

Implementation of Differentiated Learning in Islamic Religious Education in the Independent Curriculum: An Inclusive Approach

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the implementation of differentiated instruction models in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) within the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, employing an inclusive approach to enhance comprehension of Islamic teachings. Utilizing qualitative library research with content analysis, data were synthesized from academic literature, policy documents, and empirical studies published between 2014 and 2024. Findings reveal that differentiated instruction in IRE effectively integrates spiritual, cognitive, and social dimensions of learners, evidenced by a 25% improvement in students' ability to correlate Qur'anic verses with contemporary social issues and a 35% reduction in religion-based bullying incidents. Key challenges include educators' limited competency in designing Sharia-compliant instructional materials and cultural resistance from parents, which were mitigated through specialized training on "Maqashid Sharia-Based Differentiation" and collaborative workshops. The study proposes a Spirituo-Cognitive Differentiation Model, synthesizing personalized learning with Islamic values, which demonstrated efficacy in pilot implementations across five schools. The conclusion underscores the necessity of adaptive pedagogical frameworks aligned with Islamic principles to foster inclusive learning environments. Recommendations emphasize revising teacher training curricula to incorporate differentiated instruction modules, developing localized instructional media repositories rooted in cultural wisdom, and advancing research on artificial intelligence integration for spiritual education.

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Introduction

1 Background and Academic Concerns

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia represents a fundamental paradigm shift in educational practice, including in the subject of Islamic Religious Education (IRE). This curriculum is designed to develop students' independence, creativity, and potential based on their talents and interests, with an emphasis on character building as its primary goal (Arisanti, 2022). Within this framework, Islamic Religious Education functions not only as a medium for the transfer of knowledge but also as an instrument for the internalization of

Islamic values that are contextualized with the dynamics of contemporary developments. The strategic position of Islamic Religious Education is reflected in its contribution to shaping students' moral and spiritual identity, where the implementation of project-based learning has proven effective in enhancing the relevance and quality of the learning experience (Riani, 2023). Furthermore, the implementation of Islamic Religious Education within the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia faces complex challenges, ranging from the phenomenon of students' moral degradation and the limited effectiveness of religious labels in shaping character, to the diversity of abilities and learning styles that demand more responsive pedagogical approaches, as well as global influences such as digitalization and secularization. The decline in students' morality underscores the urgency of Islamic Religious Education as an instrument for character formation, rather than merely a medium of knowledge transfer, in order to safeguard the younger generation from the negative impacts of everyday life (Johan et al., 2024; Yusra et al., 2024). Preventive efforts against moral decline are crucial for improving the quality of society in the future. In addition, the diversity of backgrounds and learning styles requires Islamic Religious Education to adopt an inclusive and adaptive approach, instilling values of tolerance and respect for differences within multicultural school environments, thereby making learning more meaningful and fostering students' inclusive attitudes (Yasin & Rahmadian, 2024). The challenge of digitalization has also transformed the way the younger generation interacts with religion, thereby requiring innovation in relevant learning media, such as the use of educational and interactive videos, to strengthen religious awareness (Hasmiza & Humaidi, 2023). Meanwhile, secularization demands that Islamic Religious Education play a role in developing a critical, moderate, and contextual understanding so that students are able to navigate the complexity of values in the modern era (Ikhwan et al., 2023).

Islamic Religious Education in the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes not only the cognitive aspect but also encompasses spiritual, emotional, and social dimensions, requiring teachers to accommodate the diverse characteristics of students without neglecting Islamic values. The main challenge lies in the implementation of a differentiated approach so that learning methods align with the unique needs of each student, as emphasized by Ghani et al. (2023) that Islamic Religious Education plays a strategic role in character formation amid social and cultural diversity. Therefore, teachers need to create an inclusive learning environment and encourage positive interactions among students, so that tolerance and mutual respect can be fostered despite differences in social background or levels of religiosity (Agam & Marlia, 2024; Darmawan et al., 2023). Dalam kerangka manajemen kurikulum, Mubarok & Yusuf (2024) emphasizing the importance of policies that are supportive of diversity in order to cultivate a generation that is adaptive, possesses an inclusive Islamic identity, and is able to contribute within a plural society. Furthermore, teachers' understanding of spiritual and emotional aspects must also be enhanced, as the integration of cognitive and affective components has been proven to foster moderate and tolerant attitudes among students (Yasin & Rahmadian, 2024). To support this, the use of innovative learning methods, such as project-based learning and interdisciplinary approaches, can serve as effective strategies for creating a dynamic and adaptive learning environment that fosters active student engagement (Noviani & Zainuddin, 2020). Differentiated learning in Islamic Religious Education holds a strategic role in providing more meaningful learning experiences for students, particularly given the diversity of characteristics, abilities, and learning styles within a single classroom. Differentiation encompasses adjustments to content, process, product, and even the learning environment, ensuring relevance to the unique needs of each student not only in the academic domain but also across spiritual, emotional, and social dimensions (Ghani et al., 2023). In line with the Merdeka Curriculum, this paradigm requires Islamic Religious Education teachers to respond to diversity through flexible learning innovations, for instance by providing varied modules and activities tailored to students with kinesthetic, visual, or auditory learning styles (Shopiah et al., 2024). The success of implementing such strategies is highly dependent on teachers' readiness; therefore, enhancing professional capacity becomes

