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Analysis of Teacher Readiness and Adaptation Strategies in the Implementation of Differentiated Learning in PAI Subjects at Junior High School

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ABSTRACT
The implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* encourages student-centered differentiated learning, yet classroom realities frequently face time constraints and student heterogeneity. This study aims to analyze the preparedness, obstacles, and strategies of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers in implementing differentiated instruction at SMP Negeri 4 Camplong. A descriptive qualitative method with a case study design was employed, involving the principal, vice principal for curriculum, vice principal for student affairs, the IRE teacher, and six seventh-grade students through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis. Findings indicate that teacher preparedness is reflected in developing one-semester teaching modules, conducting initial mapping through *Juz Amma* recitation habits and question-and-answer sessions, forming heterogeneous four-student groups (peer tutoring), using quizzes, applying a humanistic emotional approach, and conducting proportional assessments, despite lacking specialized training on differentiation. These strategies serve as adaptations to local conditions rather than replacements for all principles of differentiated instruction and help sustain student engagement in class. In conclusion, teacher creativity and autonomy help maintain meaningful learning within this case context, though the findings are not generalized to all schools due to being limited to a single case study site.

1. INTRODUCTION

The dynamics of national education today are colored by structural and cultural transformations through the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, a policy that demands a shift in the learning paradigm from a teacher-centered orientation to a student-centered approach (N. Fauziah et al., 2025). This curriculum reform is designed as a response to the challenges of learning recovery while also serving as an instrument to accommodate the diversity of characteristics, interests, learning styles, and cognitive levels of students in the classroom (Viqri et al., 2024). Through this framework, educators are encouraged to abandon uniform conventional teaching patterns and shift toward flexible, contextual learning methods that continuously optimize the unique potential of each student (Akhmadi, 2023; Alimuddin, 2023). Nevertheless, the translation of this macro paradigm often encounters operational complexities at the educational unit level, particularly in the subject of Islamic Religious Education (PAI), which includes multidimensional material covering creed, ethics, sharia, and the history of Islamic civilization (Viqri et al., 2024). Ideally, the implementation of differentiated learning requires layered pedagogical and administrative readiness from educators, ranging from the ability to design diagnostic assessments, develop adaptive teaching modules, to executing differentiation of content, process, and product to bridge the gaps in students' abilities (Naibaho, 2023; Rahmadayanti &

Hartoyo, 2022). In practice, these theoretical demands often intersect with structural limitations in the field, such as the allocation of three lesson hours (3 JP) per week, which restricts teachers' ability to explore all stages of differentiation ideally in each face-to-face meeting (Astria & Kusuma, 2023). These measurable empirical conditions were identified through a preliminary study (initial classroom observations and pre-research interviews with PAI teachers and the deputy principal for curriculum) at SMP Negeri 4 Camplong, which has fully implemented the Merdeka Curriculum administratively. The results of the initial observations and interviews indicate three main indicators in the field: first, there is a significant gap in basic Quranic reading and writing skills (BTQ) among seventh-grade students within a single learning group; second, PAI teachers have not received guidance or specific technical training on developing differentiated learning tools based on the characteristics of PAI material; and third, the limited allocation of 3 JP per week leads teachers to choose pragmatic steps such as using standard textbooks, making simple modifications to available teaching modules, and standardizing final assessment instruments. These initial findings indicate that the lack of pure differentiation model implementation in that class is not a form of policy neglect, but rather an operational adjustment to the resource limitations in the local school environment.

In the realm of academic literature, several previous studies have examined the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and differentiated learning from various perspectives. Mukhlis (2026) explores the issues while reconstructing adaptive pedagogical strategies in PAI learning based on the Merdeka Curriculum at the elementary school level (Mukhlis, 2026). Meanwhile, Sitorus (2025) conceptually maps the concepts, challenges, and opportunities of differentiated learning through a literature review (Sitorus, 2025). Meanwhile, Ahmad et al. (2024) analyze the technical constraints in the preparation of teaching modules for mathematics subjects at the madrasah Aliyah level (Ahmad et al., 2024). Although those studies provide valuable theoretical and empirical foundations, there is a fundamental difference in focus with my research. Based on the urgency of the issue, this research is crucial to fill the academic gap regarding how the pedagogical readiness and adaptation strategies of PAI teachers are contextualized when the theoretical framework of the Merdeka Curriculum cannot be ideally executed at the junior high school level. The novelty of this research lies in revealing the forms and pragmatic strategies employed by PAI teachers at SMP Negeri 4 Camplong, ranging from the use of interactive quizzes to the optimization of peer tutoring strategies through heterogeneous study groups, in navigating the void of differentiated learning without sacrificing the essence of achieving religious learning objectives. Through an in-depth mapping of this case, this article is expected to provide significant theoretical contributions to curriculum policy evaluation while also offering a more realistic and grounded practical adaptation model for educators in the field.

