



Differentiation-Based Innovations in Islamic Education: A Study within Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum Framework

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Article Info	Abstract
<p>Article History</p> <p>Received: 25 November 2024</p> <p>Revised: 14 February 2025</p> <p>Accepted: 25 May 2025</p> <p>Published: 21 June 2025</p> <p>Keyword: Differentiated Learning, Innovation, Islamic Education, <i>Merdeka</i> Curriculum</p> <p>Copyright (c) 2025 Hasnahwati, Tobroni, Abdul Haris, Romelah</p> 	<p>The Merdeka Curriculum at SMPIT Insan Madani represents a strategic innovation in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) to address contemporary educational challenges. This curriculum emphasises student autonomy, differentiated instruction, and the integration of technology, aiming to reinforce Islamic values while aligning religious teachings with Islamic philosophy. Utilising a qualitative methodology, this study collects data through observation, interviews, and documentation. The data analysis involves filtering relevant information, aligning it with theoretical frameworks, and evaluating educators' roles in PAI instruction. The implementation of PAI learning innovation follows a differentiated approach consisting of three key components: content, process, and product. Content differentiation involves assigning varied learning materials and tasks tailored to students' comprehension levels. For example, students grouped based on their understanding receive different assignments to better suit their needs. Process differentiation allows teachers to assess students' proficiency and adapt instructional methods accordingly. In the context of prayer lessons, students who face difficulties in reading are given corrective guidance, while those more advanced engage directly in practice activities. Product differentiation empowers students to demonstrate their understanding through creative outputs such as summaries or PowerPoint presentations, submitted independently to the teacher. This innovative approach reflects a personalized and transformative learning experience, ensuring that each student receives education suited to their individual abilities. The method aligns with the core principles of the Merdeka Curriculum by fostering autonomy, spiritual growth, and academic excellence. Overall, the differentiated PAI learning model at SMPIT Insan Madani serves as a practical response to students' diverse learning needs, equipping them with balanced spiritual and intellectual competencies relevant to the digital era and the demands of 21st-century education.</p>
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Introduction

Islamic education within the national education system faces new challenges as a result of changes occurring in the era of globalization. A new, solution-oriented and anticipatory approach is needed to address these issues (Pewangi, 2016). However, new challenges have emerged in today's technological age. Various sources provide students with a wide range of information, both positive and negative. Furthermore, they are increasingly exposed to digital culture, which tends to be individualistic and often distances students from religious values. Therefore, it is crucial to find innovative and relevant approaches to Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning in this technological age (Gunarsih, 2023).

Furthermore, the religious education process in schools still suffers from numerous weaknesses, which poses another challenge for teachers. This failure stems from the fact that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) instruction typically focuses on dense material and emphasizes only the cognitive aspect. This aspect, particularly when it comes to understanding and developing students' religious values, receives little attention or is often neglected. (Yaqin, 2019, Khuzaimah, 2017).

With Thus, the development of the Merdeka curriculum aims to provide greater freedom for teachers and students to organize their learning process, while ensuring that education is more relevant and flexible. This curriculum is necessary in response to changing global dynamics, the demands of 21st-century education, and the increasingly complex needs of society and individuals. The Merdeka Belajar curriculum emphasizes the importance of students acquiring skills relevant to the modern world. These skills include digital literacy, social-emotional skills, creativity, problem-solving, communication, collaboration, and critical thinking. This curriculum is intended to provide students with relevant skills in a world full of technological and information developments (Hanipah, 2023). It's crucial for teachers to implement the Merdeka Belajar policy. They can collaborate effectively and productively in developing the school curriculum by organizing and compiling materials, textbooks, teaching modules, and learning materials (Sahrandi & Bahri, 2023).

The implementation of the independent curriculum is one effort to innovate learning in Indonesia. This is intended to improve the quality of education, particularly in Islamic Religious Education (PAI (Samsiah et al., 2024)). One innovation in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning is the independent curriculum. This curriculum provides teachers and students with greater flexibility to explore more relevant, contextual, and individualized learning. The Independent Curriculum embraces the concept of intracurricular learning, giving teachers the freedom to choose teaching materials that align with the interests and learning needs of their students. Teachers can use various methods to develop teaching materials to maximize the potential and abilities of each student (Mustofa et al., 2023).

