

## Implementation of Differentiated Instruction Strategies for Students' Learning Motivation in Islamic Elementary School

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### Abstract

This study aimed to analyze the strategies used by Islamic Education teachers in managing differentiated learning and its impacts on students' learning motivation at Az-Zahra Islamic Elementary School, Palembang. Using a qualitative case study design, the research involved six Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers and students from grades 1 to 6. Data were analyzed using Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's interactive model, which consists of three cyclical stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. This model was selected because it enables continuous interaction between the researcher and the data, allowing emerging patterns to be refined throughout the analysis process. The findings revealed that IRE teachers implemented differentiated learning through four main strategies: differentiation of content, process, product, and learning environment, each aligned with diagnostic assessment results. Teachers adapted instructional materials to address students' diverse needs, designed varied learning activities, and developed lesson plans, modules, worksheets, and assessments that accommodated individual differences. The learning environment was also extended beyond the classroom through outdoor and experiential activities that reduced fatigue and enhanced engagement. Collectively, these practices fostered an inclusive and student-centered atmosphere that enhanced intrinsic motivation, active participation, perseverance, and self-confidence. Furthermore, the results indicated a significant overall improvement in students' learning motivation, as reflected in their enthusiasm during class activities, willingness to ask questions, and independent efforts to understand the material beyond classroom sessions.

**Keywords:** Differentiated Instruction, Implementation, Students' Learning Motivation

### Abstrak

*Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis strategi yang digunakan oleh guru Pendidikan Agama Islam dalam mengelola pembelajaran diferensiasi dan dampaknya terhadap motivasi belajar siswa di Sekolah Dasar Negeri Az-Zahra, Palembang. Dengan menggunakan desain studi kasus kualitatif, penelitian ini melibatkan enam guru Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) dan siswa kelas 1 hingga 6. Data dianalisis menggunakan model interaktif (Miles, Huberman, dan Saldana) yang terdiri dari tiga tahap siklus: reduksi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan/verifikasi. Model ini dipilih karena memungkinkan interaksi berkelanjutan antara peneliti dan data, sehingga pola yang muncul dapat disempurnakan sepanjang proses analisis. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa guru PAI*

*menerapkan pembelajaran diferensiasi melalui empat strategi utama: diferensiasi konten, proses, produk, dan lingkungan belajar, yang masing-masing selaras dengan hasil asesmen diagnostik. Guru menyesuaikan materi pembelajaran untuk memenuhi beragam kebutuhan siswa, merancang berbagai kegiatan belajar, dan mengembangkan rencana pembelajaran, modul, lembar kerja, dan asesmen yang mengakomodasi perbedaan individu. Lingkungan belajar juga diperluas di luar kelas melalui kegiatan di luar ruangan dan pengalaman yang mengurangi kelelahan dan meningkatkan keterlibatan. Secara kolektif, praktik-praktik ini menumbuhkan suasana inklusif dan berpusat pada siswa yang meningkatkan motivasi intrinsik, partisipasi aktif, ketekunan, dan kepercayaan diri. Lebih lanjut, hasil penelitian menunjukkan peningkatan keseluruhan yang signifikan dalam motivasi belajar siswa, yang tercermin dalam antusiasme mereka selama kegiatan kelas, kesediaan untuk bertanya, dan upaya mandiri untuk memahami materi di luar sesi kelas.*

**Kata kunci:** Pembelajaran Diferensiasi, Impelentasi, Motivasi Belajar Siswa

## INTRODUCTION

Contemporary educational practices increasingly require approaches that recognize the diverse characteristics of learners. Students differ in their readiness levels, interests, learning styles, and degrees of content mastery, making it impossible for instruction to be delivered uniformly. Recent educational regulations also emphasize the importance of student-centered learning, in which teachers are expected to adjust strategies, materials, and learning processes to accommodate these individual differences. The uniqueness of each learner therefore serves as the primary rationale for implementing more adaptive and responsive instructional approaches, including differentiated learning in the classroom (Amalia et al., 2023). The pandemic that shook the world also had an impact on educational settings, causing students' needs to be disregarded. Under all conditions, the learning process should ideally prioritize the needs of the students by conducting an initial assessment of their psychological state, educational background, and preparedness for learning. As a result, the government has established an independent learning program, one of which is implementing Kurikulum Merdeka (Independent Curriculum), which began in 2021, in order to address the conditions surrounding education and learning recovery during the pandemic (Fitra, 2022).

