


Differentiated Learning in the Merdeka Curriculum: A Literature Review on School Practices

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* Darius AP, Yasri Tandi Tumonglo, Faridah Husnatul Mar'ah, Hari R^{abcd} 

¹²³⁴Universitas Islam Syekh Yusuf Tanggerang, Indonesia

Corresponding Author: 2407010140@students.unis.ac.id

A B S T R A C T

This literature review explores the implementation of differentiated instruction within the context of Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum. As a major reform in the national education system, the Merdeka Curriculum promotes student-centered learning, flexibility, and autonomy in teaching. Differentiated instruction aligns closely with these goals by responding to learners' diverse needs, interests, and readiness levels. The review synthesizes findings from national and international research to evaluate how differentiation is conceptualized, practiced, and challenged in real school settings. Key findings reveal that differentiated learning enhances student engagement, supports inclusive education, and improves academic outcomes when implemented effectively. However, it also uncovers several barriers, such as limited teacher preparedness, lack of professional development, and insufficient classroom resources. Many educators express a positive attitude toward differentiation but often struggle with its practical application due to workload, large class sizes, and curriculum constraints. The review emphasizes the need for systemic support, ongoing training, and reflective practices to ensure successful implementation. It also highlights the importance of policy alignment and school-level collaboration to cultivate a culture of differentiation. In conclusion, differentiated instruction is not just a pedagogical choice but a fundamental element in realizing the vision of Merdeka Curriculum – learning that is equitable, contextual, and meaningful for every student.

Keyword: *Differentiated Instruction, Merdeka Curriculum, Inclusive Education*

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INTRODUCTION

Differentiated learning is not a new concept in educational discourse. Carol Ann Tomlinson, one of its main proponents, defines it as a proactive approach to teaching that adjusts curriculum and instruction to maximize the learning capacity of all students (Tomlinson, 2014). To strengthen its credibility, it is essential to include the number or range of studies reviewed on differentiated instruction. Furthermore, this concept should be defined more precisely – for instance, by referring to Tomlinson's framework, which highlights key elements such as content, process, product, and learning environment tailored to students' diverse needs. In the Indonesian context, this pedagogical model is especially relevant given the diversity of students across regions, cultures, and socio-economic backgrounds. The Merdeka Curriculum acknowledges these variations and calls for instructional differentiation as a response.

The Merdeka Curriculum was designed to address challenges in the previous curriculum, such as rigidity, overemphasis on content delivery, and lack of student autonomy. It introduces a framework that encourages educators to adapt to students' unique characteristics and promote independent thinking (Riyanto & Murtiningsih, 2023). Within this framework, differentiated instruction emerges as a promising strategy to fulfill the curriculum's goals. However, despite its theoretical appeal, practical implementation often varies across schools.

Differentiated learning is not a new concept in educational discourse. Carol Ann Tomlinson, one of its main proponents, defines it as a proactive approach to teaching that adjusts curriculum and instruction to maximize the learning capacity of all students (Tomlinson, 2014). In the Indonesian context, this pedagogical model is especially relevant given the diversity of students across regions, cultures, and socio-economic backgrounds. The Merdeka Curriculum acknowledges these variations and calls for instructional differentiation as a response.

In practice, differentiated learning may take various forms, including modifications in content, process, product, or learning environment (Hall, Strangman, & Meyer, 2011). For example, students might be offered different reading materials based on their literacy levels or asked to complete projects that reflect their interests. Such practices are intended to engage learners more deeply and promote equity in learning opportunities. However, the success of such practices depends heavily on teacher preparedness and school support systems.

The need for differentiated instruction is further heightened by the learning losses experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Ministry of Education noted significant gaps in student achievement, particularly among marginalized groups (Kemdikbudristek, 2022). Consequently, the Merdeka Curriculum, which emerged in the post-pandemic era, emphasizes instructional flexibility, autonomy, and responsiveness to individual student needs—principles central to differentiated learning.

