

## DIFFERENTIATED LEARNING WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM AT THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LEVEL

Windy Septiani<sup>1,3</sup>, Samsul Bahri<sup>2</sup>, Nana Triana Winata<sup>3</sup>

Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa dan Sastra Indonesia, Fakultas Keguruan dan Ilmu Pendidikan, Universitas Wiralodra<sup>1,2,3</sup>

Indramayu – Indonesia

Email: [windys.akhmad@gmail.com](mailto:windys.akhmad@gmail.com)

| Article Info  | Abstract  |
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| <p><b>Article History:</b></p> <p>Accepted<br/>March 2025</p> <p>Revised<br/>February 2025</p> <p>Approved<br/>January 2025</p> | <p>This research is a case study that employs a descriptive qualitative method. Data collection techniques involved interviews with one elementary school teacher and one Islamic elementary school teacher in Indramayu Regency. The Merdeka Curriculum is closely related to differentiated learning, as it serves as a framework that outlines the content to be taught and the instructional approaches utilized in an educational program. Differentiated learning approaches are integral to schools that implement the independent curriculum. This research was motivated by findings that some teachers lack an understanding of diagnostic assessment and differentiated learning approaches. Given the integral role of differentiated learning in the Merdeka Curriculum, this research aims to contribute to the development of more effective and efficient teaching practices. Based on these findings, the research elaborates on diagnostic assessment and differentiated learning concepts to enhance teachers' comprehension of these essential elements. Consequently, it is expected that teachers will be able to implement differentiated learning more effectively and efficiently in the teaching process. Furthermore, this research aspires to enhance the quality of education and achieve better educational outcomes. Additionally, the research is a reference for future research on differentiated learning and diagnostic assessment, fostering teachers' ability to implement more effective and efficient instructional strategies.</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Learning; Differentiation; Merdeka Curriculum</p> |

### A. Introduction

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum aligns with the Decree of the Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia No. 56/M/2022 concerning the Guidelines for Curriculum Implementation in the Context of Learning Recovery (Ibrahim & Haerudin, 2024). Education plays a crucial role in national development and serves as an effort to enhance individuals' or groups' knowledge and intelligence. The rapid advancement of science and technology necessitates a focus on developing high-quality and competitive human resources to thrive in the era of globalization. In the 21st century, competition among nations extends beyond the economic, military, and infrastructure sectors, including education. Educational institutions must restore their function to achieve ideal academic excellence, industrial relevance, contributions to new industries, and empowerment while implementing fundamental reforms to develop high-quality human resources (Bahri, 2022). In response, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology has introduced the *Merdeka Curriculum* policy as part of learning recovery efforts. This policy is based on the Decree of the Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology No. 56/M/2022, which serves as a guideline for curriculum implementation (Menteri Pendidikan Kebudayaan Riset dan Teknologi Republik Indonesia, 2022).

The Merdeka Curriculum is closely linked to differentiated learning. A curriculum is a plan or framework that determines what will be taught in an educational program and how the teaching process will be carried out. According to McLeskey and Waldron, the curriculum implemented in inclusive schools involves modifications to align with students' needs. This curriculum is designed based on lessons and skills appropriate to each child's ability level, providing relevant learning materials. It also involves adjustments in curriculum content and teaching strategies used by educators, known as differentiated learning, along with the application of a student-centered approach, which prioritizes learners and caters to their individual needs (Andini, 2022).

This research shares similarities and differences with previous research on implementing differentiated learning. One previous research by Ibrahim dan Haerudin (2024) focused on junior and senior high school teachers in the Sragen and Majalengka Regencies. In contrast, this research concentrates on elementary school teachers in the Indramayu Regency. Despite differences in research subjects and locations, both studies examine the application of differentiated learning in schools.

Furthermore, another research by Permadi (2023) showed that differentiated learning can improve learning outcomes, particularly in specific subjects. The research found that the experimental class showed a significant increase in scores compared to the control class. The similarity between this research and the previous one lies in their shared focus on implementing differentiated learning. However, the primary difference is in the research methodology. While previous studies employed a quantitative approach with numerical data analysis, this research adopts a descriptive method using a literature review approach involving the search and analysis of relevant academic sources.

