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EXPLORING TEACHERS' STRATEGIES IN IMPLEMENTING DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

In elementary school, differentiated learning is an effective method of addressing student diversity. By using this strategy, learning content, processes, and products can be tailored to students' needs, interests, and learning readiness. It has the ability to significantly improve student motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes. The purpose of this study is to find and explain the methods used by teachers to implement differentiated learning in the classroom. Qualitative case studies are used through classroom observations, in-depth interviews, and thematic analysis. Research shows that the successful implementation of this strategy is greatly influenced by institutional support, teachers' abilities, and effective time and class management. These findings reinforce the importance of ongoing training and strategic support from schools and governments to maximize the implementation of these strategies to achieve inclusive and high-quality education. These results suggest that the application of differentiated learning can improve students' learning processes and outcomes, although this faces challenges such as time constraints and variations in students' abilities.

Keywords: *learning outcomes, case studies, basic education, teacher strategies, student diversity, learning motivation, differentiated learning*

INTRODUCTION

Learning in elementary school has diverse student characteristics, both in terms of academic ability, learning interests, learning styles, and social backgrounds[1]. This diversity requires teachers to be able to design learning that is adaptive and responsive to the needs of students. If the learning process does not pay attention to the differences in student characteristics, then some students have the potential to experience learning difficulties and are less involved in learning activities in the classroom. Therefore, teachers need to implement learning strategies that are able to accommodate the diversity of students' learning needs in schools [2]

One approach that can be used to accommodate the diversity of students is differentiated instruction. Differentiated learning is a learning strategy that adjusts the content, processes, and learning products based on students' learning readiness, interests, and learning profiles[3]. Through differentiated learning, teachers can provide a more flexible learning experience so that each student can learn according to their own abilities and needs[4]

In the context of education in Indonesia, the application of differentiated learning has become increasingly relevant, especially since the implementation of the Independent Curriculum which emphasizes student-centered learning[5]. The Independent Curriculum encourages teachers to understand the characteristics of students and design learning that is able to develop students' potential optimally. The implementation of differentiated learning in the curriculum is expected to increase learning motivation, student involvement, and the quality of learning in the classroom [6]

Various studies show that the application of differentiated learning has a positive impact on the learning process in elementary school[5]. Differentiated learning can improve learning activities, concept understanding, and student learning outcomes because learning is designed according to different levels of student learning readiness. In addition, this approach is also able to increase student involvement in the learning process [7]

However, in practice, the implementation of differentiated instruction in elementary schools still faces various challenges. Teachers often have difficulty identifying students' learning needs, designing appropriate learning strategies, and managing classes with large numbers of students[8]. This condition shows that teachers need the right strategy so that differentiated learning can be applied effectively in the learning process [7]

Based on these problems, more in-depth research is needed on teachers' strategies in implementing differentiation instruction in elementary schools[9]. This study aims to explore the strategies used by teachers in designing and implementing differentiated learning in the classroom. This study uses a qualitative approach with case study methods through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and thematic analysis to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the practice of implementing differentiated instruction in elementary schools[10].

The concept of differentiated instruction was first systematically developed by Carol Ann Tomlinson, who argued that teachers must proactively plan varied approaches to what students need to learn, how they will learn it, and how they can express what they have learned. This framework has become a cornerstone in modern educational theory, particularly in inclusive and heterogeneous classroom settings. In elementary schools, where the gap between students’ cognitive development stages can

be especially pronounced, the need for adaptive teaching practices is particularly acute. Students in the same classroom may differ significantly in their prior knowledge, reading levels, and cognitive processing speeds, making a one-size-fits-all approach not only ineffective but potentially harmful to student confidence and motivation.

Furthermore, the role of the teacher in differentiated instruction extends beyond mere content delivery. Teachers are expected to act as diagnosticians who continuously assess student readiness, as facilitators who guide diverse learning pathways, and as reflective practitioners who refine their instructional strategies based on ongoing student feedback. This multidimensional role demands not only pedagogical competence but also strong classroom management skills, creativity in designing learning activities, and a deep commitment to equitable education. Given these demands, understanding how teachers navigate the practical implementation of differentiated instruction in real classroom settings becomes essential for both teacher educators and educational policymakers.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach and case study design. The purpose of this study is to understand in depth how teachers use differentiation instruction in the natural context of elementary schools. The case study method was used to explore teachers' real practices in differentiated learning in more detail and contextual.

Elementary school teachers who implement differentiated learning are the subjects of this study. The choice of topics was carried out by purposive sampling by considering factors such as teachers' experience in implementing differentiated learning and active involvement in the learning process in the classroom. This method is used to make the data obtained more relevant and in-depth for research purposes.

In-depth interviews, classroom observations, and documentation were the data collection methods in this study. In-depth interviews were conducted to obtain information about teachers' experiences, strategies, and difficulties in implementing differentiation instruction. Classroom observations were conducted to see teachers' learning practices, including interactions between them and students and the implementation of differentiation strategies in the classroom. Meanwhile, the documentation

To test the validity and credibility of the research data, source triangulation techniques and techniques are used. Source triangulation is done by comparing data from various sources, and technique triangulation is done by comparing the results of observations, documentation, and interviews.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data of this study. Thematic analysis is carried out in several stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawn. At the data reduction stage, the researcher selects and focuses data that is relevant to the research objective. After the data is presented in the form of a descriptive narrative, conclusions are made based on the patterns and themes found in the research data. The aim of this analysis was to gain a thorough understanding of the approach teachers use to implement differentiated instruction in primary schools.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Differentiated learning is a learning method that emphasizes tailoring the learning process to students' needs, interests, and abilities. In primary education, this approach is becoming increasingly relevant due to the many characteristics of students in the classroom. Studies by Fauzia and Ramadan show that implementing differentiated learning in the Independent Curriculum can improve the quality of learning because it provides opportunities for students to learn according to their readiness and potential[11]. As a result, learning becomes more flexible and student-centered rather than uniform.