Nevertheless, implementing differentiated instruction within the Merdeka Curriculum presents multiple challenges. Research indicates that many teachers struggle to design differentiated lesson plans due to limited training and resources (Sari & Widodo, 2023). Others cite difficulties in managing classrooms with wide disparities in student ability. These barriers raise important questions about the practicality of differentiation in Indonesia's diverse school contexts and the extent to which it can be scaled.

Several studies have begun to document both the promises and limitations of differentiated learning in the context of the Merdeka Curriculum. For instance, Pratiwi et al. (2023) found that while differentiated strategies improved student engagement, their application remained superficial in many cases. Teachers often differentiated only at the level of classroom grouping or material selection, without deeper pedagogical adjustments. This suggests a gap between conceptual understanding and practical execution.

Another critical issue involves teacher beliefs and mindsets. Research shows that successful implementation of differentiation depends not only on skills but also on teachers' commitment to inclusivity and growth-oriented teaching (Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019). In Indonesia, this may require a shift in pedagogical culture, especially in schools where teacher-centered methods are still dominant. The Merdeka Curriculum thus calls for a broader professional development effort.

Additionally, differentiated instruction requires substantial planning and assessment efforts. Teachers must continuously assess student readiness, preferences, and progress to inform instructional decisions (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013). In the Merdeka Curriculum, the role of formative assessment is central, as it provides the data necessary for differentiation. However, this necessitates that teachers possess not only assessment literacy but also the time and support to act on data meaningfully.

Technology is often suggested as a solution to facilitate differentiated learning. Digital platforms can provide adaptive content, track student progress, and enable personalized learning pathways (Chien et al., 2020). In Indonesia, some schools have adopted platforms like Merdeka Mengajar to support differentiated instruction. Yet, disparities in digital access and infrastructure still pose considerable limitations, particularly in remote or under-resourced areas.

In response to these realities, the Ministry of Education has initiated various training programs and communities of practice to build teacher capacity for differentiation (Kemdikbudristek, 2023). These programs aim to foster collaboration and reflective practice among educators. However, the effectiveness of such initiatives depends on sustained support, school leadership, and the alignment of assessment, curriculum, and instruction.

From a theoretical perspective, differentiated instruction is grounded in constructivist and sociocultural learning theories. Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) supports the idea of scaffolding instruction based on students' current abilities and potential (Vygotsky, 1978). Similarly, Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences emphasizes the need to acknowledge varied student strengths, further legitimizing differentiated approaches within the Merdeka framework.

This literature review seeks to synthesize existing research on the practice of differentiated learning within the Merdeka Curriculum. It explores empirical studies, policy documents, and theoretical frameworks that inform current understandings. The goal is to identify key themes, gaps, and implications that can inform teacher practice, school leadership, and future research.

By reviewing current literature, this study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on inclusive and student-centered education in Indonesia. It highlights both the potential of differentiated learning to enhance student outcomes and the systemic challenges that must be addressed. In doing so, it provides a foundation for policy refinement and professional development efforts under the Merdeka Curriculum.

In sum, differentiated learning represents a promising yet complex pedagogical approach within the Merdeka Curriculum. Its successful implementation hinges on a convergence of factors including teacher competence, school infrastructure, policy support, and cultural readiness. A thorough review of the literature can help illuminate pathways forward and guide practical efforts to realize the transformative vision of Merdeka Belajar.

METHOD

This literature review explicitly employs a structured qualitative synthesis approach to examine the implementation of differentiated instruction within the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia. The goal is to synthesize current knowledge, identify recurring themes, and analyze practical challenges and opportunities in instructional differentiation.