The characteristics of this independent curriculum include two key features that support learning recovery: project-based learning for *soft skills* and character development aligned with the Pancasila student profile. It focuses on essential material, ensuring sufficient time for learning basic skills such as literacy and numeracy. It also provides flexibility for teachers to adapt learning based on student abilities and adapt it to local contexts and content (Pillawaty et al., 2023).

The independent curriculum allows for innovation in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning because it allows teachers and students to utilize student-centered approaches, character development, and technology, which are crucial for Islamic Religious Education learning in the modern era. It is hoped that this curriculum change will improve student character development, especially in today's challenging digital era (Samsiah et al., 2024). The independent curriculum aims to foster students who believe in God and uphold the cultural values of the Indonesian nation. Furthermore, teachers and students are given the freedom to innovate and create innovative, fun, and independent learning methods (Nurhantara & Utami, 2023).

The innovative Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning strategy in implementing the independent curriculum at SMPIT (Islamic Junior High School) represents a significant shift in the way religious education is delivered. This innovation combines Islamic philosophy and the principles of independent learning, differentiation, and the use of technology. Therefore, to meet student needs, differentiated learning must be implemented in schools. Differentiated learning is defined as a collection of common *sense decisions* made by instructors with a focus on student needs (Aminuriyah & Suyitno, 2022). Differentiated teaching and learning is a type of learning in which students are given sufficient time to develop their abilities and potential. This learning process can foster student creativity. Teachers must be able to create a learning process that students enjoy so they enjoy asking questions, researching, and creating (Aminuriyah, 2022).

In a differentiation strategy, there are three activities that can be carried out, namely: 1) Content differentiation is a strategy to differentiate the organization and format of content delivery. Content is the knowledge, ideas, and skills that students must learn based on the curriculum; 2) Process differentiation refers to strategies for differentiating the processes that students must undertake, which can help them understand the content or material; 3) Creating unique products refers to strategies for changing student learning outcomes, practice results, application, and development of what has been learned. (Noperman, 2022).

This research is relevant to several previous studies, namely: *First*, Analysis of the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum through Differentiated Learning: This study investigates how the Independent Curriculum, which is implemented by a large number of educational institutions in Indonesia, encourages the use of differentiated learning to find out how effectively this curriculum is used and the potential benefits and obstacles. (O. N. Hasanah, 2024). Exploring Difficulties and Opportunities for Implementing Differentiated Learning: This study investigates the difficulties of teachers in implementing differentiated learning in the classroom as well as opportunities to improve this method. (Heningjakti & Surono, 2023). The results of the study indicate that Islamic Religious Education and Character Building learning activities have implemented differentiated learning and assessment as a form of implementing independent learning curriculum-based learning, and have a positive impact on increasing student creativity. Independent learning-based learning improves students' critical thinking skills, increases their emotional sensitivity, and creates strong intuition. (Munauwarah & Achadi (2023). At SMPIT Insan Madani, a school specializing in Islamic Education (PAI) or Islamic

Personal Development (BPI) subjects, the learning process in class is divided into two groups, namely a group with good morals and worship and a group with poor morals and worship (SMPIT Insan Madani).

Based on the description above, the researcher believes that the location of SMPIT Insan Madani Palopo is an interesting site for research, particularly in terms of how PAI learning innovation strategies apply differentiated learning using the Merdeka curriculum.

Research Method

This research uses qualitative methodology, namely research used to examine the conditions of natural objects, where the researcher is the key instrument, data collection techniques are carried out through triangulation (combination), data analysis is inductive, and the results of qualitative research emphasize meaning more than generalization (S. Sugiyono, 2022).

The data collection techniques used in this study were observation, interviews, and documentation. The researchers conducted direct observations of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in grades VIII B and VIII C, as well as students, during Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning activities in and outside of the classroom. b. Indirect observation, by collecting data in the form of photos of the school location, photos and videos of activities during the learning process. In the interview activity technique, the researcher used structured and unstructured interviews. A structured interview is an interview conducted using pre-prepared question materials, or interview guidelines. Such as a list of questions that have been prepared and given to informants with uniform questions. While an unstructured interview is a type of interview conducted without following interview guidelines, but by means of free dialogue and trying to stay focused on the research topic. (Rahmadi, 2011). The interviewees in the study were the principal, and two PAI teachers of class VIII B and two people of VIII C.

