

Innovating Islamic religious education methods through differentiated instruction: Enhancing learning motivation and understanding of religious concepts

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Abstract

Islamic Religious Education in elementary schools requires an adaptive instructional approach to address the diverse readiness levels and learning styles of students. This study aims to analyze the strategies employed by teachers in implementing differentiated instruction and its impact on student's learning motivation and religious character formation. A descriptive qualitative method was applied through observation, interviews and documentation involving sixth grade Islamic education classes. The findings reveal that teachers implemented differentiation in content, process, and product by adjusting to students' Qur'an reading proficiency, learning style preferences, and personal interests. This strategy significantly enhanced students' active participation, confidence in expressing opinions, and intrinsic motivation driven by spiritual awareness, as indicated by voluntary engagement in religious practices such as Dhuha prayer and independent Qur'an recitation. Moreover, religious character traits such as honesty, discipline, and responsibility were fostered through authentic and personalized learning experiences. The novelty of this study lies in its emphasis that differentiated instruction in Islamic Education functions not merely as an adaptive pedagogical technique but as an instrument of conscious and humanistic value internalization rather than compliance-based religiosity. These findings provide strategic implications for developing a more personal, inclusive, and spiritually grounded PAI learning model rooted in students' individual fitrah.

Keywords: Religious Character; Differentiated Instruction; Islamic Religious Education

Abstrak

Pendidikan Agama Islam di sekolah dasar membutuhkan pendekatan pembelajaran yang adaptif untuk mengatasi tingkat kesiapan dan gaya belajar siswa yang beragam. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis strategi yang digunakan oleh guru dalam mengimplementasikan pengajaran berdiferensiasi dan dampaknya terhadap motivasi belajar dan pembentukan karakter religius siswa. Metode kualitatif deskriptif diterapkan melalui observasi, wawancara dan dokumentasi yang melibatkan kelas pendidikan agama Islam kelas enam. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa guru menerapkan diferensiasi dalam konten, proses, dan produk dengan menyesuaikan pada kemampuan membaca Al-Qur'an siswa, preferensi gaya belajar, dan minat pribadi. Strategi ini secara signifikan

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meningkatkan partisipasi aktif siswa, kepercayaan diri dalam menyampaikan pendapat, dan motivasi intrinsik yang didorong oleh kesadaran spiritual, seperti yang ditunjukkan oleh keterlibatan sukarela dalam praktik keagamaan seperti salat dhuha dan pembacaan Alquran secara mandiri. Selain itu, karakter religius seperti kejujuran, kedisiplinan, dan tanggung jawab dipupuk melalui pengalaman belajar yang otentik dan personal. Kebaruan dari penelitian ini terletak pada penekanannya bahwa pengajaran berdiferensiasi dalam Pendidikan Agama Islam tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai teknik pedagogis yang adaptif, tetapi juga sebagai instrumen internalisasi nilai secara sadar dan humanis, bukan sebagai religiusitas berbasis kepatuhan. Temuan ini memberikan implikasi strategis untuk mengembangkan model pembelajaran PAI yang lebih personal, inklusif, dan berlandaskan spiritual yang berakar pada fitrah individu siswa.

Kata kunci: Karakter Religius; Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi; Pendidikan Agama Islam.

Introduction

Islamic religious education holds a strategic position in shaping student's character and spirituality amid the rapid currents of globalization and technological advancement (Afif & Ningrum, 2024). In the context of modern education, Islamic Religious Education Functions not only as a means of transferring normative religious knowledge, but also as an instrument for cultivating understanding, internalization, and lived experience of Islamic values in everyday life. (A. R. Wisiyanti, 2024). However, various studies indicate that the implementation of Islamic Religious Education in schools continues to face considerable challenges, particularly concerning low learning motivation and suboptimal students learning outcomes, including in the area of religious character formation (Hapsari et al., 2025). This phenomenon indicates the existence of a gap between the ideal objectives of religious education and the realities of its implementation in practice.

One of the factors contributing to the low effectiveness of Islamic Religious Education is the predominance of conventional, teacher-centered instructional models that have yet to accommodate the diverse characteristics and learning needs of students (Nisa et al., 2024). In fact, students possess diverse learning styles, interests, and levels of ability. The mismatch between instructional strategies and students' individual needs can lead to disengagement, low participation, and insufficient internalization of religious values (Rozali et al., 2022). From the perspective of Islamic education, this becomes a serious concern because the primary objective of Islamic Religious Education is to cultivate individuals who are faithful, knowledgeable, and morally upright, rather than merely enabling students to understand religious concepts at a cognitive level (Hasibuan et al., 2023).