2. METHODS

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study design to deeply explore the dynamics of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, pedagogical readiness, and local adaptation strategies of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers (Poltak & Widjaja, 2024). This approach is considered the most appropriate because it allows researchers to understand complex phenomena in the classroom naturally within the real-life context at SMP Negeri 4 Camplong. This research was conducted over a period of 2 months, specifically in September-October 2026, coinciding with the ongoing odd semester learning activities. The determination of research subjects was carried out using purposive sampling techniques involving 10 key informants who have direct involvement with the study focus, namely the principal (as the managerial policy maker), the Vise Principal for Curriculum(as the coordinator of technical training and curriculum

planning), the Vise Principal for Student Affairs (as the informant for mapping students' backgrounds), the PAI Teacher (as the main executor of learning), and 6 seventh-grade students. The selection of the six students was based on the recommendation of the PAI teacher, considering the representation of heterogeneity in academic abilities and levels of Al-Qur'an literacy (BTQ). Proportionally, the student informants were divided into 3 characteristic categories: 2 students with high academic achievement and fluency in reading the Al-Qur'an (who are often appointed as peer tutors), 2 students with moderate abilities, and 2 students who still experience basic difficulties in reading hijaiyah letters and require intensive assistance. This variation-based grouping aims to capture the responses of students from various ability spectrums to the teacher's adaptation strategies.

The procedure for collecting primary and secondary data was carried out comprehensively through three main techniques using in-depth interviews conducted face-to-face with semi-structured interview guidelines across 12 interview sessions (each lasting 30–45 minutes). The details include 2 interview sessions with the PAI teacher (before and after class observation), 1 session each with the principal, curriculum deputy, and student affairs deputy, 1 focus group interview session with six students, and 1 confirmation interview session with the PAI teacher. The interview instruments focus on 4 main indicators: conceptual understanding of differentiated learning, readiness in preparing teaching materials and initial assessments, obstacles in time allocation and facilities, and strategies for adapting classroom learning. Non-participant observation was conducted during 4 PAI learning sessions in the seventh grade (each lasting 3 x 40 minutes according to the 3 JP load) without intervening in the lesson. The researcher used an observation guide focusing on 5 main aspects: the mechanism of naturally mapping students' initial abilities at the beginning of the class, the use of standard textbooks, the communication patterns and emotional approach of the teacher toward low-ability students, the dynamics of interactive quiz implementation, and the management of peer tutors in heterogeneous study groups. Document Review was conducted by analyzing the PAI Teaching Module, Learning Objectives Flow (ATP), daily grade lists, and records of students' reading and writing skills in the Qur'an (Juz Amma) to verify the consistency between administrative documents and actual classroom practices. To ensure validity, the researcher applied source triangulation (comparing the perspectives of school leaders, PAI teachers, and students), technique triangulation (aligning interview results, observations, and documents), and the member checking procedure (Wulandari et al., 2025). The implementation of member checking was concretely carried out in two stages: first, the researcher submitted a summary of the interview transcripts along with a draft of the initial interpretation of the findings in writing to the PAI teacher and the deputy principal for curriculum at the end of the data collection phase; second, the researcher held a face-to-face verification discussion for approximately 20 minutes to ensure that the researcher's understanding of the readiness, structural constraints, and local adaptation strategies was in line with the reality and intentions of the informants, while also providing space for corrections if there were any interpretative errors. Next, the collected data is analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, which includes three continuous stages: data condensation by selecting and focusing on key information, data display in the form of systematic narratives and matrices of findings, and conclusion drawing and verification (Husnullail et al., 2024).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP Negeri 4 Camplong shows a distinctive dynamic in the management of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning.

To systematically depict all field findings in accordance with the research objectives, the presentation of these results is grouped into three main themes: the pedagogical readiness of PAI teachers, obstacles to the implementation of differentiated learning, and the learning adaptation strategies applied in the classroom.

