



Differentiated Instruction in Indonesian Language Subjects at Inclusive High Schools

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Abstract

This study aims to describe the understanding, implementation, perceptions, supporting factors, and challenges in the application of differentiated learning in inclusive schools for the Indonesian Language subject. This research is a qualitative study conducted at MAN 2 Sleman and SMAN 2 Ngaglik Sleman from June to October 2024. The research subjects include Indonesian Language teachers and students involved in differentiated learning. The instruments used are observation, interviews, and documentation. The results show that teachers have a good understanding of differentiated learning, with adjustments to methods, materials, and assessments according to students' needs, especially for those with special needs. Supporting factors for success include diagnostic assessments, technology, and flexible classroom management. However, challenges exist, such as limited learning media and teaching method adaptation. Differentiated learning proves to be effective, but it requires additional resource support and further training for teachers.

Keywords: *Indonesian Language; Teachers; Inclusion; Differentiated Learning*

Introduction

One distinctive characteristic of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* (Freedom Curriculum) is its prioritization of students' learning progress over the breadth of material covered. This aligns with the learner-centered approach emphasized in *Kurikulum Merdeka*. The learner-centered principle provides the foundation for understanding that learning should cater to students' needs. If students' learning achievements and paces vary, the teaching process must be designed to address this diversity. This concept is known as differentiated learning (Wahyudin et al., 2024). In the context of evolving modern education, differentiated learning is becoming increasingly relevant and essential. It provides an optimal approach to address the complex challenges facing education today by catering to the learning needs of every student and maximizing their learning potential. Additionally, differentiated learning facilitates

students' development of critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and knowledge generation—competencies vital for thriving in an increasingly complex society.

The foundational concept of differentiated learning, as proposed by Tomlinson & Strickland (2005), refers to a structured approach in planning instruction for students with diverse intellectual abilities. The approach aims to respect individual learning needs and optimize students' learning capacities. Differentiated learning involves adjusting content, process, and product based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Its core principles include the importance of a high-quality curriculum as a foundation and the need for teachers to actively guide and support students in their learning journey. Teachers must understand that every student has unique needs, interests, abilities, and learning styles. Therefore, they must adapt instructional materials (content), teaching methods (process), and ways students demonstrate their learning outcomes (product) to meet individual needs.

In addition to the theories proposed by Tomlinson, Indonesia's prominent educational figure, Ki Hajar Dewantara, also expressed a perspective on differentiated learning. He likened teachers to skilled sculptors, stating, "Similar to carvers who deeply understand the nature of wood—its types, aesthetic qualities, and carving techniques—a teacher should have profound knowledge of the art of educating..." Ki Hajar Dewantara's philosophy underscores that teachers, like sculptors, must comprehend the "material" they shape—students. Teachers need deep understanding of every aspect of education, including students' characteristics, potential, and unique needs, to create a meaningful and student-centered learning experience.

Differentiated learning is also closely associated with inclusive education. Inclusion in education refers to a system that recognizes, accepts, and values diversity among students while ensuring that individuals and minority groups are not marginalized (Anggraena et al., 2021, p. 2). Inclusive education implies that students with special needs are not only enrolled in mainstream education environments but that educational settings and teaching strategies are designed to accommodate and benefit all students. Research on differentiated learning in inclusive schools is crucial as it provides a systematic framework to meet students' diverse learning needs most effectively.

The *Kurikulum Merdeka* continues to emphasize Bahasa Indonesia as a mandatory subject. The teaching of Bahasa Indonesia in schools is of high importance, as it is Indonesia's official and national language. Learning it helps students recognize their national identity and fosters pride in the country's culture and heritage.

Recent studies have provided a comprehensive understanding of differentiated learning and inclusive schools. A study by Taş & Minaz (2024) explored the impact of differentiated learning activities based on learning styles on the academic achievement and learning resilience of fourth-grade students in social studies. Using a controlled experimental pretest-posttest design, the study revealed that differentiated activities significantly improved academic performance and resilience. Both teachers and students reported positive experiences, highlighting increased engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes. Recommendations include implementing student-centered approaches, teacher training, and curriculum enrichment with differentiated activities.

