

## **Transforming Islamic Religious Education Learning through Differentiated Learning in the *Merdeka* Curriculum**

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### **Abstract**

This paper investigates the transformation of Islamic religious education (PAI) learning through differentiated learning in the Merdeka Curriculum setting. The curriculum, heralding a shift towards contemporary educational paradigms, aims to cater to individual student differences through enhanced personalized learning strategies. This paper used a qualitative research method, using literature type by collecting data from books, journal articles, conference or seminar papers, and other publications related to three main concepts: differentiated learning, Islamic religious education, and the Merdeka Curriculum. The findings highlight three significant insights. Firstly, the emphasis on personalized learning, as viewed by Tomlinson, is crucial for adapting education to meet diverse student needs, including their readiness, interest, and learning environment, a key principle of the Merdeka Curriculum. This curriculum supports such individualized strategies and represents a significant shift towards enhancing learning experiences. Secondly, this curriculum's alignment with differentiated learning is evident in its promotion of learner-centered approaches, making education more inclusive and effective. Thirdly, applying differentiated learning in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) within the Merdeka Curriculum framework demonstrates a dynamic approach to catering to diverse student requirements, thus fostering deeper engagement and comprehension in PAI subjects. This study confirms a meaningful link between differentiated learning and the Merdeka Curriculum's goals, indicating a progressive direction for PAI learning, potentially improving educational outcomes and challenging traditional Islamic education methods. This study posits differentiated learning as a key strategy in actualizing the goals of the Merdeka Curriculum, thus significantly contributing to the ongoing discourse on educational reform in Indonesia.

**Kata Kunci:** *Differentiated Instruction, Islamic Education, Merdeka Curriculum*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Each student has unique and diverse characteristics. It requires teacher attention so that students can develop their potential optimally. Student potential can be optimized by aligning their needs with the learning process (Smale-Jacobse et al., 2023), where student needs include readiness, interest, and learning preferences (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2023, p. 31). Learning is the primary standard of implementing education, with learning methods evolving, and the teacher's responsibility is to select the best one to help students achieve their learning objectives while keeping them motivated and enjoying school (Leite et al., 2022).

It indicated that the methods are determined based on students' needs; diverse students require varied teaching methods (van Geel et al., 2023). These things are

accommodated in differentiated instruction (Gentry et al., 2013; Kristiani et al., 2021, p. 18). The concept was strengthened after the emergence of the Merdeka curriculum in 2020, which was referred to as a medium for the transformation of contemporary Indonesian education (Abidah et al., 2020; Hidayat & Patras, 2024) and as a government effort to improve the quality of Indonesian education (Wang et al., 2023). In addition to student profiles, the Merdeka concept, and teaching modules, differentiated instruction is another concept identical to the Merdeka curriculum.

Another indicator of the strengthening of studies on differentiated instruction is the increase in the number of scientific publications on it, giving the impression that the concept has never been studied in contemporary education studies in Indonesia. In fact, in 2012 (Wilujeng, 2012), 2016 (Suprayogi & Valcke, 2016), dan 2017 (Suprayogi et al., 2017), there have been publications by Indonesian authors and its collaborations with overseas authors on differentiated instruction in reputable and non-reputable international journals. However, the sharp increase occurred in the era of the Merdeka curriculum because it is one of the distinctive concepts made explicit to accommodate student-centered learning approaches and their various individual differences (Penyusun, 2024a, p. 36). However, these studies have not linked differentiated instruction with Islamic education or Islamic religious education as one of the mandatory subjects for all Muslim students of the education system in Indonesia, which applies to every level of education (Nasional, 2003).