The Pedagogical Readiness of PAI Teachers in Differentiated Learning

Conceptually, the PAI teacher at SMP Negeri 4 Camplong has understood the basic essence of differentiated learning as an effort to adjust learning methods to students' needs without changing the main competency goals. The readiness of teaching materials was also independently prepared in the form of an integrated teaching module for a full semester, even though the teacher had never attended formal technical guidance (Bimtek) specifically discussing differentiation. This condition was revealed through the statement of the PAI teacher who said: "In my opinion, differentiated learning is a type of learning that has the same goal, which is to make students understand the material, but teachers must be skilled in strategizing to show learning outcomes." "I have never participated in training related to differentiated learning, but personally, I have not encountered any difficulties in preparing the PAI teaching module because it has been a cohesive unit for one semester." (Interview with PAI Teacher) This independent readiness is supported by a conducive institutional climate and the professional autonomy granted by the school leadership. The principal confirmed that although special training has never been conducted formally and has only been discussed in internal meetings, the school provides full trust and support for teachers' creativity, as he stated: "Special training for differentiated learning for teachers has indeed never been held formally, but I often mention it during meetings." "I give full freedom and trust to the teachers, including the PAI teacher, to manage the class well according to the students' needs." (Interview with the Principal) Based on the interview data and the review of the semester teaching module documents, it can be interpreted that the pedagogical readiness of the PAI teacher is adaptive and autonomous. The absence of formal training does not hinder teachers' initiative in designing lesson plans, as the trust of the leadership and the availability of basic facilities serve as initial capital that fosters a sense of security for teachers to experiment contextually in the classroom.

Barriers to Implementing Differentiated Learning

Although the support facilities and the student-to-class ratio are quite ideal, with 21 students in the seventh grade, the pure implementation of differentiated learning still faces its own challenges in the field. In the PAI subject, the allocation of 3 lesson hours (3 JP) is considered relatively adequate for initial mapping, but the heterogeneity in students' Al-Qur'an literacy skills remains the main challenge that requires extra patience. The PAI teacher described the challenge of the heterogeneity in students' abilities as follows: "Alhamdulillah, the condition of the students in my class is not too disparate because the majority are deeply rooted in their Islamic faith, ranging from public schools, madrasahs, to Quranic studies." "Although there are some students who are not fluent in reciting the Quran, that is where the challenge lies for me to continue being enthusiastic about teaching." (Interview with the PAI Teacher) Classroom observations also show that the differences in the fluency levels of reading the Qur'an among seventh-grade students make it difficult to rigidly implement the distribution of worksheets or material targets for each individual during a single face-to-face session. Thus, the main obstacle at SMP Negeri 4 Camplong is not the lack of facilities or class overcrowding, but rather the disparity in basic Quran reading skills among a small number of students and the consideration of operational efficiency so that administrative burdens do not take up the time of direct interaction between teachers and students.

Learning Adaptation Strategies and Management of Heterogeneous Classes

In response to these challenges, the PAI teacher developed adaptation strategies that focus on process differentiation through emotional approaches, natural diagnostic assessments, interactive quizzes, and the optimization of peer tutoring. Before delving into the core material, the teacher makes it a habit to read Juz Amma together and conduct a brief Q&A session to map the students' initial abilities into the categories of fluent, not yet fluent, and not able. Next, the teacher forms heterogeneous study groups to facilitate knowledge transfer among peers, as explained in the following interview excerpt: "To assess the students' initial abilities, I start with the routine of reading Juz Amma... When forming groups, I always mix those who can with those who cannot, usually with 4 students per group to ease the learning process, so that cooperation and knowledge sharing can occur." Usually, I also use games or quizzes." (Interview with the PAI Teacher) Classroom observations confirm that this mechanism is lively and participatory; more skilled students appear enthusiastic about helping their peers understand readings and religious material, while the insertion of interactive quizzes during lessons successfully maintains class concentration and enthusiasm. This practice is also validated by the testimony of a representative from the seventh-grade students who directly experience the benefits of the pressure-free learning atmosphere: "Learning PAI in class is enjoyable because there are often quizzes or games, so it doesn't get boring." If there is a reading or material that I don't understand, usually my groupmate who is already fluent helps, and the teacher explains it slowly, so I'm not afraid of making mistakes. (Interview with a Seventh Grade Student) In line with that process strategy, the teacher also implements a proportional assessment system where the learning objectives remain the same, but the methods and evaluation achievement limits are adjusted to each student's real abilities without coercion. These findings indicate that the adaptation strategy, which combines emotional approaches, peer tutoring, and proportional evaluation, has proven to be quite effective in maintaining active engagement and psychological comfort among students amidst the limitations of pure differentiation implementation. To summarize the relationship between research indicators, empirical data sources, and the main findings from the three themes above comprehensively, the following matrix presents the research results at SMP Negeri 4 Camplong.

