Student Diversity and Differentiated Learning: Exploring Differentiated Learning Practices in Elementary Schools

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Abstract

One of the characteristics of learning in the independent curriculum is the application of differentiated learning, where this learning seeks to facilitate the needs and diversity of students in the class. This diversity can come from aspects of student learning styles, abilities, interests which will have an impact on the learning practices designed by the teacher. By implementing differentiated learning, the independent curriculum provides ample space for teachers to develop flexible and adaptive learning. This research aims to explore the implementation of differentiated learning in elementary schools. The researcher wants to reveal the practices carried out by teachers in facilitating student diversity at SDN 1 Ketindan, Malang Regency which focuses on differentiated learning practices. Researchers use a descriptive qualitative approach to explore and describe this phenomenon which emphasizes process, meaning and understanding to realize research objectives. Based on the research results, it shows that teachers have implemented differentiated learning well, content differentiation is carried out by teachers by differentiating content or material during learning. Teachers differentiate them by referring to the level of students' understanding of the material to be studied. Process differentiation is carried out by teachers by differentiating ways of delivering material to students which refers to their learning styles. Furthermore, the teacher carries out product differentiation by differentiating the learning products produced by students to see and measure students' mastery of the material they have studied.

Keywords – Differentiated Learning; Elementary school; Merdeka Curriculum.

1.   Introduction

The independent curriculum as the national curriculum aims to form students with all the skills needed in the 21st century. The Independent Curriculum is designed to provide wider space for students to develop their potential, not only in terms of academics but also social, emotional and character skills (Cahyanto, Lutfia , et al., 2021; Dapa, 2020). This also aims to make students have character and are ready to face global challenges. One of the focuses of this independent curriculum is the development of the Pancasila Student profile, where this profile includes six main characters, namely faith and devotion to God Almighty as well as noble character, global diversity, mutual cooperation, independence, critical reasoning and creativity. Each of these characters has an important role in forming students who have moral integrity, empathy, and the ability to work together with others (Faigawati et al., 2023; Sugiri & Priatmoko, 2020). The Merdeka Curriculum also aims to produce a generation that is able to contribute positively to society. To achieve this goal, one of the goals is that teachers are expected to be able to implement more flexible and student-centered learning.

Teachers can adapt teaching methods according to students' needs and interests and give them the opportunity to learn more independently. Apart from that, students are also encouraged to be actively involved in the learning process through projects and practical activities that are relevant to real life (Hartono et al., 2018; Omeri, 2015). Students are taught to develop practical skills that are useful in everyday life and their future careers, not just learning theory while at school (Cahyanto et al., 2021). This skill is very essential in an era that continues to develop and demands high adaptability. Mastery of these skills will generally prepare students for an increasingly complex world of work and make students agents of change who are able to innovate and adapt quickly (Gnyawali et al., 2005; Sitorus et al., 2022). Teachers no longer act as the only source of information, but rather as companions who help students find answers and solutions through their own exploration and discovery. This of course requires

teachers to continue to develop competencies to support the implementation of the Independent Curriculum effectively and be able to provide meaningful learning experiences for students (Dalila et al., 2022; Dapa, 2020).

On the other hand, teachers are given very wide space to organize flexible and adaptive learning and the freedom to design learning activities that suit the needs and characteristics of students in the class or what is often called differentiated learning. This freedom allows teachers to be more creative and innovative in developing teaching strategies that can motivate students and make learning more interesting and relevant (Faigawati et al., 2023; Fatmawati et al., 2023). To achieve the learning objectives that have been set, teachers can provide a variety of learning activities to students. This flexibility allows teachers to adapt learning to each student's learning style and interests, so that each student has the same opportunity to achieve optimal learning outcomes. Flexibility in the Independent Curriculum also aims to facilitate diversity in the classroom. By providing a variety of learning activities, teachers can meet students' individual needs and reduce gaps in academic achievement.

The Merdeka Curriculum wants to ensure that learning remains relevant and meaningful for students and is able to encourage sustainable academic development. In other words, learning in the current era is oriented towards efforts to enable students to learn according to their abilities and learning development (Jilardi et al., 2011; Sulistianingrum et al., 2023). Consequently, teachers must try to understand the strengths, weaknesses, interests and learning styles of each student as basic information in designing effective and relevant learning strategies. In this way, students are able to be well facilitated in various aspects. Differences in student learning styles can be accommodated by providing variations in teaching methods (Faigawati et al., 2023). Apart from that, students' varying abilities can also be addressed through differentiated learning. In a class where there are students with different levels of ability, from those who quickly grasp the material to those who need more time to understand the

concept, the teacher can provide assignments that are tailored to each student's ability level.

