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independent curriculum: context
Indonesia**

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Teachers' perspectives on differentiated learning in the independent curriculum: context Indonesia

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Abstract

This research aims to explore teachers' perspectives on the implementation of differentiated learning within the Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) in Indonesia. Differentiated learning, as a pedagogical approach, adapts teaching strategies to individual student needs, aligning with the Merdeka Curriculum's goal of providing personalized and flexible education. This study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing in-depth interviews and participant observations to gather data from teachers across various educational levels. The findings reveal that the majority of teachers have a positive perception of differentiated learning, acknowledging its potential to enhance student engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes. Teachers noted that this approach enables them to better address the unique learning needs of each student, fostering more effective academic and social development. However, the implementation of differentiated learning is hindered by several challenges, including limited time, insufficient resources, and inadequate training and support from schools and the government. Additionally, teachers emphasized the importance of collaboration among educators to exchange strategies and best practices for differentiated learning. This study concludes that, despite the challenges, differentiated learning in the Merdeka Curriculum has significant potential to improve educational quality in Indonesia. By addressing the barriers through sustainable support, comprehensive training, and collaborative professional communities, this approach can contribute to a more inclusive and adaptive education system that meets the diverse needs of students and maximizes their potential.

Keywords: Teacher, Differentiated Learning, Independent Curriculum, Indonesia

1. Introduction

Education is a fundamental pillar in developing the potential of individuals and society (Şavga & Liviçhi, 2021). In an era of rapid technological and informational advancements, preparing future generations requires a curriculum that aligns with the demands of the times (Simarmata & Mayuni, 2023). The Merdeka Curriculum emerges as a significant innovation within Indonesia's education system, offering greater flexibility and autonomy to teachers and schools in designing learning activities (Asfiati, 2023). This article focuses on exploring differentiated learning within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum. This approach is highly relevant as it allows students to access, engage with, and master learning materials in ways that align with their individual needs, interests, and potential, fostering a more inclusive and adaptive educational experience. One of the key ideas of the Merdeka Curriculum, or in other words, freedom, is the differentiated learning approach. The Merdeka Curriculum is an educational approach that prioritizes learning freedom, enabling students to fully develop their potential according to their interests and abilities. In this context, differentiated learning means an approach that allows teaching and learning to be tailored to students' needs and abilities. To successfully implement the Merdeka Curriculum, perceptions must be adjusted to create a clear vision. After that, the curriculum is applied gradually and then evaluated if there are any issues. In this way, new progress will impact teachers, related institutions, and students (Subandrio & Kartiko, 2021).

Differentiated learning has become a crucial focus in global education reforms, including in Indonesia through the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. The Merdeka Curriculum, introduced to provide greater flexibility and independence in the teaching and learning process, emphasizes the importance of a responsive approach to the individual needs of students. Differentiated learning is a pedagogical strategy designed to adjust teaching methods, materials, and assessments based on differences in students' abilities, interests, and learning styles. The main goal is to ensure that each student has the opportunity to learn according to their potential, achieving optimal learning outcomes.

The teacher's perspective on differentiated learning in the Merdeka Curriculum is crucial, as teachers are the main implementers who interact directly with students in the classroom (Isnawan & Sudirman, 2022). Teachers' understanding, attitudes, and experiences in applying this strategy will significantly affect the effectiveness of differentiated learning. This research aims to explore how teachers at various education levels understand, implement, and respond to the challenges and opportunities within differentiated learning under the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum. By exploring teachers' perspectives, deeper insights into best practices and obstacles that need to be overcome can be gained to optimize the implementation of this curriculum and improve the quality of education in Indonesia.

Differentiated learning in the Merdeka Curriculum becomes increasingly important because it recognizes that every student has different learning styles, levels of understanding, interests, and developmental speeds. By understanding these differences, this approach enables each student to reach their best potential. According to Marlina (2019), to achieve this, teachers need to learn the following: (a) evaluate a curriculum that can be adjusted to students' strengths and weaknesses; (b) apply planning and school strategies by adapting the curriculum and teaching methods to meet students' needs; (c) explain how teachers can assist students; and (d) evaluate and assess curricula and teaching methods that can be used to meet students' needs.

The Merdeka Curriculum method is expected to give teachers the ability to understand each student's needs and strengths, creating an inclusive learning environment where every student feels valued and supported throughout their learning process. In this process, teachers should be able to create learning experiences that match this diversity, including using various teaching methods, customized resources, and assessments that support individual development.

This article aims to explore the concept of differentiated learning, offering practical examples and highlighting its significance in enhancing the education system. By emphasizing the role of differentiated learning within the Merdeka Curriculum, this article seeks to demonstrate how this approach fosters inclusivity, empowers students to reach their fullest potential, and contributes positively to society. As a foundational step toward understanding this concept, the article invites readers to engage in further discussions and research to deepen their knowledge. Through this exploration, the article aspires to support the development of a more inclusive, student-centered, and adaptive education system aligned with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum.

