

Constructive Alignment of Differentiated Instruction and Assessment in Islamic Religious Education: Implications for Enhancing *Tafaqquh fi al-Din* in Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

This study evaluates the alignment between differentiated instructional materials and assessment practices in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) within the implementation of Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum. Using a qualitative evaluative case study design, the research involved Islamic Religious Education teachers, school administrators, and students selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, and analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. The findings indicate that differentiated instructional materials have generally accommodated students' learning readiness, interests, and learning profiles through variations in content, learning processes, and learning products. However, assessment practices remain only partially aligned, as summative evaluation continues to rely predominantly on standardized written examinations despite the adoption of authentic assessment methods. The study further reveals that stronger alignment between differentiated instruction and differentiated assessment enhances students' comprehensive religious understanding (*tafaqquh fi al-din*), including cognitive mastery, affective internalization of Islamic values, and observable religious practices. These findings highlight the importance of strengthening teachers' assessment literacy to achieve meaningful implementation of differentiated learning in Islamic Religious Education.

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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary educational landscape in Indonesia is experiencing a significant transformation through the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum (Curriculum of Freedom), which emphasizes

learner-centered education, differentiated instruction, and competency-based learning. The curriculum explicitly encourages teachers to accommodate students' diverse learning readiness, interests, and learning profiles while promoting meaningful learning experiences that foster holistic competencies (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). This paradigm shift requires teachers not only to redesign instructional strategies but also to reconstruct assessment systems that accurately reflect students' individual learning trajectories. As emphasized by Tomlinson (2017), differentiated instruction is meaningful only when teaching, learning activities, and assessment operate as an integrated system that responds to learner diversity.

Within this educational transformation, Islamic Religious Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam; hereafter PAI) occupies a strategic position because its objectives extend beyond the transmission of religious knowledge toward the development of spiritual awareness, moral character (*akhlaq al-karimah*), and comprehensive religious understanding (*tafaqquh fi al-din*). Indonesian educational policy recognizes that PAI contributes significantly to students' character formation by integrating cognitive, affective, and psychomotor competencies within authentic learning experiences (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). Likewise, scholars argue that contemporary Islamic education should cultivate critical religious literacy, ethical decision-making, and contextual understanding of Islamic teachings that enable learners to respond constructively to modern social challenges (Azra, 2020; Halstead, 2021).

The implementation of differentiated instruction in PAI has consequently become increasingly important because students enter classrooms with diverse educational backgrounds, levels of Qur'anic literacy, prior religious experiences, learning motivations, and socio-cultural contexts. These differences require teachers to differentiate instructional content, learning processes, learning environments, and student products so that every learner has equitable opportunities to achieve intended learning outcomes (Tomlinson, 2017; Tomlinson & Moon, 2013). In Islamic educational philosophy, this principle is consistent with the prophetic approach to teaching, in which the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) adapted his communication according to the intellectual capacities and circumstances of his companions. Such pedagogical flexibility demonstrates that differentiated instruction is not merely a contemporary educational innovation but also aligns with long-standing Islamic educational traditions (Al-Attas, 2020).

Although differentiated learning has been increasingly implemented in Indonesian schools following the adoption of the Merdeka Curriculum, evidence suggests that the implementation has focused predominantly on instructional activities rather than assessment practices. Many teachers have diversified learning materials through digital media, project-based learning, collaborative discussions, contextual case studies, and differentiated assignments. Nevertheless, student achievement continues to be evaluated primarily through standardized written examinations and multiple-choice tests that emphasize factual recall rather than conceptual understanding, reflective thinking, or authentic religious practice (Faiz et al., 2022; Suryaman et al., 2023). This inconsistency creates a pedagogical mismatch between differentiated instruction and conventional assessment, potentially reducing the effectiveness of differentiated learning.

Assessment constitutes an inseparable component of the instructional process because it provides evidence of student learning, informs instructional improvement, and supports educational decision-making (Brookhart, 2020). In differentiated classrooms, assessment should likewise be differentiated to accommodate learners' varying abilities, learning pathways, and demonstrations of competence. Rather than relying exclusively on uniform testing formats, differentiated assessment emphasizes authentic evaluation methods such as portfolios, performance assessments, reflective journals, presentations, projects, observations, and self-assessment, enabling students to demonstrate learning through multiple forms of evidence (Tomlinson, 2017; Brookhart, 2020). Such assessment practices are

particularly relevant in PAI because religious understanding encompasses cognitive mastery, affective internalization, and behavioral manifestation of Islamic values.