The transformation of 21st-century education requires Islamic Religious Education teachers to implement learning that is more contextual, collaborative, and oriented toward students' needs (Sinaga & Firmansyah, 2024). Nafisa (2025) further emphasizes that teachers are required to develop innovative learning models that are responsive to students' individual potentials and characteristics. In this regard, differentiated instruction emerges as a relevant pedagogical approach. According to Lestari et al. (2024), differentiation emphasizes the importance of adjusting the content, process, and products of learning to align with students' diverse learning styles, interests, and levels of readiness. This approach provides space for each student to engage in meaningful learning according to their individual capacities (Al Mujab, 2023).

Recent studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of differentiated instruction in improving students' motivation and academic achievement. For instance, a study by Gadafi et al. (2025) found that the application of differentiation can significantly enhance students' learning motivation as well as their academic outcomes across various subjects. In the field of general education, this approach has been proven effective in fostering active student participation and strengthening their conceptual understanding (Kurniawan et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the implementation of differentiated instruction within the context of Islamic Religious Education remains relatively limited and has not been extensively explored. Abdul Sakti (2023) notes that the characteristics of Islamic Religious Education encompassing cognitive, effective, and psychomotor domains are inherently well suited for the application of differentiation strategies, as they offer opportunities to integrate knowledge acquisition with the development of spiritual attitudes.

The findings of Nata et al. (2024) reinforce that the implementation of differentiated instruction in the context of Islamic Religious Education not only enhances students' cognitive learning outcomes at also strengthens the affective and psymotor domains related to the practice of Islamic values. In line with this, Kurniyadi & Fatimah, (2025) revealed that teachers who apply differentiation strategies are able to cultivate a more adaptive learning environment, enabling students with diverse ability backgrounds to achieve optimal learning goals. Such as learning process, which appreciates individual differences, also fosters spiritual awareness, moral responsibility, and social sensivity (Suwahyu, 2025).

Although previous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of differentiated instruction, the majority of existing research has focused on general subjects such as mathematics and science, while studies examining its application within the context of Islamic Religious Education remain limited and

largely descriptive. This condition highlights a significant research gap in the development of innovative, differentiation oriented instructional strategies for Islamic Religious Education. Moreover, much of the literature on Islamic Religious Education emphasizes cognitive or evaluative dimensions and has yet to comprehensively link differentiation with the development of students' spiritual motivation and their understanding of religious concepts. In fact, these two aspects represent fundamental indicators of successful Islamic education.

Therefore, this study contributes novelty in two key dimensions. First, at the conceptual level, it broadens the interpretation of differentiated instruction within the framework of Islamic education by positioning religious values and spirituality as integral elements of instructional design. Second, at the practical level, this study proposes an implementable model of differentiation in Islamic Religious Education that not only adapts instructional strategies to students' learning characteristics, but also integrates them with the development of religious character. Distinct from previous studies that predominantly emphasize methodological aspects of general education, this research specifically examines how differentiation can be utilized as a strategy to enhance learning motivation while simultaneously deepening students' understanding of religious concepts.

The urgency of this study is further reinforced by the fundamental role of Islamic Religious Education in shaping a generation that is religious, adaptive, and globally competitive. In this era technological disruption, uniform and purely normative instructional approaches are no longer effective in developing students' spiritual and moral competencies (Hamdani, 2023). Therefore, innovative learning models that are responsive to individual needs, relevant to social context, and grounded in Islamic values are urgently required. Differentiated instruction emerges as a strategic solution to these challenges, as it enables a balanced integration of both academic and spiritual dimensions within a unified instructional process.

Accordingly, this study aims to describe and analyze the implementation of innovative instructional methods in Islamic Religious Education through a differentiated instruction approach as an effort to enhance students' learning motivation and understanding of religious concepts. Through this research, it is expected that a more effective, adaptive, and contextual model of Islamic Religious Education can be identified, while also providing theoretical contributions to the developments of pedagogical innovations in contemporary Islamic education. This study is further expected to offer practical implications for teachers and educational institutions in designing learning strategies that are

more humanistic, spiritual, and responsive to the dynamic needs of students in the twenty first century.

Research Method

This study employs qualitative approach using a case study design aimed at obtaining an in depth understanding of the implementation of differentiated instruction in Islamic Religious Education. This approach was selected because it allows for a contextual and comprehensive analysis of the learning practices being carried out (Salsabila et al., 2025).

This research was conducted at SD Islam Amanah Bangsa Muhammadiyah, with a focus on sixth grade students as the case unit representing the implementation of differentiated instruction in Islamic Religious Education. Primary data were collected through direct observations and in-depth interviews with the Islamic Religious Education teacher and several students selected through purposive sampling. Observations were carried implemented in the classroom, while interviews aimed to explore in the learning process. This approach enabled the researcher to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of differentiation as applied in real classroom settings.

Data analysis was carried out using an interactive process consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The validity of the findings was ensured through source and technique triangulation to maintain the credibility and consistency of the data. This method is expected to yield a comprehensive depiction of the practice of differentiated instruction and its contribution to enhancing students' learning motivation and understanding of religious concepts.

