



## Implementation of Differentiated Learning in the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum for Elementary Schools

### *Implementasi Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi Dalam Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar Tingkat Sekolah Dasar*

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#### Abstract

This study explores the implementation of differentiated learning in the Merdeka Curriculum at the Integrated Islamic Elementary School in Kampung Pajak, North Labuhanbatu, aiming to tailor the learning process to the unique needs and characteristics of students. Using a qualitative method with a descriptive approach, the research involved interviews, observations, and documentation from teachers, the principal, and third-grade students. The findings indicate that differentiated learning at this school is implemented through several key aspects: 1) creating a comfortable and supportive learning environment, 2) conducting continuous assessment to gauge student readiness, 3) teacher responsiveness in understanding students' needs and characteristics, and 4) effective classroom management. While this approach successfully enhances student motivation and academic outcomes, some challenges were encountered, including limited preparation time and varying student abilities. This study also compares its findings with previous research, showing that differentiated learning, when supported by an adequate environment and assessment, can increase active participation and student achievement. The implications of this research provide educators with insights into strategies to optimize differentiated learning, especially in elementary schools with limited resources under the Merdeka Curriculum.

**Keywords:** Differentiated Learning, Merdeka Curriculum, Learning Environment, Continuous Assessment, Classroom Management

#### Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi implementasi pembelajaran berdiferensiasi dalam Kurikulum Merdeka di SD Islam Terpadu Kampung Pajak Labuhanbatu Utara, yang bertujuan untuk menyesuaikan proses pembelajaran dengan kebutuhan dan karakteristik unik siswa. Penelitian menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan deskriptif, melibatkan wawancara, observasi, dan dokumentasi dari guru, kepala sekolah, dan siswa kelas III. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa penerapan pembelajaran berdiferensiasi di sekolah ini dilakukan melalui berbagai aspek: 1) menciptakan lingkungan belajar yang nyaman dan mendukung, 2) melakukan penilaian berkelanjutan untuk mengukur kesiapan siswa, 3) responsivitas guru dalam memahami kebutuhan dan karakter siswa, dan 4) manajemen kelas yang efektif. Meskipun berhasil meningkatkan motivasi belajar dan hasil akademik siswa, beberapa tantangan dihadapi, seperti keterbatasan waktu untuk persiapan dan variasi kemampuan siswa. Penelitian ini juga membandingkan temuan dengan studi sebelumnya, yang menunjukkan bahwa pembelajaran berdiferensiasi, jika didukung lingkungan dan penilaian yang tepat, dapat meningkatkan partisipasi aktif dan pencapaian belajar siswa. Implikasi penelitian ini memberikan wawasan bagi pendidik tentang strategi yang dapat digunakan untuk mengoptimalkan pembelajaran berdiferensiasi, khususnya di sekolah dasar dengan keterbatasan sumber daya dalam penerapan Kurikulum Merdeka.

**Kata Kunci:** Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi, Kurikulum Merdeka, Lingkungan Belajar, Evaluasi Berkelanjutan, Manajemen Kelas

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The Merdeka Belajar curriculum launched by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture aims to provide freedom and flexibility to students and teachers in the learning process in educational institutions. One of the key approaches in this curriculum is differentiated learning, which is designed to meet the unique needs and characteristics of each student in the classroom.

The curriculum is an educational tool that is important in the learning process (Zailani, 2020). Curriculum implementation is closely related to the term curriculum administration (Aziz, 2024). The curriculum, in both intracurricular and extracurricular forms, is effective in instilling student character (Aziz et al., 2024). The Merdeka Belajar curriculum is a new approach to the Indonesian education system with the aim to give teachers and students more freedom in the learning process. The curriculum also embodies creative and contextual learning approaches in shaping young generations with strong and noble characters (Aziz & Nasution, 2024).