The concept of *tafaqquh fi al-din* further reinforces the necessity of comprehensive assessment in Islamic Religious Education. Religious understanding is not limited to memorizing verses or recalling doctrinal concepts but involves deep comprehension, critical reflection, moral reasoning, and the practical application of Islamic teachings in daily life (Azra, 2020). Therefore, evaluation instruments that measure only factual knowledge fail to capture students' holistic religious development. Instead, assessment should examine students' abilities to interpret Islamic sources, connect religious principles with contemporary issues, demonstrate ethical behavior, and reflect upon their own spiritual growth. Such multidimensional assessment aligns with Bloom's revised taxonomy as well as contemporary theories of authentic assessment (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Brookhart, 2020).

Despite increasing scholarly attention to differentiated instruction, empirical studies examining the alignment between differentiated instructional materials and differentiated assessment in Islamic Religious Education remain limited. Existing studies primarily investigate teachers' implementation of differentiated learning strategies (Faiz et al., 2022), the development of the Merdeka Curriculum (Suryaman et al., 2023), or innovations in PAI pedagogy (Rahman & Aziz, 2023). Comparatively few studies evaluate whether assessment instruments are genuinely aligned with differentiated instructional practices or examine how such alignment influences students' comprehensive religious understanding. Consequently, an important research gap persists regarding the coherence between differentiated teaching and assessment within PAI classrooms.

Addressing this gap is essential because instructional alignment significantly influences educational quality and student achievement. According to Biggs and Tang (2022), constructive alignment requires learning objectives, instructional activities, and assessment methods to function cohesively in supporting intended learning outcomes. When differentiated learning materials are assessed using uniform evaluation methods, the intended benefits of differentiation including equitable learning opportunities, improved student engagement, and meaningful competency development are substantially diminished. Conversely, assessment systems that correspond to differentiated instructional approaches are expected to enhance students' religious understanding by recognizing individual learning progress, encouraging reflective learning, and supporting authentic demonstrations of Islamic competence.

Therefore, this study aims to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the alignment between differentiated Islamic Religious Education instructional materials and the evaluation methods employed by teachers. Specifically, this research seeks to answer three questions: (1) To what extent are current PAI instructional materials aligned with the principles of differentiated learning? (2) How congruent are the assessment instruments employed by PAI teachers with the differentiated instructional materials they implement? and (3) How does the alignment between differentiated instruction and differentiated assessment contribute to enhancing students' comprehensive religious understanding (*tafaqquh fi al-din*)? By addressing these questions, the study is expected to contribute theoretically to the growing literature on differentiated assessment in Islamic education while providing practical recommendations for improving assessment practices within the implementation of Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative evaluative case study design to examine the alignment between Islamic Religious Education (PAI) instructional materials and differentiated learning assessment practices implemented under Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum. A qualitative approach was selected because the research sought to obtain an in-depth understanding of teachers' planning, instructional

implementation, and assessment practices within their natural educational settings. The evaluative perspective enabled the researchers to assess the congruence between differentiated instructional materials and assessment instruments while identifying strengths, challenges, and opportunities for improvement. The study adopted the Context, Input, Process, and Product (CIPP) evaluation model proposed by Stufflebeam and Zhang (2017), which is widely recognized for evaluating educational programs comprehensively.

The research was conducted at selected junior and senior high schools that have implemented the Merdeka Curriculum for at least two academic years. The research participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in differentiated learning implementation. The participants consisted of Islamic Religious Education teachers, school principals, vice principals for curriculum affairs, and students who had experienced differentiated learning in PAI classes. The selection criteria included teachers who had attended official Merdeka Curriculum training, actively implemented differentiated instruction, and regularly conducted classroom assessment using curriculum-based learning objectives.

Data were collected through multiple techniques to ensure the richness and credibility of the findings. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers, school administrators, and selected students to explore their experiences regarding differentiated instructional materials, assessment strategies, and perceived impacts on students' religious understanding. Second, classroom observations were undertaken using structured observation sheets to document differentiated instructional practices, student engagement, learning activities, and assessment implementation during classroom instruction. Third, document analysis was carried out on lesson plans (Modul Ajar), teaching materials, learning worksheets, assessment rubrics, portfolios, project assignments, observation sheets, and students' learning outcomes. The triangulation of interviews, observations, and document analysis provided comprehensive evidence regarding the alignment between instructional planning and assessment implementation.