One of Indonesia's education policies, Merdeka Curriculum (Independent Curriculum), gives elementary schools more autonomy in choosing curriculum and instructional strategies that best meet the needs of their pupils. Flexibility in differentiated learning is made possible by the Merdeka Curriculum's implementation, which emphasizes the idea that every person has unique interests, abilities, and potential. Teachers must also combine and coordinate these differences with effective teaching strategies (Dista et al., 2024). One approach that may be used in implementing the Merdeka curriculum is differentiated instruction, which is the teacher's method of balancing students' learning styles, aptitudes, and abilities, and providing learning experiences that meet each student's needs (Agustina et al., 2020). A good teacher is one who adapts his/her lessons to the needs of their students (Khabibah et al., 2023). The Merdeka curriculum enhances learning by minimizing differences in learning. A differentiated instruction is defined as a teaching approach based on the active role of the teacher in analyzing the needs and situations of the students. This also serves as guidance for the teacher to help students recognize and value their own strengths, and the teacher consistently works to assist students in discovering their own strengths (Afrida, 2022). According to Augustina, differentiated instruction is instruction that is tailored to each student's unique needs and abilities (Fauzi et al., 2023; Jatmiko & Putra, 2022; Muhajiir et al., 2021). As students learn, teachers have important responsibilities. The teacher has an advantage as a means of preventing students from falling behind in their learning. In addition, a teacher must be engaged in the planning, execution, and evaluation of the learning process. On the other hand, the teacher's ability to implement various teaching methods, strategies, and techniques is also necessary, since it is the primary factor in the

success of any educational endeavor (Picasouw et al., 2023). One of the main challenges for educators in carrying out teaching is the deviation from the student characteristics. One of the teacher's strengths in accommodating students' unique characteristics and learning styles is their ability to successfully complete the learning process (Amalia et al., 2023; Picasouw et al., 2023; Pramudianti et al., 2023)(Mastuti et al., 2022). A phenomenon that occurs in elementary classrooms is that teachers do not have adequate diagnostic results for the students they teach. This leads to problems not consistent with the instructional methods that teachers use in the classroom for teaching students who are not proficient in the subject matter. On the other hand, differentiated instruction needs to be based on preliminary diagnostic results (Dista et al., 2024). Starting from the various problems and challenges that have been described, teachers should adapt by implementing differentiation in the learning process, especially through a differentiated learning approach. The differentiated learning process aims to liberate students because students have different abilities so that students can actualize their potential according to their respective uniqueness and potential (Agustina et al., 2020)(Agustiana et al., 2023).

Diverse learning must be approached carefully (Ananda Shelyna et al., 2023). Effective planning necessitates effective teaching techniques for differentiated instruction, particularly in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) courses. Instructors prepare and arrange learning resources, games, homework assignments, and end-of-term assessments based on students' interests, readiness, and preferences (Gusteti & Neviyarni, 2022). The teacher has the ability to modify learning objectives, procedures, products, and learning environments for students with special needs. With this approach, the teacher can instruct students according to their individual characteristics (KomalaSari, 2023). Teacher must understand that there are various approaches to learning a particular subject, including breaking down content, process, and final product. The differentiated teaching approach guides students empathetically, accommodates their needs through direct instruction, and maximizes their learning time (Fauzia & Hadikusuma Ramadan, 2023).

Despite the government's efforts to address learning loss through various national policies, most existing studies primarily focused on general classroom teachers, cognitive learning outcomes, or policy implementation at the system level. Research rarely examines how Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers, particularly at the elementary school level, manage differentiated learning within the unique context of post-pandemic recovery. Additionally, previous studies tend to emphasize instructional models or student performance, while limited attention was given to how IRE teachers design differentiated instruction and how these practices influence students' learning motivation. This gap indicated the need for a deeper exploration of IRE teachers' strategies for adapting instruction for diverse learners in real classroom settings.