The Merdeka Belajar Curriculum focuses on empowering students to become independent, creative, and solution-orientated learners. In order to achieve this goal, this curriculum provides space for teachers to innovate in teaching and assessment methods. One of the strategies that can be integrated in the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum is differentiated learning. Differentiated learning is learning that fulfils, serves, and recognises the diversity of students in learning according to students' readiness, interests, and learning preferences (Naibaho, 2023).

The differentiated learning paradigm sees all students as unique. Differentiated learning provides the needs that are required by students. The differences that exist in each student should be a concern because of different inputs (Faiz et al., 2022). In order to maximise the advantages of Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, the integration of differentiated learning is an urgent strategic path. Based on this pattern, it is hoped that each student can learn with the most effective method for them, achieve optimal learning results, and develop according to their unique potential.

The implementation of differentiated learning is expected to stimulate students in maximising the reception of information in the learning process. The benefits of implementing differentiated learning include; valuing each student with various characteristics, teaching with the focus of student success and development, facilitating student learning needs as a real form of justice in learning treatment, and collaboration

between teacher and student (Wahyuningsari et al., 2022). The implementation of differentiated learning will affect schools, classes, and especially students. As each student has different characteristics, uniform treatment is not always appropriate for all students. (Amalia et al., 2023).

Differentiated learning is very suitable for the independent curriculum, because this method takes into account the character and condition of students, in line with the principles of the independent curriculum which emphasises the focus on students in the learning process (Fauzia & Ramadan, 2023). Differentiated learning is suitable with the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum due to the very diverse character of students in terms of background, abilities, interests, and learning styles.

Differentiated learning is closely related to the Merdeka Belajar curriculum that is currently being discussed in all educational institutions. Differentiated learning shows the teacher's effective efforts in implementing the current curriculum. One of the schools that applies Merdeka Belajar curriculum is SDIT Al Fikri Pajak Village North Labuhanbatu. This school is one of the school that applies differentiated learning.

Research on the implementation of differentiated learning in Merdeka Belajar curriculum is important. Research on the implementation of differentiated learning can help identify the best ways to adapt teaching methods and subject matter to the various needs of students. This is to ensure that all students get the necessary support to learn effectively and reach students' full potential. By understanding how differentiated learning is effectively implemented, research can contribute in improving the quality of education. The most important thing underlying the research on the implementation of differentiated learning in the independent learning curriculum is the objectives and concepts of differentiated learning in the Merdeka Belajar curriculum.

Differentiated learning has become a popular approach in education to accommodate students' different needs, interests and learning styles. In Indonesia, the newly launched Merdeka Curriculum provides room for the implementation of differentiated learning in a more structured and thorough manner, according to students' diverse needs. Several researches such as Wahyuningsari et al. (2022) dan Amalia et al. (2023) shows that this approach not only improves students' sense of belonging in the classroom but also helps optimise learning outcomes, especially in heterogeneous classroom environments. However, most existing studies tend to address the conceptual and theoretical aspects of differentiated learning, without exploring how these strategies

are implemented in the Indonesian basic education context, particularly in resource-constrained schools.

Therefore, this study fills this gap by reviewing the concrete implementation of differentiated learning at SDIT Al Fikri Pajak Village North Labuhanbatu, which has just adopted the Merdeka Curriculum. Through this approach, this research is expected to provide practical guidance for teachers in tailoring learning methods to students' unique characteristics and overcoming challenges such as time management, limited facilities, and varied classroom management needs. By exploring the strategies applied in field conditions, this research contributes to improving the effectiveness of implementing differentiated learning in primary schools in the context of Merdeka Curriculum.

Merdeka Belajar curriculum is an educational initiative which focuses on giving students and teachers more freedom in the learning process, paying attention to students' backgrounds, abilities, interests, and learning styles (Fauzia & Ramadan, 2023). This curriculum aims to create more relevant and adaptive learning experiences according to the individual needs of students, thus supporting the implementation of differentiated learning.

SDIT Al Fikri Pajak Village is one example of an institution that implements differentiated learning within the framework of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum. This condition indicates that schools can integrate adaptive learning methods to deal with student diversity in daily practice.