Van Geel et al. (2019), in a Scopus-indexed journal, identified differentiation as a complex process involving various skills and knowledge. Through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and expert meetings, they identified four chronological stages of differentiation: lesson preparation, period planning, lesson execution, and evaluation. They also identified five factors influencing differentiation, verified through triangulation and member checking. Conducted in the Netherlands, their study reflects a cultural complexity distinct from Indonesia. The current research seeks to explore differentiated learning within Indonesia's cultural context.

Similarly, Pozas et al. (2020) revealed important findings on the application of Differentiated Instruction (DI) by teachers in Germany. Their study emphasized the importance of understanding how teachers implement DI to address diverse student needs while highlighting the need for additional teacher training and support in practicing DI. On another note, Shutaleva et al. (2023) underscored the significance of inclusive education and its challenges, such as insufficient skills, infrastructure, and teachers' attitudes towards students with special needs. The research highlighted the necessity of legal frameworks, inclusive education principles, and the role of universities in promoting social inclusion for individuals with disabilities.

Relevant Indonesian research, such as Sutrisno et al. (2023), indicates the critical role of differentiated learning in maximizing students' potential. Through *Kurikulum Merdeka*, students can learn in ways most effective for them, fostering inclusive classrooms where each student feels valued and supported. However, implementing *Kurikulum Merdeka* faces challenges that need addressing to achieve optimal results. The study emphasized the importance of initial assessments, grouping students based on learning styles, and developing their interests and talents as key steps in differentiated learning. Similarly, Wulandari et al. (2023) highlighted the effectiveness of diagnostic assessments in differentiated learning for Bahasa Indonesia in SMA Negeri 1 Kuta Utara. Diagnostic assessments, including tests and interviews, helped identify students' weaknesses and design appropriate learning activities, resulting in increased student interest in learning.

Based on literature reviews and relevant research, this study addresses the knowledge gap regarding the implementation of differentiated learning in inclusive schools in Indonesia. The research aims to explore how teachers apply differentiated strategies to meet the diverse needs of students in inclusive schools and the challenges and opportunities they encounter. By understanding the application and impact of differentiated learning in Bahasa Indonesia in inclusive schools, this study seeks to contribute to more effective and supportive inclusive education practices in Indonesia. It will also provide practical recommendations for improving teacher training, structural support, and strategies to overcome challenges in implementing differentiated learning in inclusive schools. Thus, the study is titled **Differentiated Learning in Bahasa Indonesia in Inclusive Schools**.

Method

This research employs a descriptive qualitative methodology, focusing on the study of differentiated learning processes. Qualitative research is a method aimed at producing detailed descriptions and in-depth explanations of human processes (Miles et al., 2014).

1.1. Type of Research

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative approach.

1.2. Time and Location of the Research

This qualitative study was conducted to examine the process of differentiated learning in inclusive schools, specifically at MAN 2 Sleman and SMAN 2 Ngaglik Sleman. The research was carried out from June to September 2024. The process began with preparation activities, including proposal drafting and revision, obtaining research permits, data collection, report writing, and revisions.

1.3. Data Sources

The data sources in this study are the differentiated learning processes in Bahasa Indonesia lessons conducted at phases E and F. The data collected include events that occur during the implementation of differentiated learning in Bahasa Indonesia lessons. These data are then analyzed in-

depth to examine the practices of differentiated learning and the challenges encountered during the process.

1.4. Data, Instruments, and Data Collection Techniques

Data collection techniques refer to methods or approaches used by researchers to gather the information and data required for the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data collection in this study involved field observations at MAN 2 Sleman and SMAN 2 Ngaglik related to differentiated learning in Bahasa Indonesia lessons. The researcher requested a research permit from UNY and submitted it to the relevant schools. Documentation of the learning process, school environment, and facilities used in Bahasa Indonesia lessons was collected. Additionally, the researcher conducted interviews with Bahasa Indonesia teachers. The data obtained were recorded, summarized, transcribed, categorized, and tabulated before being interpreted to derive meaningful insights.

