



Implementing Differentiated Instruction in Islamic Religious Education to Strengthen Religious Character in Primary Islamic Schools

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A ARTICLE INFORMATION

Article History:

Received 2026-01-23

Revised 2026-04-02

Accepted 2026-04-22

Keywords:

Differentiated learning;
Islamic Religious Education;
Religious character;
Student-centered learning;
Madrasah ibtidaiyah;

DOI:

10.71280/jotter.v3i3.565

A B S T R A K

This study aims to describe the implementation of differentiated learning in Islamic Religious Education to strengthen students' religious character at MI Muhammadiyah Tahuna. This research employed a qualitative approach with a case study method. Data were collected through interviews, classroom observations, and documentation involving Islamic Religious Education teachers, the head of the madrasah, and students. The data were analyzed through data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings show that differentiated learning was implemented by adjusting learning activities to students' readiness, abilities, interests, and learning needs. Teachers applied content, process, and product differentiation through varied activities such as discussion, worship simulation, collaborative learning, reflection, posters, Islamic poetry, and personal assignments. The implementation of differentiated learning contributed to strengthening students' religious character, particularly in worship discipline, honesty, responsibility, confidence, respect for differences, and social awareness. Supporting factors included teacher commitment, institutional support, and student enthusiasm, while the constraints included limited facilities, large class size, limited learning time, and teachers' difficulty in designing varied learning materials. This study concludes that differentiated learning in Islamic Religious Education can become an adaptive and meaningful pedagogical strategy for strengthening students' religious character in primary Islamic education.

INTRODUCTION

Islamic Religious Education (IRE) has a strategic role in shaping students who are faithful, pious, and noble in character. In the context of primary education, IRE is not merely intended to transmit religious knowledge, but also to internalize Islamic values into students' attitudes and daily behavior. Religious education becomes meaningful when students are able to understand religious teachings, practise worship consistently, show honesty and responsibility, and develop social awareness in their interactions with others. Previous studies have shown that structured planning and consistent implementation of Islamic Religious Education can contribute to the formation of students' religious character, including faith, piety, noble morals, and discipline in daily life (Anshori, 2025; Ihwanah et al., 2024). Therefore, IRE learning at the primary school level needs to be designed not only to strengthen cognitive understanding, but also to develop affective and behavioral dimensions of students' religious character.

However, the implementation of IRE learning in primary schools faces the challenge of student diversity. Students in one classroom do not have identical learning readiness, interests, learning styles, religious experiences, or levels of understanding. Some students may understand



religious concepts quickly, while others require more concrete examples, repeated guidance, or varied learning activities. This diversity requires teachers to design learning that is adaptive, inclusive, and responsive to students' individual needs. Uniform instruction tends to disadvantage students whose readiness or learning preferences differ from the dominant classroom pattern. Therefore, IRE teachers need learning strategies that can accommodate diversity while maintaining the goal of strengthening religious values (Hakim & Mu'id, 2025; Zain, 2026).

One instructional approach that is relevant to this need is differentiated learning. Differentiated learning refers to an instructional approach that adjusts content, process, product, and learning environment based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Tomlinson's model emphasizes that differentiation does not mean lowering learning standards, but providing multiple pathways so that students can access learning, process meaning, and demonstrate understanding according to their characteristics. In the context of Islamic Religious Education, differentiated learning allows teachers to provide varied religious materials, flexible learning activities, diverse assignments, and supportive classroom conditions so that students can understand and practise Islamic values more personally and meaningfully (Ramadani & Inayati, 2024). Studies on IRE teachers' experiences indicate that differentiated learning can be implemented through content, process, product, and learning-environment differentiation, although teachers still face challenges related to strategies, time, and resources (Komara & Sukandar, 2025).

In the context of religious character formation, differentiated learning has strong potential because religious character cannot be developed only through one-way explanation. Values such as responsibility, honesty, discipline in worship, respect, and social concern require learning experiences that are reflective, contextual, and suited to students' developmental characteristics. Differentiated IRE learning enables students to engage with religious values through activities that match their level of readiness, such as guided reading of Islamic texts, group discussion, worship practice, storytelling, reflective tasks, role play, project-based assignments, or personal learning products. Through these varied activities, students are not only expected to know Islamic teachings, but also to internalize and practise them in daily life (Anshori, 2025; Dianti et al., 2025; Supriatna & Holik, 2025).

