

The Implementation of Differentiated Instruction and Its Impact on the Teaching Stress Levels of Islamic Education (PAI) Teachers at SMAN 2 Situbondo

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the practice of differentiated learning carried out by Islamic Education (PAI) teachers at SMAN 2 Situbondo and to identify the obstacles encountered during its implementation. The research employed a qualitative approach with a field research design. Data were obtained through observation, interviews, and documentation, while the validity of the data was ensured by applying source and technique triangulation, supported by reference materials and member checking. The process of data analysis involved stages of collection, reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that differentiated learning strategies covering content, process, and product have been applied in classroom instruction, yet challenges persist, particularly regarding teachers' limitations in adapting strategies to the diverse needs of students. The study concludes that enhancing teachers' competence in differentiated instruction is essential to minimize teaching stress and improve the overall effectiveness of the learning process.

Keywords: Implementation; Islamic Education Teachers; Differentiated Learning; Teaching Stress.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji pelaksanaan pembelajaran diferensiasi oleh guru Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) di SMAN 2 Situbondo serta mengungkap

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hambatan yang muncul dalam proses penerapannya. Pendekatan penelitian yang digunakan adalah kualitatif dengan jenis penelitian lapangan (field research). Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui observasi, wawancara, dan dokumentasi, sedangkan keabsahan data diuji menggunakan triangulasi sumber dan teknik, dilengkapi dengan bahan referensi serta member check. Proses analisis data mencakup tahap pengumpulan, reduksi, penyajian, hingga penarikan kesimpulan. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pembelajaran diferensiasi dengan strategi konten, proses, dan produk telah diterapkan di sekolah, namun pelaksanaannya masih menemui kendala, terutama terkait keterbatasan guru dalam menyesuaikan strategi dengan kebutuhan individu siswa. Kesimpulan penelitian ini menekankan perlunya peningkatan kompetensi guru dalam mengimplementasikan pembelajaran diferensiasi agar dapat menekan stres mengajar sekaligus meningkatkan efektivitas proses belajar mengajar.

Kata Kunci: Implementasi; Guru PAI; Pembelajaran Diferensiasi; Stres Mengajar.

A. Introduction

The concept of personalized differentiated learning was initially introduced by Tomlinson in 1999. His framework highlights the vital role of educators in applying diverse instructional strategies that respond to students' varying needs (Purwowidodo, 2023). Differentiated instruction is understood as a continuous effort in which teachers identify differences in learners' styles, interests, and abilities, then adapt their teaching practices to ensure each student engages in

meaningful and effective learning. This approach requires teachers to develop a deeper awareness of learners' individual characteristics so they can design instructional strategies that are both relevant and impactful. Similarly, Earl, in her book *Assessment as Learning: The Use of Classroom Assessment to Maximize Student Learning*, emphasizes that the core objective of differentiation is to guarantee that every learner receives the right instruction at the right time (Nasution, 2023).

The principles of differentiated learning are also consistent with Indonesia's educational philosophy. Ki Hajar Dewantara, the nation's first Minister of Education, stressed the importance of recognizing each child's uniqueness. In his influential work *Pusara*, he rejected the idea of standardizing elements of learning that are inherently diverse and cannot be treated uniformly.

This philosophy is further reflected in the educational transformation spearheaded by Nadiem Anwar Makarim, Indonesia's current Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, through the *Merdeka Belajar* (Freedom to Learn) initiative. With a strong emphasis on learner-centered pedagogy, this reform introduced groundbreaking policies such as the *Merdeka Curriculum* and the *Merdeka Mengajar* platform, officially launched on February 11, 2022. These programs seek to expand opportunities for students to learn autonomously and creatively, fostering personalized learning environments that are accessible to all, regardless of cultural or social background.

Within this context, differentiated instruction emerges as an essential tool for realizing the vision of *Merdeka Belajar*. Nonetheless, integrating it alongside long-established teaching traditions requires significant adjustments. Schools face the challenge of transforming entrenched practices, and teachers are compelled to modify or replace their approaches to align with new instructional goals. This transition is often demanding, leading to increased stress among educators due to the mental and emotional pressures of ongoing adaptation.

International studies echo these concerns, frequently identifying teaching as one of the most stressful professions. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2016) reports that educators across the globe often experience high levels of stress and burnout, driven by heavy workloads, performance expectations, and limited institutional support.