The evaluation focused on three principal dimensions. The first dimension examined the extent to which instructional materials reflected differentiated learning principles, including differentiation of content, learning processes, learning products, and accommodation of students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. The second dimension evaluated the alignment between differentiated instructional materials and assessment practices by analyzing the diversity of assessment techniques, authenticity of assessment instruments, suitability of assessment rubrics, and consistency with intended learning outcomes. The third dimension investigated the contribution of aligned differentiated assessment to students' comprehensive religious understanding (*tafaqquh fi al-din*), including cognitive understanding, affective internalization of Islamic values, and observable religious practices.

Data analysis followed the interactive model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing with continuous verification throughout the research process. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentary evidence were coded using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns related to differentiated instruction and assessment alignment. Emerging themes were subsequently compared across different data sources to strengthen interpretative validity. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study applied the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was established through prolonged engagement, methodological triangulation, source triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing. Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of the research context and participants. Dependability was maintained through an audit trail documenting all stages of data collection and analysis, while confirmability was ensured by preserving interview transcripts, observation records, coding procedures, and documentary evidence throughout the research process.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Prior to data collection, permission was obtained from school authorities, and informed consent was secured from all participants. Participants were informed about the objectives of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw from the research at any stage. To protect participants' identities, pseudonyms were used in all reports, and all research data were stored securely and used exclusively for academic purposes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Alignment of Islamic Religious Education Instructional Materials with the Principles of Differentiated Learning

The evaluation revealed that the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) instructional materials generally reflected the principles of differentiated learning advocated by the Merdeka Curriculum. Document analysis of lesson plans (Modul Ajar) showed that teachers had mapped students' learning readiness, interests, and learning profiles before determining learning strategies and instructional materials. Content differentiation was implemented by providing learning resources with different levels of complexity. Students with higher religious literacy were assigned activities involving Qur'anic interpretation, case analysis, and independent literature exploration. Meanwhile, students requiring additional support received simplified materials, guided worksheets, visual learning media, and teacher-assisted activities.

This finding was confirmed through interviews with PAI teachers.

"At the beginning of the semester, we first identify students' abilities. Some students already understand the meaning of Qur'anic verses, while others are still learning to read properly. Therefore, we cannot provide exactly the same learning materials to everyone." (PAI Teacher 1)

Another teacher emphasized that differentiated materials increased students' participation during classroom instruction.

"When students are allowed to learn according to their own abilities, they become more confident. Previously, weaker students tended to remain silent, but now they actively participate because the learning tasks are adjusted to their readiness." (PAI Teacher 2)

Classroom observations further indicated that teachers implemented process differentiation through cooperative learning, peer tutoring, project-based learning, reflective discussions, and digital learning platforms. Students were also given opportunities to choose different learning products, including essays, posters, presentations, digital videos, reflective journals, and community service projects. However, not all teachers implemented differentiation comprehensively. Some lesson plans still relied on standardized instructional activities with limited modifications for students experiencing learning difficulties.

Congruence Between Differentiated Instructional Materials and Assessment Practices

Although differentiated instructional materials had been implemented relatively well, the evaluation demonstrated that assessment practices remained only partially aligned with differentiated instruction. Document analysis showed that teachers had introduced authentic assessment methods such as portfolios, classroom observation, performance assessment, presentations, and project evaluation. Nevertheless, summative assessment continued to rely predominantly on standardized written examinations consisting of multiple-choice and short-answer questions.

One teacher acknowledged this inconsistency during the interview.

"During classroom learning, students complete different assignments according to their abilities. However, when the semester examination arrives, everyone answers the same questions because that is still the school's assessment policy." (PAI Teacher 3)

A curriculum coordinator similarly explained the challenges of implementing differentiated assessment.

"Teachers understand the concept of differentiated assessment, but developing several assessment rubrics for one lesson requires considerable time. Many teachers are still adapting to the new curriculum." (Vice Principal for Curriculum)

Students also perceived the inconsistency between differentiated learning and assessment.