Differentiated learning is still not widely used, particularly in IRE instruction. The issue with Islamic religious education is that, due to individual differences in traits and comprehension capacities, students still struggle to absorb the content. Implementing Islamic religious education, it needs to be done in a way that meets expectations based on factors that support learning (Anggraini et al., 2023; Sufyadi et al., 2021). In line with this research, which is based on IMTAQ and IMTEK as well as being healthy, superior in learning and self-development. With this, the vision and mission of the Az-Zahrah Palembang Islamic Elementary School have carried out the goals of education in this country, namely developing the potential of students to become human beings who believe and are devoted to God Almighty, have noble character, are healthy, knowledgeable, capable, creative, independent, and democratic and responsible citizens. In the learning process at Az-Zahrah Islamic Elementary School in Palembang, a Merdeka curriculum has been implemented and to make the learning process easier, teachers implement differentiated learning, namely by grouping students according to interests, talents and varied learning models according to the characteristics of students. This is in line with the aim of this research, as IRE subjects receive great attention in the learning process because they will support the achievement of one of the school's visions and missions. This

research discusses the strategies teachers apply to manage differentiated learning in IRE subjects to increase students' learning motivation at Az-Zahrah Islamic Elementary School in Palembang.

This research underscores the urgent need to address the diverse learning needs of students in the context of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) at the elementary level, particularly amidst the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift towards a Merdeka Curriculum. The novelty of this study lies in its in-depth, practice-oriented examination of differentiated learning strategies as implemented by teachers of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) at Az-Zahrah Islamic Elementary School, Palembang. Az-Zahrah Islamic Elementary School was selected as the site for the study because it has piloted structured differentiated learning initiatives over the past two academic years—including teacher professional development on differentiation, documented lesson plans with tiered tasks, and school-level monitoring of student progress—making it a suitable exemplar for practice-based study. By triangulating classroom observations, teacher interviews, and school records, this research provided a comprehensive model that integrates planning, execution, and evaluation tailored specifically to IRE subjects. This model is grounded in empirical evidence from the school and therefore contributes both to theory and to practical guidance for teachers and policymakers seeking to implement differentiated instruction in similar contexts. The study aims to contribute valuable insights into effective management strategies that can boost students' motivation and engagement, thereby enhancing the quality of education. By highlighting the positive impact of differentiated instruction on learning motivation, this research emphasizes the importance of innovative teaching approaches that are responsive to individual student differences, calling for immediate application and further development to meet the increasing educational demands of today's diverse student populations.

## **METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative approach with an explanatory case study methodology aimed at providing a comprehensive explanation of the phenomenon (Norman et al., 2021). This research method was used to characterize the strategies used by the teachers at Islamic Az-Zahrah Elementary school Palembang to differentiate instruction in the IRE curriculum. The research subjects were selected using the purposive sampling technique, which included the principle, the teachers of the lower and upper grade levels, and the students from those respective grade levels. Researchers used observation, documentation, data triangulation, and structured, in-depth interviews to gather data for this study (Rosenthal, 2016). First, an interview with the principal was conducted to discuss the policies provided to teachers to effectively accomplish learning objectives. Second, teacher interviews were conducted with IRE teachers discussing the methods they employ to manage differentiated instruction. Third, student interviews were conducted to determine how well students understood when individualized instruction when implemented.

Observations were made regarding the methods IRE teachers used to implement differentiated instruction. Data were collected using documentation, including learning tools (syllabus, curriculum, teaching modules, teaching materials, learning media, and learning assessment tools). In order to obtain reliable research data and conduct data triangulation, observations and documentation were also carried out to validate interview data. Researchers conducted Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with IRE instructors to learn about the strategies teachers use to manage differentiated learning, in addition to personal observations, documentation, and interviews for deeper data exploration. Additionally, a questionnaire with both closed-and open-ended questions was used by the researchers. The interactive approach was utilized to analyze research data. This model has three steps: data condensation, data display, and drawing and verifying conclusions (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Anything that is used as a source to obtain the information required for is considered a research subject. Purposive sampling is a sampling approach used to select research subjects based on predetermined criteria, such as the belief that the sample members are knowledgeable about the

subject of the study, among other rational considerations (Bekele & Ago, 2022). Instead of using pre-research criteria that they identified, researchers select research subjects based on the location and examine objects that are consistent with the research theme.

The study's participants were chosen using the purposive sampling technique. These included IRE teachers and students from Az Zahrah Islamic Elementary School in Palembang, an elementary school implementing differentiated instruction and a Merdeka curriculum. This is one of Palembang City's elementary schools with excellent facilities and infrastructure, having earned an A accreditation.

