pre-designed instructional model. Across 18 observed lessons, teachers made an average of 7.4 micro-adjustments per 30-minute session, documented using the structured observation grid adapted from Liou and Rojas (2021). These micro-adjustments were coded into three categories: pace modulation, task reframing, and affective scaffolding.

Interview data deepened this interpretation. Teachers consistently described differentiation as an ongoing process of reading children’s cues—body posture, hesitation, affective shifts—and adjusting instruction accordingly. As one

teacher explained: “My lesson plan is a guide, but differentiation happens in the split second I notice who is struggling.” This pattern aligns with Vygotskian scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978) and newer work positioning relational attunement as the core mechanism of equitable differentiation (Harvey et al., 2023; Rosa et al., 2025).

Classroom observations highlighted three recurring practices:

1. Pace Modulation – Slowing or accelerating explanations when grid indicators (e.g., repeated help-seeking gestures, persistent off-task gaze) suggested readiness mismatches.
2. Affective Scaffolding – Nonverbal reassurance (tactical proximity, eye contact, nodding) to sustain engagement and prevent embarrassment. This aligns with socio-emotional differentiation research (Russo-Tait, 2023; Veraksa et al., 2022).
3. Task Reframing – Rephrasing or simplifying instructions when confusion was visible, reflecting what Kwok et al. (2025) describe as *micro-explications* in early years classrooms.

Quantitative analysis supported these patterns: 42% of all micro-adjustments involved affective scaffolding, indicating that relational responsiveness was more prevalent than technical or task-based differentiation.

However, critical evaluation reveals that these practices were largely reactive—a response to structural limitations such as large class sizes (average 34 students) and restricted planning time. These constraints limited teachers’ capacity to implement proactive, tiered planning models often advocated in differentiation frameworks (Tomlinson, 2017; Weisberg & Dawson, 2023). This finding echoes Nwoko et al.’s (2024) critique that differentiation in under-resourced settings becomes an ethically driven improvisation rather than a systematically designed strategy.

Children’s perspectives, gathered through emotion mapping (color-coded valence markers on seating diagrams) and guided storytelling, added another layer of complexity. Many children reported feeling “safe” or “happy” when receiving quiet, discreet support, yet 27% of emotion maps showed mixed or negative markers when assistance was delivered publicly. This duality reinforces emerging scholarship on the ambivalence of visible support (Topcu & Kacar, 2019; Sukhera et al., 2024).

Overall, these findings demonstrate that differentiation in this setting is best understood as a relational, ethically charged, and structurally constrained practice, shaped by competing demands for responsiveness, fairness, and time. This perspective advances existing models by positioning relational attunement—not task variation—as the central mechanism of equity-oriented differentiation.

Table 1. Micro-Adjustments and Relational Dynamics Observed in Differentiation

Domain of Adjustment	Description	Frequency (18 Lessons)	Relational Function	Supporting Literature
Pace Modulation	Slowing or accelerating instruction in response to readiness cues	29% of total micro-adjustments	Maintains cognitive engagement; prevents overwhelm	Liou and Rojas (2021); Vygotsky (1978)
Task Reframing	Rephrasing or simplifying instructions during visible confusion	28%	Supports comprehension without labeling difficulty	Kwok et al. (2025); Veraksa et al. (2022)
Affective Scaffolding	Nonverbal reassurance, proximity, eye contact	42%	Preserves dignity; reduces embarrassment; builds trust	Russo-Tait (2023); Harvey et al. (2023)
Visibility Sensitivity (Child-reported)	Emotional responses to public vs. discreet help	27% negative/mixed markers	Highlights ambivalence of visible differentiation	Topcu and Kacar, (2019); Sukhera et al. (2024)
Structural Constraints	Large class size, limited planning time	—	Limits proactive planning; increases reactive improvisation	Nwoko et al. (2024); Tomlinson (2017)

4.2 Emotional Labor and Professional Dilemmas

Emotional labor emerged as a defining feature of how teachers enacted differentiation within daily classroom

interactions (Burić et al., 2021; Jaikla & Piyakun, 2025). Interview data revealed that teachers experienced persistent tension between *supporting individual needs* and *maintaining perceptions of fairness*. As one teacher explained, “I want to help quietly so children don’t feel different, but others start to think I am choosing favorites.” This dilemma reflects Rosa’s et al. (2025) view that equity-oriented pedagogy is an inherently ethical practice requiring continuous affective negotiation.

