
Differentiated Learning Strategy: Education Transformation Towards Learning Equity

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Abstract:

Differentiated learning is a pedagogical approach that emphasizes adapting instruction to students' needs, interests, and learning profiles. This approach has become increasingly relevant in the context of inclusive education and the implementation of the Independent Curriculum, which promotes equity and student-centered learning. This article aims to comprehensively examine differentiated learning strategies as an educational transformation toward learning equity. This study employed a qualitative literature review method by analyzing national and international journals indexed in SINTA, Scopus, and Google Scholar, published between 2014 and 2024. The findings indicate that differentiated learning, implemented through three main pillars—content, process, and product differentiation—significantly enhances student engagement, intrinsic motivation, and learning outcomes, including for students with special needs in inclusive settings. The major challenges identified include teacher preparedness, administrative workload, and classroom management. This study concludes that differentiated learning is not merely a technical teaching strategy but a student-centered educational philosophy that promotes equity, respects diversity, and supports the optimal development of every learner.

Keywords: differentiated learning, inclusive education, learning equity, independent curriculum

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INTRODUCTION

21st-century education faces increasingly complex challenges as the diversity of student characteristics grows. Classes are no longer understood as homogeneous groups, but as learning spaces consisting of individuals with different social, cultural, ability, interests, and learning styles. The conventional education paradigm, which is oriented toward uniformity, is considered no longer relevant in addressing these needs. Learning practices that generalize all students often lead to inequality in learning outcomes and educational injustice (Subban, 2006; Tomlinson, 2014).

The concept of the "myth of the average," put forward by Tomlinson (2014), explains that a curriculum designed for "average" learners is, in fact, ineffective for most students. Students with substandard abilities tend to be left behind, while students with high abilities do not receive adequate challenges. This condition is increasingly evident in the context of inclusive education, where children with special needs learn alongside regular children in the same classroom environment.

Differentiated learning serves as a response to these problems. This approach emphasizes teachers' efforts to adjust learning based on students' readiness, interests, and

learning profiles. In the Independent Curriculum, differentiated learning is one of the main principles, emphasizing the importance of student-centered learning. Differentiation is not interpreted as preferential treatment, but as a form of educational justice—giving each student what they need to achieve the same learning goals (Tomlinson, 2014).

The transformation of education is an urgent need to meet these challenges. Educational transformation is not only related to changes in curriculum or policies but also concerns changes in the learning paradigm in the classroom. Teachers are required to shift from being the sole source of learning to facilitators who can design meaningful learning experiences that align with students' needs. In this context, student-centered learning strategies are a crucial foundation in realizing learning equity.

One of the relevant pedagogical approaches in supporting the transformation of education toward learning equity is differentiated learning. Differentiated learning is a strategy designed with consideration of students' differences in learning readiness, interests, and profiles. This approach allows teachers to tailor content, processes, products, and learning environments to align with the individual needs of students (Subban, 2006).. Thus, differentiated learning provides space for each student to learn according to his or her potential without being disproportionately compared with other students.

Differentiated learning views diversity as a strength, not as an obstacle in the learning process. Through this approach, teachers no longer focus on achieving uniform learning outcomes but on a fair and meaningful learning process. Students are given the opportunity to demonstrate understanding and skills in various ways that suit their characteristics. This is in line with the principle of inclusive education, which emphasizes respect for differences and the fulfillment of every child's right to learn (Marlina, 2019).

In the context of education policy in Indonesia, differentiated learning is strongly relevant to the Merdeka Learning policy, which emphasizes learning flexibility, strengthening teacher competence, and developing students' potential holistically. The implementation of differentiated learning supports the creation of an inclusive, participatory, and responsive learning environment that caters to students' needs. In addition, this approach also contributes to increasing learning motivation, the active involvement of students, and achieving more optimal learning outcomes (Faiz et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, the implementation of differentiated learning in schools still faces various challenges. Teachers often have difficulty identifying the individual needs of students, designing varied learning tools, and managing heterogeneous classrooms. Additionally, the limitations of teachers' conceptual understanding and practical skills in implementing differentiated learning are inhibiting factors. Therefore, a comprehensive study of differentiated learning strategies is needed to transform education toward learning equity (Herwina, 2021).