The principal of the school was the first subject used as a data source for this study. There were 15 participants in total, consisting of 6 IRE teachers, 6 pupils in grades 1 through 5, and 3 other people. The information that was extracted relates to Islamic Religious Education Teacher Strategies in Managing Differentiated Learning. Additionally, the study examines efforts to enhance students' learning motivation. It also discusses the factors that affect teachers' strategies for managing differentiated learning in Islamic religious education.

The process of methodically searching and gathering data from observations, interviews, and documentation is known as data analysis. It involves categorizing the data, describing it in units or sub-chapters, synthesizing it, arranging it into patterns, selecting the relevant material to be studied, and drawing conclusions that are clear and systematic enough for readers and researchers to understand. Data analysis produces scientifically grounded conclusions aligned with the study theme by integrating collected data with relevant theoretical frameworks.

The data analysis followed the interactive model developed (Miles et al., 2014). This model consists of three interconnected and cyclical components: (1) data condensation, where the researcher selected, organized, and simplified raw data from interviews, observations, and documents; (2) data display, in which the organized data were presented in matrices, narrative descriptions, and thematic charts to facilitate interpretation; and (3) conclusion drawing and verification, conducted by continuously reviewing emerging patterns, comparing data across sources, and validating the findings through triangulation. This model was chosen because it allows systematic and iterative engagement with the data, ensuring analytical rigor throughout the entire research process (Adlini, 2020; Hasanah, 2020).

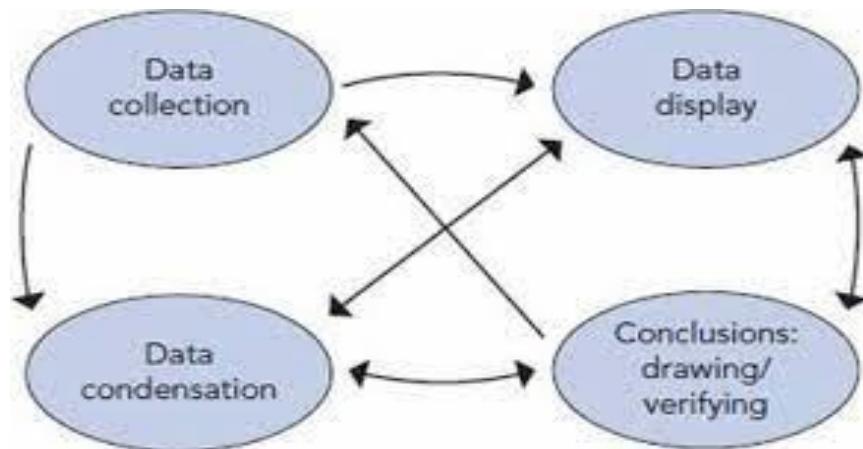


Figure 1. Data Analysis Techniques

The process of data condensation is conducted first. In this procedure, researchers sort through all of the data they collected while conducting their investigation into the learning challenges faced by students participating in distance learning in order to identify and eliminate irrelevant, significant, and reliable data. In addition, the researcher provides a summary of key findings from a wealth of information gathered through observation, documentation, interviews, and Google Forms or

questionnaires in order to address the research's problem formulation, which is the learning challenges faced by students and the factors contributing to learning difficulties in distance learning.

Following the data condensation procedure, the researcher gathers the chosen data and presents it in accordance with the problem formulation in the form of narratives (descriptions), tables, images, and charts organized into sub-chapters. After reviewing pertinent ideas regarding the types of learning challenges faced by students and the circumstances that led to learning difficulties in distance learning, the researcher examined the data that had been provided and drew conclusions that were corroborated by the evidence. These conclusions were supported by reliable and valid field data collected for the study using Google forms or questionnaires, observations, interviews, and documentation.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Strategies Employed by Teachers in Managing Differentiated Learning in Islamic Religious Education Subjects to Enhance Students' Learning Motivation at Az-Zahra Islamic Elementary School in Palembang**

This study examined how Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers at Az-Zahrah Islamic Elementary School in Palembang implemented differentiated learning strategies to enhance students' motivation. Through thematic analysis of interviews, observations, documentation, FGDs, and questionnaire responses, five major themes emerged that systematically addressed the research objectives and questions.

