

Implementation of the Differentiated Learning Model in Islamic Religious Education at Elementary Schools in Cianjur

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Abstract. The heterogeneity of elementary school classrooms presents persistent challenges for Islamic Religious Education (IRE), demanding pedagogical approaches that transcend uniform instruction. This study was motivated by the need to enhance IRE effectiveness by examining the implementation of the differentiated learning model. This descriptive qualitative study utilized a comparative case study design at SD Negeri Tugusari and SD Negeri Pataruman Cianjur. Data were collected via non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews with teachers and students, and document analysis of lesson plans and instructional materials. The results demonstrate that both schools successfully implement differentiation by adjusting content, process, and product according to diverse student readiness, interests, and learning profiles. This implementation was found to significantly enhance student engagement and intrinsic motivation in IRE. The study concludes that differentiated learning is an effective and impactful methodology for IRE in these contexts. This research contributes to the practical development of learning strategies that are responsive to student diversity in elementary education.

Keywords: Differentiated Instruction, Islamic Religious Education, Elementary School, Student Engagement, Learning Motivation.

1 Introduction

The contemporary educational landscape is defined by an increasingly recognized and complex challenge: the profound diversity of learners within a single classroom. Students present a wide spectrum of academic readiness, linguistic backgrounds, cultural perspectives, personal interests, and distinct learning profiles [1]. This heterogeneity renders traditional, one-size-fits-all pedagogical models—which often rely on homogenous content delivery and standardized assessment—ineffective and inequitable. Such approaches risk failing a significant portion of students, either by overwhelming those who struggle or by failing to challenge those who are advanced, leading to disengagement, demotivation, and unrealized potential [2]. In response to this pedagogical imperative, the paradigm of Differentiated Instruction (DI) has emerged as a robust and principled framework for managing classroom diversity effectively. At its core, DI is a philosophy of teaching that acknowledges student variance as the norm, not the

exception. It compels educators to proactively plan and deliver instruction by modifying three core elements—*content* (what students learn), *process* (how students make sense of it), and *product* (how students demonstrate their learning)—based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles [1].

This academic anxiety regarding instructional effectiveness is particularly acute within the domain of Islamic Religious Education (*Pendidikan Agama Islam* - PAI) at the elementary school level. The objectives of PAI transcend the cognitive acquisition of knowledge (e.g., memorizing chapters, understanding pillars of faith). PAI is fundamentally oriented toward the affective and psychomotor domains: the internalization of spiritual values, the cultivation of *akhlāq* (moral character), and the formation of a pious and socially responsible individual [3], [4]. When a uniform instructional model is applied to this deeply personal and developmental subject, the risk of failure is magnified. A lesson on *sabr* (patience) delivered as a homogenous lecture may resonate with some students but entirely fail to connect with the lived experiences or developmental stages of others. This disconnect can lead to superficial learning, low engagement, and a failure to internalize the core values that define the subject's purpose.

The literature robustly supports the efficacy of DI in addressing these challenges. Research consistently demonstrates that differentiation, when implemented effectively, enhances student motivation, engagement, and academic outcomes [5], [6]. By providing appropriate levels of challenge and offering choices that align with student interests, DI fosters a more inclusive and supportive learning environment [7]. Specifically within the PAI context, studies have begun to affirm its value. Adzim [8] and Purnawanto [9] argue that DI allows PAI to become more contextual and relevant, moving beyond rote memorization to meaningful application. By adjusting materials, teachers can guide advanced students toward deeper theological inquiry while providing structured support for those struggling with foundational concepts. This creates a more equitable pathway for all students to achieve spiritual and academic growth [10]. Furthermore, the positive impact of DI on character development has been noted, as it provides a framework for students to internalize religious values in a manner consistent with their own experiences [11].

Despite this theoretical and empirical support, a significant gap persists between the *promise* of DI and its *practice* in many Indonesian elementary schools. The implementation of differentiated learning is not a simple technical fix; it is a complex, demanding pedagogical shift that requires deep conceptual understanding, sophisticated classroom management skills, and adequate resources [12]. Research highlights substantial barriers that impede its adoption. Many teachers, including those in PAI, report difficulties in accurately assessing individual student needs and designing varied, high-quality learning activities. Furthermore, institutional and systemic obstacles, such as resource limitations (e.g., lack of diverse materials, inadequate technology) and inflexible curricular demands, present significant challenges, particularly in non-urban or under-resourced schools [13]. This implementation gap is the central problem this study seeks to address.