Result and Discussion

The findings of this research reveal various efforts implemented by teachers in developing students' learning motivation and religious understanding. Based on the data analysis obtained from observation, interviews, and documentation, several key findings were identified, which can be elaborated as follows:

A. Differentiated learning in Islamic religious education

The differentiation model implemented encompasses three main forms: content differentiation, process differentiation, and product differentiation (Putu Swandewi, 2021). In content differentiation, teachers adjust the depth of the material according to students' abilities. For instance, based on the factual data found in the study, the teacher categorized students into three levels of Qur'an

reading competence, namely fluent readers, fairly fluent readers, and those who are still at the basic stage (IQRO). Students who were already fluent in reading the Qur'an were provided with simple tafsir (interpretation) materials on verses related to honesty and responsibility. Meanwhile, students with moderate reading abilities were guided to understand the general meaning of the verses through structured discussions, whereas those at the basic level practiced reading short surahs with the assistance of digital applications and direct supervision from the teacher. In terms of process differentiation, the teacher applied various instructional methods based on students' learning styles. Visually inclined students were assigned to create mind maps or *dawah* posters with themes of virtuous character; auditory learners were asked to listen to recordings of the stories of the Prophets and retell them orally; while kinesthetic learners were given the opportunity to perform short drama simulations on the theme of mutual assistance.

Observation results indicated that students who were initially passive during conventional instruction became more active when given the opportunity to engage in activities aligned with their preferred learning styles. Regarding product differentiation, the teacher granted students the freedom to choose the format of their final assignments. Out of 20 students, seven chose to create posters, six opted for oral presentations, and seven produced short videos with themes related to daily worship. This diversity in the form of students' products not only demonstrates the presence of learning autonomy but also indicates that assessment is no longer uniform; rather, it accommodates individual competencies (Observation, Grade 6, Elementary School). Thus, product differentiation serves as an authentic evaluation tool that more accurately reflects each student's potential.

These findings are consistent with Tomlinson's theory of differentiation, which posits that each student possesses varying levels of readiness and learning needs. Therefore, teachers must adapt the content, process, and product of instruction to ensure that all students can achieve the expected competencies (Mulyawati et al., 2022). In the context of Islamic education, this principle aligns with the concept of *fitrah* the innate nature of human beings which holds that every individual is created with unique potential that must be nurtured equitably (Septemiarti, 2023).

Table 1: Categories of Differentiation

Differentiation Category	Forms of Classroom Implementation	Impact on Students
Content Differentiation	The teacher adjusts learning materials based on students'	Students with lower abilities become more confident, and they

	prior knowledge and readiness levels.	understand religious values through sources that match their individual learning styles.
Process Differentiation	The teacher varies learning methods to align with different learning styles (visual, auditory, kinesthetic).	Students become more active as the methods suit their learning preferences. Honest, empathetic, cooperative behaviors and self-awareness begin to emerge.
Product Differentiation	The teacher provides options for final assignments based on students' interests and potential.	Students' creativity increases, they demonstrate independent worship practices, and internalize religious values such as honesty, discipline, and care for others.

Several previous studies, such as those by Qomariyah & Nurhamidah (2024), have also shown that the implementation of differentiated instruction in Islamic Education can enhance students' learning outcomes and active participation. However, the present study adds a new finding the emergence of students' self-awareness in practicing religious values without external coercion. This is evident from observable behavioral changes, as students began to perform daily acts of worship, such as *shalat Dhuha* and Qur'an recitation, voluntarily after engaging in learning activities that allowed them to express themselves according to their individual learning styles.

Theoretically, this success can be explained through the synergy between differentiation theory and religious character education. When teachers provide students with the opportunity to learn in alignment with their own potential and interests, students feel valued and this sense of appreciation fosters a deeper sense of meaning toward the religious teachings they study. In this context, Islamic Education teachers serve not merely as instructors but as spiritual mentors who facilitate the growth of faith and morality through a personalized approach. (Chantika et al., 2024) .

B. The implementation of differentiated instruction and its impact on learning motivation

In the context of Islamic Religious Education, learning motivation is not merely a cognitive drive to comprehend subject matter, but also a spiritual enthusiasm to internalize and practice Islamic teachings (Marfu'ah et al., 2024). The findings of this study indicate a significant increase in students' active participation during lessons, their confidence in expressing opinions, and their consistency in performing daily religious practices such as *Duha* prayer and independent Qur'an recitation. Observational data revealed that prior to the implementation of differentiation, only a small portion of students were actively

engaged during the learning process. However, following the application of this strategy, the majority of students demonstrated stronger emotional and spiritual involvement, as evidenced by their enthusiasm in completing religious tasks aligned with their personal preferences.