Observations across IRE 1 to IRE 6 revealed that teachers consistently grouped students based on their readiness levels, learning profiles, and ongoing assessment results. In IRE 1 and IRE 2, grouping was primarily readiness-based, with teachers separating students who required more structured guidance from those who could complete tasks independently. In IRE 3 and IRE 4, grouping shifted toward learning preferences, with visual, auditory, and kinesthetic groups formed according to the learning activities planned. In IRE 5 and IRE 6, teachers combined diagnostic assessment data with performance tasks to create flexible groups that were adjusted according to lesson. These observations demonstrate that student grouping was not static but adapted dynamically across grade levels, reflecting genuine implementation of differentiated instruction.

### **Planning Approaches for Differentiated Instruction**

The teachers initiated differentiated learning by assessing students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles using diagnostic tools. The diagnostic tools consisted of a short readiness test assessing students' prior knowledge of core IRE concepts, accompanied by a brief learning-style and interest questionnaire. The readiness test identified students with high, moderate, or emerging understanding, while the questionnaire helped map preferences such as visual, auditory, or kinesthetic tendencies. These combined results became the basis for how each IRE teacher grouped students before planning differentiated activities. These assessments informed the development of instructional tools such as lesson modules, student worksheets (LKPD), and assessments tailored to individual learning needs. Although some plans varied in quality, all teachers demonstrated efforts to customize learning designs aligned with the principles of differentiated instruction under the Merdeka Curriculum. Planning for differentiated learning is reflected in the teacher's compilation of teaching modules, creation of the student worksheet (LKPD), and preparation of formative and summative assessments, which are based on the findings of the students' initial ability mapping that was completed earlier.

It can be inferred from the findings of the observations, interviews, and document evaluations that all IRE instructors at the Az-Zahrah Islamic Elementary School in Palembang have produced differentiated lesson plans, despite certain limitations. Following the lesson, the instructor is required to create student-specific worksheets, or LKPD. Based on classroom observations, five of the six IRE

teachers at Az-Zahra Islamic Elementary School in Palembang were found to have developed LKPD aligned with differentiated learning principles, whereas one teacher had not yet incorporated these elements into the lesson design.

Additionally, there is an assessment process involved in the instructional process. The purpose of this evaluation procedure is to ascertain the comprehension level of the students. Learning assessments serve a number of purposes, such as assessing pupils' comprehension, identifying students' areas of weakness, assisting them in realizing their full potential, assessing their skills and challenges, and designing lesson plans that work for everyone. Summative assessments are used by Azzahra Islamic Elementary School in Palembang for the evaluation process in a consistent manner, including questions as well as guidelines for administering summative examinations on your own based on students' ability. The approach is to establish the learning objectives, assess students' requirements and learning styles, and then select an assessment method that best meets those needs. This is achieved by utilizing both a product differentiation strategy (by allowing students to display the outcomes of their learning strategies in a variety of product forms, such as essays) and a process differentiation strategy (by employing LKPD). Choosing what and how much TP and CP will be tested is the first step in developing a formative and summative assessment plan. A grid of assessment questions, scores, and a list of student grades are constructed after the TP and CP have been established.

### **Instructional Practices across Content, Process, Product, and Environment**

The implementation of differentiated instruction across the six IRE teachers at SD IT Az-Zahra Palembang demonstrated a coherent yet varied pattern of adaptation that reflects a mature understanding of learner diversity. Observational data showed that content differentiation was enacted through deliberate modification of instructional materials based on students' readiness levels, for example, the teacher of IRE 1 designed tiered reading texts that ranged from simple narrative explanations to analytical discussions on Akhlak Terpuji (Noble Character). Similarly, IRE 2 prepared multi-level worksheets on fikih wudu (Fiqh of Wudhu), enabling students to engage with material that matched their cognitive preparedness. Other teachers adopted comparable strategies: IRE 3 supplemented lessons with illustrated vocabulary lists for lower-readiness students while providing enrichment tasks for higher-achieving learners; IRE 4 offered alternative material formats such as story-based modules; IRE 5 created differentiated booklets on Asmaul Husna tailored to varied literacy levels; and IRE 6 implemented "choice cards" allowing students to select appropriately challenging content.

Process differentiation was equally evident through the teachers' adjustments to instructional approaches aligned with students' learning profiles. IRE 1 integrated visual media such as diagrams and mind maps, whereas IRE 2 relied more heavily on auditory input by using recordings of du'a' to support auditory learners. IRE 3 emphasized interactive and collaborative discussions, while IRE 4 designed kinesthetic learning experiences through direct practice of prayer movements. IRE 5 encouraged creative project-based tasks such as student-produced mini-books, and IRE 6 incorporated multimedia tools and peer tutoring to scaffold understanding for varied proficiency levels. These instructional variations indicate a pedagogical responsiveness that aligns with the core principles of differentiated instruction.