The search was conducted using a combination of databases including Google Scholar, ERIC, ScienceDirect, ResearchGate, and Indonesia's national scientific journal portal (SINTA). Policy documents from the Ministry of Education and Culture (Kemdikbudristek), such as technical guidelines and training materials related to the Merdeka Curriculum, were also included. The keywords used in the search included: "*differentiated instruction*", "*Merdeka Curriculum*", "*student-centered learning*", "*inclusive education*", and their equivalents in Bahasa Indonesia. Studies were refined using Boolean operators (AND, OR) and selected based on the following inclusion criteria: publications from 2018–2024 to ensure relevance to the Merdeka Curriculum implementation timeline, written in English or Bahasa Indonesia, and consisting of peer-reviewed articles, government publications, books, or institutional reports with an explicit focus on differentiated instruction or its application in Indonesian education. Excluded studies included opinion pieces, blogs, or editorials, those focusing on outdated curricula or irrelevant educational contexts, and those unavailable in full-text format.

A total of 30 studies met the criteria and were included in the review. Of these, 12 were qualitative studies, 10 quantitative, and 8 used mixed-methods. The literature comprises both international theoretical works (e.g., Tomlinson, Vygotsky) and empirical studies conducted in Indonesian schools.

The data were analyzed using thematic synthesis, a method that involves coding data into themes and sub-themes across multiple sources. Each study was carefully read, and key information was extracted relating to instructional practices, teacher competencies, assessment methods, and policy frameworks. The themes were grouped into broader categories to compare findings across contexts. This process was guided by a modified framework derived from PRISMA principles, although not all elements of the PRISMA checklist were applied given the qualitative nature of this review.

To enhance validity, the thematic interpretations were cross-checked by multiple reviewers. Triangulation was used by comparing findings across qualitative and quantitative

sources. By combining global theoretical perspectives with localized empirical data, the review offers a balanced and context-sensitive understanding of differentiated instruction within Indonesia's evolving educational landscape.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, findings from the literature review are presented and discussed under four major thematic areas: (1) conceptual understanding of differentiated instruction among teachers, (2) instructional strategies and classroom implementation, (3) challenges and barriers to effective differentiation, and (4) institutional and policy-level support. These themes emerged consistently across national and international sources, highlighting both the strengths and limitations of differentiated instruction under the Merdeka Curriculum. The discussion integrates theoretical insights and empirical evidence to contextualize the application of differentiation in Indonesian schools. It also examines how differentiated practices align with the broader goals of student-centered and inclusive education. The findings reveal a dynamic interplay between teacher agency, systemic support, and classroom realities.

Teachers' Understanding of Differentiated Instruction

A significant number of studies highlight that many Indonesian teachers have a limited conceptual grasp of differentiated instruction (Sari & Widodo, 2023). While most educators support the principle of meeting students' diverse needs, their understanding often remains surface-level. They may confuse differentiation with simple variation in teaching methods, rather than a deliberate and data-informed strategy. This limited conceptualization affects the depth and consistency of implementation. Without a solid foundation, differentiation tends to be mechanical rather than responsive.

Tomlinson (2014) emphasizes that differentiated instruction must be proactive, flexible, and rooted in ongoing assessment. However, many educators in the reviewed studies interpret it merely as grouping students or assigning easier tasks to slower learners. This misunderstanding undermines the inclusive intent of differentiation. Teachers may unintentionally reinforce fixed-ability thinking, rather than promoting growth for all students. This trend was especially evident in rural or under-resourced schools.

The Merdeka Curriculum encourages teachers to exercise autonomy in designing learning experiences, yet autonomy without deep understanding can lead to fragmented practices. Pratiwi et al. (2023) noted that while teachers supported the "freedom to teach" principle, they lacked training on how to adapt their instruction meaningfully. As a result, lesson plans labeled as "differentiated" often did not reflect real pedagogical adjustments. This gap points to the need for capacity building.