The novelty of this research lies in its specific, in-depth comparative analysis of DI implementation within PAI classrooms at two distinct public elementary schools in Cianjur District: SD Negeri Tugusari and SD Negeri Pataruman. These schools were selected for their contrasting socio-cultural and resource contexts, providing a rich opportunity to explore how DI is *adapted* in response to local conditions. Unlike broader

studies that measure general efficacy, this study provides a thick, descriptive narrative of *how* differentiation is operationalized in the real world [14]. Furthermore, it distinctively integrates an analysis of student motivation and engagement as specific outcomes of DI within the PAI domain, an area that remains under-explored [15]. By linking DI strategies not just to academic results but also to the psychological and affective dimensions of learning religion, this study provides a more holistic understanding of its impact.

Therefore, this study aims to describe and analyze the implementation of the differentiated learning model within Islamic Religious Education at SD Negeri Tugusari and SD Negeri Pataruman. It seeks to answer *how* PAI teachers differentiate content, process, and product; *what* the perceived impact of these strategies is on student motivation and engagement; and *what* the primary challenges and adaptive solutions are in these specific contexts. The expected outcome is a comprehensive understanding of DI in practice, providing a foundation for strategic recommendations to improve the implementation of responsive, inclusive, and effective PAI pedagogy in elementary schools.

2 Method

This research employed a descriptive qualitative methodology, utilizing a comparative case study design. This approach was selected for its capacity to provide an intensive, holistic, and contextually-rich description of the phenomenon of differentiated learning implementation in its natural setting [16]. The descriptive focus allowed for a detailed portrayal of the *how* and *why* of pedagogical practices, while the comparative design between SD Negeri Tugusari and SD Negeri Pataruman enabled the analysis of contextual variations and adaptations.

The research subjects were selected using purposive sampling. Participants included the primary Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers at both schools, who were the key informants regarding pedagogical design and implementation. Additionally, a representative sample of students from different grade levels, selected based on teacher recommendations to represent a range of academic abilities and engagement levels, participated in interviews.

Data collection was conducted using three primary methods to ensure methodological triangulation [17]. First, non-participant classroom observations were conducted over several weeks to witness the differentiated strategies in practice, documenting teacher actions, student groupings, resource use, and student interactions. Second, semi-structured interviews were held with the PAI teachers to explore their philosophies of differentiation, planning processes, perceived challenges, and observations of student impact. Brief, informal interviews were also conducted with students to ascertain their perceptions of the learning activities. Third, document analysis was performed on pedagogical artifacts, including *Rencana Pelaksanaan Pembelajaran* (RPP) or lesson plans, teaching materials (e.g., worksheets, media), and examples of student work (products).

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña [18], involving iterative cycles of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. All interview transcripts and observation field notes were

coded thematically, identifying patterns related to differentiation strategies (content, process, product), student motivational responses, and implementation barriers. Triangulation of sources (teacher interviews, student interviews, observations, documents) was used to validate the findings and ensure the credibility of the interpretations.

3 Result

The analysis of observations, interviews, and pedagogical documents from SD Negeri Tugusari and SD Negeri Pataruman revealed that both schools are actively and deliberately implementing the differentiated learning model, though with distinct adaptations based on their specific contexts. The implementation was found to be a comprehensive process of adjusting materials, methods, and assessments, which in turn yielded significant impacts on the classroom environment. The findings are presented in three narrative sections: the practical application of differentiation strategies, the resulting impact on student motivation, and the challenges encountered.

3.1. The Implementation of Differentiated Learning Models in PAI

The implementation of differentiated instruction in the PAI classrooms at both schools was not a monolithic strategy but a flexible application of core principles, primarily manifesting through the differentiation of content, process, and product. At SD Negeri Tugusari, the primary driver for differentiation appeared to be student *readiness* and *interest*. The PAI teacher frequently employed tiered assignments. For instance, during a lesson on the history of the four Rightly-Guided Caliphs, students were provided with reading materials at three different complexity levels. Students assessed as having higher readiness were given texts that included more nuanced political and social details, while other students received more straightforward biographical narratives. This was often followed by tiered tasks: one group might be asked to analyze the leadership qualities of a Caliph, while another group focused on sequencing the major events of their rule. This readiness-based approach aligns with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, ensuring all students were appropriately challenged.