While the benefits of differentiated learning have been widely discussed conceptually and theoretically, there is a need for more in-depth empirical research on the concrete implementation of this approach in the context of the Merdeka Curriculum. This research aims to explore in detail how differentiated learning in the Merdeka Belajar curriculum of SDIT Al Fikri Pajak Village North Labuhanbatu, challenges and solutions to differentiated learning and strategies in differentiated learning.

While various studies have highlighted the benefits of differentiated learning, such as improved learning motivation and student academic outcomes, there is a gap regarding its implementation in primary schools using Merdeka Belajar curriculum in Indonesia. Most previous studies only address the theoretical or conceptual aspects, without looking at how differentiated learning is practically implemented in the classroom, especially in schools with limited resources and support. In addition, the application of differentiated learning in the Merdeka curriculum, which is relatively new, has not been extensively

researched in Indonesian primary schools, resulting in limited understanding of how this strategy functions in the local education context.

This research aims to fill this gap by exploring the implementation of differentiated learning at SDIT Pajak Village North Labuhanbatu, a school that has just adopted the Merdeka curriculum. Through this research, it is expected to find out how teachers face challenges in implementing differentiated learning, ranging from time management, heterogeneous class management, to limited learning facilities. In addition, this study also seeks to document the practical strategies applied by teachers in adapting learning to the unique needs of each student, in order to provide empirical guidance for the implementation of effective differentiated learning in other elementary schools with similar condition.

Research on the implementation of differentiated learning in the Merdeka Belajar curriculum has a range of important implications providing insights into the most suitable strategies in implementing differentiated learning, helping teachers develop more effective teaching strategies. Research results can provide an understanding of how differentiated learning affects student learning outcomes, both in terms of academic achievement and personal development.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

The research uses descriptive analysis qualitative research approach (Sugiono, 2014). Research data was obtained directly from teachers and students. Interviews were collected through interviews with homeroom teachers and the principal. The research was conducted in Class III Usamah bin Zaid, with a total of 20 students, the homeroom teacher being Mrs Nz. Data sources involved the class teacher and students; the homeroom teacher III and students of class III Usamah bin Zaid. The object of the research includes the principal, class teacher and students of class III Usamah bin Zaid in the environment of the school. Data collection techniques used were interviews, observation and documentation. Data analysis techniques used were data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Salim, 2019). This study has confirmed the reliability of the relationship between information gathered through interviews, observation, and documentation.

By ensuring the validity and reliability of research instruments, it is expected that the data obtained from the research will be accurate, consistent, and relevant. Instrument validity ensures that the instrument measures the intended concept correctly, while

instrument reliability guarantees the consistency of the results obtained. Through this process, the research can provide valid and reliable insights into the effectiveness of implementing differentiated learning in the context of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This research was conducted at SD Islam Terpadu Al Fikri Pajak Village North Labuhanbatu, one of the private elementary schools in Na IX-X sub-district, precisely in the small town of Aek Marbatu. The research process began with defining the problem based on initial observations. After identifying the problem and obtaining sufficient information, the researcher completed this research by describing the form of implementation of differentiated learning in the Merdeka curriculum at the school which has a set objectives. The focus of this research is to examine the implementation of differentiated learning based on observation. The researcher had the opportunity to find several important points to be identified, namely:

### **Differentiated Learning in the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum of SDIT Al Fikri**

Differentiated learning is a teaching strategy that customises methods, content and assessment to meet the unique needs of each student. This means that teachers design learning activities that are accessible to all students, regardless of differences in their backgrounds, abilities or learning styles. Based on the interview with the principal of the school, Mrs NH, she explained:

“One of the key approaches in education is differentiated learning, which is actually an enhanced component of the 2013 curriculum. While the focus of learning is still very much centered on the students, differentiated learning allows teachers to design learning experiences that are tailored to each student's readiness, interests, and learning style. It can be said that differentiated learning is an approach where teachers understand the differences between each student in the classroom and design learning experiences that cater to their needs.”