The Merdeka Curriculum was released in early 2022 and became the national curriculum in 2024 (Penyusun, 2024a, p. 46). This curriculum focuses on essential competencies and developing students' character (Penyusun, 2024a, p. 5). It also explicitly accommodates individual student differences, referred to as differentiated instruction (Penyusun, 2024a, p. 30). Therefore, teachers must attempt to accommodate these distinctions in the classroom learning environment (Tomlinson, 2000a). Enhancing differentiated instruction in the *Merdeka* curriculum can be understood as a strategy to maximize students' abilities by accommodating their unique differences. In this manner, they can develop and explore their desired scientific disciplines and talents according to their learning styles (Goli & Achadi, 2023).

Based on the explanation, enforcement of differentiated instruction in the Merdeka Curriculum is expected to develop the fields that have not achieved their goals yet. Therefore, this study discusses differentiated instruction in Islamic religious education (PAI) learning. PAI subject was chosen because it is one of three subjects that cannot be subdivided into study units with different names (Penyusun, 2024a, p. 53) and is one of the mandatory subjects for all Muslim students of the education system in Indonesia, which applies to every level of education (Nasional, 2003). Apart from that, the selection of these subjects is also intended as an effort to answer various assumptions that Islamic education is identical to classic problems, such as low student interest and the application of less varied learning methods (Maulida, 2019), lack of understanding of the subject matter that has been taught and lack of student motivation to learn (Chasanah, 2021), lack of learning facilities and infrastructure for Islamic religious education (Mulasi, 2019).

Aside from these classic problems, there have been several earlier studies on differentiated instruction and Islamic religious education learning from non-Scopus databases. However, these studies are still relatively infrequent, so they can be categorized based on their methodology. First, the results of qualitative research found several findings: implementing differentiated instruction in IRE has a good impact on increasing the students' creativity and enjoyable and meaningful learning because students have emotional sensitivity and imagination (Hasnawati, 2021), combined with Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL), prepared learning materials and uses PowerPoint and Video (Qolbiyah, 2022), allow students to learn naturally (Dirjo et al., 2023; Sukmawati, 2022), multimedia application (Nurlaili et al., 2023), utilization of hyper doc technology (Purwaningrum, 2023), improving students understanding on learning material and learning outcomes and creating an inclusive learning environment (Ridwan & Umarella, 2024).

Second, quantitative research concluded that differentiated instruction in the PAI learning process positively affects student learning outcomes (Aisyah et al., 2024). Third, a mixed method provided that differentiated instruction increases learning outcomes in PAI because it encourages teacher skills to concoct appropriate menus regarding students' diversity, needs, potency, and talents (Nurdini, 2021). Multiple studies have demonstrated the issue of learning in Islamic religious education and its correlation to the *Merdeka* curriculum, using three different types of research methods and research focus. It indicates the necessity for methodological adjustments to enhance the quality of learning.

This study proposes differentiated instruction as a viable method to address these problems since it aligns with the present conditions of the applicable national curriculum. However, this study attempts to complement previous studies by using a literature review approach to highlight the transformation of PAI learning through differentiated instruction with Tomlinson's view in the *Merdeka* curriculum context, which is widely recognized as the pioneer. Thus, three research questions are the main emphasis of this study. First, what is differentiated instruction in Carol Ann Tomlinson's view? Second, how does it relate to the *Merdeka* Curriculum? Third, how is applying differentiated instruction in IRE learning in the *Merdeka* Curriculum?

## **METHOD**

This study uses a qualitative research method with a literature study approach to explore literature related to the transformation of Islamic Religious Education learning through differentiated instruction in the *Merdeka* curriculum. The data sources reach from searching various documents such as books, journal articles, conference or seminar papers, and other publications related to three main concepts: differentiated instruction, Islamic religious education, and the *Merdeka* Curriculum.

For this purpose, the author collected relevant documents using several online databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and ResearchGate. The researcher also gathered information by utilizing trusted websites to access the *Merdeka* curriculum policy, its implementation guide, and good practices regarding differentiated instruction. Trusted

websites like the kemdikbud.go.id and its derivative: jdih.kemdikbud.go.id and kurikulum.kemdikbud.go.id.