Furthermore, SD Negeri Tugusari's teacher differentiated *product* based on student interest. After a unit on *akhlāq* (ethics), students were given a choice to demonstrate their understanding: some could write a reflective essay, others could create a poster illustrating ten good deeds, and a small group was permitted to script and perform a short role-play about honesty [19]. This autonomy in expression was observed to be highly engaging. In contrast, SD Negeri Pataruman placed a stronger emphasis on differentiating *process* to accommodate varied *learning profiles*. The PAI teacher at this school frequently organized the classroom into flexible groups based on learning styles. During a lesson on *wudhu* (ablution), students identified as kinesthetic learners were guided through a hands-on practice station; visual learners were directed to a station with illustrated diagrams and a video tutorial; and auditory learners participated in a teacher-led group involving verbal repetition of the steps and intentions. This multimodal approach ensured that the same core content was accessible through different sensory pathways, a strategy empirically linked to higher retention and engagement [15]. This school also utilized creative projects, consistent with differentiation of product, but these were often collaborative, such as groups creating a mind map of Islamic

principles or a joint storytelling project. Both schools, therefore, demonstrated a clear commitment to moving beyond homogenous instruction, adapting their pedagogy to meet students where they were [10].

3.2. Enhancement of Student Engagement and Learning Motivation

A direct and prominent consequence of implementing differentiated learning, as reported by teachers and observed in classrooms at both schools, was a significant and visible enhancement of student engagement and learning motivation. The shift from a passive, teacher-centric lecture model to an active, student-centric differentiated model transformed the classroom dynamic. Students who had previously been observed as disengaged or passive in uniform lessons demonstrated increased enthusiasm, focus, and active participation. This finding aligns strongly with Self-Determination Theory [2], which posits that motivation thrives when three basic psychological needs are met: *competence*, *autonomy*, and *relatedness*. The differentiated strategies directly addressed these needs.

The differentiation based on readiness (e.g., tiered tasks at SD Tugusari) fostered a sense of *competence*. Students were presented with tasks that were challenging but achievable, mitigating the frustration or boredom that often accompanies one-size-fits-all assignments. Teachers reported that students felt successful and were more willing to take on academic risks. The provision of choice, particularly in product assignments (e.g., essay vs. poster vs. role-play), directly fed students' need for *autonomy*. By allowing students to align tasks with their interests and strengths, teachers signaled respect for their individuality, which in turn fostered a greater sense of ownership and intrinsic motivation [20], [21]. A teacher at SD Pataruman noted, When they get to choose *how* to show what they know, they are happier and the work is much better. Furthermore, the use of flexible, small-group processes (common at SD Pataruman) nurtured *relatedness*. Students were observed engaging in peer teaching and collaborative problem-solving, creating a supportive social environment. This social engagement is particularly crucial in PAI, where discussion of values and ethics is central. The literature confirms this finding, indicating that DI not only addresses cognitive needs but also critical affective and psychological ones, which are the bedrock of sustained learning motivation [6], [15], [22].

3.3. Challenges and Strategic Solutions in Implementation

Despite the documented successes in implementation and student motivation, teachers at both schools reported significant and persistent challenges, largely confirming the barriers identified in the broader literature. The most frequently cited challenge was *time constraint*. Teachers expressed that the process of designing multiple lesson pathways, creating varied materials, and managing a multi-activity classroom was substantially more time-consuming than traditional instruction. A teacher at SD Tugusari stated, The planning takes the most time. It is not just one lesson plan; it is like three-in-one. This time-poverty was a source of considerable stress and a barrier to more consistent implementation [8], [12], [13].

The second major challenge was *teacher readiness and competency*. While the teachers in this study were implementing DI, they expressed a need for more in-depth, practical training. They reported feeling confident with simpler differentiation (e.g.,

interest-based choice) but less secure with more complex forms, such as dynamically assessing readiness and managing multiple, simultaneous learning-process groups. This reflects a broader need for sustained professional development that moves beyond introductory theory to practical, classroom-based coaching [23]. Finally, *resource limitation* was a tangible barrier, particularly noted at SD Negeri Tugusari. A lack of diverse reading materials, limited access to technology for creating digital content, and inadequate physical space to manage multiple groups effectively were all cited as hindrances.