"Learning activities are enjoyable because we can work in groups, create videos, or design posters. But during the final examination, everything becomes multiple-choice questions again." (Student 4)

The findings indicate that assessment alignment remains incomplete. Although differentiated learning activities have become increasingly student-centered, evaluation practices continue to emphasize standardized cognitive testing, thereby reducing opportunities to assess students' authentic religious competencies.

The Impact of Aligned Differentiated Assessment on Students' Religious Understanding

The evaluation further demonstrated that classrooms implementing differentiated assessment consistently showed improvements in students' comprehensive religious understanding (*tafaqquh fi al-din*). Teachers reported that students demonstrated greater confidence when assessment recognized individual learning progress instead of comparing students using identical standards.

One teacher explained:

"Students who previously felt less capable became more enthusiastic because they realized that teachers appreciated their progress rather than only the final score." (PAI Teacher 4)

Similarly, another teacher observed noticeable behavioral changes.

"Assessment is no longer limited to written tests. We also observe students' daily behavior, participation in congregational prayers, honesty, discipline, and social responsibility. These aspects provide a more complete picture of their religious development." (PAI Teacher 5)

Students likewise acknowledged positive changes resulting from differentiated assessment.

"I enjoy Islamic Education more because teachers do not only ask us to memorize. We are encouraged to apply Islamic values through projects and daily activities." (Student 7)

Another student added:

"Portfolio assessment motivates me because I can see my own progress from one assignment to another. Previously, I only focused on examination scores." (Student 2)

Classroom observations corroborated these interview findings. Students demonstrated increased participation in discussions, greater willingness to ask questions, improved collaboration, and stronger confidence when presenting their work. Teachers also observed improvements in students' consistency in performing congregational prayers, reciting the Qur'an, demonstrating respectful behavior, and applying Islamic values during classroom interactions.

Overall, the findings suggest that stronger alignment between differentiated instructional materials and differentiated assessment contributes significantly to improving students' cognitive understanding, affective internalization, and behavioral implementation of Islamic teachings. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of this alignment depends substantially on teachers' competence in designing authentic assessment instruments and institutional support for implementing differentiated learning.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers have begun integrating differentiated instruction into classroom practice by adapting learning materials to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. This finding confirms Tomlinson's theory that differentiation should

encompass content, process, product, and learning environment to provide equitable learning opportunities for all students. Rather than treating students as homogeneous learners, differentiated instruction recognizes diversity as an educational asset that should shape instructional decisions. The implementation observed in this study indicates that teachers increasingly perceive learner diversity as a foundation for designing meaningful religious learning experiences rather than as an obstacle to instruction (Tomlinson, 2017; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2023).

The differentiated instructional materials identified in this study also align with the objectives of Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes flexibility, student-centered learning, and competency development. Teachers provided various instructional resources and learning activities that enabled students to construct religious understanding according to their individual capacities. This finding supports previous studies showing that differentiated instruction represents one of the principal pedagogical strategies for realizing the goals of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in Islamic Religious Education where learner diversity is highly evident.

Despite these encouraging developments, the study found that differentiated instruction was frequently limited to classroom activities while assessment practices remained largely standardized. This inconsistency reflects a persistent challenge in educational reform, whereby instructional innovation progresses more rapidly than assessment reform. According to Biggs and Tang (2022), effective learning requires constructive alignment between intended learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessment methods. When differentiated instruction is evaluated using identical written examinations for all learners, the educational benefits of differentiation are substantially reduced because assessment no longer reflects the diversity of students' learning pathways.

The findings further indicate that authentic assessment has begun to complement conventional written examinations through portfolios, classroom observations, presentations, projects, and reflective journals. These assessment approaches provide broader evidence of students' religious competencies than standardized testing alone. Similar conclusions were reported by Ramdhan et al., who argued that authentic assessment within the Merdeka Curriculum enables teachers to evaluate cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions simultaneously, thereby supporting multicultural and value-oriented Islamic education.

However, teachers acknowledged experiencing considerable challenges in developing differentiated assessment instruments. Time limitations, large class sizes, administrative responsibilities, and limited assessment literacy frequently prevented teachers from designing multiple assessment rubrics that corresponded to differentiated instructional pathways. Similar implementation barriers have been identified in recent studies, which conclude that successful differentiated assessment depends not only on curriculum policy but also on teachers' pedagogical competence, institutional support, and sustained professional development.