Furthermore, the literature suggests that pre-service teacher education does not consistently emphasize differentiation. Smale-Jacobse et al. (2019) argue that teacher beliefs and competencies about differentiation are largely shaped during training. In Indonesia, universities may touch on inclusive pedagogy, but not always in practical or context-specific ways. Consequently, novice teachers enter classrooms with abstract knowledge, which is hard to apply in complex classroom settings.

Understanding differentiation also involves grasping students' readiness, interest, and learning profiles. Many teachers find this aspect challenging, as it requires regular formative assessment and reflection. Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (1978) supports the idea that instruction should meet students at the edge of their competencies. However, reviewed studies found that few teachers systematically gather or use this kind of data.

In schools where professional development is prioritized, teacher understanding tends to be stronger. Kemdikbudristek (2023) launched several self-paced courses on differentiated instruction through the "Merdeka Mengajar" platform. However, the literature shows mixed results in uptake and completion. While the platform is accessible, teachers often report time constraints or lack of motivation to engage deeply with the content.

Another issue concerns the language and framing of differentiation. Teachers sometimes view it as a Western concept incompatible with local culture or classroom norms. This perception limits experimentation and adaptation. However, studies also reveal that when differentiation is framed as “adapting to students’ needs,” teachers are more open to the idea (Riyanto & Murtiningsih, 2023). Cultural alignment therefore plays a role in acceptance.

Collaborative learning communities are shown to enhance teachers’ conceptual growth. Pratiwi et al. (2023) highlight how peer mentoring and reflective practice help clarify misconceptions. In schools that foster collaboration, differentiation becomes a shared professional goal, not an individual burden. This underscores the importance of a supportive teaching culture in schools.

Overall, the literature indicates that deep understanding of differentiated instruction remains uneven across schools and regions. It is strongest where professional development is ongoing, leadership is supportive, and teachers have time to reflect on their practices. Conversely, in many public schools, differentiation is treated as an added requirement rather than an integrated strategy.

Thus, improving conceptual understanding is foundational to the success of the Merdeka Curriculum. Without it, differentiated instruction risks becoming symbolic rather than transformational. Professional learning communities, clear guidance, and culturally grounded training materials are essential to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Classroom Strategies and Implementation Practices

Differentiated instruction in classrooms under the Merdeka Curriculum manifests through various strategies, though their depth and effectiveness differ. The most common methods involve grouping students by ability, offering choice in assignments, or using tiered tasks (Pratiwi et al., 2023). While these are essential elements, many implementations remain superficial. Teachers often focus on modifying content but neglect differentiation in process and product. This partial adoption limits the holistic benefits of differentiation.

Tomlinson (2014) suggests that effective differentiation requires balancing multiple dimensions: content, process, product, and learning environment. However, studies show that most Indonesian teachers focus primarily on content-based differentiation—adjusting difficulty levels or using varied resources. Process differentiation, such as varied instructional methods or pacing, is less commonly used, partly due to limited training and rigid school schedules.

One promising strategy observed in some schools is the use of learning menus or choice boards, which allow students to choose from different activities based on their interests. This promotes student agency and motivation (Hall et al., 2011). Teachers in inclusive schools also use flexible grouping, where students rotate roles and collaborate across readiness levels. These practices align with the Merdeka Curriculum’s emphasis on active and independent learning.

Another example is scaffolded instruction, where teachers provide varying levels of support based on students’ needs. In one study, high-performing teachers used graphic organizers, guided questioning, and peer tutoring to support lower-performing students while encouraging autonomy among advanced learners (Sari & Widodo, 2023). These strategies reflect a deep understanding of learner variability and adaptive teaching.

Technology has also been used to implement differentiated instruction. Platforms such as “Merdeka Mengajar” and “Google Classroom” allow teachers to assign differentiated tasks and provide individualized feedback. Chien et al. (2020) found that digital tools help manage differentiation more efficiently, especially in large classrooms. However, access to digital devices and internet connectivity remains a challenge in many rural areas.