Teachers act as facilitators and mentors to help students develop critical thinking skills, creativity, and problem-solving abilities. This way, students not only memorize information but also learn how to apply it in real-world contexts. Furthermore, a supportive and inclusive learning environment is needed to support successful learning. Schools need to create a learning environment that makes students feel valued and supported (Aguanda et al., 2023; de Jager, 2013). Teachers' understanding of student characteristics which include various aspects such as learning styles, interests, motivation and socio-cultural background really helps them in creating an inclusive learning environment (Aljowaysir et al., 2019; Astuti & Afendi, 2022). Learning that is tailored to individual student needs not only has an impact on increasing student engagement, but also encourages students to take an active role in the learning process. This is in line with the goals of education which seeks to form individuals who are not only intellectually intelligent, but also have strong social-emotional skills.

By accommodating students' differences in learning styles, abilities, and interests, differentiated learning allows each student to learn in the way that is most effective for them. SDN 1 Ketindan is a public elementary school located in Malang district. This school has implemented an independent curriculum that applies differentiated learning in everyday life. Based on preliminary studies at SDN 1 Ketindan Malang, it shows that in class VI teachers apply differentiated learning through various strategies. Apart from that, class VI students have also produced various learning products and displayed them in several work exhibitions at the end of the year. The aim of this research is to dig deeper into the implementation of differentiated learning in schools.

2.   Method

Differentiated learning is a topic that researchers want to reveal in this research. The main focus is to dig deeper into differentiated learning practices in elementary schools, especially in class VI SDN 1 Ketindan Malang. The research used a qualitative descriptive approach because the researcher wanted to know more about the process and experiences experienced by the research subject teachers and the implementation of differentiated learning in detail (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). On the other hand, research also wants to explore and describe natural conditions which refers to extracting meaning and understanding in the form of words (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Taylor et al., 2016). The researcher hopes that the results of this research will be able to provide additional knowledge and insight into good, in-depth tactics regarding the implementation of differentiated learning in the independent curriculum which is used by teachers in forming the profile of Pancasila students in schools.

In an effort to realize the objectives of this research, researchers used various data collection techniques to collect phenomena comprehensively (Davies & Dodd, 2002; Saldana, 2011). Before conducting research, at the beginning the researcher conducted a preliminary study with teachers regarding initial information as well as determining the focus of the research according to conditions in the field. Next, after the researcher found the focus, they continued by collecting data using various methods through classroom observations, interviews with teachers and students, as well as analysis of curriculum documents and learning materials. After the data was collected, the researcher carried out analysis and coding for in-depth analysis until finally conclusions were drawn (Yin, 2016). Researchers also use data analysis techniques according to Miles et al., (2014) which includes stages of data reduction, presentation, verification and drawing conclusions.

3.   Result and Discussion

In this section, the researcher will present the research results and discussions that have been adjusted to the data found during the field. This

research focuses on differentiated learning practices implemented by teachers in elementary schools. This aims to reveal in depth how this approach is applied in learning in class VI SDN 1 Ketindan Malang and its impact on student learning. The results of these findings will be described in detail to provide a comprehensive picture of the implementation of differentiated learning. The findings in this research are as follows.

Implementation of Content Differentiation in Learning

The implementation of differentiated learning in schools has been implemented for a long time since schools implemented the Merdeka curriculum. In implementing this content differentiation, teachers apply it by providing diverse material to students in learning. This is adjusted to the student's mastery of the material or competency at that time. Teachers do not just provide one form of material for all students, but adapt the material to ensure that all students can access and understand the content being taught. This practice is in accordance with the views of (Gheyssens et al., 2022; Smets & Struyven, 2020) which explains that content differentiation is a strategy where teachers present information and learning materials in various formats to meet the diverse learning needs of each student.

Based on the research results, teachers are seen presenting material in the form of written text, videos and visual presentations. Students look more comfortable because there are several forms of material. Students who like reading use text material, while students who like visuals use video material. Students who like learning kinesthetically understand material through interactions with their classmates (van Geel et al., 2019). By providing various forms of material, students have the opportunity to learn in the way they find most effective (Eikeland & Ohna, 2022; van Geel et al., 2019). On the other hand, teachers also consider students' competency levels at the start when preparing learning materials as explained below.

"For students who have mastered the basic concepts of the

material I will teach, I usually provide more challenging material to deepen their knowledge, but for students who are still struggling with the basic material, I provide simpler material with additional guidance to help them understand the material (GK-VISC.03)"

Providing various types of content aims to ensure that each student can achieve the desired learning goals. This means that even though all students will achieve the same goals, the way students achieve these goals can vary (Damavandi et al., 2011), students can choose content that best suits their learning style and can still achieve the same learning goals (Mills et al. al., 2014; Morgan, 2014). In addition to providing different types of content, teachers develop different assessments to measure student understanding. Students are given the option to show their learning progress in various ways, such as making presentations, writing essays, and creating creative work. Indirectly from this practice, teachers not only help students learn in the way that is most appropriate for them, but also provide opportunities for students to demonstrate their abilities in ways that best suit their strengths.