1.5. Data Analysis Techniques

Miles et al. (2014) state that activities in qualitative data analysis are conducted interactively. This interactive model involves simultaneous activities: data collection, data condensation, data display, and drawing conclusions/verification.

a. Data Collection

The data collection process in this study included classroom observations, interviews with teachers and students, and document analysis related to differentiated learning.

b. Data Condensation

Data condensation was conducted by selecting and focusing on the data considered significant to the research. This process also involved refining, sorting, discarding, and organizing the data.

c. Data Display

Data display was carried out by presenting the condensed data. Analyzing the displayed data enhances understanding and allows for further analysis or action. To maintain data consistency with the core issues, data presentation was formatted as data vignettes.

d. Drawing Conclusions and Verifying Data

The final stage of the analysis was drawing conclusions and verifying the data. According to Creswell & Creswell (2018), drawing conclusions involves summarizing the research findings based on the analyzed data and verifying the reliability and validity of these findings.

Result and Discussion

1. Teachers' Understanding of Differentiated Learning in Inclusive Schools

Teachers in inclusive schools demonstrate a profound understanding of differentiated learning as an approach tailored to meet the individual learning needs of each student. They recognize that each student possesses unique learning styles, readiness levels, and interests, and that differentiated learning is designed to respect and accommodate these differences. Based on this understanding, teachers adopt a more flexible approach in identifying students' needs. This approach involves adjusting teaching

materials and content while maintaining integration among students with varying learning styles. Such practices align with the principle of "Respecting Learners' Needs" by C. A. Tomlinson & Strickland (2005), which emphasizes the importance of responding to individual differences without segregating students into isolated groups.

Teachers ensure that each student has an adequate foundation of knowledge before advancing to more complex tasks. This approach reflects the application of process differentiation, wherein teachers modify the learning process to prepare students adequately before they undertake assignments (C. A. Tomlinson & Strickland, 2005, p. 16). The teachers' understanding is consistent with the theory of C. A. Tomlinson & Strickland (2005), which asserts that differentiated learning should be based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Findings from the study, focusing on the understanding of three teachers at MAN 2 Sleman and SMAN 2 Ngaglik, reveal variations in the implementation of differentiated learning, adapted to the specific needs of their students.

2. Implementation of Differentiated Learning in Inclusive Schools

Based on observations at MAN 2 Sleman and SMAN 2 Ngaglik, this study explores the implementation of differentiated learning in inclusive schools, specifically in the context of the Indonesian Language subject within the Merdeka Curriculum. The implementation of differentiated learning follows several key steps:

a. Mapping Students' Learning Needs

The implementation of differentiated learning in inclusive schools begins with mapping students' learning needs. This mapping aims to understand the individual differences among students, including their learning readiness, interests, and learning profiles. By conducting accurate mapping, teachers can design and apply more effective and inclusive teaching strategies, ensuring that each student receives education tailored to their needs and potential.

In inclusive schools such as MAN 2 Sleman and SMAN 2 Ngaglik, teachers conduct mapping as an initial step in the learning process. This mapping includes key aspects such as learning readiness, interests, and students' learning profiles.

b. Developing Learning Plans

Learning plans must take into account the diverse needs and characteristics of students. Teachers in inclusive schools, such as those at MAN 2 Sleman and SMAN 2 Ngaglik, develop adaptive learning plans, referring to Learning Outcomes (Capaian Pembelajaran, CP), Learning Objectives (Alur Tujuan Pembelajaran, ATP), and teaching modules. This process aims to create inclusive and effective learning that enables each student to learn according to their needs. Teachers in inclusive schools develop learning plans considering various essential elements, including CP, ATP, and teaching modules, along with information from the mapping of students' learning needs.