MI Muhammadiyah Tahuna, as an Islamic educational institution in the Sangihe Islands, faces similar challenges in Islamic Religious Education learning. Students' learning readiness, interests, and abilities vary within the classroom, while IRE learning is expected to strengthen religious character in a meaningful and applicable way. This condition requires teachers to implement learning strategies that are more adaptive to student diversity. Differentiated learning becomes relevant because it provides teachers with a framework to adjust learning activities without neglecting the essential objectives of IRE, namely the formation of faithful, pious, disciplined, honest, responsible, and socially aware students.

Several previous studies have discussed differentiated learning in Islamic Religious Education. Maâ & Yulia, (2024) developed edutainment-based differentiated learning modules for Islamic Religious and Character Education in elementary schools and showed that such modules can increase student engagement in learning. Other studies also indicate that differentiated learning in IRE can be implemented by identifying students' needs through diagnostic assessment and by applying content, process, product, and learning-environment differentiation (Dianti et al., 2025). Handayani et al., (2025) further argued that differentiated instruction in IRE within the Merdeka Curriculum can support inclusive pedagogy and enhance students' understanding of Islamic teachings. Meanwhile, research on differentiated learning strategies for children's religious-moral values shows that this approach is relevant because students have different levels of understanding and ability in learning Islam (Anshori, 2025; Iman, 2025; Safitri et al., 2025).

Although these studies have contributed to the discussion of differentiated learning in IRE, several limitations remain. Existing studies have mostly focused on module development, teacher strategies, inclusive pedagogy, or general improvement of students' learning engagement. Limited attention has been given to how differentiated learning is implemented specifically to strengthen students' religious character at the madrasah ibtidaiyah level, particularly in Muhammadiyah-based Islamic schools located in peripheral or island regions. Furthermore, studies that connect differentiated learning practices with concrete indicators of religious character—such as worship discipline, honesty, responsibility, and social awareness—are still limited. This creates a research gap that needs to be addressed.

The urgency of this study lies in the need to develop IRE learning that is responsive to student diversity while remaining oriented toward religious character formation. In primary Islamic education, students are at a formative stage in which religious habits, moral attitudes, and social behavior begin to develop. If IRE learning is delivered uniformly and dominantly through verbal explanation, students may understand religious concepts cognitively but fail to internalize them as daily habits. Conversely, differentiated learning can provide meaningful learning experiences that allow each student to understand, practise, and express Islamic values according to their learning needs.

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on the implementation of differentiated learning in Islamic Religious Education to strengthen students' religious character at MI Muhammadiyah Tahuna. Unlike previous studies that emphasized module development or general differentiated strategies, this study focuses on how differentiated learning is applied in IRE learning to support religious character formation in a specific madrasah context. The study is expected to contribute to the development of adaptive IRE learning practices that integrate student-centered pedagogy with the strengthening of Islamic values.

Based on the background above, this study aims to describe and analyze the implementation of differentiated learning in Islamic Religious Education to strengthen students' religious character at MI Muhammadiyah Tahuna. Specifically, this study seeks to examine how teachers plan, implement, and evaluate differentiated IRE learning, as well as how the learning process contributes to the strengthening of students' religious character.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study method. The qualitative approach was selected because the study aimed to obtain an in-depth understanding of how differentiated learning was implemented in Islamic Religious Education to strengthen students' religious character. Qualitative research is appropriate when the researcher seeks to explore meanings, experiences, practices, and social contexts in depth rather than measure variables statistically (Creswell & Clark, 2017; Sugiyono, 2023).

The case study method was used because this research focused on a specific educational context, namely the implementation of differentiated learning in Islamic Religious Education at MI Muhammadiyah Tahuna. A case study enables researchers to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are closely related (Adrias & Ruswandi, 2025; Klaassen, 2018; Yin, 2017). In this study, the implementation of differentiated learning was examined as a pedagogical practice that involved lesson planning, classroom implementation, learning activities, assessment, and the strengthening of students' religious character.

The research was conducted at MI Muhammadiyah Tahuna, an Islamic elementary school located in the Sangihe Islands. This site was selected because the school represents an Islamic educational institution that faces diverse student characteristics in Islamic Religious Education

learning. The diversity includes differences in students' readiness, learning interests, learning abilities, and religious learning experiences.