The purpose of differentiated learning is to create better opportunities for student learning. Differentiated learning provides a strong foundation for achieving the goals of Merdeka Curriculum which focuses on student creativity, discovery and empowerment. In the quest to improve educational effectiveness and ensure that every student can reach their full potential, differentiated learning has emerged as a key approach of great importance. By focusing on customising the teaching process to meet the unique needs of each student, differentiated learning offers solutions that are responsive to diversity within the classroom.

In the observation process, the researchers found that differentiated learning had been carried out during teaching and learning activities at school, but was still in the process of perfecting its practice with the school still relatively new in implementing the Merdeka Belajar curriculum which was only implemented in 2022. The Merdeka Belajar curriculum focuses on the personality of students while differentiated learning is used to see the personality and condition of students, resulting in teachers striving to use differentiated learning in order to expand on students' educational opportunities.

The Merdeka Curriculum promotes a competency-based approach that allows students to choose and decide on their learning paths. The introduction of differentiated learning in the curriculum requires teachers to become learning facilitators who can adapt to the individual characteristics of their students. This means that teachers need to understand students' ability levels, interests and needs in order to design effective learning experiences. The implementation of differentiated learning cannot be separated from how the teacher implements the learning in his/her classroom.

Teachers are also required to have educational knowledge that considers the child's personality. Researchers will see how the teaching and learning environment affects the differentiated learning process, the evaluation of learning carried out by teachers, as well as strategies and methods in learning carried out in the differentiated learning process as well as the use of teaching modules. Mrs. Nz, the homeroom teacher, she explained in an interview:

“The student learning environment is very pleasant because the school is also very concerned about the environment around the school. The learning environment includes physical spaces in schools such as classrooms, which are places where students learn comfortably and other learning environments obtained by students such as a comfortable atmosphere and conditions while learning, clean air and adequate facilities, as well as relationships and interactions with fellow students and teachers are well established.”

A pleasant learning environment will support the implementation of differentiated learning, which prioritises students' characters and conditions. An enjoyable learning environment plays an important role in supporting the implementation of differentiated learning. When students feel comfortable and engaged, they are more likely to accept challenges, actively participate in learning activities, and reach their full potential.

The Merdeka curriculum prioritises the character of students which is in accordance with differentiated learning (Amalia et al., 2023). A pleasant learning environment is very influential in effective learning, along with the teacher knowing the

readiness, interest, and learning profile of each student with the aim of fulfilling student learning needs. In line with that (Chariroh & Sri Wulan, 2024), explained in their research that teachers can increase student confidence during learning by appropriately assessing the value of their skills, and responsibilities, instilling in students an optimistic view that they have great potential to learn and master the subject which indirectly supports student success.

Learning environment is also a component that teachers must understand; conducting evaluations in learning such as checking children's preparation before learning, checking the cleanliness of the classroom, checking the perfection of students' clothes, and checking the perfection of their clothes as an initial evaluation. Teachers also plan before teaching, including preparing the media they will use in class. The teacher then determines whether students are ready to learn by asking how they are, whether they have eaten, and whether they are ready for the lesson. The teacher also checks how students understand the lesson by reflecting on the previous lesson and relating it to the lesson being taught, as well as asking questions about today's lesson, regardless of whether they understand it or not. Teachers should always provide space for students who understand how to restate the material presented. Teachers should also always provide space for students who do not understand to ask questions about the material they do not understand, in order to better understand the lesson and make sure to give understanding students the resource space to explain the day's lesson by drawing conclusions.

The observations showed that by supporting students who experience learning disabilities through re-explanation, the teacher would understand the reason students experience the aforementioned learning disabilities. For students who did not understand this, it also provided an opportunity to come forward and overcome the difficulties, even if the results could turn out wrong. The learning provided by teachers was also tailored to the needs of students, in order for students receive learning materials in a balanced manner. The learning materials given to the students were also easy to understand, keeping students enthusiastic and excited about learning. The media used by teachers also helped convey learning materials to children more clearly.