Another important finding concerns the role of diagnostic assessment in supporting differentiated learning. Before implementing differentiated instruction, teachers in this study identified students' learning readiness through classroom observations and initial assessments. This practice reflects current recommendations that diagnostic assessment should become the foundation for instructional planning because it enables teachers to identify students' cognitive readiness as well as their learning needs before determining appropriate instructional interventions. The present study also demonstrates that alignment between differentiated instruction and differentiated assessment contributes positively to students' religious understanding (*tafaqquh fi al-din*). Students not only demonstrated improved conceptual understanding of Islamic teachings but also showed greater ability to relate Qur'anic values to contemporary social issues and everyday decision-making. These findings support the view that Islamic education should cultivate reflective understanding rather than merely memorization of religious concepts, thereby fostering students who are capable of applying Islamic principles within diverse social contexts.

Furthermore, the improvement observed in students' affective and behavioral development confirms that authentic assessment is particularly appropriate for Islamic Religious Education. Classroom observations and interviews revealed increased student participation, stronger religious commitment, improved discipline, and greater willingness to practice Islamic values in everyday school life. Such outcomes cannot be adequately measured through conventional written examinations alone. Consequently, assessment in PAI should incorporate continuous observation, performance assessment, reflective journals, and portfolios that capture students' moral and spiritual development alongside cognitive achievement.

The findings additionally emphasize that teacher professionalism remains the determining factor in successful differentiated learning implementation. Schools where teachers had participated in curriculum training demonstrated stronger consistency between instructional planning, classroom implementation, and assessment practices. Conversely, limited professional development resulted in fragmented implementation in which differentiation appeared primarily as varied classroom activities without corresponding assessment innovation. These findings reinforce previous comparative case studies reporting that institutional leadership, continuous mentoring, and teacher professional learning communities significantly influence the sustainability of differentiated instruction in Islamic Religious Education.

Overall, this study extends previous research by demonstrating that the effectiveness of differentiated learning in Islamic Religious Education depends not only on differentiated instructional materials but also on the alignment of assessment practices with differentiated pedagogical principles. The findings suggest that assessment should function as an integral component of differentiated learning rather than merely a mechanism for assigning grades. Consequently, strengthening teachers' assessment literacy, expanding authentic assessment practices, and ensuring constructive alignment between instructional objectives, learning experiences, and assessment systems are essential for enhancing students' comprehensive religious understanding and achieving the broader educational goals of the Merdeka Curriculum.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the implementation of differentiated learning in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) under Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum has demonstrated positive progress, particularly in the development of instructional materials that accommodate students' diverse learning readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Teachers have increasingly adopted differentiated strategies by modifying learning content, instructional processes, and learning products to create more inclusive and student-centered learning experiences. These practices have enabled students with varying religious literacy levels to participate more actively in classroom learning and have supported more meaningful engagement with Islamic teachings. However, the findings also reveal that the alignment between differentiated instructional materials and assessment practices remains only partially achieved. While teachers have begun incorporating authentic assessment methods such as portfolios, classroom observations, project-based assessment, presentations, and reflective journals, summative assessment continues to rely predominantly on standardized written examinations. Consequently, the evaluation system has not yet fully reflected the principles of differentiated learning, limiting its capacity to recognize individual learning progress and students' diverse demonstrations of competence.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates that stronger alignment between differentiated instruction and differentiated assessment contributes positively to students' comprehensive religious understanding (*tafaqquh fi al-din*). Students exhibited improvements not only in cognitive mastery of Islamic concepts but also in the internalization of religious values, reflective thinking, ethical

awareness, and the application of Islamic principles in their daily lives. These findings indicate that authentic and differentiated assessment provides a more comprehensive representation of students' religious development than conventional testing methods alone. The study therefore recommends that schools strengthen teachers' competencies in designing differentiated assessment through continuous professional development, collaborative lesson planning, and assessment literacy programs. Educational policymakers should also provide practical assessment guidelines that support the implementation of differentiated learning within the Merdeka Curriculum. Future research is encouraged to employ mixed-method or longitudinal designs involving broader educational settings to examine the long-term impact of differentiated assessment on students' religious competence, character formation, and academic achievement. Such efforts will contribute to developing a more coherent and holistic model of Islamic Religious Education that integrates differentiated instruction and authentic assessment in fostering students' intellectual, spiritual, and moral development.

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