Table 1. Main Findings Matrix of PAI Learning Implementation at SMP Negeri 4 Camplong

Research Topic	Indicator	Data Source	Main Findings
Pedagogical Readiness of PAI Teachers	Understanding concepts, formal training, preparation of teaching modules, & school support	Interview with PAI Teacher, Principal & Document Review	The teacher understands differentiation as a variation of strategies to achieve the same goal; has never attended a special training but independently developed a one-semester teaching module; fully supported by facilities and autonomy from the principal.
Implementation Barriers	Time allocation, device load, class ratio, & heterogeneity of students' basic abilities	Interview with PAI Teacher, Curriculum Deputy, Student Affairs Deputy & Class Observation	The ideal class ratio (21 students) and the allocation of 3 JP for PAI support the learning process, but the differences in recitation fluency and knowledge comprehension among a small number of students, as well as the demand for time efficiency.
Learning Adaptation Strategy	Initial assessment, group management, interaction methods, emotional approach, & evaluation system	Interview with PAI Teacher, Interview with Seventh Grade Students & Class Observation	Applying process differentiation through the recitation of Juz Amma and Q&A as a natural diagnostic assessment; heterogeneous groups of 4 students (peer tutors); insertion of quizzes/games; a humanistic emotional approach; and proportional assessment according to the students' capacities.

DISCUSSION

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is philosophically designed to dismantle uniformity in the classroom through the application of differentiated learning centered on students (Syawarianto et al., 2025). However, empirical findings at SMP Negeri 4 Camplong show a sharp contrast between the idealism of national policy and the reality of pedagogical readiness on the ground. On one hand, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers have a sufficient conceptual understanding of differentiation as an effort to adjust the learning process to achieve the same competency goals. On the other hand, this readiness has not yet been internalized into the technical skills of designing differentiated teaching materials in a structured manner. This phenomenon confirms Tomlinson's (1999) view that curriculum transitions often trigger psychological barriers in the form of administrative anxiety and a lack of operational mastery due to the absence of continuous professional development (Tomlinson, 1999). This is reinforced by the fact that the school has never conducted technical guidance (Bimtek) specifically on differentiation based on the characteristics of PAI material, so teachers' readiness relies on teaching experience and pedagogical intuition. The main obstacle identified in this educational unit is not a deficit in facilities and infrastructure, but rather the tension between the burden of differentiated administrative tasks and the limits of time flexibility. The school has actually provided government-standard textbooks and the Juz Amma manuscript adequately, along with a slim class ratio of 15 to 21 students per learning group. Theoretically, small class sizes are very conducive to the implementation of diagnostic assessments and individual mentoring (Abidin, 2023; I. D. Fauziah & Irawan, 2026). However, in the practice of PAI learning, which has an allocation of 3 lesson hours (3 JP) per week, this duration must be divided for classroom conditioning, religious habituation, and the delivery of multidimensional material (creed, ethics, jurisprudence, and Islamic history). Thus, teachers at the micro level tend to exhibit pragmatic resistance when the administrative demands of the curriculum clash with the limited face-to-face time (Rizki & Fahkrunisa, 2022; Suryati et al., 2023).

In response to the situation, the PAI teacher at SMP Negeri 4 Camplong developed an adaptive strategy based on pedagogical pragmatism. Instead of preparing three variations of teaching modules and student worksheets (LKPD) that consume time, the teacher optimizes standard textbooks combined with a humanistic emotional approach. In the perspective of Max Weber's social action theory (Fikria & Moefad, 2024), this step represents instrumental rationality (goal-oriented rationality), which is a conscious choice to maintain the achievement of the essence of the material without burdening the psychological stability of either the teacher or the students (Anrichal & Pramono, 2023). In the context of PAI learning, which is rich in the internalization of affective values, emotional approaches such as personal greetings and intensive mentoring at the desks of passive students play a crucial role in reducing students' anxiety when asked to recite verses from the Qur'an, thereby maintaining a psychologically safe classroom environment (Windari et al., 2023). In mapping the diversity of students' initial abilities, teachers avoid rigid written diagnostic assessment formats and replace them with natural diagnostic assessments through the habituation of reciting Juz Amma and question-and-answer sessions in the first 15 minutes of learning. However, it is critically important to note that assessments based on reading Juz Amma have diagnostic coverage limitations. This informal instrument is very effective in mapping students' psychomotor readiness and Quranic literacy (BTQ) into categories of fluent, hesitant, and unable, but it does not necessarily represent the overall readiness to learn PAI. The ability to pronounce hijaiyah letters does not necessarily correlate with the ability to reason conceptually in the realms of faith, understanding of fiqh law, or analysis of Islamic civilization history. As a result, students who are not yet proficient in reading the Qur'an risk being considered weak overall if teachers do not balance this with oral assessments on the aspect of conceptual understanding. To address the ability gap without disrupting the class focus, the teacher implements process differentiation modifications through peer tutoring in heterogeneous groups of four. The mechanism of this strategy reflects the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) by Lev Vygotsky, where high-ability students act as the more knowledgeable other, guiding their peers in verse pronunciation and basic understanding using more digestible peer language