Some teachers develop differentiated assessment practices by offering multiple ways for students to demonstrate their learning. For example, students may choose between creating a poster, writing a report, or giving an oral presentation. This aligns with Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences and promotes inclusivity (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013). Yet, such practices are still rare and often hindered by standardized testing pressures.

Classroom observations reported by Pratiwi et al. (2023) reveal that differentiated instruction is more effectively applied in private schools or schools with strong leadership support. In contrast, public schools often struggle with large class sizes and lack of planning time, which restrict implementation. This disparity highlights the systemic inequalities that affect instructional quality.

The role of lesson planning is also critical. Teachers who engage in collaborative planning are more likely to design differentiated tasks. Riyanto and Murtiningsih (2023) observed that when teachers work together in school-based training or MGMP (teacher working groups), they share strategies and refine their approaches. However, not all schools have a culture of collaboration or time allocated for it.

Differentiated strategies are most effective when they are aligned with ongoing formative assessment. Yet, many teachers do not regularly collect or use student data to inform instruction (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013). In some cases, differentiation is applied randomly or based on intuition rather than evidence. This weakens its impact and fails to address learners' actual needs.

In conclusion, while differentiated instruction strategies are being introduced in schools under the Merdeka Curriculum, their implementation remains inconsistent. Effective practices exist, especially in supportive environments, but widespread adoption requires structured training, time for collaboration, and assessment literacy. Aligning differentiation with student data and ensuring systemic support will enhance its effectiveness in everyday classroom practice.

Challenges and Barriers to Effective Differentiation

Despite the strong theoretical foundation of differentiated instruction, its practical implementation within the Merdeka Curriculum faces numerous systemic and classroom-level challenges. One of the most frequently cited obstacles is large class size, which limits the teacher's ability to monitor individual progress and tailor instruction (Sari & Widodo, 2023). In classrooms with 30 to 40 students, it becomes difficult to group students effectively, offer personalized feedback, or design varied learning pathways.

Another persistent challenge is limited teacher training and professional development. While the Ministry of Education has provided self-paced courses on platforms like "Merdeka Mengajar," many teachers lack time, motivation, or digital skills to fully engage with them (Kemdikbudristek, 2023). As a result, teachers often attempt differentiation without a deep understanding of the methodology or without support for applying it in practice.

Time constraints also hamper differentiated instruction. Teachers already struggle to complete syllabus coverage, grade assignments, and manage administrative tasks. Planning differentiated lessons requires additional time and preparation, including designing tiered activities, collecting student data, and adjusting assessment strategies. Without workload reduction or structured planning time, differentiation becomes an unsustainable expectation. Material and resource limitations further complicate the process. Many schools, particularly in rural or underfunded areas, lack the resources needed to support varied instructional strategies. For example, there may be insufficient textbooks at different levels, inadequate access to technology, or limited physical space for flexible grouping (Pratiwi et al., 2023). These infrastructural gaps constrain the options available to teachers.

Some teachers express resistance based on pedagogical beliefs. They may view differentiation as extra work or perceive it as unfair to treat students differently. Others hold fixed beliefs about ability levels and fear that differentiating tasks could lead to reduced expectations for low-performing students (Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019). Changing these mindsets requires a cultural shift toward growth-oriented and inclusive teaching.

Assessment culture also presents a major barrier. In many Indonesian schools, emphasis is still placed on standardized testing and uniform assessment criteria, which contradicts the principles of differentiation. Teachers often feel pressure to "teach to the test," leaving little room for personalized instruction. Moreover, limited assessment literacy hampers their ability to use formative data to drive differentiated planning (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013).

Leadership and school culture significantly influence whether differentiated instruction is implemented effectively. Schools with strong instructional leadership are more likely to provide support structures, allocate planning time, and encourage experimentation. Conversely, schools with rigid bureaucratic cultures or unsupportive principals may hinder teachers' efforts to adopt differentiated approaches (Riyanto & Murtiningsih, 2023).