The researcher in conducting this study collected written documentation, including (a) curriculum syllabus, (b) teaching modules, (c) teacher data, (d) Recording the results of the researcher's interviews with all research subjects using a voice recorder from *a mobile phone*. For data analysis using the Miles and Huberman and Saldana models including data condensation (data reduction), data presentation and conclusions and verification. (Miles et al., 2014). The steps for data analysis were carried out in the following ways: reviewing or filtering the data that had been obtained, adjusting and matching the data with the theory, and analyzing teachers in the PAI subject learning process related to the innovation strategies carried out by PAI teachers at SMPIT Insan Madani and making conclusions.

Result and Discussion

To produce individuals who are ready to face the conditions of the times, outdated teaching methods will not be enough. Therefore, teaching methods must be followed and adopted in the education system. One such teaching method is the differentiated teaching method (Bal et al., 2022). Differentiated learning is an effort to adapt classroom learning to meet the individual learning needs of each student. In

the implementation of differentiated learning at SMPIT Insan Madani, differentiated learning begins with an initial assessment to determine a learning design that is appropriate for the students and that matches the learning material. Therefore, this learning can take the form of differentiation of content/material, process, or product.

Differentiated learning based on content allows students to differentiate the material they receive based on their cognitive abilities. Content strategies address the knowledge, ideas, and skills students must learn based on the curriculum. Adapting learning materials allows students to learn at a level appropriate to their abilities, and aims to provide material that aligns with their needs, abilities, and level of understanding.

Content differentiation is implemented by providing the same theme or material to all students, but the type of assignment given is adjusted to each student's ability level. Thus, even though the topics discussed are similar, the level of difficulty of the questions or the form of the assignments vary according to the students' needs (GP-1, 06-08-2024). In implementing content differentiation, students can be divided into different groups, where each group is given different material or assignments. For example, each group is given a news assignment with different material, adjusted to their characteristics or learning needs (GP-2, 06-08-2024).

In the Independent Curriculum, if a student has not yet achieved a learning milestone at a certain stage, for example, if they have not yet mastered the material in grade VII, that material cannot be abandoned. The material continues to be taught even after the student has advanced to the next level. He gave the example of learning prayer. If a student has not yet mastered the movements or recitations of prayer, the material is continued until they have fully mastered it. Meanwhile, other students who have mastered the basic material are still given advanced material, such as dhikr. The Independent Curriculum places greater emphasis on the application aspect of the learning process (GP-1, 06-08-2024).

In the content strategy, students are grouped based on their abilities, allowing teachers to provide appropriate challenges. Students with higher abilities can be given more complex assignments, while those with lower abilities can be guided with a more basic and gradual approach. Communication between teachers occurs at the beginning of the lesson to develop learning tools. To meet learning needs, BPI material that was not completed in grade VII is discussed and taught again in grade VIII. The learning tools are already available. Teachers only need to compile and modify them according to the Independent Curriculum, selecting those that are relevant for implementation (GP-4, 13-05-2024).

Furthermore, it is crucial for teachers to obtain information from previous teachers about their students' progress during the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. This is especially true for teachers who have students who have not yet mastered the material. For example, material that students have not mastered in grade VII continues to be taught until the students move up to grade VIII to meet learning objectives. Furthermore, student progress reports from previous teachers are crucial to ensure ongoing learning. This differs from the 2013 Curriculum. In the Independent Curriculum, material can be continued at the next level according to the students' needs. Students continue to advance to the next grade even if they have not completed the material, and teachers often do not know the level of student achievement at the previous level (GP, 06-08-2024).

Differentiation is implemented by dividing students into study groups tailored to their needs and abilities. Homeroom teachers, who understand the characteristics

of each student, are usually responsible for assigning these groups. Meanwhile, the BPI or PAI teacher concentrates on implementing the learning according to the predetermined divisions (GP-2, 06-08-2024).

In the Independent Curriculum, conducting diagnostic assessments at the beginning of the lesson is crucial. Through these assessments, students who have demonstrated good morals can be grouped separately and provided with reinforcement materials tailored to their needs. This aligns with the principle of differentiation in the Independent Curriculum, which adapts the learning approach based on the student's condition and characteristics (KS, April 22, 2024).

Students are divided into two groups in the class based on aspects of morals and worship. The first group consists of students who have demonstrated good morals and worship, and the second group consists of students who still need guidance in both aspects. Almost all students showed positive changes in worship, especially in the implementation of prayer. However, some students need to be reminded to pray, although their parents said that some of them have never missed praying at home. Students showed moral differences in the way they speak, some are already polite, while others still need to be trained to speak more politely (GP-1, 06-08-2024).