Although extensive research has been conducted on differentiated learning, a gap remains in identifying teachers' challenges in implementing this approach. Therefore, this research aims to explore these challenges further and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the application of differentiated learning within the Merdeka Curriculum framework, particularly at the elementary school level.

Based on the discussion above, the objectives of this research are (1) to provide teachers and readers with a better understanding of differentiated learning, (2) to enhance teachers' and readers' comprehension of diagnostic assessment, and (3) to explain the implementation of differentiated learning within teaching modules. This research is expected to benefit teachers by fostering instructional innovations that motivate students. Additionally, it aims to assist school principals in providing guidance and feedback to teachers in creating attractive and student-centered learning experiences.

## **B. Methods**

This research uses a descriptive qualitative method to understand the implementation of differentiated learning within the Merdeka Curriculum. This research focuses primarily on teachers' performance of differentiated learning and students' understanding of it. This research succeeds when teachers design and implement effective differentiated learning and students understand the concept of differentiated learning.

This research aims to provide a detailed depiction of differentiated learning within the Merdeka Curriculum. Researchers conducted a literature review involving the search and analysis of relevant academic sources. The review enabled researchers to develop a deeper understanding of the research topic and to examine relevant theories. Researchers obtained literature sources from credible references, such as books, scholarly articles, and expert research findings (Khulisoh, 2022). This approach ensured a structured, systematic, and objective research process.

Researchers collected data through interviews with two teachers from a public elementary school (Sekolah Dasar Negeri) and an Islamic elementary school (Madrasah Ibtidaiyah) in the Indramayu Regency. Researchers conducted these interviews to explore teachers' understanding and experiences implementing differentiated learning.

## **C. Results and Discussion**

The interview with an elementary school teacher in Indramayu Regency revealed that one of the main challenges in implementing differentiated learning is the requirement for teachers to master the foundational aspects of students' interests. Since each student has unique characteristics, interests, and talents, teachers must act as facilitators with extensive knowledge. Additionally, the administrative workload under the *Merdeka Curriculum* demands that teachers divide their focus between teaching, understanding students' learning needs, and managing administrative responsibilities. Meanwhile, another interview with an MI (Islamic elementary school) teacher in Indramayu Regency indicated that teachers find it challenging to develop teaching modules incorporating differentiated learning. This

research explores the concept of differentiated learning and diagnostic assessment to address these challenges, thereby enhancing teachers' and readers' understanding.

The Merdeka Curriculum is an adaptive curriculum that emphasizes core materials and aims to develop students' unique abilities and potential (Rahayu et al., 2022). On November 10, 2019, the Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, Nadiem Anwar Makarim, introduced and implemented the Merdeka Curriculum to improve the 2013 Curriculum. The Merdeka Curriculum has been an alternative for schools prepared to adopt it as a learning recovery strategy from 2022 to 2024 in response to the impact of the pandemic (Rahmadayanti & Hartoyo, 2022). The teaching and learning process is a series of structured activities that help students acquire and apply knowledge to their daily lives (Pratiwi et al., 2016).

Differentiated learning is designed to fulfill students' diverse needs and abilities. According to Schollhorn, differentiated learning is a motor-based learning model that emphasizes movement variations based on the dynamic systems theory of human movement (Pitaloka & Arsanti, 2022). Differentiated learning adapts teaching methods, content, and assessments to accommodate students' needs, interests, and learning styles. The goal is to ensure that all students, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds, can access and comprehend the material in a way that best suits them. Differentiated learning is a strategy teachers apply to address students' diverse learning needs. In this approach, students engage with the curriculum based on their abilities, interests, and personal needs, which helps prevent frustration and failure during the learning process (Wahyuningsari et al., 2022).