2. Results and Discussion

2.1 Results

This study reveals several key themes related to teachers' perspectives on differentiated learning within the Merdeka Curriculum. The findings show that most teachers have a good understanding of the concept of differentiated learning and view it as an essential approach to meeting the individual needs of students. Teachers acknowledge that each student has different abilities, interests, and learning styles, and differentiated learning enables them to adjust teaching strategies to accommodate these differences.

One prominent theme is the benefits of differentiated learning in enhancing student engagement and learning outcomes. Teachers reported that by tailoring materials and teaching methods to students' needs, they could increase students' motivation and

participation in the learning process. Some teachers noted significant improvements in students' conceptual understanding and academic achievement after implementing differentiated learning. They also observed improvements in students' social and collaborative skills, as this approach often involves group work and in-depth discussions.

However, the study also identified various challenges teachers face in implementing differentiated learning. One of the main challenges is limited time. Teachers felt they needed more time to plan and execute different teaching strategies for each student or group of students. Additionally, some teachers mentioned limited resources, such as diverse teaching materials and supporting technologies, which could facilitate more effective differentiated learning.

Inadequate training and support were also significant barriers. Teachers expressed a need for more training and practical guidance on effectively implementing differentiated learning. Although some training programs are available, many teachers found them insufficiently comprehensive or not tailored to their specific needs in the field. Teachers also voiced the need for ongoing support from schools and the government to address various challenges they face.

Collaboration among teachers emerged as a potential solution to overcoming challenges in implementing differentiated learning. Teachers participating in this study emphasized the importance of sharing best practices and teaching strategies that have been successfully implemented by their peers. Some schools have begun adopting collaborative approaches through regular meetings and professional learning communities, enabling teachers to support each other and learn from one another's experiences.

Overall, despite various challenges, this study suggests that differentiated learning within the Merdeka Curriculum has significant potential to improve the quality of education in Indonesia. The teachers involved in this research remain optimistic that with adequate support, including proper training, sufficient resources, and strong collaboration among educators, they can implement differentiated learning more effectively and achieve better outcomes for all students.

Definition of differentiated learning

Differentiated learning is an approach designed to meet the needs and learning styles of diverse students in a class. In this context, the differences between students are recognized and valued, so teachers can adapt their teaching strategies to accommodate varying levels of ability, interests, and learning styles. The primary goal of differentiated learning is to provide meaningful and relevant learning experiences for each student so that every individual can reach their optimal potential.

First, differentiated learning recognizes that each student has unique learning needs. This may involve understanding the students' ability levels, interests, learning styles, and cultural backgrounds. By understanding these differences, teachers can design learning experiences that align with individual needs, either through the use of diverse learning materials, varied assessments, or different teaching approaches.

Second, differentiated learning involves flexibility in teaching methods. Teachers must be ready to use various strategies and learning tools, including technology, project-based learning, group discussions, and more. By providing a range of options, teachers can allow students to explore and express their understanding in the way that suits them best.

Lastly, differentiated learning not only covers differences in teaching but also in assessment. Teachers need to consider different ways of evaluating students' understanding, so they can provide appropriate feedback and support each student's development. By applying a differentiated approach, learning is expected to be more inclusive and relevant, accommodating the diverse needs of students in the classroom.

Goals of differentiated learning

The goal of differentiated learning is to create learning experiences that consider differences in learning styles, abilities, interests, and needs of each student. This approach

allows teachers to create learning experiences tailored to each student so they can reach their best potential. Some examples of differentiated learning goals are:

Understanding basic concepts: Students will be able to explain the basic concepts of a topic in their own words, either orally or in writing.

- a) Higher-level analysis: Students will be able to analyze and connect more complex concepts within the topic, showing deep understanding.
- b) Research-based projects: Students will be required to conduct research on a particular topic and present the results in the form of an essay, presentation, or art project.
- c) Use of technology: Students will use technology to learn more about the subject, create multimedia, or participate in relevant online discussions.
- d) Collaborative group work: Students will work together to complete tasks that require teamwork and problem-solving.
- e) Portfolio-based assessment: Students will keep a portfolio showing their progress in the subject. The portfolio will consist of various tasks and reflective notes.
- f) Additional task options: Students who have reached the initial learning goals will have the opportunity to pursue additional tasks that challenge them further on the topic.
- g) Support for special needs: Students with special needs will receive additional support or modifications to their assignments according to individual support plans.
- h) Creative project choices: Students will have the opportunity to express their knowledge through art, music, etc.
- i) Tutor support: Students struggling to understand the material will receive additional support from tutors or individual monitoring sessions.

Differentiated learning goals are essential to ensure that all students can learn according to their abilities and potential, enabling them to achieve optimal academic success.