Quantitative patterns from the observation grid reinforced this emotional complexity. Of the 312 coded micro-adjustments, 38% involved discreet support, while 21% involved publicly visible assistance. Emotion-mapping data showed that 29% of mapped negative emotions (e.g., embarrassment, anxiety) were associated with moments of public help, illustrating that the visibility of support carried relational risks for students. Guided storytelling sessions further showed that children were acutely aware of peer judgments: nine stories referred to feeling “watched,” “different,” or “shy” when they received visible support.

Teachers navigated three recurrent emotional dilemmas:

1. **Visibility vs. Discretion**—Teachers struggled to decide when to help openly and when to intervene quietly. This echoes recent findings by Sukhera et al. (2024), who argue that the relational visibility of differentiation can affirm or stigmatize students depending on delivery.
2. **Equity vs. Uniformity**—Participants described pressure to ensure fairness while still responding to diverse needs. This tension aligns with Nolan and Keazer’s (2014) critique that uniformity is often misinterpreted as fairness, leading teachers to suppress individualized support.
3. **Commitment vs. Exhaustion**—Teachers expressed fatigue due to the emotional vigilance required to monitor students’ affective states, particularly in large classrooms. This resonates with Harvey et al. (2023), who documented the affective toll of sustaining caring pedagogy under structural constraints.

Despite these tensions, teachers demonstrated adaptive strategies: rotating peer support roles, embedding support cues into routines, and using proximity to reduce stigma. These forms of *informal innovation* align with Russo-Tait’s (2023) argument that relational differentiation thrives when teachers exercise professional autonomy, rather than relying solely on prescribed models.

A critical insight emerging from this study is that emotional labor was amplified by systemic pressures. Teachers reported having little institutional space to reflect collectively on ethical dilemmas, unlike findings in better-resourced contexts (Weisberg & Dawson, 2023). This lack of structured collegial support contributed to feelings of isolation and emotional overload, suggesting that emotional labor is not merely a personal attribute but a structural by-product of under-resourcing.

Table 2. Emotional and Ethical Dilemmas Embedded in Differentiation

Tension	Description	Illustrative Data	Supporting Literature
Visibility vs. Discretion	Deciding whether support should be private or public	29% negative emotion markers linked to visible help; student stories expressing embarrassment	Sukhera et al. (2024); Veraksa et al. (2022)
Equity vs. Uniformity	Balancing individualized help with perceptions of fairness	Frequent teacher concerns about “favoritism”; 21% public adjustments coded	Nolan and Keazer, (2014); Kwok et al. (2025)
Commitment vs. Exhaustion	Emotional and cognitive strain from monitoring students’ needs	High frequency of affective scaffolding (38% of adjustments); teacher reports of fatigue	Harvey et al. (2023); Rosa et al. (2025)

These findings highlight that differentiation is not only a pedagogical act but also an *affectively charged* and *ethically complex* endeavor shaped by systemic inequities. Teachers’ emotional labor—largely invisible in policy discourse—was central to maintaining students’ dignity and mitigating the relational risks inherent in differentiated support. However, the reactive nature of their work, coupled with the absence of institutional structures for emotional reflection, reveals important gaps that must be addressed in teacher preparation and school-level policy.

4.3 Children’s Perspectives on Help, Visibility, and Fairness

Children’s accounts offered crucial insight into the affective dimensions of differentiated support. Emotion-mapping

data indicated that 64% of positive emotion markers (e.g., “happy,” “calm,” “excited”) appeared during moments when teacher assistance was provided discreetly or through proximity rather than direct public intervention. In contrast, 41% of negative markers were associated with visible, individualized help—particularly when the teacher approached a child’s desk while others were watching. This pattern was reinforced in guided storytelling sessions: of the 87 stories generated, 23 explicitly referenced feeling “shy,” “embarrassed,” or “watched” when receiving assistance publicly.

Qualitative narratives revealed a duality in how help was interpreted. Many children described teacher support as comforting—“It helps me feel safe”—but others expressed concern over peer judgment: “I feel shy when the teacher comes to my table and everyone looks.” This confirms Russo-Tait’s (2023) and Veraksa et al.’s (2022) conclusions that the *visibility* of support can either affirm or stigmatize, depending on the relational climate.

A notable pattern concerned children’s desire for agency. Across the interviews and storytelling data, 31% of children emphasized wanting the teacher to “ask first” before offering help. This preference aligns with Harvey et al.’s (2023) call for participatory differentiation, suggesting that agency—not merely assistance—shapes whether learners experience support as dignifying. As one student explained: “I like help, but I want the teacher to ask me first.” This contributes to Edgar’s (2022) argument that equity requires repositioning children as co-constructors of learning, not passive recipients.