In addition, Rachmawati and Sutikno found that the application of differentiated learning together with creative methods such as TPACK can significantly improve student learning outcomes[12]. This shows that it is not only the material delivered that determines the success of learning, but also the strategies and media that teachers use during the learning process. In addition, Yasa said that differentiated learning with students' learning environments can help them understand concepts better because they learn in a more real and relevant environment[13].

The results of interviews and observations conducted at SD Muhammadiyah Nitikan show that teachers have used various strategies for differentiated learning, including grouping students based on their abilities, assigning assignments with different levels of difficulty, and using various learning methods and media. Teachers

(G1) said that they group students and assign different assignments so that learning can be adapted to their abilities.

On the contrary, the principal (KS1) said that the school has helped implement differentiated learning by providing training, mentoring, and providing learning facilities and infrastructure According to Patras, this support shows that the institution is committed to supporting student-centered learning[14]. Nevertheless, there are still some obstacles to implement. These include limited time to design learning, significant student numbers, and significant differences in abilities between students. This condition is a challenge for teachers to use differentiated learning as best as possible in the classroom.

However, differentiated learning shows positive impacts on students, including increased student activity, increased their motivation to learn, and increased their understanding of the material. This shows that, as Widayati supports, a learning approach tailored to the needs of students can result in more effective and rewarding learning.

The results of the observation also show that the application of learning strategies such as discussions, practices, and visual media can increase student engagement and enthusiasm. Students appear to be more enthusiastic and actively participate in the learning process when learning is tailored to their style. Previous research results have shown that different differentiated learning methods can increase student engagement. These findings reinforce these findings [15].

The results of this study are in line with Carol Ann Tomlinson's theory which emphasizes that differentiated learning can be achieved by adapting learning content, processes, and products based on student needs. Various strategies for grouping students and assigning assignments indicate the application of product differentiation, and the use of various methods indicate the application of process differentiation. Many studies also support the idea that differentiated learning can improve student engagement and learning outcomes.

The importance of leadership in implementing learning innovations is also shown by the role of school principals in providing support through training and facilities. With strong institutional support, teachers can improve their skills and be creative in designing learning that suits students' needs. However, the challenges faced by teachers

show that implementing differentiated learning still needs support, especially in terms of time management, classroom management, and improved teacher understanding.

Therefore, differentiated learning can help address student diversity in elementary schools. However, continuous efforts are needed to optimize it in the field.

A closer examination of the strategies employed at SD Muhammadiyah Nitikan reveals that teachers tend to adopt a hybrid model of differentiation, combining ability-based grouping with open-ended tasks that allow students to demonstrate their understanding through multiple modalities. For instance, while one group of students might engage in written reflections, another group might present their understanding through drawing or oral explanation. This flexible approach to product differentiation aligns with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which advocates providing multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression to accommodate diverse learners. Such practices not only enhance academic achievement but also foster a sense of belonging and self-efficacy among students who might otherwise feel marginalized in a standardized learning environment.

It is also worth noting that the sustainability of differentiated instruction in Indonesian elementary schools is closely tied to the broader ecosystem of educational reform. The Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) provides a structural framework that encourages teacher autonomy and student-centered learning; however, the effective translation of this policy into classroom practice requires more than policy directives. It necessitates sustained professional development, collaborative planning time among teachers, and a school culture that values experimentation and reflective practice. The findings from this study suggest that schools which provide systemic support—through mentoring, resource allocation, and leadership that champions pedagogical innovation—are significantly more successful in embedding differentiated instruction as a standard practice rather than an occasional intervention. This underscores the importance of viewing differentiated instruction not as an individual teacher's responsibility alone, but as a shared institutional commitment to equity and excellence in education.

CONCLUSION

Differentiated learning is an important approach to addressing student diversity issues in elementary schools. This method allows the learning process to be tailored to

the unique needs of students based on their abilities, interests, learning styles, and social backgrounds. The results show that teachers can carry out differentiated learning effectively by using a variety of strategies, such as managing students based on their abilities, assigning assignments of different levels of difficulty, and using a variety of media and techniques. The success of differentiated learning in the classroom is also strengthened by the support of the principal in the form of training, mentoring, and the provision of learning facilities.

In addition, it is proven that teachers can improve student activeness, motivation, and learning outcomes through a better understanding of student characteristics and innovation in creating learning strategies. Ultimately, this will encourage a more significant learning process. Differentiated learning is not always easy to use. Teachers face many problems, including a very large number of students, large variations in student ability levels, and time constraints. To optimize this strategy, more educational institutions must help and teachers must continue to learn.

With such support, differentiated learning can help address student diversity and create an inclusive, responsive, and adaptive learning environment. Therefore, innovation and commitment from all relevant parties, including supportive policies and ongoing training, are needed to ensure differentiated learning.

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