Classes are divided into various ways, one of which is random. However, in some situations, homeroom teachers are responsible for determining the distribution based on student characteristics because they have a better understanding of each student's situation. He gave an example of a class in VIII C, where he works, where groups are divided equally between students with good qualities and students who still need guidance, so that each group has a diverse character composition (GP-3, 22-04-2024).

Process-based differentiated learning involves differentiating learning methods for specific groups of students based on their learning styles, interests, talents, or multiple intelligences (SMPIT Insan Madani KSOP Curriculum, 2023). Process learning refers to strategies for differentiating the processes students must undertake, which can help them understand the content or material. Teachers can use group discussions, project-based learning, or case studies to provide flexibility in how students learn the material. This is reinforced by interview results.

In Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning, groups are formed based on student character, even if they use the same text or story. Groups are structured in a mixed manner, with students with strong (high) and students with low (low) character, so there is balance within the group. Typically, there are three people in a group. Furthermore, he stated that the wisdom materials and BPI/PAI learning simulations are frequently updated or adapted to meet student needs and conditions. Students learn the material through group discussions and present the results as part of case-based learning throughout the learning process (GP-2, 06-08-2024).

The Independent Curriculum is preferred by teachers because it allows materials to be tailored to students' abilities and needs. For example, within a single learning theme, students with a better understanding are given assignments with more challenging questions. For example, assignments requiring reasoning are an example of such tasks. During this time, other students who are still in the basic stage are simply asked to provide brief comments on the same story. Therefore, the format of the questions varies to suit each student's abilities, even though the topics are similar. This strategy is considered to increase students' desire to learn (GP-1, 06-08-2024). Meanwhile, differentiated product learning can be implemented by providing assignments or reinforcement with different products according to students' interests

and talents (SMPIT Insan Madani KSOP Curriculum, 2023). These products refer to strategies for changing student learning outcomes, practicing, applying, and developing what has been learned. Teachers give students the freedom to demonstrate their understanding through various products, such as presentations, written reports, artwork, or videos, and this is reinforced by interviews.

One way to implement product differentiation in learning is to give students a choice of assignments, such as creating a resume or a PowerPoint presentation. Students work independently and are given sufficient time to complete them according to their abilities and readiness (GP-4, 07-05-2024). Students typically have the freedom to choose how they complete assignments, such as presentations or oral presentations, especially before exams or assessments. For example, religious instruction can be practiced directly by students or demonstrated in front of the class, depending on each student's comfort and ability (GP-1, 06-08-2024).

Similarly, during the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning process for class VIII C exclusively for girls, students were divided into two groups. Group one was in the classroom, and group two was in the corridor. Similarly, for class VIII B exclusively for boys, group one was in the classroom and group two was outside. The learning process alternated between groups one and two, occupying both the classroom and the outside.

The implementation of differentiated learning strategies at SMPIT Insan Madani is further strengthened by documentation in the form of a Teaching Module at the school. In the Teaching Module, each activity in the learning process is designed to group students according to their needs and level of academic achievement. Furthermore, the KSOP Insan Madani curriculum considers learning activities designed by taking into account the principles of learning and assessment, as well as the different needs and characteristics of students in terms of cognitive abilities, learning styles, interests, and talents. Therefore, learning plans or teaching modules are developed with differentiated learning steps (KSOP SMPIT Insan Madani Curriculum, 2023).

Thus, the differentiated learning implemented at SMIT Insan Madani in the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning process adapts to students' academic needs and abilities through differentiation of content/material, process, and product. This ensures students can more easily understand the material taught and stay on track with lessons, as it is tailored to their needs, both in terms of mastery and consistent application in everyday life.

The interview results above are supported by the researcher's observations on-site. During the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning process for class VIII C exclusively for girls, students were divided into two groups. Group one was in the classroom, and group two was in the corridor. Similarly, for class VIII B exclusively for boys, group one was in the classroom and group two was outside. The learning process alternated between groups one and two, occupying both the classroom and the outside.

The implementation of differentiated learning innovation strategies at SMPIT Insan Madani is further reinforced by documentation in the form of teaching modules available at the school. These modules are designed to group each student's learning activity according to their needs and academic achievement levels. Then in the KSOP Insan Madani curriculum regarding learning activities that are designed by paying attention to the principles of learning and assessment as well as the different needs and characteristics of students in terms of cognitive abilities, learning styles, interests

and talents, so that learning plans or teaching modules are developed with differentiated learning steps (KSOP SMPIT Insan Madan Curriculum, 2023).