Product differentiation emerged through the provision of flexible assessment formats that allowed learners to express their understanding in multiple ways. IRE 1, for instance, permitted students to produce either posters or reflective essays, while IRE 2 accepted video demonstrations or written assignments related to wudu procedures. IRE 3 frequently required infographic production to represent the pillars of prayer, and IRE 4 evaluated learning through short role-play recordings illustrating moral values. Meanwhile, IRE 5 encouraged creative outputs such as calligraphy compositions, and IRE 6 differentiated between digital presentations for advanced learners and handwritten summaries for those needing greater structure. These varied outputs reveal a commitment to recognizing students' strengths and providing equitable opportunities to demonstrate mastery.

Differentiation was also visible in the learning environment. The teacher of IRE 1 arranged quiet reading corners to support reflective learners, while IRE 2 leveraged outdoor spaces to reduce cognitive fatigue and enhance engagement. IRE 3 organized the classroom into thematic zones—such as “focus zones” and “collaboration zones”—to accommodate different task demands. IRE 4 routinely used the prayer room to facilitate embodied religious practice, whereas IRE 5 created rotating learning stations, each with specific thematic functions. IRE 6 enabled flexibility in seating, providing options ranging from floor mats to standing areas. Collectively, these environmental adjustments demonstrate that the teachers viewed the physical space as an integral component of differentiation. Notably, five of the six teachers consistently implemented adaptive learning environments, while one teacher displayed only partial alignment with differentiation principles.

Overall, the findings confirmed that differentiated instruction at Az-Zahra Islamic Elementary School in Palembang was implemented not only as a theoretical framework but as an integrated pedagogical practice. The variations across teachers in content, process, product, and environment collectively illustrated a robust enactment of differentiated learning, thereby reinforcing the study’s claim that the school constitutes a relevant and credible site for examining differentiated instruction in IRE settings.

### **Assessment and Reflective Practices**

Teachers conducted both formative and summative assessments that were adapted to student characteristics, rather than using norm-referenced assessment comparisons. Reflection activities, such as journaling or feedback sheets, were used to develop students’ self-awareness regarding their learning progress. This dual approach to evaluation emphasized not only achievement but also the learning journey and student growth.

According to the Grade 2 IRE instructor, the evaluation was conducted to determine how well the pupils comprehended the subject matter and to support improvements in instructional practice. In this instance, the assessment is summative and took the form of a test, final project, or presentation. Regarding the reflection process, the teacher encouraged students to complete an autonomous reflection sheet or write a journal. By using this technique, the teacher was able to enhance the learning process to make it more efficient and significant while also being more receptive to students’ learning needs. Mrs. MJ, the Grade 3 IRE teacher, reported reflecting on her instructional practices. She explained that she employed formative and summative assessments alongside student-led classroom and individual reflections. The summative assessment at the end of the unit was conducted first. This was followed by reflection activities conducted both in class and independently. Subsequently, tests, final projects, and presentations were used as summative assessments, which were administered by Mrs. RB and Mr. S. Regarding the reflection process, the teacher encouraged students to complete an autonomous reflection sheet or write a journal. Mr. J, in contrast, implemented results- and process-focused evaluation. Evaluations that were adjusted for student characteristics were thus integrated in both process and product differentiation. Additionally, Mr. A typically conducts end-of-class evaluations during which students are invited to share their views based on what they have learned.

Furthermore, 83% of the assessments conducted by IRE teachers at Az-Zahrah Islamic Elementary School in Palembang did not compare students to one another; rather, they were based on the needs and skills of the students, their learning preferences and styles, the degree of difficulty of the tasks, and task differentiation. Additionally, written examinations and oral assessments were used for formative, summative, and evaluation purposes. In contrast, 17% of teachers applied similar evaluative approaches.

### **Enabling and Constraining Factors**

Several contextual and institutional elements were found to influence the implementation of differentiated learning: 1) Enabling factors included teachers’ advanced academic qualifications, institutional support, and familiarity with differentiation principles, which collectively fostered

innovation and effective implementation. 2) Constraining factors comprised staff shortages, high teacher workloads, limited access to professional development, and skepticism from parents and senior educators who were unfamiliar with differentiated instruction.