Research in Indonesia has also explored the use of differentiated instruction. For instance, Yulianti (2022) examined its application in elementary schools, showing how

teachers adjusted content and methods to meet young learners' diverse capabilities. Putra (2023) studied differentiation in junior high schools, highlighting its role in enhancing classroom interaction and student participation. Meanwhile, Lestari (2023) investigated differentiation in senior high schools but focused primarily on STEM fields, particularly mathematics and science, rather than religious education.

Although these studies provide valuable insights, two notable gaps remain. First, most prior works have centered on general subjects and have not addressed the specific challenges faced by Islamic Education (PAI) teachers, who also bear the responsibility of nurturing religious and spiritual values. Second, few studies have examined the connection between differentiated instruction and teacher stress levels, especially in the context of the newly implemented *Merdeka Curriculum*.

Given these gaps, this study focuses specifically on PAI teachers. The choice is both academically relevant to the researcher's field of

expertise and practically significant, as PAI instruction in Indonesia still largely relies on teacher-centered, one-directional approaches. Such methods have contributed to declining student engagement in PAI subjects, raising concerns that intended learning goals may not be fully achieved. Therefore, investigating the implementation of differentiated instruction in the context of PAI is crucial for gaining a deeper understanding of both the opportunities and challenges it presents within Indonesia's educational system.

B. Methods

Research is generally defined as a systematic activity of collecting and evaluating data carried out in a logical and methodical way, employing various techniques that may be interactive or non-interactive, experimental or non-experimental, as well as qualitative or quantitative, depending on the purpose of the study. The present research adopts a descriptive qualitative method, an approach that emphasizes explaining problems through findings, opinions, and the implementation of specific models (Nana Syaodih, 2017).

For this purpose, the researcher conducted fieldwork, which Emzir (2018) characterizes as empirical or inductive inquiry. Through the descriptive qualitative approach, data were presented in the form of narrative accounts reflecting the experiences, perceptions, and viewpoints of the study participants. The collected information was systematically arranged into coherent narratives. Sources included transcripts, interviews, field notes, documents, and other supporting materials, all of which were thoroughly analyzed to provide a detailed and accurate understanding of the phenomena under study. The primary aim of this methodological approach is to comprehensively document and interpret field data so as to generate in-depth insights into the research context.

C. Research Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study are primarily derived from interviews with Islamic Education (PAI) teachers, the vice principal in charge of curriculum, and students of SMAN Situbondo. Analysis of these interviews revealed

several limitations which, at the very least, contributed to clarifying the core issues being investigated. These include:

Implementation of Differentiated Instruction in Islamic Education (PAI) at SMAN 2 Situbondo

The practice of differentiated instruction at SMAN 2 Situbondo began with the introduction of the *Merdeka Curriculum* in 2022, though it reached more effective implementation in 2023. The success of this approach is supported by several contributing factors. Evidence of its effectiveness can be observed during learning sessions, where students displayed strong attention and genuine interest in Islamic Education (PAI). Such engagement encouraged active classroom participation and allowed students to internalize the subject matter into their daily lives voluntarily, without coercion from teachers.

Findings from classroom observations and interviews revealed that while differentiated learning had been introduced, many teachers still demonstrated limited understanding of

its core concepts and varied applications. Discussions with the vice principal for curriculum highlighted the school's commitment to improving instructional quality. This commitment was demonstrated through collaborations with external institutions, support from the Bondowoso District Education Office, partnerships with HAFECS (Highly Functioning Education Consulting Services), and the use of the *Merdeka Mengajar* (PMM) platform, which facilitates self-directed teacher learning. In addition, SMAN 2 Situbondo has consistently provided professional support for educators, including PAI teachers, by offering mentoring through the *Guru Penggerak* program, encouraging regular peer-learning forums held twice a month, and granting access to professional development opportunities organized by the Ministry of Education, MGMP forums, and other educational institutions.

Interviews with PAI teachers further revealed that some continued to favor conventional teaching methods, incorporating differentiated strategies only in a limited way. One teacher

admitted that their approach to differentiated learning remained underdeveloped. Typically, lessons began with short lectures to introduce key concepts, followed by group work. For instance, in a lesson about *Wali Songo*, students were divided into nine groups, each tasked with studying the life and contributions of one of the figures. The groups then presented their findings to the class using presentation media.