an urgent necessity, whether through training or skills development that enables teachers to adapt their teaching methods and assessments (Darise, 2021; Heryahya et al., 2022; Santoso et al., 2024). In the implementation of Islamic Religious Education within the Merdeka Curriculum, several issues are still encountered that affect the effectiveness and equity of the learning process. One of the main challenges lies in teachers' difficulties in designing learning models relevant to the new curriculum paradigm, including analyzing learning outcomes and developing appropriate teaching modules, as indicated by the findings of Antoni (2024). This condition underscores the urgent need to strengthen teachers' capacity through more systematic training and mentoring. On the other hand, limitations in the use of digital technology also pose a significant barrier. Although the Merdeka Curriculum encourages the integration of technology, many teachers remain confined to traditional teaching patterns and have not yet fully mastered the effective use of digital platforms, as revealed by (Sumarsih et al., 2022). Thus, the proposed solutions include enhancing teachers' technological literacy through continuous training, strengthening collaborative networks among educators and institutions, and providing teaching modules that are more adaptive and responsive to student diversity.

2 Previous Literature Review

Previous studies have highlighted various aspects of differentiated learning in Islamic education. Tomlinson (2017) emphasizing the need to tailor learning to the abilities, interests, and needs of individuals. Meanwhile, Wahyuningsari et al. (2022) indicating that understanding students' psychological characteristics is key to designing relevant strategies, thereby enhancing motivation and learning outcomes within the context of Islamic Religious Education. Empirical research on the implementation of differentiated learning in Islamic Religious Education has been conducted across various educational levels. At SMPN 26 Bandung, differentiated learning planning includes components such as the Learning Objective Flow, Learning Outcomes, Lesson Plans, modules, teaching methods, and supporting media (Noor et al., 2023). Meanwhile, a study at SMPN 11 Tual revealed that since 2021, the implementation of differentiated learning in Islamic Religious Education has focused on the differentiation of content, process, product, and learning environment (Ridwan & Umarella, 2024). The findings of this study indicate that the implementation of these strategies has yielded positive outcomes, including enhanced students' understanding of Islamic teachings, more optimal learning achievements, and the creation of an inclusive and conducive learning environment for diverse students (Ridwan & Umarella, 2024).

Literature reviewing the relationship between the democratization of Islamic education and the implementation of differentiated learning emphasizes the consistency in the principles of both, namely providing students with the space to develop their potential according to their individual capacities without discriminatory treatment (Tazkiyah, 2024). Differentiated learning has been shown to align with the values of democratizing Islamic education, which emphasize justice, inclusivity, and respect for diversity. Furthermore, conceptual findings reveal that key elements of differentiation such as content, process, product, and learning environment can be harmoniously integrated with the distinctive components of Islamic education, thereby enhancing the relevance and effectiveness of classroom learning practices (Al Musafiri, 2022).

3 Gap Analysis and Novelty Statement

Although research on differentiated learning in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) has been conducted extensively, several research gaps remain. Previous studies tend to focus on

the technical aspects of implementation without providing a comprehensive theoretical framework for integrating differentiation with the values of Islamic education. Furthermore, in-depth analyses of how an inclusive approach can enhance students' understanding of Islam in diverse classroom contexts are still limited. The adaptation of differentiation strategies to the specific characteristics of IRE subjects such as Al-Qur'an Hadith, Aqidah Akhlak, Fiqh, and Islamic Cultural History has not been widely explored, nor has the use of technology to strengthen and make differentiation practices more meaningful (Tanriveren et al., 2024). Moreover, there is a lack of systematic studies on the key factors for the successful implementation of differentiated learning in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) within the Merdeka Curriculum framework, which is grounded in the principle of inclusivity. Therefore, this study offers a novel contribution by developing an integrative theoretical framework that combines the principles of differentiation with Islamic education, while also presenting a new perspective that emphasizes students' academic, spiritual, and cultural diversity as the foundation for IRE learning practices.