Based on the results above, the researcher concluded that the presence of media and methods from the teacher will advance learning according to the personality and situation of the students and increase the effectiveness of learning. Children will absorb the materials with enthusiasm, then the appropriate media in learning will support the



content of the lesson to be easily understood by students, and finally the teacher must repeat the material to help children who are neglected in learning and always give them space to be active in the classroom without discriminating them. Similarly, formative assessment (exercises), midterm summative assessment (UTS), and final summative assessment (UAS) showed very positive results on student performance with the intention of understanding how differentiated learning can be implemented, the obstacles, and how it affects student learning outcomes.

**Table 1.** Overview of Research Findings

<b>Aspects Encountered</b>	<b>Indicator</b>	<b>Sub-Indicator</b>
Differentiated Learning Lesson Plan in Elementary School		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Teachers prepare diagnostic assessments (observations, tests, student data) to see students' ability to receive the subjects.</li> <li>2. Teachers carry out diagnostic assessments that have been prepared.</li> <li>3. Teachers prepare and organize teaching materials or teaching modules.</li> <li>4. Teachers consider how to design effective learning experience and determine which learning tools are needed to support it.</li> </ol>
	Lesson Implementation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Grouping students based on their interests and learning profiles.</li> <li>2. Providing and explaining the learning materials.</li> <li>3. Implementing a learning model coupled with differentiated learning, commonly referred to content differentiation, and ensuring all students have the same opportunities to learn.</li> <li>4. Applying differentiated learning strategies to learning by preparing media as units that can be seen and understood by students as part of the learning process.</li> <li>5. Preparing assignments as group assignment and individual assignment.</li> <li>6. Supervising and supporting the learning process.</li> </ol>
	Evaluation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Diverse affective, cognitive, and psychomotor assessments in one meeting.</li> <li>2. Feedbacks throughout the lesson.</li> <li>3. Reflection and revision.</li> </ol>

Based on research data obtained during the observation, of the application of differentiated learning has an impact on the school, classes, and students. Each student has different characteristics and cannot be treated the same. If teachers cannot provide services that suit students' needs, students may not be able to make progress in their

learning process. Some of the classroom impacts that differentiated learning achieved include students feeling accepted i.e. students with diverse characteristics feel valued, safe and have hope for growth. Teachers and students work together to ensure that students' learning needs are supported and well served.

The impact is expected to result in optimal learning outcomes. In implementing differentiated learning, of course, teachers will encounter various challenges and obstacles. Teachers must be able to guide students in a way that allows them to develop according to their characteristics. This is in line with differentiated learning. One of the values and duties of a teacher is to create student-centered learning that opens students' thinking and potential. Therefore, differentiated learning will be the forerunner of driving teachers' vision of freedom of learning and the realisation of the Pancasila learner profile in accordance with the curriculum used, which is Merdeka Belajar. One way to achieve this vision is by implementing differentiated learning, and it is necessary to build a positive culture to support differentiated learning from all parties.

### **Challenges and Solutions in Differentiated Learning in Merdeka Belajar Curriculum**

There are a few challenges faced when implementing differentiated learning at the school: 1) Student factor. Based on the results of observations during teaching and learning activities, what hindered differentiated learning from being applied perfectly at is that there are students who have a tendency to want to control their group. During the learning process this resulted in chaos, and as a result, victims of this chaos ended up in emotional turmoil, while the perpetrators tend not to care; 2) Teacher inexperience factor. During the observation, it was found that there were teachers who were less precise in determining the student groups, with one group ending up with students that had the same competitive level, which resulted in a competition to be the best in the group; 3) Material inadequacy factor. The teaching materials and media used were less refined, likely due to time constraints in their preparation. It was observed that although the teaching materials provided by the teacher were of good quality, the use of learning media faced challenges. This was because it was prepared on the same day, resulting in a shift from using games assisted by a projector to simpler, manual ice-breaking activities.