Based on this description, this article aims to examine differentiated learning strategies as a form of educational transformation toward learning equity. This study focuses on understanding the concept of differentiated learning, its urgency in the context of inclusive education and Independent Learning, and its implications for creating equitable and meaningful learning for all students. It is hoped that this article will make both theoretical and

practical contributions for educators, policymakers, and education researchers in developing learning practices that are responsive to the diversity of students.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a literature study method. Data were obtained from national and international scientific journals, reference books, and education policy documents relevant to the topic of differentiated learning and inclusive education. The data collection technique was carried out through documentation with the keywords: differentiated learning, inclusive education, and learning equity. Data analysis was carried out using content analysis techniques through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, comparative analysis, and conclusion drawn.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Content Differentiation

Content differentiation at the inclusive elementary school level is carried out by adjusting the teaching materials to still refer to Learning Outcomes, but presented through various levels of complexity and modes of access. Teachers provide teaching materials in the form of graded texts, visual worksheets, learning audio, and interactive digital media. In Indonesian subjects, for example, regular students with good literacy skills can read entire narrative texts, while students with learning disabilities or special needs access the same stories through sequential images or audio recordings (Marlina, 2019).

This practice allows all learners to learn the same core concepts without compromising the standard of learning. Literature findings show that content differentiation in inclusive primary schools is able to lower learning frustration levels and significantly improve understanding of basic concepts. Content differentiation aims to ensure that every child gets equal learning opportunities according to their needs and abilities. Principles of Content Differentiation (Morgan, 2014; Herwina, 2021).

a. Learning Readiness Based

Learning readiness refers to the level of initial knowledge and ability of learners.

Children with high readiness can be given more challenging material, while children with low readiness need simpler and more gradual material.

b. Interest-Based

Learning materials are associated with students' interests in order to increase motivation and learning engagement.

c. Learning Profile-Based

The learning profile includes visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning styles. Content differentiation allows material to be presented in various forms according to the child's learning style (Gardner, 2011).

Content differentiation is an essential learning strategy in inclusive education. Through adjusting learning materials based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles, teachers can create fair, meaningful, and child-friendly learning. The implementation of content differentiation in PAUD and Elementary Schools is proven to support learning

engagement and optimal development of all students (Tomlinson, 2014; Sousa & Tomlinson, 2018).

Process Differentiation

Process differentiation in inclusive elementary schools is focused on how students process information during learning activities. Teachers apply a flexible grouping strategy by dynamically grouping students based on learning readiness and needs at that time. In Mathematics learning, for example, students are grouped into concrete manipulative groups, contextual problem-solving groups, and advanced challenge groups.

For students with special needs, the learning process is accompanied by visual assistance, repetition of instructions, and the use of flexible learning time. This approach is in line with the principles of the Zone of Proximal Development which emphasizes the importance of appropriate support so that students can achieve optimal development (Vygotsky, 1978).

Some of the key principles of process differentiation include:

1. Flexibility – teachers provide a variety of activities
2. Student-centred – not one method for all
3. Meaningful activities – always leading to the same learning objectives
4. Responsive to individual needs
5. Process Differentiation Strategy in the Inclusion Class

Some effective strategies are implemented:

1. Flexible Group
 - Groups can change according to learning objectives
 - Not labeling students smart or weak
2. Station-Based Learning Stations
 - Each station offers a different way of learning
 - Students move according to their abilities and interests
3. Scaffolding
 - Provide gradual assistance
 - Assistance is reduced as students become independent
4. Flexible Study Time
 - Certain students are given a longer time
 - Avoiding the stress that fuels frustration

Process differentiation is at the heart of equitable and inclusive learning. By adjusting the way students learn without compromising achievement standards, teachers can create classrooms that are friendly, adaptive, and meaningful for all students, including children with special needs (Bondie et al., 2019).

Product Differentiation

Product differentiation in inclusive elementary schools provides opportunities for students to demonstrate understanding through various forms of work. After learning a theme, students can choose the form of the final product such as posters, illustrated stories, three-dimensional models, simple presentations, or oral demonstrations.

The assessment was carried out using the same rubric with equivalent concept understanding indicators. Thus, even though the shape of the product is different, the fairness

of the judgment is maintained. This practice has been proven to increase students' confidence, especially for students with special needs who previously had difficulty demonstrating abilities through written tests. The Principle of Product Differentiation In order for product differentiation to be effective, teachers need to pay attention to the following principles: (Marlina, 2019; Herwina, 2021).

