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Implementation Of A Differentiated Instruction Approach To Improve Student Learning Outcomes In Islamic Religious Education At Al-Ikhlas Klampar Junior High School, Proppo, Pamekasan

Moh Ramadhani
Madura Islamic University, Indonesia
Moh. Afiful Hair
Madura Islamic University, Indonesia
Atnawi
Madura Islamic University, Indonesia

Corresponding Author: ramadanimohamad464@gmail.com, affkhir@gmail.com, atnawi@uim.ac.id

Abstract

Disparities in learning outcomes in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) often stem from a traditional teaching approach that treats all students as if they have the same abilities. This qualitative case study aims to provide an in-depth analysis of how a differentiated instruction approach is implemented to boost student engagement and learning outcomes at Al-Ikhlas Junior High School in Klampar, Pamekasan. Through field data collection techniques such as observation and interviews, it was found that teachers integrated differentiation through three main phases: mapping initial characteristics, varying instructional activities through small-group guidance, and performance-based assessment. The results of the observations demonstrate that this strategy is effective in fostering an inclusive classroom climate, encouraging students to express their opinions, and cultivating intrinsic motivation. Nevertheless, tangible obstacles—such as limitations in teachers' time management and school facilities—remain intertwined challenges in the field. Overall, this differentiation model successfully embodies the essence of student-centered learning.

Keywords: Learning Outcomes; Merdeka Curriculum; Differentiated Instruction; Islamic Religious Education.

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INTRODUCTION

Islamic education is, in essence, a process of inner and outer development that is systematically designed to develop the full potential of the human being in a balanced manner. This human dimension encompasses spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and social aspects, all of which are grounded in the sacred teachings of the Qur'an and the guidance of the Sunnah (Nurlaili & Suhirman, 2023). Within the curriculum structure of formal educational institutions, the subject of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) carries a very significant moral mandate. PAI must not be reduced to merely a space for the transfer of knowledge that relies on rote memorization or rigid cognitive learning. Rather, this religious education is oriented toward the long-term development of a well-rounded Muslim personality an individual who is faithful, God-fearing, of noble character, and fully committed to practicing the universal values of Islam in the reality of daily social life (Ahmad, 2012).

Given the nobility of this mandate, the academic atmosphere in the classroom must be managed dynamically so that it can address the diverse needs of students and thereby optimally achieve the goals of Islamic education. However, a significant gap is often evident when observing the reality of teaching practices in the field. The process of value transmission in the classroom remains largely trapped in a conventional, one-size-fits-all approach that tends to be monotonous. Teachers often employ a one-way teaching model based on the implicit assumption that all students have the same average pace of response, level of interest, and level of understanding of the material (Nurlaili & Suranada, 2024).

In fact, by nature, every child is born with different personality traits. These differences range from early learning readiness, learning style modalities (whether visual, auditory, or psychomotor), internal motivation, to the sociocultural background that shapes their worldview. When teachers impose a one-size-fits-all approach to address this diversity, the negative implications are immediately felt in the classroom. Some students who learn at a slower pace will feel left behind and frustrated, while more gifted students will become bored because they lack meaningful academic challenges (Lestari et al., n.d.).

It is this phenomenon of hidden academic injustice that often leads to low levels of active student participation, declining motivation, and, ultimately, cognitive learning outcomes that fall far below the proficiency standard. This challenging and dilemma-ridden situation is clearly evident at Al-Ikhlas Klampar Junior High School (SMP) in Proppo, Pamekasan. Based on the results of initial theoretical observations and reinforced by in-depth interviews with teachers of Islamic Education (PAI) at the school, an empirical picture emerged showing that the curve of student

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learning outcomes still reveals a wide disparity. On the one hand, there is a group of students who easily master the indicators of mastery for the subject matter; on the other hand, quite a few students complain about the difficulty of understanding core religious material.

As a result, their cumulative grades often fail to meet the Minimum Proficiency Criteria (KKM) set by the school. Furthermore, this disparity spills over into the affective domain, where student participation in question-and-answer sessions or group discussions becomes uneven. The classroom atmosphere tends to be dominated by a select few students, while the majority of the other students choose to remain passive and withdraw from the learning dynamics because they feel that the teaching methods presented do not accommodate their learning styles (Cahyono & Wahyuni, 2025).