## **The Impacts on Student Learning Motivation**

Student responses from the motivation questionnaire indicated a measurable increase in motivation when differentiated learning strategies were implemented in IRE classes. A total of 84% of students reported feeling more interested and engaged when learning materials were adapted to their readiness and learning profiles. Approximately 79% stated that they were more eager to ask questions and participate actively during lessons. Additionally, 82% felt more confident when their individual efforts and progress were acknowledged by teachers through differentiated feedback and assessment methods.

Intrinsic motivation indicators also showed notable improvement: 80% of students noted that personalized content and meaningful, real-life tasks made learning more enjoyable and relevant to them. In terms of extrinsic motivation, 77% agreed that engaging learning environments, teacher appreciation, and varied instructional methods increased their willingness to participate and persist in learning activities.

The study's findings demonstrated that differentiated learning strategies were systematically applied by IRE teachers through structured planning, targeted instruction, and responsive assessment. These strategies proved effective in fostering student engagement and enhancing both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The thematic analysis also provided a clear and empirically grounded understanding of how differentiation contributes to improved learning outcomes, aligning closely with the study's aims and research questions.

Differentiated learning is one of the features of the Merdeka Curriculum, according to data from field studies. Schools like Az-Zahra Islamic Elementary School in Palembang, which are prepared and have evolved into driving schools (*sekolah penggerak*), are implementing the new differentiated learning approach. This establishes Az-Zahra Islamic Elementary School in Palembang as a model for other educational institutions, as it has already understood and executed government directives about the Merdeka Curriculum, like putting in place a differentiated teaching methodology. Since differentiated learning is still a relatively new idea, instructors continued to face numerous challenges when attempting to integrate it into their lessons as part of the Merdeka Curriculum Implementation (Komalasari, 2023). In order to meet the requirements for all children, schools now need to incorporate differentiated learning (Khasanah & Alfiandra, 2023). The differentiated learning process at the elementary school level has been implemented at the Az-Zahra Islamic Elementary School in Palembang.

The differentiated learning process has been implemented at Az-Zahra Islamic Elementary School in Palembang. The differentiated learning management strategy for IRE teachers at the Islamic Elementary School in Az-Zahra Palembang began with teachers analyzing students' diverse learning needs and individual differences. After that, the teacher planned differentiated learning scenarios. IRE teachers at the Az-Zahra Islamic Elementary School in Palembang have planned differentiated learning scenarios. Differentiated learning planning started from obtaining information regarding students' learning readiness, interests and learning profiles, then the teacher created a differentiated learning design or strategy according to the needs. Then the teacher prepared teaching modules, LKPD and differentiated assessments that are developed based on the results of student identification or mapping. Each student has individual diversity and therefore demonstrates different learning needs. Teachers accommodate students' learning needs so that learning can run effectively (Efendi et al., 2024; Sianturi, 2025; Widyawati & Rachmadyanti, 2023).

The teacher planned the lessons, exercises, and daily assignments that students must do both in class and at home. The final evaluation was based on the students' interests and learning preferences

as well as their readiness to learn the topic. Teachers who comprehend the analysis of students' needs, can produce various content in accordance with those needs, have a varied learning process, and can assist students in developing learning products based on their interests (Bujuri, 2018). These aspects are key components of a successful implementation of differentiated learning. The differentiation strategy comprises four components that have a significant impact on learning success: content differentiation, process differentiation, product differentiation, and learning environment differentiation (Altıntaş & Özdemir, 2016; Nurzaki Alhafiz, 2022).

To attain the best learning outcomes, teachers might use differentiated learning materials that are grouped based on the requirements of their pupils. Students can select assignments and resources that align with their hobbies and areas of interest through individualized learning. As a result of feeling more invested in the content they are studying, students may become more motivated and interested in learning (Ahmad Teguh Purnawanto, 2022). Process differentiation is the next step in the learning process. During this step, the teacher successfully divides the class into groups based on the interests of the students, for example, children who learn best when their teachers explain concepts through songs can be placed in these groups and taught the material through singing.