Based on the results of the interviews, observations, and documentation above, the differentiated learning implemented at SMIT Insan Madani in the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning process adapts to students' academic needs and abilities through differentiation of content/material, process, and product. Thus, students can more easily understand the material taught and do not fall behind in lessons because it is tailored to students' needs in terms of their ability to master the material, and can be applied in everyday life with consistency.

The implementation of differentiation strategies in three activities carried out at SMPIT Insan Madani, such as content differentiation, students in different groups, so the material given is not the same as the assignments given to other groups. In addition, teachers in providing material see students from the level of material mastery, for example, the same theme but, the assigned tasks will have different levels of difficulty adjusted to the needs and learning styles of students in receiving the material. So students are motivated to continue learning and enjoy it for themselves, because their learning needs are met.

Likewise, in process differentiation, teachers observe students in terms of their ability to master the material. For example, in prayer material, students who are not yet fluent in their prayer readings will be corrected, and students who are already good at praying will go straight to prayer practice activities. Similarly, students are grouped, in one group whose prayer *iba* and prayer need to be improved, and the other group whose prayer time needs to be improved. Meanwhile, in product differentiation, students who have received the material taught, the teacher gives assignments in the form of *resumes* or *power point* (PPT) to be done independently and send the assignments that have been made to the teacher. Just like when it comes to exams, students are given the opportunity to choose the form of the exam, for example prayer practice or presentation by making a PPT with *the Canva platform*.

Differentiation strategy is an effort to implement differentiated learning by considering learning activities that can be adapted to students' profiles and needs (Elias et al., 2021). This strategy emphasizes the importance of tailoring learning activities to each student's interests, readiness, and needs. Differentiation, on the other hand, requires teachers to design flexible and varied learning activities so that each student can reach their full potential. Differentiated learning encompasses teachers' understanding of students' unique characteristics beyond simply varying methods. This aligns with the student-centered education paradigm. This paradigm involves teachers as facilitators and is responsible for providing an inclusive and flexible learning environment. Students will feel valued and actively engaged in their learning in this way, making learning more meaningful. By using a differentiation strategy, teachers must conduct ongoing assessments to determine student needs and development. The data from these assessments is then used to create appropriate content, processes, products, and learning environments for each individual or group of students. This strategy is increasingly relevant in the Merdeka curriculum, which emphasizes differentiated learning, because it provides students with the freedom and flexibility to learn according to their specific needs.

According to Tomlinson (2001), differentiated learning is an effort to adapt classroom instruction to meet the individual learning needs of each student. Differentiated learning allows teachers to tailor methods, materials, and assessments to each student's needs and abilities. This strategy allows each student to learn in the way that works best for them (Tomlinson, 2001).

There are three main components that contribute to differentiated learning: content (what is taught), process (how learning occurs), and product (how students demonstrate their understanding). When it comes to delivering material, adapting teaching methods, and providing various types of assessment, teachers must be flexible. In other words, differentiated learning allows students to convey their understanding in various ways, gain access to materials according to their readiness, and learn in an environment that supports their individual learning styles. Furthermore, to design adaptive learning, teachers must have a good understanding of student characteristics and appropriate pedagogical competencies. This requires appropriate initial assessment, careful planning, and ongoing evaluation of what strategies are working.

Differentiated learning is one of the primary principles of the Independent Curriculum, emphasising the importance of considering individual student differences in learning design. The goal of differentiated learning is to ensure that each student has access to education tailored to their particular needs, interests, and abilities. This is achieved by considering individual differences in learning styles, cognitive abilities, behaviours, and cognitive. (Sarnoto, 2024). According to Sarnoto (2024), teachers in differentiated learning must consider the unique needs of each student, identify their diverse skills, interests, and learning styles, and select appropriate teaching strategies accordingly. Additionally, teachers must provide a range of options for learning activities and assessments that enable students to choose how they learn and assess themselves. (Sarnoto, 2024).