Woodcock et al. (2022) state that the creation of learning plans is crucial because it allows learning experiences to be designed with consideration of each student's strengths and needs. This is done to ensure that all students can actively and meaningfully participate in their learning while receiving appropriate challenges. By utilizing CP, ATP, and the provided teaching modules, teachers can plan lessons that are not only structured but also responsive to the individual differences among students.

c. Implementing Differentiated Learning

- 1. Differentiation of Content:** Differentiation of content is crucial to ensure that every student has access to meaningful learning tailored to their abilities. Teachers in inclusive schools implement content differentiation by adjusting the teaching materials according to students' needs and capabilities.
- 2. Differentiation of Process:** Differentiation of process involves modifying how teaching is delivered to meet individual students' needs (C. A. Tomlinson, 2001, p. 80). This may include using different teaching methods such as group discussions, project tasks, or technology-based learning that is adapted to students' learning styles. The Merdeka Curriculum also supports flexibility in teaching methods, allowing teachers to adjust the learning process based on assessments of students' needs and learning styles (C. A. Tomlinson, 2001, p. 92). In inclusive schools, there are students with diverse needs and learning styles. Differentiation of process is key to ensuring that all students can understand and apply the learning material. Teachers play a central role in managing inclusive classrooms, creating teaching strategies responsive to individual needs, and supporting every student in their learning journey.
- 3. Differentiation of Product:** Differentiation of product at MAN 2 Sleman and SMAN 2 Ngaglik emphasizes the flexibility of teachers in providing students with choices to express their understanding. Teachers at these schools allow students to select from various forms of assignments, such as projects or presentations, according to their learning styles and interests. This approach provides students with opportunities to demonstrate their learning outcomes in a personalized and creative manner. This reflects the implementation of differentiated learning that values the uniqueness and potential of each student.
- d. Conducting Evaluation and Reflection on Each Lesson:** Evaluation and reflection are essential stages in the cycle of differentiated learning, especially in inclusive school environments. This process not only assesses students' learning achievements but also involves critical analysis of the teaching practices that have been implemented. Evaluation and reflection aim to enhance the quality of learning and ensure that each student's learning needs are met optimally. Teachers at inclusive schools, such as those at MAN 2 Sleman and SMAN 2 Ngaglik, implement evaluation and reflection as an integral part of their teaching strategies to ensure the success of differentiated learning.

3. Teachers' Perception of the Effectiveness of Differentiated Learning in Inclusive Schools

Teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of differentiated learning in inclusive schools can be understood from a deeper perspective, given that inclusive schools are highly diverse educational environments. Differentiated learning aims to address the varied needs of students through adaptive approaches that cater to their readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Based on interviews with teachers from several schools, such as MAN 2 Sleman and SMAN 2 Ngaglik, it appears that this approach yields significant results, particularly for students with special needs.

Differentiated learning in inclusive schools is not only seen as an adjustment of teaching materials. It also serves as a means to ensure that all students, regardless of their physical or cognitive conditions, can reach their full potential. A teacher at MAN 2 Sleman stated that although the challenge of adjusting the curriculum is considerable, the results are very satisfying. The teacher from this school mentioned that by adapting the materials, such as converting learning resources into audio or PDF formats, visually impaired students can effectively participate in the Indonesian Language lessons. They also observed an increase in student motivation, as the students felt that their needs were respected and well-facilitated. Differentiated learning not only helps students understand the material but also boosts their self-confidence.

4. Supporting Factors for the Success of Differentiated Learning in Inclusive Schools

a. Diagnostic Assessment

Diagnostic assessment is a crucial first step in differentiated learning. This assessment allows teachers to understand the needs, readiness, interests, and learning profiles of students before beginning the learning process. With this information, teachers can design and adjust their teaching strategies to suit the abilities and needs of each individual student, ensuring that the learning process is more effective and inclusive.

