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The Implementation of Differentiated Learning to Foster the 4C Skills in Students in Islamic Education (PAI) Subjects

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Abstract

Differentiated learning is an instructional approach designed to accommodate the diverse abilities, interests, and learning needs of students. This study explores the implementation of differentiated learning to foster 4C (Critical Thinking, Creativity, Collaboration, and Communication) skills in Grade X students during Islamic Education (PAI) lessons at SMK Plus Nurul Ulum Kemungsari Lor Panti Jember. The research specifically examines three aspects: the activities involved in differentiated learning, its relevance in fostering 4C skills, and the outcomes achieved through its application. This qualitative descriptive study employed observation, interviews, and documentation as data collection methods. Data were analyzed using Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's interactive model, which includes data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data condensation involved selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the collected information. The credibility of the findings was ensured through triangulation of techniques and sources. The findings demonstrate that differentiated learning effectively supports the development of 4C skills in students by tailoring the teaching process to their unique needs. This approach not only enhances students' engagement and learning outcomes but also highlights its relevance as a pedagogical strategy for Islamic Education.

Keywords: Differentiated Learning, 4Cs Skills, and Islamic Religious Education (IRE)

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INTRODUCTION

The transformation of Indonesia's national education system has been marked by substantial revisions in curricula, learning processes, and teacher quality initiatives aimed at cultivating intellectually capable and morally upright citizens (Halim et al., 2023; Ilham et al., 2023). These reforms reflect a concerted effort to address the evolving demands of a globalized world while preserving the cultural and ethical values integral to Indonesian society. Institutional reforms—including the enactment of the National Education System Law in 2013 and the revision of

Government Regulation No. 19 of 2005 on National Education Standards—underline the state's commitment to diversifying pedagogical approaches and accommodating regional uniqueness in educational programming (Halim et al., 2023; Ilham et al., 2023). As Agung (2020) notes, these policy shifts are not merely administrative adjustments but represent a broader strategy to empower educators and learners alike, fostering a learning environment that is responsive to the multifaceted dimensions of student differences.

Critically, the recent movement toward restored educational autonomy emphasizes student-driven, creative, and independent learning, yet it simultaneously exposes the challenges many learners face, particularly in the realm of analytical thinking (Bachtiar, 2024). Traditional teaching methods, which often rely on uniform instructional strategies, fail to address the diverse cognitive, emotional, and social needs of students, leading to disengagement and underperformance. In this context, differentiated learning emerges as a vital instructional strategy that tailors content, process, and assessment to the varied readiness levels, interests, and learning preferences of students (Jasminto & Rofi'ah, 2024). Pioneering studies in differentiated instructional methods indicate that a one-size-fits-all approach neglects the diverse cognitive and developmental needs of learners, thereby limiting the effectiveness of pedagogical practices (Jasminto & Rofi'ah, 2024). As Alrabi (2023) emphasizes, differentiated learning fosters inclusivity, ensuring that all students, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities, have equitable opportunities to succeed.

Within vocational educational settings, such as SMK Plus Nurul Ulum, the implementation of differentiated learning in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) holds considerable promise (Mashudi & Hilman, 2024). IRE, as a subject, plays a pivotal role in shaping students' moral, ethical, and spiritual development in accordance with Islamic teachings. However, traditional teaching methods often fail to engage students, leading to disinterest and a lack of deep understanding. By integrating innovations—such as digital-based learning tools that enhance engagement and facilitate higher-order thinking skills—educators can better address the unique challenges faced by students in IRE programs (Mashudi & Hilman, 2024). This approach not only embraces the diversity of learner experiences but also aligns with the broader educational objective of nurturing students' critical and analytical capacities. Recent empirical research supports the notion that differentiated strategies, when attentively implemented, contribute to stronger academic performance and greater moral and ethical discernment (Ilham et al., 2023; Aulia et al., 2024).