These findings are consistent with the self-determination theory proposed by Badriah & Surawan (2025), which asserts that intrinsic motivation develops when three basic human needs are fulfilled: autonomy, competence, and social relatedness. In Islamic Religious Education, teachers provide students with autonomy by allowing them to choose learning activities that match their interests and learning styles. Students' competence is fostered through engagement with tasks that align with their abilities and levels of understanding. Furthermore, social relatedness grows through positive interactions in collaborative activities such as religious projects or community-based Islamic programs. Together, these three elements make the learning process more meaningful both spiritually and emotionally.

Furthermore, these findings can also be explained through the ARCS model developed by Keller Setyowati et al., (2022), which encompasses four components: *attention*, *relevance*, *confidence*, and *satisfaction*. Differentiated instruction successfully captures students' attention through a variety of creative learning activities, renders Islamic Religious Education content more relevant to everyday life, fosters confidence by allowing each learner the opportunity to succeed according to their potential, and provides learning satisfaction as students are able to connect religious understanding with their personal experiences.

Accordingly, the results of this study not only reinforce the findings of (Gadafi et al., 2025) which suggest that adaptive learning strategies enhance students' motivation and engagement in religious education, but also extend them. The present findings reveal that the motivation developed through differentiated instruction is not merely situational or externally stimulated, but evolves into intrinsic motivation grounded in religious awareness. In several observed cases, students who previously participated in religious practices only due to school requirements began to demonstrate personal initiative by performing them independently outside class hours. This indicates that differentiation in Islamic Religious Education influences not only the cognitive and affective domains but also contributes to the development of a deeper spiritual commitment (Observation, Grade 6).

The pedagogical implications of these findings are highly significant for teachers of Islamic Religious Education. Teachers must understand that learning

motivation in Islamic education cannot be fostered through uniform approaches alone. Innovation and flexibility in designing learning activities are essential so that students feel their potentials and individual needs are recognized (Digna et al., 2023). Accordingly, differentiated instruction serves as an effective means of cultivating a learning spirit grounded in faith and a genuine love for knowledge (Munandar et al., 2025).

Overall, the results of this study reinforce existing theories and prior research demonstrating that differentiated learning effectively enhances both motivation and academic achievement, as noted by Gadafi et al. (2025) and Qomariyah & Nurhamidah (2024). However, the novelty of this research lies in its application within the context of Islamic Religious Education, explicitly aimed at fostering religious character formation. This suggests that differentiation is not only relevant to general subjects such as mathematics or language, but also holds substantial significance in value-based and moral education.

Thus, differentiated instruction in Islamic Religious Education should not be viewed merely as a technical pedagogical strategy but as an instrument for the internalization of spiritual values that are humanistic and inclusive. This approach enables each student to experience religious learning in a personal and meaningful way, according to their readiness and learning style, without feeling coerced or standardized. Consequently, differentiation can be understood as a bridge between cognitive education and spiritual character development two fundamental pillars of Islamic Religious Education.

C. Implementation of differentiated instruction in fostering religious character

The implementation of differentiated instruction within the context of Islamic Religious Education extends beyond the cognitive domain and is directed toward the development of students' religious character. Religious values such as faith (*iman*), piety (*taqwa*), honesty, discipline, responsibility, and tolerance are instilled through learning activities that are adapted to the unique characteristics and needs of each student. (Nasywa Maulida et al., 2025).

The teacher's strategies in instilling religious values are reflected across the three dimensions of differentiation, namely content, process, and product. In terms of content, the teacher does not merely deliver information but connects the material to students' real-life experiences. For instance, when discussing the concept of gratitude (*shukr*), students are encouraged to share personal experiences of receiving help and then relate them to the obligation of expressing thankfulness to Allah and to others. Regarding the process, the teacher applies

the principles of *uswah hasanah* (exemplary behavior) and personal guidance. The teacher consciously demonstrates courteous behavior during interactions, greets the students before class begins, and addresses them individually to build emotional closeness. Students are also given opportunities to serve as role models during learning activities, such as leading the *Duha* prayer or the daily supplication. In the **product** dimension, students are not only required to complete academic tasks but are also guided to produce creative works that reflect the internalization of Islamic values. Some students create posters with the theme "Honesty in Everyday Life," while others produce short videos demonstrating how to help friends in need. The teacher evaluates these works based on attitude and effort, rather than solely on aesthetic outcomes, illustrating the holistic approach of Islamic Religious Education teachers in cultivating religious values through differentiated learning.



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Figure 1. Learning Product

The integration of religious values aligns with Lickona's theory of character education (Arlini & Hanif, 2025) on character education that emphasizes dimensions of moral knowing, moral feeling dan moral action. which emphasizes the three moral dimensions of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. Differentiated learning facilitates the balanced development of these three aspects, enabling students to understand religious values, internalize their significance, and manifest them in behavior.