Teachers in this situation must do more than deliver material; they must carefully observe how each student behaves, including their interests, academic abilities, and different learning styles. Differentiated learning systematically values and responds to diversity, as each student has unique potential. Choosing the right teaching strategy for each student can be challenging. By using observation, formative assessment, and active communication, teachers can comprehensively map students' learning profiles. By using this mapping, teachers can create varied and adaptive learning activities. To make learning more relevant, challenging, and enjoyable for each student according to their abilities and learning tendencies, this strategy is crucial.

Meanwhile, Vygotsky's (1978) view regarding this differentiation is still very relevant to his idea of *the Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD) for this method. The ZPD proposes that teachers should provide assistance, or *scaffolding*, to students according to their developmental level. This will help students learn at a level slightly beyond their current abilities (Vygotsky, 1978).

This demonstrates that differentiated learning doesn't just focus on students' differing learning styles or preferences; it also considers their cognitive readiness. This means that teachers must understand their students' abilities and then create learning interventions that are challenging but within their developmental range. Students aren't left facing material that's too easy or too difficult; instead, they're guided to move from what they've already mastered to higher learning outcomes. In this way, learning becomes effective.

Scaffolding is crucial to this process. In practice, teachers provide temporary, gradually adjusted support, such as providing directions, examples, visual aids, or guiding questions. This guidance is gradually reduced as students begin to understand and master the concepts taught, allowing them to learn independently. Differentiated learning that is adaptive and responsive to individual student development is

fundamental to this process. By applying the ZPD in differentiated learning, teachers not only help students achieve learning goals but also foster self-confidence, independence, and a desire to learn. This method encourages individualized, progressive, and continuous learning, in line with the vision of education that recognizes the extraordinary potential of every individual.

In the differentiation strategy, three activities can be carried out, namely : (1) Content differentiation, (2) process differentiation, (3) creating unique products (Noperman, 2022). Tomlinson views developing various strategies to adapt teaching according to the diverse needs, interests, and abilities of students. Differentiation involves adjusting content, processes, and learning products to meet the needs of individual students. (Tomlinson, 2001).

Teachers' cognitive understanding of differentiated learning has a significant impact on its implementation in the classroom. Therefore, implementing differentiated learning in the school is crucial to meet students' diverse learning needs, including their interests, level of learning readiness, and preferred learning styles (Maryani et al., 2023). In the implementation of differentiated learning at SMPIT Insan Madani, the process begins with an initial assessment to determine a learning design that is tailored to the students and the learning material. This learning can take the form of differentiation of content/material, process, or product (SMPIT Insan Madani KSOP Curriculum, 2023).

To address the gap in student competency achievement resulting from the current learning crisis, a learning recovery policy is needed within a specified timeframe. The Independent Curriculum is one effort to address this problem. In the Independent Curriculum, the concept of Independent Learning is prioritized. The curriculum plays an essential role in the educational process and is continuously updated to align with societal progress. The focus is on students, society, and the subjects taught. (Parwati et al., 2024). In implementing the Independent Curriculum, according to Herwina (2021), the differentiation approach is one of the main characteristics of the Independent Curriculum which has several indicators of differentiated learning as a manifestation of the Independent Learning implementation pattern as follows: (1) Creating a pleasant learning environment, (2) Clearly defined learning objectives, (3) Learning that favors students, (4) Effective classroom management, and (5) Continuous assessment (Herwina, 2021).

The implementation of differentiated teaching and learning activities will create a flexible and non-rigid curriculum that only relies on one method to achieve educational goals in schools (Muktamar, 2023). In the process of implementing differentiated learning strategies, teachers must have the ability to incorporate the latest concepts and innovations into the use of learning models and approaches that will be useful so that students are more motivated to follow the entire learning process (Farid et al., 2022).

This demonstrates that differentiated learning is dynamic, requiring teachers to continually adapt to changes, both in terms of student development and advances in science and technology. These innovations can include the use of digital media, collaborative strategies, project-based learning, and the use of digital formative assessments that enable teachers to map student needs in real time. The application of these varied learning models and approaches will make the learning process more engaging, challenging, and enjoyable for students.

Students' desire to learn is also greatly influenced by teachers' ability to differentiate and innovate learning. When the methods and materials used are aligned with students' learning styles and interests, they are more actively engaged, feel

valued, and are more motivated to complete lessons to the best of their ability. Therefore, students are differentiated not only academically but also emotionally and socially. Overall, using differentiation strategies supported by educational innovation creates a responsive, relevant, and inspiring learning environment. As drivers of change in the classroom, teachers must continuously learn so they can provide learning that is not only equitable but also meaningful for each student.