Given the sociopedagogical issues outlined above, a new paradigm shift is needed in instructional strategies one that can respect the uniqueness of each child. One relevant solution is the implementation of a differentiated instruction approach. Conceptually, differentiated instruction is defined as an educator's commitment and conscious effort to align three key elements, namely content (material), process (reasoning activities), and product (articulation of understanding), based on an assessment of students' readiness, interests, and individual learning profiles (Adzim et al., 2024). This approach not only positions students as the primary subjects or the focus of learning (student-centered learning), which is in line with the spirit of the Merdeka Curriculum reform (Yuliana & Bashith, 2025).

Long before that, this philosophy of differentiation had already taken deep root in the theological foundations of Islamic teachings. This is clearly stated in Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 286

لَا يُكَلِّفُ اللّٰهُ نَفْسًا اِلَّا وُسْعَهَا

This affirms that God does not burden anyone beyond their capacity. This normative-theological foundation conveys an implicit message to the world of education: every human being has their own unique capacity, and thus treating students uniformly without regard for their unique capacities constitutes a disregard for human nature itself (Akbar et al., 2024). Academic research into the effectiveness of this differentiation strategy has actually shown a positive trend in Indonesia in recent years. For example, a study conducted by Siti Aisyah in 2021 concluded that the implementation of differentiated instruction at SMP Negeri 1 Pamekasan successfully boosted classroom engagement and participation significantly through the use of varied instructional methods. A year later,

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Muhammad Fikri (2022) explored a similar issue at the Nurul Huda Sampang Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs), where the results demonstrated that adapting learning media and assignments was effective in enhancing students' conceptual understanding of religion. Although both studies provide valuable theoretical contributions, there is a knowledge gap that urgently needs further analysis. Siti Aisyah's research focuses its indicators solely on the psychological aspects of student engagement (Mawaddah & Khairunnisa, 2025). Meanwhile, Muhammad Fikri's research focuses on madrasahs with a homogeneous background, with a primary emphasis on student grouping patterns. The characteristics of governance, academic climate, and sociological aspects at Al-Ikhlas Klampar Private Junior High School present unique features that have not yet been documented in previous literature.

Field studies that examine the direct correlation between the comprehensive implementation of differentiated instruction, from lesson planning and classroom execution to performance-based assessment, and improvements in learning outcomes across the three domains (cognitive, affective, and psychomotor) at rural private junior high schools remain extremely rare. Therefore, this case study is specifically designed to thoroughly examine the operationalization of the differentiated learning approach in driving improvements in student learning outcomes in Islamic Education (PAI) at Al-Ikhlas Junior High School. Through this study, it is hoped that a comprehensive picture of the tactical effectiveness of this approach will emerge, while also identifying the supporting sociocultural factors and the intertwined barriers encountered in the field.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach (Lumi, 2023). This study focuses on exploring and gaining an in-depth understanding of how the differentiated instruction approach is implemented in the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning process, as well as how this approach contributes to improving student learning outcomes at Al-Ikhlas Junior High School in Klampar, Proppo, Pamekasan. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to examine learning phenomena naturally through direct observation of teacher and student activities, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of the processes, experiences, and meanings that emerge during the learning process. This approach not only focuses on the final learning outcomes but also examines various factors that influence the successful implementation of differentiated instruction, such as student characteristics, strategies used by teachers, and the learning environment. In line with Creswell's perspective, qualitative research is an approach used

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to explore and understand the meanings arising from a social or human issue through the direct collection of data from natural settings, which is then analyzed to identify meaningful patterns, themes, and relationships (Creswell, 2013).

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The research findings indicate that the implementation of differentiated instruction in the Islamic Religious Education course at Al-Ikhlas Junior High School in Klampar was carried out through three stages: planning, implementation, and evaluation of instruction. During the planning stage, teachers first identified students' characteristics based on their academic abilities, learning interests, and learning styles. This information serves as the basis for determining instructional strategies, media, and assignment formats so that the learning process can accommodate the learning needs of each student.

During the implementation phase, teachers no longer apply the same lesson plan to all students but instead provide a variety of learning activities tailored to each student's readiness level. Students who grasp the material more quickly are given enrichment tasks, such as case studies related to daily life, while students who are still struggling receive support through small-group discussions and step-by-step guidance. In addition, teachers utilize learning media such as videos, images, and student worksheets to make the material easier to understand.

The evaluation stage is conducted through assessments of both the learning process and learning outcomes. Teachers not only assess students' cognitive abilities but also monitor the development of their attitudes and skills throughout the learning process. This approach gives every student the opportunity to demonstrate their learning outcomes in accordance with their individual abilities, thereby making the assessment process more objective. These findings indicate that differentiated instruction creates a more active learning environment. Students appear more confident in expressing their opinions, actively participate in discussions, and demonstrate greater motivation to learn compared to when instruction was still teacher-centered. This environment also makes it easier for teachers to provide instructional support tailored to each student's individual needs.