Based on the results of classroom observations and interviews, several students who had previously shown low discipline in performing the *Duha* prayer began to take the initiative to come to the school mosque earlier without being instructed. From the teachers' perspective, the differentiated approach also fosters stronger emotional connections with students. As one Islamic Religious Education teacher stated during an interview, "*By understanding each student's*

character, I can determine how to correct and guide them without making them feel judged.”

Table 2. Observation Results of Learning Activities

No.	Observed Activity	Observation Notes	Differentiation Category	Indicators of Religious Values
1	Lesson Opening	The teacher greets each student personally and builds emotional closeness.	Process	Manners, politeness
2	Assessment of Qur'an Reading Ability	Students are divided into three groups: fluent, moderate, and basic (Iqra level).	Content	Perseverance
3	Lesson on the Theme of Honesty	Students watch a video about the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and reflect on personal experiences of honesty or dishonesty.	Process	Honesty
4	Mind Map or Da'wah Poster	Visual learners create da'wah posters and mind maps.	Product	Creativity
5	Group Discussion	Students actively discuss and express that the lesson feels relevant to real life.	Process	Cooperation
6	Helping Simulation	Kinesthetic learners participate actively in a role-play about helping others.	Process	Empathy
7	Listening to the Prophet's Stories	Auditory learners listen to an audio recording of a prophetic story and retell it.	Process	Exemplary behavior
8	Final Product Assignment	7 students create posters, 6 deliver oral presentations, and 7 produce short videos on daily worship.	Product	Worship and morality
9	Reflection on Islamic Values	The teacher connects students' reflections with Qur'anic verse Q.S. Al-Ahzab:70.	Content	Honesty
10	Regular Dhuha Prayer	Participation in Dhuha prayer increases from approximately 60% to over 85%.	Spiritual Process	Discipline
11	Classroom Charity Project	Students independently organize a class charity activity ("Class Charity Box").	Social Product	Compassion

Conceptually, this finding supports the view of Muhaimin (Antika & Husni, 2025) that effective Islamic education is one that is able to engage the spiritual

and moral dimensions of students through authentic learning experiences. Differentiated instruction, with its flexibility and humanistic approach, fosters the development of religious character that is not imposed externally but grows naturally from students' self-awareness.

D. The dynamics of differentiated instruction implementation in Islamic religious education

The implementation of differentiated instruction in Islamic Religious Education does not merely introduce a variety of teaching methods but also requires a paradigm shift in how teachers perceive their students. Based on interview results, Islamic Education teachers at SD Islam Amanah Bangsa Muhammadiyah stated that, in the initial stages, the implementation of differentiation demanded a considerable amount of time to align instructional strategies with students' conditions. Teachers needed to identify students' prior knowledge, interests, and learning styles through repeated observations and informal interactions. This process aligns with the principles of learner-centered education, which position students as active subjects in determining their own learning experiences.

In practice, the teacher's role extends beyond that of a knowledge transmitter to that of a learning designer who creates multiple learning pathways tailored to students' individual needs. For instance, when teaching the topic "Morality Toward Parents," the teacher provided three types of activities: (1) analyzing the story of *Luqman al-Hakim* for students with higher-order thinking skills, (2) writing personal reflections for students at an intermediate level, and (3) drawing illustrations of filial acts for visual learners and those with lower literacy abilities. Through such variations, all students were able to participate actively without feeling pressured or left behind by their peers.

This condition demonstrates that differentiation is not merely a variation of teaching methods but a pedagogical approach that values human diversity. The findings reinforce Vygotsky's concept of the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD) (as cited in Lestari et al., 2024), which posits that each learner can reach optimal development when provided with appropriate support tailored to their level of readiness and capacity. In the context of religious education, *scaffolding* or gradual guidance from teachers serves as an effective means to help students understand Islamic moral concepts in a more contextual and meaningful manner.

E. Integration of spiritual values in the learning process

Observational results indicate that the implementation of differentiated instruction in Islamic Religious Education successfully integrates spiritual values

naturally into learning activities. Each learning experience is not only directed toward mastering concepts but also toward fostering spiritual reflection. For example, in a lesson on the theme of honesty in Islam, the teacher invited students to watch a video about the Prophet Muhammad SAW as an honest merchant. Afterwards, students were asked to write about personal experiences when they had lied or told the truth and then reflect on the feelings that emerged. This activity cultivated moral awareness in students without the presence of external pressure.

Several students expressed during interviews that this type of learning “makes religious lessons feel real in everyday life.” This statement indicates the emergence of *moral feeling* the emotional engagement of students in understanding values as explained by Lickona in his concept of character education (Arlini & Hanif, 2025). The Islamic Religious Education teacher then linked the results of students’ reflections to Qur’anic teachings, such as *Surah Al-Ahzab* verse 70, which commands believers to speak the truth. Thus, religious values were not merely taught at the cognitive level but were experienced through meaningful learning activities.