Teachers in inclusive schools such as MAN 2 Sleman and SMAN 2 Ngaglik use diagnostic assessments to map students' learning needs. Informant 1 conducts pre-tests or question-and-answer sessions at the beginning of each lesson to gauge how well students understand the material to be taught. This assessment also helps determine if any students need additional explanations or special approaches in their learning.

Diagnostic assessments are conducted at the beginning of learning to determine how well students understand the material to be discussed (Wulandari et al., 2023, p. 5). The goal of diagnostic assessment is to evaluate the extent to which students understand the subject matter that will be covered.

b. Adapting Materials and Learning Media

To achieve success in differentiated learning, teachers in inclusive schools must be able to adjust the materials and media to meet the needs, abilities, and learning styles of each student. Teachers in inclusive schools like MAN 2 Sleman and SMAN 2 Ngaglik take specific steps to adapt materials and media to ensure that they are accessible and understandable for all students. Informant 2 makes efforts to simplify overly complex materials and change their format to make them more accessible for students with special needs, such as providing materials in PDF and audio formats for visually impaired students. This step is taken to ensure that students with visual impairments can participate in lessons effectively. According to C. A. Tomlinson & Strickland (2005), adjusting materials and learning media is essential to ensure that all students, including those with special needs, can access and make full use of the learning materials.

c. Managing Heterogeneous Classes with an Inclusive Approach

Managing a heterogeneous classroom in an inclusive school requires a thoughtful and inclusive approach. The right inclusive approach can create a learning environment that supports all students to develop according to their potential. Teachers in inclusive schools such as MAN 2 Sleman and SMAN 2 Ngaglik use various strategies to manage their heterogeneous classrooms. They also apply flexible grouping based on students' needs and abilities. Ariani (2022) states that managing an inclusive class requires adjustments in seating arrangements, the use of media, and the organization of class activities to meet the needs of students. This strategy involves flexibility in the physical setup of the classroom, such as placing students with visual impairments in the front row or students with physical disabilities in easily accessible areas. This aligns with efforts to ensure that all students, including those with special needs, can actively participate in the teaching and learning process. The inclusive classroom management approach is also supported by Dance & Plunkett (2012), who emphasize that the learning environment should be designed to be accessible to all students, including those with disabilities. This approach helps students feel comfortable and motivated to learn, allowing them to reach their full potential in an inclusive classroom setting.

d. Using Technology to Support Learning

Technology plays an important role in supporting learning in inclusive classrooms. Teachers in inclusive schools use technology as a tool to enhance the effectiveness of learning and ensure that all students, without exception, can actively engage in the learning process. Teachers in inclusive schools like MAN 2 Sleman and SMAN 2 Ngaglik have taken significant steps in utilizing technology to support the learning of students, particularly those with special needs. The use of technology in learning in inclusive schools is also in line with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes flexibility in the learning process. The Merdeka Curriculum provides space for teachers to use technology as a tool to create learning that is more personalized and responsive to the needs of students.

e. Providing Freedom of Expression and Assessment

An important effort in achieving successful differentiated learning in inclusive schools is also giving students the freedom to express their understanding and ideas, as well as flexible assessment methods. Teachers emphasize the importance of providing choices for students so that they can use the methods that best suit their learning styles and preferences. According to Purwowododo & Zaini (2023), differentiated learning emphasizes the importance of respecting each student's learning needs and maximizing their potential. Providing freedom of expression and assessment aligns with this principle, as it allows students to learn and demonstrate their understanding in the way that is most effective for them. This also supports the development of critical and creative thinking skills, which are part of the Pancasila student profile in the Merdeka Curriculum (Anggraena et al., 2021, p. 96). Furthermore, Suwandi (2019) emphasizes that in the era of the 4.0 Industrial Revolution, teachers must be able to develop interactive and adaptive learning materials and assessment methods that meet students' needs. By providing freedom of expression, teachers help students develop competencies that are relevant to the demands of the times, such as creativity, communication skills, and problem-solving abilities.