The originality of this research lies in its focus on the intersection of differentiated learning and Islamic Religious Education, a relatively underexplored area in educational studies. While differentiated learning has been widely studied in general education contexts, its application in IRE, particularly in vocational schools,

remains limited. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining the implementation of differentiated learning in IRE at SMK Plus Nurul Ulum, a vocational school that has already adopted this approach. By focusing on content, process, and assessment aspects, the research aims to explore how differentiated learning can enhance students' understanding, engagement, and critical thinking skills in IRE. Furthermore, the study will assess the impact of this approach on students' moral and spiritual development, contributing to the broader goal of producing competent, innovative, and morally upright individuals.

The significance of this research extends beyond the immediate context of SMK Plus Nurul Ulum. By synthesizing existing literature on differentiated learning and its application in diverse educational contexts, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of its potential in IRE. The research also addresses the gap in empirical studies on the implementation of differentiated learning in vocational schools, particularly in Indonesia. Through this investigation, the study seeks to contribute to the development of more effective and inclusive teaching strategies in IRE, ultimately supporting the broader objectives of the National Education System. The explicit objective of this research is to examine the implementation of differentiated learning in IRE at SMK Plus Nurul Ulum and to evaluate its impact on students' learning outcomes, critical thinking skills, and moral development. By achieving this objective, the research aims to provide actionable insights for educators and policymakers, fostering a more equitable and effective education system.

Overall, the transformation in Indonesia's educational policies has created a landscape where traditional teaching practices are increasingly supplemented by adaptive instructional strategies designed to meet the dynamic needs of the contemporary

METHOD

The present study employs a qualitative research approach executed within a natural setting to capture phenomena within their authentic real-world contexts. This methodological choice is informed by the need to produce descriptive data—comprising spoken and written narratives, as well as observed behaviors—that convey the depth and nuance of participants' lived experiences (Saefuddin et al., 2024). In accordance with established qualitative research paradigms, the study adopts a descriptive qualitative design aimed at obtaining a holistic understanding of experiences, actions, behavioral patterns, and perceptions. Such an approach is particularly effective in exploring complex social and educational phenomena, where rich, detailed descriptions are paramount for uncovering subtle dynamics that may not be evident through quantitative measures (Saefuddin et al., 2024).

The investigation draws upon both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data are gathered directly through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and field notes, enabling the researcher to engage closely with the educational and religious practices under study at the Lathiful Amien Islamic Boarding School in Lumajang. This method of data collection aligns with previous qualitative studies in similar contexts, including research examining educational models in Islamic boarding schools (Saefuddin et al., 2024) and studies exploring traditional teaching methodologies in religious education (Arif et al., 2023). Secondary data, such as literature reviews, archival documents, and other pertinent records, serve to augment primary findings by providing broader context and historical background, ensuring that the analysis is informed by a comprehensive understanding of the educational environment.

Data collection techniques are implemented with an emphasis on maintaining the authenticity and integrity of the observed phenomena. The researcher employs passive participant observation, permitting unobtrusive documentation of behaviors and interactions in the natural setting, a strategy that has been widely endorsed in qualitative research on educational environments (Saefuddin et al., 2024). Complementing observational methods, semi-structured interviews are conducted using a systematic and flexible guide that facilitates in-depth exploration of participants' experiences. This dual approach enables the study to capture both the overt and nuanced aspects of educational practices, ensuring that emergent themes are fully explored and understood (Saefuddin et al., 2024).