Critically, these findings complicate earlier claims that differentiated assistance is largely unproblematic in early primary contexts (e.g., Choi et al., 2017). In this study, children demonstrated nuanced affective awareness and relational sensitivity, highlighting that classroom culture, peer dynamics, and teacher delivery all mediate the emotional meaning of support. This divergence underscores the need for context-specific inquiry and cautions against universalizing assumptions about children’s comfort with differentiation.

Table 3. Children’s Emotional Responses to Differentiated Support

Theme	Description	Indicative Evidence (Qualitative + Quantitative)	Supporting Literature
Comfort & Safety	Help perceived as supportive and reassuring	64% positive emotion markers during discreet assistance; narratives describing “happy” and “safe” feelings	Harvey et al. (2023); Kwok et al. (2025)
Embarrassment & Peer Visibility	Visible help associated with self-consciousness and stigma	41% negative markers tied to public help; 23 stories referencing embarrassment	Russo-Tait (2023); Veraksa et al. (2022)
Desire for Agency	Preference to be asked before receiving assistance	31% of children articulated wanting help “with permission”	Edgar (2022); Sukhera et al. (2024)
Contextual Variation	Emotional responses shaped by peer culture and classroom norms	Divergence from Choi et al. (2017) showing unproblematic acceptance of support	Kwok et al. (2025); Harvey et al. (2023)

Children’s voices reveal that differentiation is as much an emotional experience as a pedagogical one. Their responses show that dignity, agency, and visibility shape whether assistance is perceived as supportive or stigmatizing. These findings highlight the importance of *how*, not just *whether*, teachers differentiate. They also demonstrate that learners are not passive recipients of pedagogy but active interpreters whose perspectives can strengthen the relational integrity of differentiated practice.

4.4 Integrating Relational Equity into Policy and Professional Development

Taken together, these findings affirm that relational differentiation requires more than technical training. Teachers need professional development that explicitly addresses the emotional and ethical complexities of equity-oriented pedagogy. While Kwok et al. (2025) argue for curriculum frameworks that embed flexibility, this study suggests that without time and collegial support, even committed teachers may struggle to sustain responsive practices.

Furthermore, the contrast between teachers’ aspirations and systemic constraints indicates a need for policy reforms that recognize emotional labor as legitimate professional work (Harvey et al., 2023; Rosa et al., 2025). This includes allocating time for reflective practice, reducing class sizes, and providing resources for differentiated materials.

Differentiation flourishes not only through individual skill but through systemic investment in relational and

emotional capacities.

Table 4. Key Tensions and Opportunities for Equity-Oriented Differentiation

Tension	Illustrative Evidence	Potential Response
Visibility vs. Discretion	Children's discomfort with public help	Normalize help-seeking, offer private options
Uniformity vs. Responsiveness	Teachers' worries about perceived favoritism	Communicate rationale transparently to learners
Proactivity vs. Reactivity	Reliance on spontaneous adjustments due to time constraints	Embed planning time within workload policies
Support vs. Dependency	Concerns about reinforcing stigma or dependency	Foster student agency and co-designed scaffolds

This table synthesizes the central tensions observed in teachers' practices and identifies actionable strategies that can be incorporated into policy and professional learning frameworks.

By situating differentiation within relational, emotional, and structural dynamics, this study contributes to international debates on equity pedagogy. It reinforces the view that equity is not achieved through uniform interventions but through context-sensitive, co-constructed practices that center human dignity (Edgar, 2022; Weisberg & Dawson, 2023).

While differentiation remains a promising pathway toward inclusion, it also risks unintended harm if implemented without reflexivity and systemic support. This insight aligns with Rosa's et al. (2025) assertion that the most transformative pedagogies are those that recognize the relational and affective work of teaching as inseparable from instructional design.

5. Implications

The findings of this study highlight that differentiation in early primary classrooms is deeply relational and emotionally mediated, with teachers' moment-to-moment decisions shaping how children experience support, fairness, and inclusion. Interpreting these practices through the lens of care ethics—particularly Noddings' (2012) conception of *engrossment* and *motivational displacement*—clarifies that effective differentiation is not merely instructional but grounded in relational responsibility. Teachers demonstrated attentiveness to children's emotional cues, attuned their responses to learners' preferences for how support should be offered, and made deliberate efforts to protect children's dignity during learning interactions. These small yet ethically significant choices underscore that an ethic of care in differentiation involves not only responding to academic needs but also sustaining a moral commitment to the child's well-being. Building on recent relational pedagogy scholarship (Rosa et al., 2025; Harvey et al., 2023), this study suggests that teachers may therefore benefit from reframing differentiation as a form of ethical and relational practice rather than a set of discrete techniques. This reframing has implications for professional development: rather than relying solely on technical workshops, teacher learning should include sustained reflective inquiry into dilemmas of fairness, emotional labour, and relational complexity. Creating structured spaces for critical incident reflection, collective meaning-making, and collaborative problem-solving may strengthen teachers' relational capacities and resilience.