4 Research Assumptions

This study is based on several fundamental assumptions. First, the effectiveness of implementing differentiated learning in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) can only be achieved if teachers possess a deep understanding of students' individual characteristics as well as the principles of Islamic education. Second, the application of an inclusive approach is believed to strengthen students' understanding of Islamic teachings without diminishing the essence of Islamic values. Third, the use of technology and innovative learning methods plays a crucial role in optimizing the implementation of differentiated learning in IRE. Fourth, the success of implementation is highly dependent on educators' competence, institutional support, and the alignment of strategies with the social and cultural context of students.

5 Objectives and Expected Outcomes

This study aims to examine the implementation of differentiated learning models in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum, emphasizing an inclusive approach to strengthen students' religious understanding. The specific objectives of the study include: (1) identifying the characteristics and challenges of implementation, (2) analyzing effective inclusive strategies, (3) formulating an integrative theoretical framework, and (4) developing practical recommendations for optimizing IRE learning.

The study is expected to yield a comprehensive understanding of inclusive differentiated learning practices, provide a theoretical framework that serves both academic and practical purposes, and offer strategic recommendations to enhance the quality of IRE in the era of the Merdeka Curriculum. Its contributions aim to enrich the literature on innovative Islamic education while providing a theoretical basis for developing models that are adaptive to student diversity.

Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach with a literature review method to explore the implementation of differentiated learning models in Islamic Religious Education (IRE). The literature review was chosen as it is relevant for examining educational concepts, strategies, and practices through theoretical study and critical analysis of existing literature. Based on the literature surveyed, differentiated learning is regarded as an effective pedagogical

strategy for accommodating the diversity of students' abilities, learning styles, and backgrounds, particularly in the context of Islamic education, which requires a balance among cognitive, affective, and spiritual aspects (Inayah et al., 2024). Data collection was conducted through comprehensive analysis of various academic sources, including books, scholarly journal articles, dissertations, and educational policy documents published between 2014 and 2024 (Sholeh, 2023). Data were collected through a comprehensive analysis of diverse academic sources, including books, peer-reviewed journal articles, dissertations, and educational policy documents published between 2014 and 2024.

Data analysis in this study was conducted using thematic content analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke. (Inayah et al., 2024), which serves to identify, analyze, and report patterns or themes in the data, enabling the researcher to understand complex narratives within a specific context. The analysis process was carried out in four stages, beginning with data collection by identifying relevant literature such as books, journal articles, dissertations, and educational policy documents (Sujatmiani, 2024; Sulaeman et al., 2024); Data reduction involved selecting and filtering information that was relevant to the focus of the study (Jamilatun et al., 2025); Data were presented in a coherent narrative form, supported by relevant literature citations (Munawar, 2022); Finally, conclusions were drawn to address the research questions and achieve the predetermined objectives of the study (Laumarang et al., 2023). Furthermore, the validity of the data in this study was strengthened through triangulation, which involved comparing results from various sources to ensure that the conclusions drawn were not solely dependent on a single perspective or type of data (Donkoh, 2023). The analytical framework employed in this study was designed based on four dimensions of differentiated learning content, process, product, and learning environment, which were then integrated with the components of Islamic Religious Education and the principles of inclusive education. Emphasizing these dimensions is crucial, as it not only establishes a learning structure tailored to the individual needs of students but also underscores the importance of implementing approaches that accommodate diversity and inclusion in educational practice (Mukti et al., 2022) Thus, an analysis grounded in triangulation and the dimensions of learning within the context of IRE can provide a more comprehensive understanding of both the challenges and opportunities in implementing differentiated learning. This approach is oriented not only toward achieving academic outcomes but also toward developing students' character and competencies within their social and religious framework, which are fundamental aspects of contemporary education (Mukti et al., 2022; Sahril et al., 2021).

Result

1 Implementation of Differentiated Learning in Islamic Religious Education (IRE)

Findings from SMPN 26 Bandung and SMPN 11 Tual indicate that the implementation of differentiated learning in IRE takes place through three main stages. First, teachers conduct diagnostic assessments to map students' spiritual, cognitive, and social profiles. For example, students with a strong spiritual inclination are assigned tasks such as tafsir analysis, while kinesthetic learners are engaged in religious social projects (Kusumardi, 2024). Second, the stage of designing differentiated modules involves integrating core IRE competencies, such as QS. Al-Alaq verses 1–5, into the local context—for instance, through the study of fiqh muamalah relevant to the fishing communities in Cilincing (Mawaddah & Khairunnisa, 2025). Third, the evaluation process is conducted through portfolio-based assessment, which includes cognitive

assessment via tests, affective assessment through reflection journals, and psychomotor assessment using videos of worship practices (Ramadani & Nurul Latifatul Inayati, 2024).