Differentiated learning is a useful method for delivering effective and tailored activities to students (Sahril et al., 2021). Therefore, to produce effective learning, teachers need to develop insight and awareness of the existence of diversity, which also requires space to develop according to its natural potential. Differentiated learning is learning that focuses on developing student competencies, rather than on transferring teaching materials, which produces the ideal quality of graduates as outlined in the Pancasila Student Profile concept (E. Hasanah et al., 2022).

The main principle of differentiated learning is adapting learning to student characteristics. Teachers need to design materials, strategies, media, and assessments specific to each student's readiness, learning profile, and background. (Mirawati et al., 2022)

Thus, innovation in implementing differentiated learning, which is one of the steps in the Islamic Religious Education learning innovation strategy based on the Independent Curriculum at SMPIT Insan Madani, is expected to enable teachers to understand students' abilities, adapt to their needs, and group their interests and learning styles. This reinforces Vygotsky's (1978) theory regarding the differentiation of the ZPD theory, which states that teachers must provide assistance, or *scaffolding*, to students according to their developmental level. This theory is also supported by Tomlinson's theory on differentiation. Therefore, teachers should have the ability and strive to incorporate the latest concepts and innovations into the differentiated learning approach. This will ensure that students are motivated and enthusiastic in participating in classroom learning activities and that their learning needs are met.

Conclusion

The research results show that differentiated learning in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at SMPIT Insan Madani has been implemented adaptively and responsively to students' academic needs and abilities. Content, process, and product are the three main elements that distinguish this strategy. Content differentiation involves adapting learning materials to suit the level of understanding of each student group. Teachers structure materials according to students' cognitive readiness, making the learning process more inclusive and meaningful. Teachers' ability to adapt their teaching methods to suit their students' learning pace demonstrates process differentiation. This is evident in the practice of prayer, where teachers allow students more time to understand and practice prayer movements and recitations. Product differentiation allows students to demonstrate their understanding in a variety of ways. Students can choose to convey their knowledge through individual presentations, resume writing, or other media that suits their learning style. Thus, differentiated learning not only impacts learning outcomes but also strengthens applicable religious understanding through a flexible and personalized approach. Therefore, it is hoped that further research is needed to determine the extent to which teachers truly understand student characteristics, including learning styles, interests, and individual readiness, specifically in the grouping and planning process of differentiated learning. In other words, a more in-depth analysis is still needed of teachers' abilities in conducting initial student assessments and how these assessment results are effectively used to create ideal differentiation strategies. This opens up

opportunities for further research to explore the diagnostic aspects of differentiated learning and its sustainable implementation.

Conclusion

The study reveals that the application of differentiated learning through the Independent Curriculum is a highly relevant and effective response to the diverse needs of students in the modern educational context. Differentiation is carried out in three main aspects: content, process, and product, each serving to accommodate students' varying levels of readiness, interests, and learning styles. Content differentiation enables students to engage with materials that are suited to their cognitive abilities, thereby fostering a more inclusive and meaningful learning environment. For instance, students are grouped according to their academic needs, with assignments tailored to either strengthen foundational knowledge or challenge more advanced learners. Process differentiation focuses on how students learn; teachers adjust methods based on students' progress, such as offering more practice and guidance to those who struggle with prayer materials while allowing more proficient students to advance to practical activities. Product differentiation offers students the flexibility to express their understanding through varied outputs such as presentations, written assignments, or creative media, which aligns with their personal strengths and preferences.

This approach not only improves academic outcomes but also strengthens students' religious competencies by integrating personalized, flexible, and contextually relevant learning activities. The research confirms that this strategy supports the holistic development of students, balancing spiritual and academic growth. Furthermore, differentiated learning is shown to motivate students, foster creativity, and enhance engagement by providing learning experiences that are meaningful and connected to their individual needs.

The article concludes that while the current implementation at SMPIT Insan Madani shows positive outcomes, further research is necessary to deepen the understanding of how teachers identify and interpret students' characteristics, learning styles, and readiness in constructing effective differentiation strategies. There remains a need for ongoing professional development to ensure that teachers can skillfully conduct initial assessments and utilize this data to design learning activities that truly align with the principles of differentiated instruction. This study contributes significantly to the broader discourse on educational innovation within Islamic education, offering a practical model that is adaptable to other schools seeking to implement the Merdeka Curriculum in ways that respect individual differences and foster meaningful learning experiences.

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