In response to these challenges, the schools had begun to develop strategic solutions. To address teacher readiness, both schools were investing in periodic *professional development workshops* [8], [10]. SD Negeri Pataruman, for example, had initiated a *Komunitas Belajar* (Teacher Learning Community) where teachers could share successful DI strategies and troubleshoot problems collaboratively. To manage time and resource constraints, teachers reported an increased reliance on *flexible grouping* and *technology*. While physical resources were limited, teachers were using simple, accessible technology, such as educational videos (downloaded and shared) and basic interactive platforms, to provide variety in content delivery. These solutions demonstrate a proactive and adaptive approach, indicating that while the challenges are significant, they are not insurmountable, though they predict that the sustainability of DI is heavily dependent on continuous institutional support [24].

4 Discussion

The findings of this descriptive-qualitative study provide a nuanced and grounded portrait of differentiated instruction in practice, moving the discourse beyond a simple if to the more critical how. The narrative evidence from SD Negeri Tugusari and SD Negeri Pataruman confirms that the implementation of DI in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) is not only viable but also highly effective in addressing the core pedagogical challenges of student diversity. The central argument that emerges from this research is that DI functions as a critical mediator for student motivation by creating an inclusive and responsive learning ecosystem. This discussion will synthesize the study's findings, connect them to broader theoretical frameworks, and articulate the study's primary contribution to the field.

The results compellingly demonstrate that DI is far more than a set of teaching tips or strategies; it is a fundamental pedagogical orientation [25]. The successful implementation, as observed in both schools, required teachers to engage in a continuous cycle of pre-assessment (evaluating readiness), curriculum modification (adapting content, process, and product), and flexible classroom management (e.g., grouping). The comparison between the two schools is illuminating. It suggests that there is no single correct way to differentiate. SD Tugusari's emphasis on readiness and interest-based products, versus SD Pataruman's focus on learning profiles and collaborative processes, highlights that DI is, and must be, highly contextual. This finding supports the work of emphasizing that effective DI is an adaptive response to the specific constellation of students and resources in a given classroom, rather than the rigid application of a universal script.

The study's most significant contribution, however, lies in its explicit connection of these DI strategies to the affective domain of learning, specifically student

motivation and engagement [15]. The findings provide clear, practice-based evidence for the mechanisms proposed by Self-Determination Theory [2]. The observed increases in enthusiasm and participation were not arbitrary; they were a direct result of a learning environment that systematically fulfilled students' needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. This is a crucial finding for PAI, a subject where intrinsic motivation—a desire to learn for spiritual and personal growth, not just for grades—is the ultimate goal. The study shows that DI is a powerful tool for cultivating this very form of motivation [21].

Furthermore, this research extends the application of DI theory into the unique domain of character education. By successfully accommodating all learners, DI models the Islamic principles of *'adālah* (justice) and *rahmah* (compassion) in the classroom. It moves PAI from merely *teaching* about values to *enacting* them. This aligns with and provides empirical grounding for claims that DI can strengthen the internalization of religious and moral values [3], [4], [11]. When a student struggling with reading is given a non-written option to express their understanding of *amanah* (trust), the school is not just accommodating their academic need; it is affirming their dignity and value, a profound moral lesson in itself.

However, the findings regarding challenges (time, readiness, resources) serve as a critical realist check. The implementation gap identified in the literature [8], [12], [13] was clearly evident. This confirms that the sustainability of DI is contingent upon systemic support. It cannot be solely the burden of the individual hero teacher. It requires institutional commitment in the form of sustained, practical professional development [23], allocated time for collaborative planning, and investment in diverse materials. The limitations of this study include its qualitative nature and its focus on two schools within a single district, which limits generalizability. However, its strength lies in the *transferability* [26] of its findings, providing a rich, descriptive model for other practitioners and a clear agenda for future research, which should include longitudinal studies on the long-term impact of DI on both academic and character development.

5 Conclusion

This study concludes that the implementation of the differentiated learning model in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at SD Negeri Tugusari and SD Negeri Pataruman Cianjur has a significant and positive impact on the learning process. The findings confirm that by systematically differentiating content, process, and product, teachers can effectively respond to the diverse needs, interests, and learning profiles of elementary school students. This responsive pedagogy was shown to be a primary driver in enhancing student engagement and fostering intrinsic motivation for learning PAI. The research successfully answered its objective by demonstrating that DI is not only a viable strategy but an effective one for creating a more inclusive, adaptive, and meaningful religious education.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that school leaders continue to support the sustainable implementation of DI by providing teachers with ongoing, practical professional development and by allocating sufficient resources and planning time. Teachers are encouraged to continue exploring collaborative and technologically-supported methods of differentiation. Future research is recommended to explore the longitudinal

impact of DI on student character formation and to investigate its scalability in other subjects and districts.

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