Methods of differentiated learning: To ensure that the Merdeka Curriculum runs effectively, the first step is to align perceptions to create a unified vision. Then, the curriculum is applied gradually, followed by evaluation if any issues arise. This way, new progress will impact teachers, related institutions, and students (Subandrio, 2021).

Several methods of differentiated learning include:

- a) Grouping Students: Teachers can group students based on their ability levels, such as low, medium, or high. This allows teachers to provide material suited to each student's level of understanding.
- b) Varied Materials: Teachers can provide materials that match the students' comprehension levels.
- c) Different Tasks: Teachers assign tasks with varying difficulty levels according to students' abilities, allowing students to work on tasks that suit their level of understanding.
- d) Individual Guidance: Teachers provide special support to students who need it.
- e) Evaluation Choices: Teachers adjust the curriculum to meet students' needs, including one-on-one meetings, additional tutoring, or portfolios.
- f) Use of Technology: Technology can be used to provide access to additional learning resources, adaptive programs, or interactive tools that support individual student learning.
- g) Diverse Learning Resources: To meet different learning styles, teachers can use various resources such as textbooks, videos, simulations, or online materials.
- h) Formative Assessment: Teachers frequently use formative assessments to evaluate students' progress and provide relevant feedback to help them improve their understanding.

Differentiated learning methods place students at the center of their learning experience and strive to create an environment that supports their personal development. This approach allows students to learn in the way that works best for them while helping them achieve their full potential.

Differentiated learning asserts that each student has a unique personality. Differentiated learning is designed to meet the needs of students with diverse interests and talents, as well as different learning methods (Faiz et al., 2022). The Merdeka Curriculum is also a crucial part of the educational recovery from the long-standing challenges we have faced (Yunus et al., 2023).

The implementation of differentiated learning methods in the Merdeka Curriculum is an effort to ensure that education can adapt to the needs, interests, and abilities of each student. It requires collaboration among teachers, students, and schools. The transformation of the education system must be supported by many parties with a spirit of cooperation across the nation to achieve Indonesia's educational vision (Wijaya et al., 2022). This can help create an inclusive learning environment, allowing each student to develop according to their potential. Additionally, it also supports the vision of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes student independence and learning that is relevant to their lives. However, the core idea behind this concept is the freedom to think in order to create a learning atmosphere that is enjoyable and beneficial for all parties without burdening the achievement of certain scores or grades (Wijaya et al., 2022).

Differentiation in learning refers to efforts to accommodate individual differences in learning styles, learning speeds, interests, and abilities. According to Ki Hadjar Dewantara, learning needs to be accompanied by interaction with the surrounding environment, and this learning aims for students to become more sensitive, caring, and learn to solve problems that may arise in their surroundings (Kamal, 2021). By applying differentiated learning content within the Merdeka Curriculum, several benefits can be achieved, such as:

Accommodating Student Diversity

Every student has different learning needs. With differentiation, teachers can provide material that matches the level of understanding and interests of students, allowing each student to have the opportunity to succeed.

- a) **Increasing Student Engagement:** By presenting learning material that aligns with students' interests and abilities, differentiation can enhance student engagement in learning. Students will be more motivated because they feel the material is relevant to their lives.
- b) **Improving Student Achievement:** By accommodating student differences, differentiation can help improve academic achievement. Students will be more able to reach their potential because the learning is tailored to their needs.
- c) **Inclusive Learning:** Differentiation can also help create an inclusive learning environment where all students feel accepted and valued. This is important for supporting students with special needs.
- d) **Developing Life Skills:** By allowing students to learn according to their interests, differentiation can help students develop critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity skills.

In differentiated learning within the Merdeka Curriculum, teachers need to get to know their students well, monitor their progress regularly, and design appropriate learning materials. This may involve creating diverse resources, tasks, or projects that allow students to choose their own learning path. Additionally, teacher training and development may be necessary for them to implement differentiation effectively.

It is important to remember that differentiation is not a one-size-fits-all approach, and it may require time and effort in planning and implementation. However, it can provide significant benefits in improving students' learning experiences and achieving broader educational goals.

3. Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach to explore teachers' perspectives on differentiated learning within the Merdeka Curriculum. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to gain a deep understanding of teachers' experiences,

views, and practices in a complex and dynamic context. The methods used include in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis.

In-depth interviews were conducted with 2 teachers from 2 different regions in Indonesia. The selection of teachers was done through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in teaching experience and the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was recorded with the respondents' consent. The interview questions focused on the teachers' understanding of differentiated learning, the strategies used, the challenges faced, and the support they need to implement this approach effectively.