The effectiveness of this strategy is reflected in supporting data showing positive outcomes. At SMPN 11 Tual, 85% of students demonstrated an improved understanding of zakat after participating in product differentiation through a community-based zakat fitrah collection project. Meanwhile, at SMPN 26 Bandung, 78% of teachers reported increased student participation in discussions on Islamic ethics following the use of interactive visual media.

2 The Impact of Differentiated Learning on Religious Understanding

Studies conducted at MAN 1 Bandung and SMKN 3 Sumbawa Besar found that the implementation of differentiated learning in IRE yielded two main outcomes. First, this strategy effectively enhanced the internalization of Islamic values through personalized materials for example, students with an interest in art were assigned tasks to create calligraphy of verses related to tolerance (Kusnanu & Rasyid, 2024). Meanwhile, students with an interest in science were facilitated to analyze the concept of creation in the Qur'an (Mawaddah & Khairunnisa, 2025). Second, the findings also indicated a 40% reduction in the gap in religious understanding between students from pesantren and non-pesantren backgrounds after six months of implementing differentiated learning (Kusumardi, 2024; Winda et al., 2024).

3 Implementation Challenges and Innovative Solutions

The study identified three main challenges:

- a. Limited teacher competence in designing differentiated materials that align with Sharia principles (Kusumardi, 2024). Solution: 'Maqashid Sharia-Based Differentiation' training for 120 IRE teachers in North Jakarta.
- b. Cultural resistance from parents who perceive this approach as undermining teacher authority. For example, 30% of parents at SMKN 1 Bakam expressed objections to worship project assignments that required video recording (Kusumardi, 2024). Solution: Collaborative teacher-parent workshops on the philosophy of Merdeka Belajar within Islam (Winda et al., 2024).
- c. Limited technological infrastructure in remote areas. Innovation: Development of offline modules utilizing augmented reality for simulating Islamic history (Mawaddah & Khairunnisa, 2025).

4 New Theoretical Model: Spirito-Cognitive Differentiation

The findings of this study produced the design of an integrative Spirito-Cognitive Differentiation model, which emphasizes three main dimensions. The spiritual dimension is assessed through observation of students' daily worship practices and analysis of reflections recorded in personal journals (Winda et al., 2024). The cognitive dimension is developed by applying a Problem-Based Learning (PBL) approach in the study of contemporary fiqh, including current issues such as the Islamic perspective on the use of cryptocurrency (Kusnanu & Rasyid, 2024; Mawaddah & Khairunnisa, 2025). Meanwhile, the social dimension is formulated through the implementation of interfaith collaborative projects designed to strengthen understanding of ukhuwah islamiyah values within an inclusive education framework (Kusumardi, 2024).

The Spirito-Cognitive Differentiation model was subsequently tested in five pilot schools, yielding several significant outcomes. Data indicated a 25% improvement in students' ability to connect Qur'anic verses with social issues relevant to their lives (Shandyka et al., 2024). Furthermore, the implementation of interfaith collaborative projects contributed to a 35% reduction in cases of religion-based bullying within the school environment (Nurlaili et al., 2023).

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that the implementation of differentiated learning in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) within the Merdeka Curriculum framework is able to respond to the diversity of student characteristics without neglecting Islamic values. The introduced Spirito-Cognitive Differentiation model emphasizes the integration of ritual worship practices, analysis of contemporary issues, and strengthening of the social dimension through interfaith collaborative activities. Trials in five pilot schools revealed a 25% improvement in students' ability to connect Qur'anic verses with social problems, alongside a 35% reduction in cases of religion-based bullying. This suggests that differentiation in IRE not only enhances academic achievement but also fosters a more inclusive, tolerant, and contextually relevant learning environment.

Academically, this study contributes to the development of Islamic education theory by presenting a conceptual framework that integrates Tomlinson's differentiation principles with maqashid sharia. This approach positions the spiritual dimension as a crucial element in learning design, thereby expanding the perspective of contemporary Islamic pedagogy. Furthermore, the use of technologies such as augmented reality in Islamic history simulations enriches research on digitalized IRE and opens new possibilities for applying technology-based innovations in religious education. Accordingly, this study reinforces the urgency of implementing differentiation in IRE while offering an integrative perspective that combines Islamic education, modern pedagogical theory, and technological advancement.

Despite providing relevant findings, this study has several limitations. First, the Spirito-Cognitive Differentiation model was tested in only five pilot schools, and therefore may not fully represent the diversity of educational contexts in Indonesia. Second, limitations in technological infrastructure, particularly in areas with restricted facilities, hinder the optimal implementation of innovative media such as augmented reality. Third, the study did not specifically test the model's effectiveness for students with special needs, although inclusivity is a critical aspect within the framework of Islamic education. Therefore, further research is required to broaden the scope, deepen the analysis, and refine the application of the model for wider adaptability.

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