Next, there is product differentiation. Since the products created are based on their interests, some students choose performance videos, animated films, posters, or other materials that reflect the interests and abilities of their respective groups. Students are free to select the method of demonstrating their understanding based on their preferences, for example: a) students who enjoy drawing can create infographics, posters, or clippings; b) students who enjoy singing can create songs; c) students who prefer hands-on practice can create performance videos or animated videos; and d) students who enjoy writing can create articles or poems (Nurzaki Alhafiz, 2022).

The findings of this study confirmed that the implementation of differentiated learning in IRE classrooms at Az-Zahra Islamic Elementary School in Palembang aligns with the core principles proposed by Tomlinson (2017), who emphasized that effective differentiation emerges when teachers adjust content, process, product, and environment based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. The teachers' ability to create varied learning environments—ranging from playful spaces to quiet study areas—demonstrates their understanding of the environmental dimension of differentiation, which has been highlighted as a significant contributor to student engagement in previous studies (Subban, 2023). The factors that encourage teachers to apply differentiated learning, such as educational background, institutional support, and alignment of teaching materials, are consistent with findings by Hall (2020), who argued that teacher competence and school commitment are primary determinants of successful differentiation. The school's supportive infrastructure further reinforces the literature suggesting that adequate facilities minimize barriers to student-centered instructional approaches (Levy, 2020).

However, the challenges identified—such as teacher shortages, large class sizes, insufficient professional development, and limited parental support—reflect systemic constraints commonly reported in developing educational contexts. The mismatch between the recommended student-teacher ratio and actual classroom conditions mirrors the findings of (Suprayogi et al., 2017), who note that overloaded classrooms hinder teachers' ability to manage flexible grouping and provide individualized instruction. Similarly, the lack of structured professional development echoes research by (Fauzi et al., 2023), which asserts that without ongoing training, teachers often resort to informal learning sources and consequently implement differentiation inconsistently. Parental resistance to differentiated practices also aligns with previous studies showing that misconceptions about the purpose of differentiation—often perceived as "unequal treatment"—can reduce community support for innovative pedagogies (Iqbal & Basri, 2023). This underscores the need for schools to communicate clearly that differentiation promotes fairness by addressing each learner's needs rather than applying uniform instruction.

The rise in intrinsic and extrinsic motivation observed among students further supports motivational theories stating that personalized learning increases students' sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Indy et al., 2019; Deci & Ryan, 2020). When IRE teachers tailored activities to students' readiness and interests, learners demonstrated increased curiosity, confidence, and willingness to participate—characteristics also noted in differentiated classrooms in research by Santoso et al. (2022). Additionally, the enhancement of extrinsic motivation through supportive teacher interaction aligns with the assertion that positive reinforcement and structured learning environments significantly influence students' willingness to stay engaged (Brophy, 2018).

Overall, the implementation of differentiated learning in IRE subjects at Az-Zahra Islamic Elementary School illustrates both the potential and the challenges of applying this approach in a multicultural school context. The findings indicated that differentiation can substantially improve student motivation, yet its sustainability depends on addressing structural issues, enhancing teacher capacity, and strengthening collaboration with parents. This study extends existing literature by demonstrating how differentiated learning functions specifically in Islamic education settings, a context that remains underexplored in previous research.

## CONCLUSION

This study, conducted using a qualitative case study approach, examined how Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers at Az-Zahrah Islamic Elementary School in Palembang managed differentiated learning to enhance students' learning motivation. The findings revealed that teachers systematically planned, implemented, and evaluated differentiated instruction based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Through thematic analysis, five core dimensions emerged: differentiated planning strategies, instructional execution across content, process, product, and environment; responsive assessment and reflection mechanisms; enabling and constraining contextual factors; and the positive impact on student motivation—both intrinsic and extrinsic. Each of these dimensions illustrates how the differentiation process was grounded in contextual realities and adapted based on continuous feedback from students and teaching experiences. The study concluded that differentiated instruction, when integrated thoughtfully into the instructional design and grounded in ongoing diagnostic assessments, enables teachers to meet students' diverse needs more effectively. The strategies adopted by IRE teachers in this context align with the goals of the Merdeka Curriculum and have demonstrable effects on enhancing student engagement, participation, and motivation in learning religious values. As a case study, these findings were context-specific, yet they offer valuable insights and practical models for educators and policymakers in similar educational environments. Future studies may explore the long-term impact of differentiated instruction on academic outcomes or apply this model in other subjects and school contexts to test its adaptability and scalability.

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