The lack of peer collaboration also limits differentiation efforts. Teachers working in isolation are less likely to sustain innovative practices or overcome implementation challenges. Without professional learning communities (PLCs) or mentoring structures, individual teachers may feel overwhelmed and abandon differentiated strategies. Research highlights that shared planning and peer observation are critical enablers of effective differentiation (Hall et al., 2011).

Furthermore, digital divides exacerbate inequality in differentiated instruction. While some urban schools use technology to individualize content and feedback, many rural schools lack reliable internet or devices. This digital disparity hinders the scalability of technology-supported differentiation, reinforcing educational inequality within the Merdeka framework (Chien et al., 2020).

In summary, while differentiated instruction holds promise for inclusive and personalized learning, its implementation under the Merdeka Curriculum is constrained by practical, structural, and cultural challenges. Addressing these barriers requires systemic reforms, including workload adjustments, stronger leadership, equity in resources, and sustained professional development that is responsive to local contexts.

The Role of Teachers in Facilitating Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated learning cannot be successfully implemented without the active, skilled, and adaptive role of teachers. The Merdeka Curriculum positions teachers as key agents of change who must adjust instructional strategies based on learners' readiness, interest, and learning profiles (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). Therefore, this section explores various roles that teachers must adopt, including instructional designers, facilitators, and reflective practitioners. Literature shows that teacher readiness and professional development are pivotal for effective differentiation. In addition, school support systems and policy frameworks must enable teachers to perform these roles sustainably. This part synthesizes findings from multiple studies to articulate how teacher roles evolve within the Merdeka Curriculum framework.

Teachers serve as instructional designers when implementing differentiated learning. They are expected to analyze the needs of students through diagnostics and learning assessments before planning lessons. According to Tomlinson (2017), this design process involves selecting content, processes, and products that align with student profiles. In the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, teachers use formative assessments and student portfolios to identify variations in learning styles and abilities (Rahmah, 2023). This proactive design empowers students and supports self-directed learning. Moreover, the ability to scaffold instruction based on these findings is crucial to ensure inclusivity and equity.

As facilitators, teachers must create learning environments that encourage exploration and autonomy. This is particularly emphasized in the Merdeka Curriculum's focus on student-centered learning. Hapsari (2022) explains that facilitation goes beyond delivering content—it involves guiding learners to engage in inquiry, collaboration, and problem-solving. The teacher's role shifts from authoritative knowledge holders to collaborative learning partners. This transition requires a strong foundation in pedagogy and trust in students' capacity to learn independently. Teachers also need to foster psychological safety to accommodate diverse opinions and perspectives within the classroom.

Reflective teaching is another important aspect of differentiated instruction. Teachers must continuously evaluate their methods and adapt based on feedback and learning outcomes. According to Widodo and Musthafa (2021), reflective practice includes reviewing lesson effectiveness, identifying student engagement levels, and modifying instruction accordingly. In the Merdeka Curriculum, reflection is integral not only to teaching but also to the overall learning ecosystem. It empowers teachers to remain responsive to emerging

classroom dynamics. Moreover, reflective habits promote professional growth and resilience in facing instructional challenges.

Teacher professional development (TPD) plays a significant role in supporting the differentiated instruction model. The literature indicates that many teachers still lack adequate training in differentiated pedagogy (Fadillah, 2022). Continuous workshops, peer learning communities, and mentoring programs are essential to build competency. Furthermore, training must be contextualized to the needs of each educational setting. The government's Independent Teaching Platform (*Platform Merdeka Mengajar*) serves as a resourceful digital hub, although its usage is still under-optimized in many schools. Systematic capacity-building efforts are needed to close this gap.