The data obtained were then analyzed descriptively by grouping them thematically based on the focus of the study using qualitative content analysis techniques. The further analysis process follows an interactive analysis model consisting of three further stages after data collection: condensation, presentation, and conclusion (Miles et al., 2014). Meanwhile,

## **FINDING AND DISCUSSION**

### ***Tomlinson's View on Differentiated Instruction***

Diversity is a distinctive attribute of secondary-level students; therefore, educational institutions must appropriately accommodate student differences (Tomlinson et al., 1998). Differentiation consists of teachers' efforts to respond to student diversity in the classroom learning process. Teachers differentiate four essential elements (content, process, product, and learning environment) based on students' readiness, interest, and learning profile (Tomlinson, 2000a, 2000b). Apart from these four components, additional components are made explicit in more recently published books, such as effect (the educational environment encompassing the learning and interactions of students and teachers). It exists between product components and the learning environment (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013, p. 12).

Differentiated instruction can be defined in various ways. However, a good definition is ensuring that what is learned, how students learn, and their learning outcomes are following readiness (maximizing opportunities, challenges, and appropriate growth), interests (increasing motivation), and the way they like to learn based on learning styles (increasing efficiency). In this way, learning will achieve effective differentiation from an ongoing assessment of student needs (Tomlinson, 2004). In short, a differentiated classroom offers multiple ways for students to access information (content), comprehend concepts (process), and create outputs (product), ensuring that every student may learn successfully (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 1, 2017, p. 1). At this point, Tomlinson also emphasized that "a key goal of differentiated instruction is maximizing the learning potential of each student. There is no single "recipe" for differentiation" (Tomlinson, 2005).

Differentiated instruction has two types of classroom assessment: formative and summative. Formative assessment is often known as an ongoing assessment because it is a process used to monitor the development of a student's knowledge, understanding, and skills. This assessment is divided into two categories: pre-assessment and ongoing assessment. Tomlinson asserts that many individuals conflate the two concepts and solely perceive them as ongoing assessments. Summative assessment measures and evaluates student learning outcomes (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013, pp. 18–19).

It highlights that pre-assessment is an integral component of formative assessment that is frequently disregarded. Pre-assessment is crucial for the efficacy of differentiated instruction, as successful differentiation necessitates teachers to evaluate student progress before, during, and after each learning unit. Teachers can focus more on making better lesson plans when they know how each student is different and look at three things that

affect learning: ability, interest, and learning profile (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013, p. 21). It stresses the teacher's role in maintaining consistency, persistence, and passion for modifying the curriculum and learning in response to these three factors (Tomlinson et al., 2003).

### ***Differentiated Learning in the Merdeka Curriculum***

Differentiated learning is one of the crucial concepts in the Merdeka curriculum adopted from Tomlinson's view on differentiated instruction. It refers to the introduction and explanation of the concept of differentiated learning in chapter 3 of the book "Differentiated Learning Development Model" published by the "Center for Curriculum and Learning, Agency for Standards, Curriculum, and Educational Assessment, Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, Republic of Indonesia" in 2021 (Kristiani et al., 2021). Besides, it also refers to the shift in learning principles from teacher-centered to student-centered (Hastasasi et al., 2024; Penyusun, 2024a) and the philosophical foundations of the Merdeka curriculum is to serve students' diversity (Penyusun, 2024a).

In the Merdeka curriculum, differentiated learning means learning that is designed differently between one student and another due to differences in comprehension, learning speed, and the like, so learning tries to accommodate this diversity. That is the embodiment of learning based on the principle of student-centered learning: learning oriented to serving students' learning needs (Penyusun, 2024a, p. 30). Each student can achieve the expected learning goals because learning is designed according to their understanding and competence (Penyusun, 2024b). Thus, the meaning of differentiation in the Merdeka curriculum emphasizes the teacher's efforts to create variations in learning according to students' diversity and learning needs (Penyusun, 2024c).