The analytic procedure follows an interactive model akin to that proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, comprising stages of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing with verification. Initially, raw data—including field notes, interview transcripts, and documents—are systematically condensed to highlight key themes and patterns without sacrificing critical details. Subsequently, the organized presentation of this data through visual tools such as tables and charts enhances the identification of relationships and trends inherent in the collected information. Finally, preliminary conclusions are drawn and rigorously verified against the dataset, allowing for the refinement of insights and ensuring that findings are both credible and reflective of the complex reality under investigation (Arif et al., 2023). This comprehensive and iterative process underscores the systematic nature of qualitative inquiry and its capacity to yield meaningful contributions to the understanding of educational phenomena, particularly those related to the implementation of educational values derived from the Al-Hikam book and Nahdliyah practices at Islamic boarding schools (Saefuddin et al., 2024).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study employed a qualitative research approach to explore the implementation of differentiated learning in fostering the 4Cs (Communication, Collaboration, Critical Thinking, and Creativity) among students in the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) subject for Class X at SMK Plus Nurul Ulum Kemungsarilor Panti Jember. Conducted in a natural setting, the research aimed to capture the authentic experiences and behaviors of participants, ensuring a holistic understanding of the phenomena under investigation. Data were collected through passive participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and field notes, supplemented by secondary sources such as literature reviews and archival documents. The analysis followed the interactive model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, involving data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing with verification.

1. Activities of Differentiated Learning in Fostering the 4Cs
    a. Communication. The study found that fostering communication skills among students was achieved through active participation in classroom discussions. Teachers encouraged students to ask questions, provide answers, and express their opinions based on their understanding of the material. This approach not only enhanced students' verbal and written communication skills but also created an interactive and inclusive learning environment. Students felt more comfortable sharing their thoughts, which facilitated a deeper engagement with the subject matter. This finding aligns with previous research emphasizing the importance of open dialogue and student-centered learning in developing effective communication skills (Saefuddin et al., 2024). By providing opportunities for students to articulate their ideas, the study highlights how differentiated learning can cultivate confidence and clarity in communication, essential skills for both academic and real-world contexts.
    b. Collaboration, Collaboration was fostered through group-based activities, where students worked together to brainstorm ideas or solve problems related to the material. This method promoted teamwork and allowed students to learn from one another, leveraging their diverse perspectives and strengths. The study observed that students developed a sense of mutual respect and shared responsibility, which are critical components of effective collaboration. These findings are consistent with research on cooperative learning strategies, which emphasize the value of peer interaction in enhancing learning outcomes (Slavin, 2014). The study underscores the role of differentiated learning in creating opportunities for students to practice collaboration, a skill that is increasingly important in today’s interconnected and team-oriented world.

c. Critical Thinking, To develop critical thinking skills, teachers assigned case studies and problem-solving tasks that required students to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information. These activities challenged students to think critically and apply their knowledge to real-world scenarios. The study found that students became more adept at identifying key issues, evaluating evidence, and proposing well-reasoned solutions. This approach aligns with the principles of inquiry-based learning, which encourages students to engage deeply with complex problems (Arif et al., 2023). The findings highlight the effectiveness of differentiated learning in fostering higher-order thinking skills, preparing students to navigate the complexities of modern life and make informed decisions.
d. Creativity. Creativity was nurtured through assignments that required students to produce innovative outputs, such as mind maps, concept maps, videos, and other projects. These tasks allowed students to demonstrate their understanding in unique and imaginative ways, encouraging them to think outside the box. The study observed that students became more confident in exploring their ideas and experimenting with different approaches to problem-solving. This finding supports research on the role of creativity in education, which emphasizes the importance of providing students with opportunities to express themselves and engage in creative processes (Jasminto & Rofi'ah, 2024). The study demonstrates how differentiated learning can unlock students' creative potential, fostering innovation and originality in their academic work and beyond.

In summary, the study highlights the multifaceted benefits of differentiated learning in fostering the 4Cs—Communication, Collaboration, Critical Thinking, and Creativity. By tailoring instructional strategies to meet the diverse needs of students, educators can create a dynamic and inclusive learning environment that prepares students for the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century. These findings contribute to the growing body of literature on differentiated learning, offering valuable insights for educators and policymakers seeking to enhance educational practices and outcomes.