Another critical factor is administrative and institutional support. School principals and supervisors must provide space for innovation and experimentation in classrooms. Based on findings from Arifin (2023), schools with strong leadership tend to have better differentiated learning practices. Teachers need time for lesson planning, collaborative learning, and peer observation. Without support structures, the burden of individualizing learning may become overwhelming. Additionally, school culture must promote shared responsibility for inclusive and equitable learning outcomes.

Technology integration offers both challenges and opportunities for differentiated teaching. Digital tools can aid in content variation and learning pathway customization. Tools like Google Classroom, Quizziz, and LMS systems enable teachers to assign different materials to different learners. However, not all teachers are digitally literate or equipped to utilize such tools optimally (Putri, 2022). Professional development programs must include digital pedagogy to ensure teachers are not only using tools but doing so meaningfully in line with student needs.

Teachers must also manage classroom diversity sensitively. Cultural backgrounds, learning disabilities, and socio-economic disparities require thoughtful instructional planning. The Merdeka Curriculum encourages teachers to promote inclusivity through differentiated tasks and assessments. Literature suggests that awareness and empathy are critical competencies for teachers in multicultural classrooms (Sari & Utami, 2021). Moreover, differentiation should not lead to labeling or stereotyping students, which could hinder their motivation and self-esteem.

Collaboration among teachers enhances the implementation of differentiation. Team teaching, lesson study, and curriculum co-design allow educators to share insights and strategies. According to Nasution (2023), schools that encourage teacher collaboration show better adaptation to curriculum innovation. Collaboration also reduces teacher isolation and increases motivation to experiment with differentiated practices. This community-based approach aligns well with the spirit of "Merdeka Belajar," emphasizing freedom within shared responsibility.

Teachers must balance differentiation with curriculum targets and assessment demands. A common criticism is that too much differentiation may compromise standardized outcomes. However, differentiated instruction in the Merdeka Curriculum is not meant to replace standards but to help all students reach them through varied pathways (Tomlinson, 2017). Teachers should therefore align their differentiated plans with essential learning objectives. Ongoing monitoring and formative assessments ensure that differentiation remains purposeful and accountable.

In conclusion, the role of the teacher is central to the success of differentiated learning in the Merdeka Curriculum. The literature reviewed underscores the need for adaptive pedagogy, reflective practice, professional training, and institutional support. Teachers who embrace these roles are better positioned to create responsive and equitable learning environments. Future studies may focus on how teacher training models and policy frameworks can further empower educators to sustain differentiation practices across diverse educational contexts.

CONCLUSIONS

The differentiated instruction approach within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum demonstrates a paradigm shift in Indonesian education, emphasizing student-centered learning and the importance of addressing individual differences. The literature reviewed confirms that differentiation is not merely a strategy but a philosophical stance toward inclusive, equitable education. By adapting learning content, process, and products based on student readiness, interests, and learning profiles, differentiated learning becomes a vital instrument to actualize the goals of the Merdeka Curriculum. However, the implementation of differentiated instruction in schools still faces significant challenges. Many teachers struggle to balance curriculum demands with the complexity of differentiating in diverse classrooms. Moreover, the lack of training and limited understanding of how to apply differentiation effectively hinder its success. While the policy supports teacher autonomy, insufficient systemic support and infrastructure have constrained full-scale adoption. Despite these challenges, the findings suggest that when properly supported with professional development and reflective practices, differentiated instruction can transform classroom dynamics and foster more inclusive and meaningful learning experiences. The literature indicates that students in differentiated classrooms are more engaged and better able to achieve learning goals aligned with their own potential and pace. This supports the vision of the Merdeka Curriculum to promote learning freedom and competency-based education. Future research should continue exploring the effectiveness of differentiated instruction across various educational contexts, especially in rural and under-resourced schools. Policymakers must also prioritize teacher capacity-building, resource allocation, and contextual adaptation to ensure that differentiation is not only idealized but also practical. Ultimately, the successful integration of differentiated instruction in the Merdeka Curriculum will rely on a collaborative effort between educators, institutions, and government stakeholders.

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