The variation is carried out in the aspects of the process, product, and content of learning (Penyusun, 2024c); in addition to these three elements, there is another element, namely the learning environment. In this case, the learning environment includes the class's personal, social, and physical arrangement, such as student seating, designed based on interests and learning readiness adjusted to learning goals. The goal is to create a pleasant learning atmosphere and environment for students to meet their needs. These aspects must refer to the diversity of students in the class, including their readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Kristiani et al., 2021). Thus, there are four types of differentiation forms: process, product, content, and learning environment. It is in line with Tomlinson's explanation that in differentiated learning, the teacher's task is to differentiate four key elements: content, process, product, and learning environment based on students' readiness, interest, and learning profile (Tomlinson, 2000a, 2000b).

The explanation emphasizes that student diversity is focused on something other than their learning styles but rather on aspects of their readiness, interests, and learning profiles. That is because differentiated learning focuses on accommodating learning processes following students' learning needs based on their diversity. Meanwhile, learning styles are learning preferences that can change and develop, so teachers need to develop and enrich them so that students have a variety of learning methods to achieve learning

goals. That way, teachers can avoid labeling certain learning styles in students to avoid indoctrinating learning style understanding, namely interpreting certain learning styles as part of their personality and being permanent (Penyusun, 2024b). The change in learning style aligns with Williamson's findings that learning style and personality traits are forms of individual differences that intersect and contribute to the learning process. However, learning style is more flexible and can change as a person's career progresses (Williamson, 2018).

Therefore, the Merdeka curriculum accommodates the optimization of four variations of differentiation by the diversity of students through continuous and holistic assessment. The assessment is carried out at the beginning, process, and end of learning. The initial assessment determines students' abilities regarding the material to be studied, readiness, and background. Meanwhile, the assessment at the learning process stage is oriented to determine the development of their learning and the final assessment is used to see the accumulation of learning comprehensively (Penyusun, 2024a). The three stages of assessment show the unity between learning and assessment that form a cycle. There are two forms of learning assessment, namely formative and summative. Formative assessment has two forms: at the beginning and during learning. The summative assessment is, in the end, used as the foundation for determining class promotion and student graduation (Penyusun, 2024b).

The form of sustainable assessment lies in formative assessment. Initial formative assessment aims to diagnose and improve the quality of learning so that teachers no longer give grades or numbers but rather explore the problems faced by students through optimizing the diagnostic assessment function. Meanwhile, formative assessment during the learning process aims to monitor and evaluate the development of student competencies (Kristiani et al., 2021). This assessment system is part of the learning transformation packaged in the Merdeka curriculum policy (Penyusun, 2024a). This assessment system also aligns with Tomlinson's conceptualization of the types of classroom assessment in differentiated instruction, namely formative and summative, where formative assessment consists of two categories: pre-assessment and ongoing assessment (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013).

The enactment of differentiated learning has been an inherent part since the beginning of the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum in the 2022/2023 academic year (Kemdikbud, 2022). One of the implementation choices is to enforce differentiated learning based on diagnostic assessment (Kemdikbud, 2022). It indicates that differentiated learning is one of the inherent aspects in the stages of implementing the Merdeka curriculum, which consists of the initial, developing, ready, and advanced stages (Penyusun, 2022). The implementation stages also apply to the implementation of differentiated learning so that its implementation can be carried out in stages according to teacher readiness and student learning needs. The simplest implementation example is conducting a diagnostic assessment to train sensitivity to student learning needs (Penyusun, 2022).

The follow-up of the diagnostic assessment results is related to the implementation stage of the Merdeka curriculum. The implementation of diagnostic assessments without any follow-up is included in the initial stage of implementing the Merdeka curriculum. Here, teachers only use the assessments available in textbooks or teaching modules. Meanwhile, suppose teachers use the results of diagnostic assessments to identify students who need more attention. It is included in the second stage of implementing the Merdeka curriculum, namely the developing stage. In the third stage, the diagnostic assessment results are used by teachers to design learning according to the achievements of most students. While at the advanced stage, the learning design follows the achievement stage of all students. These four stages appear in the aspect of assessment integration in learning. They are developed in the learning aspect according to students' learning stage at the elementary and secondary education levels (Penyusun, 2022).