This approach aligns with the perspective of Swandewi (2021), who asserts that differentiated instruction fosters students’ motivation and active engagement through learning activities tailored to their individual characteristics. In the context of Islamic Religious Education, such a strategy enhances students’ spiritual engagement, as it enables them to comprehend and embody Islamic values in ways that correspond to their personal learning styles. These findings are further supported by Qomariyah and Nurhamidah (2024), who state that differentiated instruction in Islamic Religious Education has a positive impact on enhancing students’ participation, sense of responsibility, and depth of understanding of religious values. In other words, differentiated learning does not merely focus on improving academic abilities but also serves as a medium for the internalization of religious values that shape students’ religious character.

Based on these insights, it can be concluded that differentiated instruction constitutes an effective means of revitalizing spiritual values within the Islamic educational process. Through adaptive, reflective, and contextual learning activities, teachers of Islamic Religious Education can guide students toward a deeper understanding of religious teachings and foster consistent religious behavior in alignment with the principles of Islam.

F. Challenges and strategic solutions of Islamic religious education teachers

Although the implementation of differentiated instruction has shown positive outcomes, this study also identified several challenges. The first major obstacle is time constraints. Teachers reported difficulties in balancing the time allocated between delivering core material and providing guidance to small groups. In large classroom settings, teachers must skillfully manage their attention to ensure that each group receives adequate support. The second challenge concerns the availability of learning media. Not all students have access to digital devices necessary to support product differentiation activities, such as video creation. Teachers addressed this limitation through a collaborative approach, combining students into mixed-ability groups so that they could assist one another in completing assigned tasks.

The third challenge concerns differences in students' emotional readiness, which also significantly affect the learning process. Some students tend to feel shy or fear making mistakes when asked to express their understanding of religious concepts openly. To address this issue, teachers applied the principle of positive reinforcement by offering simple forms of appreciation, such as verbal praise or displaying students' work on the classroom board. This approach gradually increased students' self-confidence and encouraged more active participation among all learners. In addition, teachers engaged in regular reflective sessions with their colleagues through the *Teacher Working Group* (KKG) forum. From these collaborative discussions, teachers gained new insights, such as implementing a learning contract a simple agreement between teachers and students outlining their respective learning responsibilities. This strategy proved effective in fostering a sense of accountability and learning discipline among students.

G. Transformation of religious character after implementation

One of the significant contributions of implementing differentiated instruction in Islamic Education is the observable change in students' religious behavior. Based on a three-month longitudinal observation, there was a noticeable transformation in students' patterns of worship and social interaction within the school environment. Prior to the implementation of differentiation, only about 60% of students participated in the *Duha* congregational prayer. After two months of applying the new instructional model, participation increased to more than 85%.



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Figure 3. Religious Habituation Activities

In addition, teachers observed an improvement in students' manners and cooperation. During Islamic values-based project activities, students demonstrated a high level of empathy for instance, by independently initiating a "Class Charity Box" program. Such attitudes of helpfulness and social responsibility represent manifestations of *moral action*, as described in Lickona's theory.



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Figure 4. Sharing Habituation Activities

In an interview, one student stated: *"I am now more enthusiastic about helping my friends because in our class, we often learn that helping others is a form of worship."* This statement illustrates that the student's understanding of worship extends beyond ritual dimensions to include social aspects. This finding reinforces that differentiated instruction in Islamic Education can foster reflective religiosity rather than merely ritualistic practices. From the teachers' perspective, this transformation among students is regarded as an indicator of successful learning. Teachers noted that the differentiated approach enabled them to gain deeper insights into their students' spiritual potential. One teacher remarked: *"I see that the children have begun to understand that religion is not just about memorization, but something they feel and practice."* This indicates a shift in the orientation of learning

from the mere acquisition of knowledge toward the cultivation of value-based awareness. (*value consciousness*).

H. Synthesis of findings and theoretical implications

In relation to Islamic educational theory, the implementation of differentiation aligns with the concept of *fitrah* as described in Q.S. *Ar-Rum* verse 30, which emphasizes that every human being is created with inherent potentials that must be developed in accordance with their natural disposition. Teachers who understand this principle will not demand uniform learning outcomes but will instead guide each student to achieve *ihsan* according to their individual capacity. Theoretically, these findings reinforce the perspective of Muhaimin (as cited in Antika & Husni, 2025), which posits that effective Islamic education must address the spiritual, intellectual, and moral dimensions of human beings through authentic and humanistic learning experiences. Differentiation serves as a concrete mechanism to realize this ideal, as it balances the structure of the national curriculum with the spiritual needs of learners.

Furthermore, this study expands the conceptual understanding of differentiation by linking it to a transcendental dimension. Within the context of Islamic Religious Education, differentiation is not merely a strategy to accommodate diverse abilities but also a means of *tazkiyatun nafs* the purification of the soul through learning processes that engage inner consciousness. When students are given the freedom to choose their preferred learning methods, they engage not only their minds but also their hearts in the pursuit of knowledge.