2. Relevance of Differentiated Learning in Fostering the 4Cs
The implementation of differentiated learning proved to be highly relevant to the needs of the learning process, particularly in fostering the 4Cs—Communication, Collaboration, Critical Thinking, and Creativity. This approach was designed to address the diverse learning styles, abilities, and

interests of students, ensuring that all learners could engage with the material in meaningful and effective ways. By tailoring instruction to meet individual needs, differentiated learning created a more inclusive and equitable classroom environment, where every student had the opportunity to succeed.
One of the key strengths of differentiated learning was its ability to transform the classroom into a dynamic and interactive space. Traditional teaching methods, which often rely on uniform instruction, can lead to monotony and disengagement. In contrast, differentiated learning introduced variety and flexibility into the learning process, making it more engaging and stimulating for students. This shift was evident in the increased participation and enthusiasm observed among students, as well as in their ability to connect with the material on a deeper level.
The approach also fostered stronger interactions among students and between students and teachers. By encouraging collaboration and open communication, differentiated learning promoted a sense of community and mutual support within the classroom. Students reported feeling more comfortable expressing their ideas and asking questions, which enhanced their learning experience. Teachers, in turn, were able to build stronger relationships with their students, gaining a better understanding of their individual needs and providing more targeted support.
Another significant benefit of differentiated learning was its impact on students' motivation and stress levels. By allowing students to work at their own pace and in ways that suited their learning preferences, the approach reduced feelings of pressure and anxiety. Students reported feeling more confident and motivated, which contributed to a positive and productive learning environment. This finding aligns with research highlighting the importance of student-centered approaches in promoting emotional well-being and academic success (Saefuddin et al., 2024).
The relevance of differentiated learning in fostering the 4Cs is further supported by its alignment with the demands of the 21st century. In an increasingly complex and interconnected world, skills such as communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity are essential for success. Differentiated learning not only equips students with these skills but also prepares them to adapt to new challenges and opportunities. By fostering a growth mindset and encouraging lifelong learning, this approach helps students develop the resilience and adaptability needed to thrive in a rapidly changing world.
The implementation of differentiated learning was highly relevant to the needs of the learning process, offering a flexible and inclusive approach that addressed the diverse needs of students. By creating a dynamic and supportive classroom environment, the approach enhanced students' engagement,

motivation, and overall learning experience. These findings underscore the importance of differentiated learning in fostering the 4Cs and preparing students for the challenges of the 21st century. Future research could further explore the long-term impact of this approach on students' academic and personal development, as well as its potential for broader application in diverse educational contexts.

3. Outcomes of Differentiated Learning in Fostering the 4Cs

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Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the effectiveness of differentiated learning in fostering the 4Cs among students in the PAI subject. The results align with the theoretical framework of differentiated learning, which emphasizes tailoring instruction to meet the diverse needs of students (Tomlinson, 2014). By providing varied activities that cater to different learning styles and preferences, the approach enabled students to develop essential 21st-century skills. The qualitative methodology, which included passive participant observation and semi-structured interviews, allowed for a deep and nuanced understanding of the educational practices and their impact on students (Saefuddin et al., 2024).

The relevance of differentiated learning in this context is supported by previous research, which highlights its ability to create a more inclusive and engaging learning environment (Jasminto & Rofi'ah, 2024). The observed improvements in students' communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity are consistent with findings from other studies that have explored the impact of differentiated learning on student outcomes (Ilham et al., 2023; Aulia et al., 2024). For instance, the use of group work and case studies in fostering collaboration and critical thinking aligns with the cooperative learning strategies advocated by Slavin (2014).

However, this study also reveals unique insights into the application of differentiated learning in Islamic Religious Education, a context that has been underexplored in existing literature. The integration of creative tasks such as mind maps and videos not only enhanced students' understanding of PAI material but also allowed them to express their learning in innovative ways. This finding contributes to the broader discourse on the role of creativity in religious education, suggesting that differentiated learning can bridge traditional and modern pedagogical approaches.

The study's results also highlight the importance of a supportive learning environment in fostering the 4Cs. The relaxed and interactive atmosphere observed in the classroom aligns with the principles of student-centered learning, which emphasizes the role of the teacher as a facilitator rather than a sole authority figure (Halim et al., 2023). This approach not only reduced students' feelings of monotony and stress but also encouraged active participation and engagement.