These follow-ups and stages affirm that teachers must be active learners in the Merdeka curriculum to improve their readiness and competence. That is increasingly evident because, in other characteristics that are the uniqueness of the Merdeka curriculum as well as its objectives, there is the concept of the Pancasila student profile (P3), namely "lifelong learners who are competent, have character, and behave according to Pancasila values." P3 has six dimensions: 1. faith, devotion to God Almighty, and noble character; 2. cooperation; 3. critical thinking; 4. global diversity; 5. independence; and 6. creativity). Each dimension is interrelated, cannot stand alone, and has elements and sub-elements as indicators of its achievement. There are three ways to integrate these dimensions, including integrating them into intracurricular learning activities, using them as direct learning experiences, and as a co-curricular activity project, namely the Pancasila student profile strengthening project (P5) (Penyusun, 2024a).

In the context of education in madrasahs or educational institutions under the Ministry of Religious Affairs, P5 is enriched with the concept of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* so that there is enrichment into a profile of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* students (P5-PPRA), which contains the values of religious moderation (Indonesia, 2022; Ramdhani et al., 2022). Both projects are separate from intracurricular activities, using collaborative learning and adopting cross-disciplinary learning (Habibah & Nurhidin, 2023; Penyusun, 2024c; Ramdhani et al., 2022). In addition, project implementation must still accommodate differentiated learning (Penyusun, 2024c). In this case, the capacity that needs to be improved the most is teacher competence in implementing project-based learning strategies, differentiation strategies and assessments (Penyusun, 2024c). Therefore, optimizing differentiated learning in intracurricular and co-curricular activities requires strengthening teacher capacity.

### ***Applying Differentiated Learning in Islamic Religious Education Learning***

Differentiated learning can be applied to Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning. This is due to the position of PAI as one of the compulsory subjects for all Muslim students of the education system in Indonesia, which applies to every level of education (Nasional, 2003), regardless of the type of curriculum. In addition, differentiated instruction is a type of inclusive learning because the main key is optimizing the potential

of each student (Tomlinson, 2005), where each student gets recognition of equality in their differences (Tomlinson et al., 1998).

It indicates that PAI teachers have the same authority as other subject teachers to implement differentiated learning. It means that differentiated learning can be applied to all subjects without exception. Thus, PAI teachers must implement it according to the applicable protocol. There are four protocols for implementing differentiated learning: the principles (learning environment, quality curriculum, continuous assessment, responsive teaching, leadership, and classroom routines), students' diversity (readiness, interests, and learning profiles), key elements (content, process, product, learning environment), and implementation stages (preparation, implementation, learning plan and assessment model) (Kristiani et al., 2021).

One of the differentiated learning practices can be seen in the book "Differentiated Learning Model" (Kristiani et al., 2021), which shows that the preparation stage consists of creating a learning environment, students' personal and social abilities, diagnostic tests, preparing technology and communication, theme-based learning and collaborative projects. Second is the implementation stage. This stage is a follow-up to the preparation stage. The results are the categorization of student diversity and the determination of the theme (environmental pollution). The theme is learned collaboratively involving several subjects: Science, Social Studies, Mathematics, Indonesian, English, Religious Education, Physical Education, civics, Arts, and Culture.

Third is the planning and assessment model stage. At this stage, learning activities have been systematized and applied to learning each subject, consisting of introductory, core, closing, and reflection activities. The initial activities of PAI learning consist of five activities: opening the learning, starting with reading the surah/verses of the Qur'an, ensuring students' readiness to learn (in the morning sharing and showing learning videos about *taharah* with a social-emotional learning approach, and delivering the topic. Next are the core learning activities, including textbook lesson materials and advanced learning videos. The teacher identifies things that are not yet understood by giving factual to hypothetical questions, asking students to discuss and collect information, present and respond to it, working on worksheets, the teacher monitors the achievement of task completion, and conducting attitude assessments.