5. Barriers in Differentiated Learning in Inclusive Schools

a. Adapting Teaching Methods

Adapting teaching methods in differentiated learning in inclusive schools is one of the main challenges faced by teachers. This challenge arises due to the significant diversity in students' learning needs, readiness, interests, and learning styles.

Teachers at inclusive schools like MAN 2 Sleman and SMAN 2 Ngaglik face difficulties in adjusting teaching methods to meet the needs of all students, including those with special needs. Adjusting teaching methods for differentiated learning is a significant challenge for teachers. It involves integrating teaching strategies that are accessible to all students while still meeting the curriculum standards.

b. Provision of Appropriate Learning Media

Providing appropriate learning media is another significant challenge in differentiated learning at inclusive schools. The media used must be accessible to all students, including those with special needs such as the visually impaired or students with intellectual disabilities. Teachers in inclusive schools like MAN 2 Sleman and SMAN 2 Ngaglik often face difficulties in preparing learning media that are suitable for the diverse needs of their students. The provision of inclusive learning media is a crucial part of differentiated learning approaches. The Merdeka Curriculum, as explained by the Badan Standar Kurikulum (2022), emphasizes the importance of flexibility in the use of learning media to meet the individual needs of students. Media should be adapted not only based on students' learning styles but also made accessible to students with special needs, so they can fully engage in the learning process.

Overcoming the challenge of providing appropriate media helps create a more inclusive learning environment, supporting the success of all students.

c. Managing Heterogeneous Classes

A class consisting of students with varying abilities, special needs, and backgrounds requires a highly flexible and adaptive class management approach. Teachers must be able to create an inclusive learning environment where every student can participate and feel valued, regardless of the differences present. Managing a heterogeneous class in an inclusive school is one of the biggest challenges teachers face. Arwildayanto (2018) explains that inclusive education requires a responsive and flexible approach in classroom management. Teachers must be able to adjust their teaching to accommodate the differences among students. This theory aligns with the Merdeka Curriculum, which allows teachers to tailor teaching methods based on students' characteristics and local contexts. Kukuh (2021) also emphasizes the importance of understanding the emotional and social characteristics of students in managing heterogeneous classes.

Conclusion

Differentiated learning in inclusive schools is an essential approach to ensure that every student, including those with special needs, receives fair education tailored to their individual needs. Based on the in-depth discussion, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. Teachers' understanding of the concept of differentiated learning in inclusive schools, particularly in the Indonesian language subject, is considered quite good. Teachers understand that this approach requires adjustments in teaching methods, media, and assessments according to students' needs, learning styles, and readiness.
2. The implementation of differentiated learning in inclusive schools also shows that teachers have applied various strategies that support the diversity of students. Teachers conduct diagnostic assessments at the beginning of lessons to understand students' individual needs and adjust the content and teaching methods to make the learning process more inclusive and responsive to individual differences.
3. Teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of differentiated learning are generally positive. Teachers feel that this approach has successfully enhanced students' motivation, engagement, and self-confidence, especially for those with special needs.
4. Supporting factors that influence the successful implementation of differentiated learning include the appropriate use of diagnostic assessments, adjustment of inclusive learning materials and media, management of heterogeneous classrooms with flexible strategies, use of technology to facilitate learning access, and freedom in student expression and assessment.
5. There are several inhibiting factors affecting the success of differentiated learning implementation. These challenges include difficulties in adapting teaching methods to the diversity of students, limitations in providing suitable learning media for students with special needs, and challenges in managing heterogeneous classrooms.

Suggestions

Based on the research conclusions, differentiated learning in inclusive schools requires special attention from various parties to be implemented optimally. To educational policymakers, it is highly recommended to provide more training and professional development for teachers in understanding and

implementing differentiated learning. To school principals, it is crucial to continue supporting teachers in the implementation of differentiated learning by providing inclusive facilities and learning environments. For future researchers, this study opens opportunities for further research on specific barriers in the implementation of differentiated learning, especially in the context of inclusive schools.

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