Based on the research findings, the implementation of differentiated instruction in the Islamic Religious Education course at Al-Ikhlas Klampar Junior High School has been carried out through the stages of planning, implementation, and evaluation. Teachers first identify students' characteristics before determining the instructional strategies to be used. This step is taken so that the learning process can be tailored to each student's learning needs, ensuring that all

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students have equal opportunities to understand the material according to their individual abilities. Although not all components of differentiated instruction have been fully implemented, teachers have made efforts to adapt methods, media, and assignment formats to the students' circumstances. These findings indicate that instruction is no longer teacher-centered but is shifting toward student-centered learning, in line with the core principle of the Merdeka Curriculum. These findings align with the research by Fitri Yuliana et al., which states that the implementation of differentiated instruction in Islamic Education (PAI) is carried out through the stages of planning, implementation, and evaluation tailored to students' characteristics, thereby making the learning process more effective (Yuliana & Bashith, 2025).

The learning concept implemented by the teacher aligns with Carol Ann Tomlinson's theory, which explains that differentiated instruction is the teacher's effort to adapt content, processes, products, and the learning environment based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Through this approach, each student receives learning support tailored to their needs, making the learning process more meaningful. In this study, the teacher employed a variety of teaching methods, including group discussions, presentations, question-and-answer sessions, and the use of audiovisual media, to help students better understand the Islamic Religious Education material. This strategy demonstrates that teachers have endeavored to provide diverse learning experiences tailored to students' individual circumstances, resulting in a more active learning process compared to instruction that relies solely on lectures. These findings align with research indicating that the use of multimedia in differentiated instruction enhances student engagement and helps teachers accommodate differences in students' characteristics (Nurlaili & Suhirman, 2023).

The implementation of differentiated instruction also has an impact on students' learning activities. Throughout the learning process, students appeared more confident in expressing their opinions, actively participated in discussions, and were able to collaborate effectively on group assignments. These observations indicate that differentiated instruction not only enhances students' understanding of the material but also builds their self-confidence and fosters their ability to interact with one another. In Islamic Religious Education, this is particularly important because the learning objectives are not solely focused on knowledge but also on the development of attitudes, moral character, and social skills (Rahmi & Fauzan, 2025). When students are given the opportunity to learn according to their abilities and learning styles, they tend to feel more comfortable participating in the learning process, thereby enabling learning objectives to be achieved more effectively. This finding is consistent with the results of a study indicating that

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differentiated instruction in Islamic Education can enhance students' active participation while fostering a more inclusive and student-centered classroom environment (Nurlaili & Suranada, 2024).

Nevertheless, this study also identified several challenges in implementing differentiated instruction. Teachers require more time to identify students' learning needs, develop varied instructional materials, and prepare learning resources tailored to students' characteristics. Additionally, the diverse student population requires teachers to pay closer attention to ensure that all students have equal learning opportunities. These conditions indicate that the success of differentiated instruction is influenced not only by teacher competence but also by school support through the provision of learning resources, teacher training, and policies that support the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. These findings are consistent with research indicating that time constraints, teacher readiness, and school facilities remain the primary challenges in implementing differentiated instruction in schools (Sajidah et al., 2025).

Overall, the implementation of differentiated instruction in Islamic Religious Education has had a positive impact on the quality of the learning process (Romadhon et al., 2025). Teachers no longer assume that all students have the same abilities, but instead provide learning support tailored to each student's individual characteristics. This approach makes learning more inclusive, increases student engagement, and helps students gain a deeper understanding of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) material. Therefore, differentiated instruction can be an effective strategy for supporting the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in the subject of Islamic Religious Education, provided that teachers continue to enhance their competence in designing adaptive learning experiences and schools provide adequate support in the form of resources and training.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that the implementation of differentiated instruction in the Islamic Religious Education course at Al-Ikhlas Klampar Junior High School has had a positive impact on the learning process. Teachers strive to adapt strategies, methods, media, and forms of assessment to the characteristics and learning needs of students, thereby creating a learning environment that is more active, interactive, and student-centered. The application of differentiated instruction also encourages students to be more confident in expressing their opinions, actively participate in discussions, and more easily understand the material according to their individual abilities. Although there are still some challenges such as

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time constraints, teacher readiness, and the wide range of student abilities overall, this approach supports the achievement of Islamic Religious Education learning objectives while aligning with the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes learning that is tailored to the needs and potential of each student.

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