- Equality of purpose: learning objectives are the same, products can be different
- Flexibility: learners can choose the shape of the product
- Authentic: the product reflects the child's real understanding
- Inclusive: accessible to all children, including children

Based on processes and customized content Product differentiation is an important strategy in differentiated learning that allows students to show learning outcomes according to their potential and needs. Through the application of product differentiation, teachers not only assess learning outcomes, but also appreciate the process, uniqueness, and humanity of each child (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2018).

The Role of Continuous Assessment

In inclusive primary school practice, continuous assessment serves as the foundation for learning decision-making. Diagnostic assessments are carried out at the beginning of the semester to map students' academic readiness, social-emotional abilities, and special needs. This data is used by teachers to design precise and realistic differentiation (Tomlinson, 2014).

Formative assessments are carried out periodically through observations, simple reflection sheets, exit tickets, and student portfolios. The results of the formative assessments are used to adjust learning strategies, including regrouping students and adjusting the difficulty level of tasks. Thus, learning becomes adaptive and responsive to student development.

Implications for Inclusive Education and School Practice

Differentiated learning has significant implications for inclusive education practices, especially in early childhood education and basic education units. In the context of inclusive schools, the diversity of students is no longer seen as an obstacle, but as a potential that needs to be managed through the right pedagogical strategy.

For teachers, the application of differentiated learning encourages a shift in role from merely being material presenters to becoming designers of the learning experience. Teachers are required to conduct initial mapping of students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles, including children with special needs. This practice has been shown to increase teachers' professional empathy and reflective abilities in responding to dynamic learning needs (Faiz et al., 2022).

For students, differentiated learning creates a learning climate that is safe and respectful of differences. Children are no longer rigidly compared based solely on academic achievement but are valued based on their learning processes and efforts. This has a very positive impact on social-emotional development, self-confidence, and intrinsic motivation, especially in early childhood and for students with special needs (Bondie et al., 2019; Morgan, 2014).

At the school managerial level, the implementation of differentiated learning requires internal policy support, such as strengthening the teacher learning community, reducing

irrelevant administrative burdens, and providing diverse learning resources. School principals play a strategic role as learning leaders in building an inclusive and fair school culture.

In a broader context, differentiated learning contributes to the realization of social justice in education. Schools no longer function solely as a tool for academic selection, but as spaces for the development of each child's potential according to their individual characteristics.

Practical Implications for Teachers and Schools

Practically, differentiated learning can be implemented gradually in schools. Teachers do not have to differentiate all aspects of learning simultaneously. Differentiation can start with a single component, such as a learning product, and then expand to processes and content.

In inclusive schools and early childhood education, differentiation strategies can be realized through structured play activities, the use of multisensory media, and the flexibility of time and learning methods. This approach aligns with the principles of child-centered learning and respect for each developmental stage.

CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion above, it can be concluded that the Differentiated Learning Strategy is a key catalyst in the transformation of education toward learning equity. Differentiation is not just about distinguishing the level of difficulty of tasks, but about recognizing the dignity and uniqueness of each student. The three main pillars of content, processes, and products work synergistically to ensure that curriculum standards are accessible to all students without exception. The implementation of this strategy has proven effective in increasing student engagement, minimizing learning frustration, and creating an authentic inclusive climate. However, its success depends heavily on the teacher's proficiency in conducting formative assessments and the courage to abandon rigid classical teaching patterns.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that teachers gradually implement differentiated learning while continuously developing assessment skills through professional development and collaborative reflection. School principals should support implementation by strengthening teacher learning communities, reducing administrative burdens, providing learning resources, and facilitating inclusive education workshops. Policymakers need to integrate differentiation principles into teacher training programs and support reduced class sizes, teaching assistants, and flexible assessment systems. Future researchers should examine long-term impacts, conduct comparative studies across schools, and develop practical implementation tools. Higher education institutions must embed differentiation into teacher education curricula with an emphasis on practical experience in diverse classrooms. These collective efforts are expected to enable wider and more effective implementation of differentiated learning, ultimately contributing to learning equity and quality education for all students in alignment with inclusive education principles and the Independent Curriculum.

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