Students exhibit a wide range of characteristics and learning needs, making it essential for teachers to select appropriate instructional models from the numerous frameworks developed by education experts (Oktapyanto, 2016). The primary objective of differentiated learning is to help all students achieve the same learning goals but through varied approaches. This method allows teachers to accommodate students' unique characteristics and provide tailored learning experiences. However,

research on the effectiveness of differentiated learning in improving student motivation, particularly in pedagogical contexts, remains limited (Mubarok, 2023).

There are 3 key approaches to differentiated learning : (1) Content Differentiation, which involves adapting the curriculum and instructional materials to align with students' learning needs; (2) Process Differentiation, which refers to the way students engage with and process new concepts, including different learning strategies; and (3) Product Differentiation, which focuses on how students demonstrate their understanding of the material (Aprima & Sari, 2022). Additionally, teachers control four critical elements of differentiated learning: content, process, product, and the classroom learning environment. Teachers can modify these elements based on students' profiles and learning journeys (Wahyuningsari et al., 2022).

Tomlinson, Carol Ann, and Moon define differentiated learning through several key principles: (1) Variation in learning, where teachers acknowledge and understand students' diverse experiences and learning methods; (2) Recognizing students' potential, as each student possesses unique capacities that may not yet be fully evident; (3) Measuring success through progress, where students' achievements are evaluated based on their growth toward learning goals and their ability to exceed set expectations; and (4) Teacher's role as a facilitator, ensuring that every student receives the necessary support to reach their full potential (Faiz et al., 2022).

Kristiani et al. (2021) further emphasize that meaningful classroom activities should be differentiated based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. The strategies for differentiating these activities can be categorized as shown in the following table:

**Table 1**  
**Differences in Strategies Based on Student Readiness, Interests, and Learning Profiles**

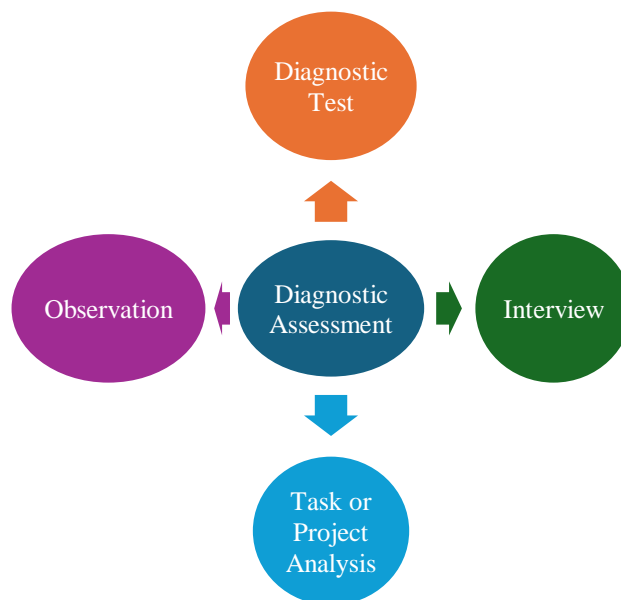
| <b>Readiness</b>  | <b>Interests</b>   | <b>Learning Profiles</b>  |
|---|--|---|
| Class discussions with questions of varying difficulty levels | Class discussions with different questions based on students' interests. | Class discussions via online media chats, podcasts, and talk shows. |
| Peer tutors explain to struggling classmates.                 | Peer tutors with shared interests.                                       | Peer tutors in large groups (classes), small groups, and            |

| Readiness   | Interests  | Learning Profiles   |
|---|--|---|
|   |  | individually (via videos, images, and songs).                                     |
| Assignments using RAFT (Role Audience Format Topic) with varying difficulty levels. | Assignments using RAFT with varying topics based on students' interests. | RAFT performed in role-playing (drama)  |
| Think – Pair – Share  | Jigsaw (expert groups based on interests)                                | Gallery walks   |
| Learning contracts for activities based on students' readiness.                     | Learning contracts for activities based on student's interests.          | Learning contracts according to auditory, visual, or kinesthetic learning styles. |
| Choice boards with activities of varying difficulty levels.                         | Independent study based on students' interests.                          | Assessments using various learning styles.  |