I. Theoretical perspective on differentiation in Islamic education

From a theoretical standpoint, differentiated instruction aligns profoundly with the paradigm of Islamic education, which regards human beings as unique, autonomous, and inherently capable of developing according to their *fitrah* (innate nature). The Qur'an elucidates that every individual is created with distinct potentials, as stated in *Surah Al-Hujurat* verse 13, emphasizing that diversity serves as a means for mutual understanding and complementation. This principle forms the philosophical foundation of differentiation, wherein teachers are expected to appreciate and accommodate the varying abilities, interests, and learning styles of their students.

Conceptually, differentiated learning is rooted in Tomlinson's (2014) framework, which underscores the importance of adapting the content, process, and product of learning according to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. In the context of Islamic Religious Education, this principle resonates with Muhaimin's (2012) view that Islamic education should aim at the holistic

development of human potential, encompassing intellect (*'aql*), heart (*qalb*), and action (*'amal*). Thus, differentiated instruction can be understood as an effective medium to harmoniously integrate the dimensions of *ta'lim* (knowledge transmission) and *tarbiyah* (moral and spiritual cultivation). This perspective is further reinforced by Swandewi (2021), who asserts that differentiation is not merely an instructional strategy but rather a form of appreciation for student diversity. Teachers are expected to design learning experiences that foster students' self-confidence and intrinsic motivation. In practice, differentiated instruction provides each learner with the opportunity to grow according to their individual potential, without feeling pressured by the uniform standards often imposed by traditional educational systems.

Moreover, the concepts of scaffolding and collaborative learning within differentiated instruction align closely with social learning theory, which emphasizes the significance of interpersonal interaction in the learning process. In the context of Islamic Religious Education, the teacher acts as a facilitator who guides students in internalizing religious values through dialogue, reflection, and experiential learning. Consequently, the implementation of differentiated instruction not only enhances academic outcomes but also strengthens religious character formation and social competence among students, as evidenced by previous studies (Qomariyah & Nurhamidah 2024).

J. Integration of Islamic educational theory and the differentiated approach

Islamic Education emphasizes the balance between the dimensions of *ta'lim* (the transmission of knowledge) and *tarbiyah* (moral and spiritual development). Differentiated instruction serves as a bridge that harmoniously integrates these two dimensions. When teachers adapt their instructional strategies to the individual characteristics of their students, the *tarbiyah* process becomes more effective, as moral messages and Islamic values are internalized through experiences that correspond to students' mental and emotional readiness.

Muhaimin (2012) explains that the essence of Islamic Education lies in the internalization of divine values (*ilahiah*) into all aspects of a learner's life. Within this framework, differentiation is not merely a technical method, but a spiritual strategy aimed at developing *insan kamil*—a complete human being who achieves balance between intellect, heart, and action. This aligns with the principle of *rahmatan lil 'alamin*, which asserts that Islamic Education should remain adaptive to diversity while maintaining its orientation toward the universal values of Islam.

The implementation of differentiation also reflects the Qur'anic concept of *hikmah* wisdom in conveying truth according to the context and capacity of the recipient. A teacher who practices differentiation essentially emulates the *dakwah* method of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), who never imposed uniformity but rather adapted his approach to the conditions of his companions. For instance, the way he educated Abu Bakr differed from his approach to Umar ibn al-Khattab, as he understood the distinct personalities and backgrounds of each. Thus, differentiation in Islamic Education is not merely a modern pedagogical strategy but a continuation of the wise and contextual educational practices rooted in the Islamic tradition.

K. Implications of research findings for teachers and educational institutions

The findings of this study present several important implications within the context of Islamic educational practice and policy. First, teachers of Islamic Religious Education need to develop adaptive pedagogical competencies, particularly the ability to conduct diagnostic assessments to map students' learning profiles. Without an accurate understanding of students' readiness and interests, differentiation will be difficult to implement effectively. Therefore, teacher training programs should emphasize reflective capacity and the design of flexible, learner-centered instructional models based on students' individual needs.

Second, schools must provide adequate structural support and resources. The implementation of differentiation requires flexibility in time allocation, learning spaces, and instructional media. Schools can, for instance, facilitate collaborative scheduling among teachers, establish mini-Islamic Education laboratories, or organize religious value-based project activities as forms of institutional support for differentiation practices. Collaboration between Islamic Education teachers and teachers of other subjects is also essential to enable the integration of religious values across disciplines.

Third, educational policies at both institutional and national levels need to provide greater space for pedagogical innovation. The *Merdeka Curriculum* in principle offers significant opportunities for the implementation of differentiation; however, its application in practice remains limited due to rigid administrative orientations and assessment systems. The findings of this study imply the need for specific guidelines on the implementation of differentiated instruction within religious subjects, so that teachers have a clearer framework for practice.