The solutions proposed by the teachers regarding the learning challenges faced are: 1) Grouping students more carefully based on the readiness and interests of each student; 2) Giving directions at the beginning of learning and emphasising that all learning processes will have an assessment, which means that every student is obliged to carry out

the learning procedures and instructions properly and avoid behaving outside of the previously agreed class rules; 3) Teachers prepare teaching materials at the beginning of the semester to ensure everything is accounted for, and the media and models can be made at the very least a day before the subject matter is explained to minimise material inadequacy.

These challenges and solutions were implemented in differentiated learning in the mathematics subject of identifying numbers.



**Figure 1.** Differentiated Learning at SDIT Al Fikri Kampung Pajak Labuhanbatu Utara

During the class, the teacher perceived the students' willingness and interest in learning this material. The teacher knew beforehand that some students prefer learning activities with play instead of *silent mode*, some students prefer challenges so that their group or themselves have a much higher grade than others, and some students prefer learning that uses interesting worksheets to fill in. The teacher brought together all the students' interests by finding one learning method or model accompanied with interesting worksheets to explain the material.

The teacher selected the groups through random numbers beforehand, then asked the students to make their own group names, for example, names of countries. The teacher then conducted a learning model in the form of group discussion. At the time, the groups have been filled with students who were dominantly smart in learning, which would be useful for them to interact with each other. The teacher then explained the material along with examples, then continued with simple ice breaking, followed by giving the group discussion questions and then individual worksheets for self-assessment.

Evaluation could also be obtained throughout the class; affective score through the attitude assessment rubric which could be inferred from the attitude of students while

learning and socialising with their groupmates, psychomotor score obtained through students' skills in advancing their group, and cognitive value obtained through independent worksheets. All activities became structured and orderly.

### **Strategies in Differentiated Learning**

Teachers use different methods, models, and tools to support students in differentiated learning. For instance, in a Class III math lesson, the teacher formed groups by randomly selecting students and letting them choose group names, which made them more excited. The lesson included clear explanations, fun ice-breaking activities, group tasks, and individual worksheets. This setup helped the teacher check students' progress in various ways: observing their behavior, seeing how well they worked in groups, and reviewing their individual work. This approach kept the lesson organized and effective.

Differentiated learning strategies help educators identify the best methods to teach and apply to students. It is also important for teachers to also understand the steps involved to ensure effective implementation. These steps include: 1) Conducting a formative assessment as the first step to gauge students' readiness before planning differentiated content. This helps teachers understand students' grasp of the material and how to support their learning. 2) Offering learning choices based on students' interests, such as different reading materials, videos, games, and tasks, allowing them to select what works best for them. 3) Creating suitable teaching modules that contain relevant material, which can be adjusted in difficulty based on the students' understanding. 4) Managing the classroom effectively, where the teacher guides students to learn successfully and follow set rules, using well-organized procedures and activities (Sarnoto, 2013). Classroom management refers to teachers' skills in managing their classrooms through routine procedures and activities that learners do every day, in order for the learning process can run smoothly and efficiently.

The challenge in differentiated learning is that teachers have difficulty adjusting to student characters. This is not a concern, but rather a motivation for teachers to continue to improve methods during the learning process (Fauzia & Ramadan, 2023). In addition, the findings regarding the learning environment at school are very supportive of implementing differentiated learning to the fullest.

The school also pays close attention to the students' learning environment. The learning environment includes physical spaces such as classrooms with comfortable atmosphere and conditions while learning, clean air and adequate facilities, and

relationships and interactions with fellow students and teachers are also well established. Thus, it has indirectly provided a solution to the obstacles in the learning process. A pleasant learning environment is essential for successful differentiated learning. By creating a positive, supportive and energising atmosphere, teachers can increase student engagement, reduce stress and facilitate better learning experiences.