(Tohari & Rahman, 2024). Although effective in boosting the confidence of struggling students to ask questions and practice, the implementation of peer tutoring in PAI learning carries the risk of an imbalanced learning load if not strictly monitored by the teacher. Skilled students are at risk of cognitive fatigue because their time is consumed teaching peers who are still spelling hijaiyah letters, while their own exploration of advanced material is hindered. Therefore, the role of the teacher as a facilitator remains crucial to ensure the quality control of reading is maintained, preventing the transfer of tajwid errors among students while also providing enrichment challenges for the tutor students to ensure their right to learn is fulfilled.

In addition to peer tutors, teachers insert interactive quizzes during lessons as a mechanism to maintain classroom dynamics. In line with the principles of gamification in education (Fahrur et al., 2025), quick competitive question-and-answer quizzes have proven to restore student attention and serve as instant formative evaluations for teachers to detect misconceptions in the material before the lesson ends (Hidayati, 2022; Nurnaifah, 2024). From the perspective of final assessment, teachers apply the same standards for achieving learning objectives but provide proportional flexibility in the fulfillment process (for example, through gradual oral remediation for students who struggle with reading Arabic texts). This approach aligns with the principle of distributive justice in education, which is to provide proportional support according to the real needs of the students (Avandra & Desyandri, 2022). Compared to previous research, these findings show several points of convergence as well as significant distinguishing contributions. In line with Mukhlis's (2026) findings at the elementary school level and Ahmad et al.'s (2024) findings at the madrasah aliyah level, this study confirms that the main constraints faced by teachers in the Merdeka Curriculum stem from the administrative complexity of teaching materials and the limited face-to-face time. However, unlike Sitorus's (2025) conceptual study, which positions content, process, and product differentiation as an ideal package that must be implemented in its entirety, the case study at SMP Negeri 4 Camplong shows that in schools with limited technical training, teachers do not apply pure differentiation but instead construct local adaptation strategies as a transitional bridge. The main contribution of this research lies in the empirical demonstration of how the combination of autonomy granted by the principal, natural assessment based on recitation, emotional approach, quizzes/games, and peer tutoring can maintain the significance of PAI learning in small ratio classes (15–21 students), while also revealing the critical aspect that these pragmatic strategies still require pedagogical control by the teacher to prevent learning disparities among students.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the research objective to explore the implementation of differentiated learning in the subject of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at SMP Negeri 4 Camplong, three main conclusions were drawn. First, the level of readiness of PAI teachers is categorized as adaptive conceptually and intuitively based on teaching experience, but they are not yet technically-administratively ready to design structured differentiated teaching materials. Second, the main obstacles faced include the absence of technical guidance (Bimtek) specifically for differentiation based on PAI material, the complex burden of preparing teaching materials, and the limited allocation of three lesson hours (3 JP) per week amidst the wide gap in students' ability to read and write the Qur'an. Third, to overcome these obstacles by utilizing a small class ratio (15–21 students) and the support of school principal autonomy, the most prominent local adaptation strategies include natural diagnostic assessments through the habituation of reciting Juz Amma and initial question-and-answer sessions, a humanistic emotional approach, interactive quizzes, and the optimization of peer tutoring in heterogeneous groups accompanied by teacher supervision. This research contributes to demonstrating that context-based pedagogical adaptation can be one of the pragmatic strategies to maintain the principles of inclusive and responsive learning to the needs of students, even though a pure differentiation model has not yet been fully implemented. However, considering that this research is a case study of a single educational unit, its findings are contextual and cannot be directly generalized to all schools.

Therefore, further studies with a broader range of schools and long-term impact measurements across all domains of PAI competence are highly recommended.

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