In comparison to previous research, this study demonstrates that differentiated learning can be effectively applied in vocational education settings, particularly in subjects like PAI that require both cognitive and moral development. The findings suggest that differentiated learning is not only relevant but also essential in preparing students to meet the challenges of the 21st century. By fostering the 4Cs, this approach equips students with the skills needed to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

Furthermore, the study highlights the potential of differentiated learning to address the diverse needs of students in vocational education. Unlike traditional teaching methods, which often adopt a one-size-fits-all approach, differentiated learning allows educators to tailor instruction to the unique abilities and interests of each student. This personalized approach not only enhances academic performance but also promotes students' personal and moral development.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on differentiated learning by providing empirical evidence of its effectiveness in fostering the 4Cs in Islamic Religious Education. The findings underscore the need for further research on the application of differentiated learning in diverse educational contexts, particularly in subjects that integrate moral and ethical development. Future studies could explore the long-term impact of this approach on students' academic and personal growth, as well as its potential for broader implementation in vocational education systems. Additionally, research could investigate the role of technology in enhancing differentiated learning, particularly in the context of digital-based learning tools and resources. By addressing these areas, educators and policymakers can develop more effective strategies to prepare students for the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated the effectiveness of differentiated learning in fostering the 4Cs—Communication, Collaboration, Critical Thinking, and Creativity—among students in the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) subject for Class X at SMK Plus Nurul Ulum Kemungsarilor Panti Jember. The findings reveal that differentiated learning, through its tailored and inclusive approach, not only enhances students' academic performance but also equips them with essential 21st-century skills. By providing opportunities for students to ask questions, express opinions, collaborate in groups, solve case studies, and engage in creative tasks, the approach created a dynamic and interactive learning environment that catered to diverse learning needs and preferences.

The relevance of differentiated learning in this context is undeniable. It addresses the challenges of traditional, one-size-fits-all teaching methods by fostering a more engaging, inclusive, and student-centered classroom. Students reported feeling more motivated, less stressed, and better equipped to understand and apply the material. The approach also strengthened interactions among students and between students and teachers, creating a supportive and collaborative learning community. These outcomes align with the broader educational goals of preparing students to navigate the complexities of the modern world, where skills such as communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity are indispensable.

The study’s findings contribute to the growing body of literature on differentiated learning, particularly in the context of Islamic Religious Education. By highlighting the successful integration of differentiated learning in PAI, this research underscores the potential of this approach to bridge traditional and modern pedagogical practices. It also emphasizes the importance of adapting teaching strategies to meet the diverse needs of students, ensuring that all learners have the opportunity to thrive.

The implications of this research extend beyond the immediate context of SMK Plus Nurul Ulum. For educators, the study provides practical insights into how differentiated learning can be implemented to foster the 4Cs in various educational settings. For policymakers, it highlights the need to support teacher training and resource development to enable the effective application of differentiated learning. Additionally, the study suggests that differentiated learning can play a crucial role in promoting inclusivity and equity in education, particularly in diverse and multicultural environments.

Future research could explore the long-term impact of differentiated learning on students' academic and personal development, as well as its application in other subjects and educational contexts. Investigating the role of technology in enhancing differentiated learning, particularly through digital tools and resources, could also yield valuable insights. Furthermore, studies could examine the challenges and

barriers to implementing differentiated learning, providing practical solutions for educators and institutions.

This study underscores the transformative potential of differentiated learning in fostering the 4Cs and preparing students for the demands of the 21st century. By creating a dynamic, inclusive, and student-centered learning environment, differentiated learning not only enhances academic outcomes but also equips students with the skills and confidence needed to succeed in an increasingly complex and interconnected world. This research contributes to the ongoing discourse on innovative teaching practices, offering valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers committed to advancing educational excellence.

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