In addition to the interviews, participatory observation was conducted in one class at one school, chosen based on the results of the initial interviews. This observation aimed to directly observe how differentiated learning is applied in daily practice. The researcher acted as a non-participant observer, noting interactions between the teacher and students, teaching methods used, and students' responses to the applied approach. This observation helped confirm and expand the findings from the interviews and provided richer context for the data collected.

Document analysis was also carried out to complement the data from interviews and observations. The documents analyzed included lesson plans, teaching materials, and student assessment results. The purpose of the document analysis was to understand how the concept of differentiated learning is translated into lesson planning and implementation.

Data from interviews, observations, and document analysis were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques. The steps of analysis included data transcription and interpretation. With this method, the study is expected to provide a comprehensive picture of how teachers understand and implement differentiated learning within the Merdeka Curriculum, as well as the challenges and opportunities they face.

3.1 Discussion

The results of this study reveal that teachers in Indonesia generally have a positive understanding of differentiated learning within the context of the Merdeka Curriculum. They recognize the importance of this approach in creating more personalized and effective learning experiences for each student. This understanding is crucial, as it indicates that teachers are on the right track in terms of the concepts and objectives of differentiated learning. However, having a good understanding alone is not enough; effective implementation is essential to achieving the desired outcomes.

The benefits identified by teachers, such as increased student engagement and improved learning outcomes, highlight the significant potential of differentiated learning (Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2009). When teachers adjust materials and teaching methods to meet individual student needs, students' motivation and participation tend to increase (Williams & Williams, 2011). These findings align with educational literature, which shows that personalized learning can enhance students' understanding and academic performance (Shemshack et al., 2021). However, to realize these benefits more broadly, well-planned strategies and sustained support are needed.

The main challenges teachers face in implementing differentiated learning, such as time constraints and limited resources, reflect practical realities in the field. Teachers feel that designing and implementing various teaching strategies for each student or group of students requires more time than they have. Resource limitations also hinder their ability to provide diverse teaching materials and adequate technological support. Therefore, innovative solutions and support from schools and the government are required to address these obstacles.

The lack of adequate training and support is also a significant issue. Although some training programs are available, many teachers feel that these programs are neither comprehensive enough nor relevant to their specific needs. This underscores the need for more structured training programs that focus on best practices in differentiated learning.

Additionally, continuous support from schools and the government is essential to provide the motivation and assistance teachers need.

Collaboration among teachers emerges as a potential strategy for addressing the challenges of differentiated learning. By sharing best practices and successful strategies, teachers can learn from and support each other in implementing this approach. Professional learning communities and regular meetings can serve as effective platforms to facilitate this collaboration. Support from schools in creating a collaborative culture is also crucial to ensure that teachers do not feel isolated in addressing the challenges of differentiated learning.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that despite various obstacles, differentiated learning within the Merdeka Curriculum has significant potential to improve the quality of education in Indonesia. Teachers are optimistic that with the right support, they can implement differentiated learning more effectively. This support includes better training, sufficient resources, and strong collaboration among educators. Thus, differentiated learning can become a powerful tool to achieve more inclusive and adaptive education, in line with the goals of the Merdeka Curriculum.

4. Conclusion

This study highlights teachers' perspectives on differentiated learning within the Kurikulum Merdeka (Independent Curriculum) and identifies various benefits and challenges faced in its implementation. The findings reveal that the majority of teachers hold a positive understanding of the importance of differentiated learning to meet students' individual needs. They perceive this approach as an effective way to enhance student engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes, ultimately supporting the achievement of more inclusive and adaptive educational goals.

The reported benefits of differentiated learning include increased student participation and comprehension, as well as the ability to create a more dynamic and responsive learning environment. Teachers noted that by tailoring materials and teaching methods to the needs and potentials of each student, they could more effectively support students' academic and social development. These findings demonstrate that differentiated learning has great potential to improve education quality if implemented correctly.

However, this study also reveals significant challenges faced by teachers in applying differentiated learning. Limited time and resources pose major obstacles, as teachers find it difficult to design and execute varied teaching strategies to address individual student needs. Moreover, inadequate training and the lack of sustained support from schools and the government hinder teachers' ability to effectively implement this approach.

Teachers in this study emphasized the need for more comprehensive and relevant training, as well as ongoing support to overcome existing barriers. They also highlighted the importance of collaboration among educators to share best practices and effective teaching strategies. Through professional learning communities and regular meetings, teachers can support and learn from one another's experiences, which can aid in better implementing differentiated learning.

Overall, this study concludes that differentiated learning within the Kurikulum Merdeka has significant potential to improve the quality of education in Indonesia. Despite the challenges, with adequate support from schools and the government, along with strong collaboration among educators, teachers can overcome these obstacles and apply differentiated learning more effectively. Consequently, the Kurikulum Merdeka can fulfill its goals of creating a more inclusive, adaptive, and responsive education system that caters to the diverse needs of students, providing them with better opportunities to reach their full potential.

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