The role of educators in a school organization is a key determinant of the learning process. Most school activities are carried out by the human resources within the institution. Therefore, educators must be selected based on their professionalism, teaching achievements, and high level of dedication (Syaifulloh & Pranoto, 2017). Additionally, students at the same developmental stage may exhibit different levels of understanding and readiness. Consequently, within the differentiated learning approach, teaching methods and materials should be adapted according to students' comprehension and preparedness levels (Nurhasanah et al., 2023). In differentiated learning, teachers must be able to understand, identify, and continuously assess students' strengths and weaknesses. It includes observing and evaluating their readiness, interests, and learning preferences. Furthermore, teachers should utilize diverse approaches that allow students to express their learning preferences, whether in content, process, product, or learning environment (Soviyani et al., 2023).

Diagnostic assessment is specifically conducted to identify students' abilities, strengths, and weaknesses, allowing instruction to be designed according to their capabilities and status (Ardiansyah et al., 2023). This type of assessment addresses students' learning difficulties by determining their underlying causes and identifying appropriate interventions (Wahyuningsih & Maryani, 2023). The objectives of diagnostic assessment include (1) identifying students' difficulties in understanding concepts or learning materials, (2) recognizing their strengths and

weaknesses in grasping subject matter, (3) determining appropriate teaching strategies for different learners, and (4) assisting teachers in designing more effective instruction.



**Figure 1. The Components of Diagnostic Assessment**

Diagnostic assessment is divided into two categories: cognitive and non-cognitive assessment. The purpose of cognitive diagnostic assessment is to (1) identify students' competency levels, (2) align classroom instruction with the student's average ability levels, and (3) provide remediation or supplementary lessons for students performing below average. These aspects indicate that cognitive diagnostic assessment provides a holistic overview of students' cognitive abilities, allowing educators to conduct learning activities based on their students' abilities and characteristics and to implement necessary adjustments (Ardiansyah et al., 2023). On the other hand, non-cognitive diagnostic assessment aims to (1) evaluate students' psychological and socio-emotional well-being, (2) assess students' engagement in home learning activities, (3) understand their family background, (4) examine their social background, and (5) identify students' learning styles, personalities, and interests. Diagnostic assessment follows several key principles: (1) it is a decision-making process regarding individual or group learning needs, (2) it involves a comprehensive and balanced approach that considers the factors contributing to students' learning difficulties, and (3) it



integrates both diagnosis and intervention since the effectiveness of teaching depends on students' mastery of the material (Ardiansyah et al., 2023).

Based on the discussion above, it is evident that teachers play a crucial role in ensuring the successful implementation of learning in the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in mathematics education. Effective implementation of differentiated learning must begin with teachers' understanding of its core principles. Therefore, further dissemination and training regarding this curriculum are necessary, especially for schools in rural areas (Gusteti & Neviyarni, 2022).

#### **D. Conclusion**

The interview results with 1 public elementary school (Sekolah Dasar Negeri) teacher and 1 Islamic elementary school (Madrasah Ibtidaiyah) teacher in Indramayu Regency indicate that many teachers still lack a clear understanding of differentiated learning and face difficulties in its implementation. The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes flexibility and autonomy in the teaching and learning process, allowing teachers to adapt instruction based on students' needs and characteristics. This concept aligns with differentiated learning, which adjusts teaching methods, content, and assessment to accommodate students' diverse abilities and interests.

The Merdeka Curriculum and differentiated learning reinforce each other to foster a more inclusive and student-responsive learning environment. By understanding differentiated learning and its benefits for student development, teachers must apply its principles effectively. Through its implementation, schools and educators can provide a more relevant, engaging, and personalized learning experience that caters to each student's abilities and interests.

As a recommendation, it is suggested that teachers should not be overly burdened with administrative tasks, allowing them to focus more on monitoring and supporting students' progress.

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