In addition, this study highlights the importance of teachers' spiritual reflection in applying differentiated learning. Teachers of Islamic Education are not merely facilitators of learning, but also moral and spiritual role models for their students. Therefore, sincerity, patience, and empathy become key factors in the success of differentiation. Teachers who view their students as unique individuals created by Allah are more capable of cultivating a compassionate learning atmosphere, in accordance with the principle of *ta'dib* an education rooted in civility and moral refinement.

L. Contribution to the development of educational science

Academically, this study provides a theoretical contribution by expanding the concept of differentiation from the perspective of Islamic education. While differentiation has been predominantly discussed within the context of general and cognitively oriented education, this research asserts that differentiation also holds strong relevance in value-based and spiritual learning. The findings shift the paradigm that religious education does not have to be uniform and normative; rather, it can be dynamic, reflective, and learner-centered without compromising the essence of Islamic teachings.

Furthermore, this study enriches the discourse on the integration between Western educational theories and Islamic values. Humanistic and constructivist approaches need not be viewed as contradictory to Islamic principles; instead, they can serve as means to strengthen the practices of *tarbiyah* and *ta'lim* within a modern educational context. Differentiation becomes the intersection between these two paradigms, emphasizing humanity, learning autonomy, and the balanced development of noble character.

In addition to the various practical implications mentioned above, the findings of this study also carry strategic significance in the context of implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum*. Differentiated instruction represents the core of this new curricular paradigm, which emphasizes learning tailored to students' needs, interests, and potentials. Within the framework of Islamic Education, the application of differentiation not only supports the mastery of basic competencies but also brings to life the values of the *Profil Pelajar Pancasila* (Pancasila Student Profile), particularly the dimensions of faith, devotion to God Almighty, and noble character.

Through differentiated learning, students come to understand that faith and piety do not grow through coercion, but through meaningful learning experiences that touch the heart. Teachers who are sensitive to students' diversity are better able to instill values such as honesty, responsibility, and tolerance in

ways that are relevant to each learner. Thus, differentiation strategies make a tangible contribution to the development of students with strong character, reflective thinking, and spiritual intelligence.

From a social perspective, this study demonstrates that differentiated instruction can serve as a solution to issues of exclusion and inequality in religious education. Traditionally, students with lower abilities or differing learning styles have often felt marginalized in uniform Islamic Education classrooms. The differentiated approach opens space for pedagogical justice, as every student is given the opportunity to succeed through pathways that align with their individual potential. This aligns with the Islamic concept of *al-'adl* (justice), which does not necessarily mean equality, but rather placing everything in its proper proportion.

Philosophically, differentiated learning in Islamic Education also embodies the value of *rahmah* (compassion) within the educational process. Teachers who implement differentiation are not merely transmitting knowledge but also demonstrating compassion and empathy toward students' diversity. This attitude reflects the principle of *ta'dib* in education one grounded in courtesy and gentleness which lies at the heart of authentic Islamic pedagogy. Therefore, differentiation can be regarded not only as a methodological innovation but also as a manifestation of prophetic values within the landscape of modern education.

Considering the findings of this study, it can be asserted that the future of Islamic Education learning should be directed toward a model that is more flexible, reflective, and learner-centered. Teachers should not only understand the theory of differentiation but also possess spiritual and social sensitivity to manage student diversity wisely. When teachers are able to create authentic learning experiences, appreciate differences, and cultivate spiritual meaning in every activity, religious education will serve as a medium for shaping a generation of faithful individuals who think critically and uphold noble character.

Conclusion

Based on the findings and discussion, it can be concluded that the implementation of differentiated instruction in Islamic Religious Education has been proven to enhance students' learning motivation and foster their religious character. Teachers who apply differentiation adjust their instructional strategies to students' readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles, enabling the processes of *ta'lim* and *tarbiyah* to occur in a balanced manner. Through this

approach, religious values are not only understood cognitively but also internalized through meaningful learning experiences.

The implications of this study highlight the importance of providing professional development for Islamic Religious Education teachers so they can develop adaptive competencies in implementing differentiated instruction in accordance with students' characteristics. Schools also need to offer institutional support, including curriculum flexibility and collaborative structures among teachers, to expand the effective application of this approach.

Recommendations and Acknowledgements

It is recommended that Islamic Religious Education teachers continue to develop the systematic and sustainable implementation of differentiated instruction by paying close attention to students' spiritual, affective, and social dimensions. Educational institutions should provide adequate support through training and mentoring to ensure that this strategy can be applied effectively. Future research is encouraged to expand the context and educational levels examined, as well as to integrate learning technologies to strengthen the application of differentiation. The researcher extends sincere gratitude to SD Islam Amanah Bangsa Muhammadiyah for granting permissions and providing support throughout the study, to the Islamic Religious Education teacher and sixth grade students for their valuable participation, and to colleagues and academic supervisors for their insightful feedback during the completion of this research.

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