The research results indicated that while the teacher had begun to integrate diagnostic assessments into the learning process, their use of varied strategies was minimal. This reflected a lack of deep understanding of differentiated instruction, resulting in lessons still dominated by lectures and group discussions. Such practices contrast with Jean Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory, which stresses that learning occurs through active interaction with the environment, enabling learners to construct knowledge through the processes of schema, assimilation, accommodation, and equilibrium (Masitah, 2018).

The gap between theory and practice became apparent in the teacher's reliance on a knowledge-transmission model—where information flows from teacher to student—rather than fostering student-centered construction of knowledge. Ideally, learners should be supported in building their own cognitive structures in accordance with their developmental readiness. To achieve this, teachers must provide diverse activities that allow students to form understanding based on their own pace, interests, and learning styles (Binus University, 2024).

These findings also align with Howard Gardner's *Multiple Intelligences Theory*. Gardner emphasizes that children are inherently curious learners who engage with their environment through multiple senses. His framework identifies eight distinct intelligences, offering teachers valuable insights for recognizing and nurturing the varied potentials of students (Nata, 2017). The practices observed in PAI instruction at SMAN 2 Situbondo reflected this perspective, demonstrating that differentiated approaches can

provide opportunities for students to explore and develop their multiple intelligences.

The Selection of Differentiated Instruction Methods for Islamic Education (PAI) Teachers at SMAN 2 Situbondo

Although supported institutionally, the implementation of differentiated instruction at SMAN 2 Situbondo presented various challenges and differing perceptions among teachers. Teachers reported diverse experiences and obstacles when attempting to apply this approach in their classrooms. The findings indicate that PAI teachers adopted differentiated instruction largely because it is mandated by the Indonesian national curriculum. However, they also emphasized the need for stronger support, particularly in training and professional development, to address the barriers encountered in practice.

Through this process, PAI teachers came to recognize that students should not be treated as passive recipients of knowledge but as active participants in the learning process.

Traditionally, teachers perceived their role as transferring knowledge to be memorized and reproduced (Robert Bala, 2023). This view has become increasingly irrelevant following the introduction of the *Merdeka Curriculum* and the adoption of differentiation.

One experienced PAI teacher, who has taught since 2002, observed significant shifts in classroom practices over time. In the early years, differentiation was not applied. The teacher noted that one of the greatest challenges lies in teachers' readiness to design and deliver lessons that are genuinely differentiated. The study also shows that differentiated instruction requires more time than conventional methods, while teachers still struggle to meet the diverse learning needs of all students in a single class.

This aligns with Ki Hajar Dewantara's concept of *kodrat zaman* (the nature of the times), which emphasizes that education must respond to contemporary developments for the benefit of learners (Simon Petrus Rafael, 2024). According to Dewantara, reform should always consider students' personal and social needs, while

remaining consistent with national values and human principles.

Differentiated instruction, therefore, demands that teachers design flexible, varied, and responsive learning experiences. This includes offering multiple pathways for learning, providing choice in materials and assignments, forming diverse learning groups, and giving additional support when needed. Such practices aim to build an inclusive classroom environment where all students feel respected, supported, and able to reach their potential.

Challenges in Implementing Differentiated Instruction

Despite these efforts, PAI teachers at SMAN 2 Situbondo faced recurring challenges in applying differentiation, ranging from process-based to product-based difficulties. Classroom observations and teacher interviews confirmed the consistency between teachers' accounts and actual classroom practices.

The vice principal of curriculum highlighted that the essential goal of PAI instruction is to strengthen students' Qur'anic literacy and their

ability to apply *fiqh* in everyday life. However, one major obstacle was the relatively uniform level of students' learning readiness, which limited opportunities for meaningful differentiation.

D. Conclusion

This study explored the relationship between differentiated instruction and the teaching stress levels of PAI teachers. Referring to the three research questions—how differentiation was implemented, why teachers adopted it, and its impact on their stress—the findings conclude that the practice of differentiation is still not widely applied among PAI teachers.

Although the school has provided several forms of support—such as the *Guru Penggerak* program, professional development organized by the Ministry of Education, and district or provincial MGMP forums—these initiatives have not yet enabled PAI teachers to implement differentiated instruction fully and effectively at SMAN 2 Situbondo.

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