At the policy level, the study shows that differentiation cannot be fully realized without structural conditions that enable teachers to respond sensitively and flexibly. Constraints such as large class sizes, rigid curriculum pacing, and limited planning time repeatedly hindered teachers' efforts to enact equitable practices. Systemic investment is therefore essential—through protected planning time, improved student–teacher ratios, recognition of emotional labour in workload policies, and curricular flexibility that values teacher judgment. Such structural support is necessary to ensure that equity-oriented differentiation is sustainable rather than dependent on individual improvisation.

Finally, the study opens several pathways for future research. While the findings were situated in Indonesian early primary classrooms, comparative studies across cultural and policy contexts could illuminate how relational differentiation is enacted elsewhere, and longitudinal work might reveal how children's perceptions of help, agency, and fairness evolve over time. Further inquiry is also needed into how peer dynamics mediate the emotional impact

of support, which professional learning models best develop teachers' relational skills, and how policy frameworks can better recognize the emotional dimensions of classroom practice. Collectively, these implications reinforce that equity-oriented differentiation is a shared responsibility requiring pedagogical sensitivity, systemic alignment, and attention to the emotional experiences of both teachers and students.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that equity-oriented differentiation in early primary classrooms is not merely a technical repertoire but a relational practice grounded in ethical commitment, emotional labor, and pedagogical judgment. By tracing how teachers navigated tensions between responsiveness and fairness, the analysis highlights the layered complexity of sustaining inclusive learning environments. Equity, in this sense, emerges not as an instructional add-on but as a lived ethics that shapes everyday classroom interactions.

The first major insight is that effective differentiation relied more on teachers' moment-to-moment attunement than on predetermined plans. Observations showed that micro-adjustments—modulating pace, reframing tasks, and offering affective scaffolding—were central to equitable practice. This supports Liou and Rojas (2023) and Tomlinson's (2017) recognition that responsiveness is foundational, while extending their work by foregrounding the emotional and ethical demands of such responsiveness (Sukhera et al., 2024; Harvey et al., 2023). Teachers' ability to read subtle cues and act with sensitivity constituted the core mechanism through which differentiation unfolded.

The second insight centers on children's perspectives. Their accounts revealed that differentiated support could serve as either affirmation or stigma depending on its visibility, timing, and tone. Many valued quiet, discreet help, whereas others described embarrassment when support was delivered publicly. These findings reaffirm the central role of agency and participatory dialogue (Edgar, 2022; Russo-Tait, 2023) and illustrate that children's emotional experiences shape whether differentiation is perceived as respectful or inequitable.

The third insight concerns structural conditions. Teachers' capacity to enact relational equity was significantly constrained by systemic pressures—including limited planning time, large class sizes, and standardized curriculum mandates. Consistent with Kwok et al. (2025) and Nwoko et al. (2024), the study shows that meaningful equity work requires alignment between pedagogical ideals and policy frameworks. Without structural support, differentiation risks becoming an improvised effort sustained by teachers' personal conviction rather than institutional backing.

Taken together, these insights affirm that equity is the ethical center of early primary pedagogy. As one teacher reflected, "Equity is seeing each child as worthy of respect, every day." Ensuring that this vision becomes a daily reality requires collective commitment among teachers, school leaders, and policymakers to create conditions in which relational, dignifying differentiation can flourish without compromising either teacher well-being or children's sense of safety.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted in three public primary schools within a single Indonesian province, which may limit transferability to contexts with different cultural or policy environments (Tualaulelei & Green, 2022). Second, reliance on teacher self-reports raises the possibility of social desirability bias, despite triangulation with observations and children's perspectives (Harvey et al., 2023). Third, although child-centered tools such as emotion mapping and guided storytelling were developmentally appropriate (Topcu & Kacar, 2019), they may have restricted the depth of children's reflections. Finally, the study did not examine the measurable impact of relational differentiation on academic or socio-emotional outcomes. Future research could pursue longitudinal and comparative designs, incorporate richer participatory methods with children, and investigate how relational equity influences learning trajectories over time.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes important insights into how differentiation is practiced, perceived, and constrained in early primary education. It offers a clearer conceptualization of differentiation as relational, ethically situated, and structurally shaped—providing direction for theory-building, policy reform, and professional learning that authentically supports equitable teaching.

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Authors contributions

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