In the closing activity, the teacher and students conclude about the material learned (*taharah*). In the reflection stage, the teacher invites students to think again about the benefits of learning to purify, gives rewards in the form of praise, informs them about the learning activities for the next meeting, and closes the lesson by praying together. The fourth stage is assessment. Each subject has three aspects of the same assessment at this stage: knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The most widely used assessment type is formative assessment because it better reflects student competence. Teachers also provide diagnostic tests periodically to monitor the progress of their students' learning.

Through collaborative project-based learning, learning about environmental pollution has four types of differentiation. Content differentiation is adjusted to the results



of the initial assessment. Process differentiation refers to the results of categorizing student diversity, including their learning styles. Product differentiation that adjusts learning readiness and final products that suit interests. The products include comics, posters, crafts, bulletin boards, and learning videos. Differentiation of the learning environment is designed according to the student's residence (during distance learning) and seating in the classroom. From this learning, the PAI subject is part of project-based learning. The material content connects the concept of *taharah* with maintaining environmental cleanliness, while the resulting product is filling in student worksheets (LKPD) based on observations of materials, videos, and daily activities in *taharah*. In the final stage, there is a product creation in the form of a video about how to purify (*taharah*) in every condition in various environments.

In addition to these practices, this study found several other differentiated learning practices related to Islamic Religious Education (PAI) subjects. First is the problem of implementation. Teachers have prepared diagnostic assessment instruments but have yet to implement them, so the results of grouping students' learning needs do not correspond to the actual conditions of diversity and students' learning needs. That is reinforced by the practice of formative assessment, which is still limited during the learning process in the classroom (Kamila et al., 2024). Whereas the formative assessment system of differentiated learning in the conception of the independent curriculum and Tomlinson both consist of pre-assessment (diagnostic assessment) and learning process assessment (ongoing assessment) (Penyusun, 2024a; Tomlinson & Moon, 2013).

Second, the benefits of implementing differentiated learning include improving understanding of the material, learning outcomes, and a more inclusive learning environment (Ridwan & Umarella, 2024), having a significant impact on learning outcomes (Aisyah et al., 2024; Nurdini, 2021), teachers' efforts in providing natural learning opportunities for students based on their initial abilities (Dirjo et al., 2023; Sukmawati, 2022), increasing students' active participation in the learning process in the classroom (Anggraini et al., 2023). Third, strategies for implementing differentiated learning. Utilization of multimedia to display videos and images related to the subject matter in initial learning activities (aperception) to attract students' interest in learning (Nurlaili et al., 2023), utilization of hyperdoc technology (Purwaningrum, 2023), and increasing teacher competence in compiling teaching modules that accommodate differentiated learning (Pudjiani, 2023).

Some of these findings prove the dynamics and strengthening of differentiated learning practices in Islamic Religious Education subjects. It reflects the learning transformation that places teachers and students equally as active learners. This transformation is a consequence of the Merdeka curriculum established as the national curriculum where the curriculum update itself is a form of transformation in education that directly impacts learning practices.

## CONCLUSION

The results of this study conclude that the concept of differentiated learning in the Merdeka curriculum is an adaptation of Tomlinson's thoughts on differentiated instruction. The adaptation is an effort to improve the quality of education in Indonesia so that teachers and students have an equal position as lifelong learners. It is a consequence that places teachers always to improve their competence and be adaptive to various advances in information and communication technology. That is the foundation for teachers to create independently in differentiating various elements (content, process, product, and learning environment). In that way, teachers can become learning partners for students and strive for an amusing learning process according to the diversity and needs of their students. In PAI learning, this can solve various learning problems, which until now are still often considered monotonous, traditional, and boring. Thus, the results of this study have implications for the renewal of a more enjoyable learning process for students because it is based on their needs and diversity.

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