This research showed that differentiated learning at the school was implemented by paying attention to a comfortable and supportive learning environment. According to the results of interviews with the teachers, a safe and comfortable environment allows students to feel valued, in order for them to grow more active in participating and receiving learning materials. This is in line with the research from Wahyuningsari et al. (2022), that mentioned a supportive learning environment is an important element in differentiated learning. The research found that a positive environment increases student engagement, allowing differentiation methods to be applied effectively. A good learning environment also supports the creation of a conducive atmosphere in accommodating students' individual differences. By comparing these results, it can be concluded that the learning environment plays a significant role in supporting a differentiated approach.

This study showed that teachers at the school conducted continuous assessment to understand students' learning readiness. By understanding the different characteristics and shortcomings of students, teachers can adjust teaching approaches to support their success. This result is in line with the research of Amalia et al. (2023) who emphasised that continuous assessment is an important component in differentiated learning. The study found that continuous assessment allows teachers to understand students' individual needs, therefore learning approaches can be tailored to students' abilities and interests. Both studies showed that diagnostic assessment and teacher responsiveness contribute significantly to the effectiveness of differentiated learning.

This research also revealed several challenges in implementing differentiated learning, such as differences in students' interests and readiness, as well as time constraints for teachers in preparing materials that suit students' profiles. One of the proposed solutions is grouping students based on their interests and abilities, as well as careful planning of teaching materials. Fauzia and Ramadan (2023) supports this finding, stating that time and preparation challenges are common obstacles to differentiated learning, especially in schools that are new to implementing Merdeka Curriculum. The research also suggests that collaboration between teachers and structured preparation

of teaching materials can help overcome these barriers. In this context, the study showed that teachers managed to overcome some of the barriers by designing more effective learning groups, although preparation constraints were still a challenge.

This research also underlined the importance of learning media and models in supporting the implementation of differentiated learning. Teachers use learning media that match students' interests, such as educational games and group discussions, which make students more involved and understand the material better. This aligns with Saputra (2020), which stated that attractive media can increase students' concentration and motivation in differentiated learning. By applying various methods, teachers can create interesting learning experiences for students with different learning profiles. Comparison with previous research shows that the successful application of varied learning media is one of the main keys to the success of differentiated learning.

The results of this study indicated that differentiated learning has a positive impact on students' learning outcomes, which can be seen from the improvement in the results of the mid-semester exam (PTS) and the final semester exam (UAS). In addition, students feel more valued and able to show their best potential when learning is tailored to their characteristics. This is consistent with Astria dan Kusuma (2023), which showed that differentiated learning improved students' creative thinking skills and learning outcomes in mathematics. The research stated that the differentiated approach helps students to be more engaged in learning, so they are able to achieve more optimal learning outcomes. The results support the conclusion that implementing differentiated learning has a positive impact on students' academic development and motivation.

Based on this analysis and comparison, the research at SDIT Kampung Pajak Labuhanbatu Utara successfully confirmed the benefits of differentiated learning that have been widely discussed in previous research. By paying attention to aspects of the learning environment, continuous assessment, student grouping, and media use, this school has been able to effectively implement differentiated learning in the Merdeka Curriculum, although some challenges still need to be overcome. Although some challenges remain, this research shows how the differentiated approach can be adapted to meet the needs of diverse students, thereby positively impacting the quality of education in the school.

## CONCLUSION

Teachers face challenges when using differentiated learning. One main issue is that it requires a lot of time, and because of that, teachers need to prepare various activities for their students. Despite these challenges, SDIT Al Fikri Kampung Pajak, Labuhanbatu Utara, has successfully applied differentiated learning. All teachers there use it, and it has positively impacted student performance, as shown by improved scores from midterm (PTS) to final exams (PAS). For differentiated learning to work well, strong collaboration between schools and teachers is important, along with supportive school facilities. At Al Fikri, teachers use different teaching methods, models, and media to support this approach.

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