Overall, content differentiation has been carried out well by teachers and shows its effectiveness in ensuring that all students can understand the learning material. Providing various forms of material according to student competencies has succeeded in creating an inclusive learning environment (Smets et al., 2022; Smets & Struyven, 2020). Student motivation and involvement in the learning process increases. Through the practice of content differentiation, teachers can provide students with equal opportunities to learn according to their potential. The practice of content differentiation in learning can be seen in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Use of Diverse Materials in Learning

Implementation of Process Differentiation in Learning

Teachers implement process differentiation in learning by differentiating the way in which material is delivered to students. Teachers try to create various ways to convey information according to students' learning styles and levels of understanding. This is in accordance with the views of (Amalia et al., 2024; Faigawati et al., 2023) who explain that this differentiation process is a strategy carried out by teachers adjusting teaching methods based on students' characteristics and learning needs. Apart from that, the way teachers implement process differentiation is by paying attention to students' learning styles and giving them the opportunity to study material in different ways. Teachers use video and power point tools to help students understand the material, for students who have an auditory learning style use discussions and lectures to deliver the material.

Meanwhile, students who have a kinesthetic learning style are given activities through movement and direct exercises and are given assignments that involve physical activity such as experiments and projects so that student involvement in learning is always high. This is in accordance with the views of Fatmawati et al., (2023) & Gnyawali et al., (2005) who explain that in the classroom a teacher ideally needs to pay attention to the diversity of student learning styles and provide variation through learning carried out individually and also in work. group. Individual learning is usually carried out by teachers to facilitate students learning at their own pace and ability where they can work on assignments or projects that are tailored to their ability level. The hope is that students will not feel burdened or feel too light (Sitorus et al., 2022) in carrying out the assignments given. This is in accordance with the teacher's statement as follows.

> *"In daily learning there are always several activities that students carry out in accordance with the learning objectives they want to achieve that day. "These activities are adjusted to the speed and abilities of students so that students with a fast learning speed do not get bored and students with a low*

learning speed are not burdened (GK-VISC.07)"

Meanwhile, group learning is usually carried out to facilitate collaboration between students. In group work, students consist of various levels of ability. Teachers form groups based on balanced abilities to ensure that each group member can make an equal contribution. In this way, teachers hope that students can maximize their potential and can learn from their friends. Teachers also occasionally use various technological devices to support learning, such as using online quiz applications to measure student understanding and using videos to explain complex concepts. Teachers not only help students understand the material well (Mills et al., 2014) but also create meaningful learning experiences for students (de Jager, 2013; Eikeland & Ohna, 2022). The practice of process differentiation in learning can be seen in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Use of Various Methods in Learning

Implementation of Product Differentiation in Learning

In implementing product differentiation, teachers differentiate the products or learning outcomes produced by students at the end to see the level of mastery of the material. With this product differentiation, it is possible for students to demonstrate their understanding in various ways that suit their strengths, interests and learning styles (Sitorus et al., 2022). In this way, teachers can evaluate student understanding more holistically, considering that each student has a different way of demonstrating their knowledge. One of the ways teachers use product differentiation is by asking students to make presentations in front of the class. This presentation is in the form of a report on the results of student activities. Through presentations, students not only demonstrate their

understanding of the material, but also develop communication skills, critical thinking, and public speaking confidence (Gagne et al., 2005; Mills et al., 2014). Apart from that, this activity also provides an opportunity for students who have the strength in speaking to show their potential.

The teacher also asks students to make a product as a final assignment in learning. The products produced vary greatly according to the material studied and students' creativity. The teacher gives students choices regarding the type of product they will make. Students look very motivated, in product assessment teachers always look at aspects of creativity, suitability to the material topic, and overall product quality. The learning process that students go through to produce certain products is part of the teacher's assessment, the process is always monitored on an ongoing basis as a form of student learning development. Based on the research results, teachers are also seen providing feedback during the learning process to assist students in completing products. The teacher states that constructive feedback will have an impact on increasing student learning motivation as stated below.

> *"The products produced by children are very varied and innovative, they can make them optimally as long as there is support and encouragement from the teacher in the making process. With reinforcement and positive feedback from the teacher, students will be more enthusiastic and motivated to finish more quickly. (GK- VISC.11)"*

By implementing product differentiation in learning, teachers can encourage students to develop various skills that are relevant to real life. Students learn to work independently, think creatively, and solve problems, and learn to take responsibility for their own learning. Apart from that, students' creativity can also be honed, because to produce a product students will go through many processes which really enable them to develop critical thinking, collaboration skills with friends, and develop students' level of innovation. The impact of this is not only increasing students' understanding of the material, but also preparing

them to become independent and adaptive learners in the future (Jilardi et al., 2011). Some of the products produced by students in differentiated learning can be seen in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3. Student Product Results in Differentiated Learning

4.   Conclusion

Based on the results of research conducted in class VI at SDN 1 Ketindan Malang, it shows that the teacher has implemented differentiated learning well. Content differentiation is carried out by teachers by differentiating material or content during learning. Teachers differentiate the material based on the level of students' understanding of the material to be studied. Process differentiation is carried out by teachers by differentiating ways of delivering material to students which refers to the learning styles of students in class. Furthermore, regarding product differentiation, teachers carry out this by differentiating learning products produced by students. This is also used by teachers to measure students' mastery of the material that has been taught.

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