The participants were selected using purposive sampling. The participants included Islamic Religious Education teachers, the school principal, and students who were directly involved in the learning process. The Islamic Religious Education teacher was selected as the main participant because the teacher designed and implemented differentiated learning in the classroom. The principal was involved to provide institutional information regarding school policy, learning support, and character education programs. Students were involved to provide information about their learning experiences and changes in religious attitudes during the implementation of differentiated learning (Patton, 2014; Tisdell et al., 2025).

The focus of this study was the implementation of differentiated learning in Islamic Religious Education to strengthen students' religious character. The research focused on four main aspects. First, the planning of differentiated learning, including diagnostic assessment, identification of students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles, and preparation of learning objectives and teaching materials. Second, the implementation of differentiated learning, including differentiation of content, process, product, and learning environment. Third, the assessment of differentiated learning, including how teachers evaluated students' understanding and religious character development. Fourth, the contribution of differentiated learning to students' religious character, particularly responsibility, honesty, worship discipline, respect, and social awareness.

Data were collected through interviews, observation, and documentation. Interviews were conducted to obtain information from teachers, the school principal, and students regarding the planning, implementation, challenges, and impact of differentiated learning in Islamic Religious Education. The interviews were semi-structured so that the researcher could use guiding questions while still allowing participants to explain their experiences openly and naturally.

Classroom observation was conducted to examine how differentiated learning was implemented during Islamic Religious Education lessons. The observation focused on teacher strategies, student activities, learning materials, classroom interaction, differentiation practices, and indicators of students' religious character. Through observation, the researcher was able to identify whether the teacher applied content differentiation, process differentiation, product differentiation, or learning environment differentiation.

Documentation was used to support and verify the data obtained from interviews and observations. The documents analyzed included lesson plans, teaching modules, student assignments, assessment instruments, learning media, school character education documents, and other relevant academic documents. Documentation was important to examine the consistency between planning, classroom implementation, and assessment.

The main instrument in this qualitative study was the researcher. The researcher played a central role in determining the focus of the study, collecting data, interpreting findings, and drawing conclusions. In addition, supporting instruments were used, including interview guidelines, observation sheets, and documentation checklists.

The interview guidelines were designed based on the research focus, including differentiated learning planning, implementation, assessment, challenges, and religious character strengthening. The observation sheet was used to record classroom practices related to content, process, product, and learning environment differentiation. Meanwhile, the documentation checklist was used to identify and analyze documents that supported the implementation of differentiated learning in Islamic Religious Education.

Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which consists of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification (Miles et al., 2014).

Data condensation was carried out by selecting, simplifying, and organizing data from interviews, observations, and documentation based on the research focus. Data display was conducted by presenting the findings in narrative descriptions, thematic categories, and matrices. The final stage was conclusion drawing and verification, in which the researcher interpreted patterns, relationships, and meanings from the collected data.

The data were categorized into several themes: differentiated learning planning, implementation of differentiated learning, assessment practices, challenges in implementation, and the strengthening of students' religious character. The researcher then compared data from interviews, observations, and documentation to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the implementation of differentiated learning in Islamic Religious Education.

The validity of the data was ensured through triangulation, member checking, and careful documentation of the research process. Triangulation was conducted by comparing data from different sources and techniques, namely interviews, observations, and documentation. Source triangulation was carried out by comparing information from teachers, the principal, and students. Technique triangulation was carried out by comparing interview findings with classroom observation and document analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017; Shenton, 2004).

Member checking was conducted by confirming the summary of findings with the participants to ensure that the researcher's interpretation was consistent with their experiences and statements. In addition, the researcher maintained data credibility by recording field notes, organizing interview results, and reviewing documents systematically. These strategies were used to ensure that the findings were credible, consistent, and accountable.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Implementation of Differentiated Learning in Islamic Religious Education

The first finding shows that Islamic Religious Education learning at MI Muhammadiyah Tahuna has begun to apply a differentiated learning approach to accommodate students' diverse learning needs. The implementation of differentiated learning was reflected in the teacher's effort to adjust learning activities based on students' readiness, ability, and interests. In the classroom, the teacher did not merely function as a transmitter of religious knowledge but also as a facilitator who guided students to understand, practise, and internalize Islamic values through meaningful learning experiences.

The implementation of differentiated learning in Islamic Religious Education was carried out by providing different learning activities according to students' levels of understanding. Students with higher learning readiness were given more exploratory tasks, such as interpreting the meaning of short Qur'anic verses, explaining moral messages, and relating Islamic teachings to daily life. Meanwhile, students who still needed basic reinforcement were guided through memorization, repetition, and simple religious practices. This finding indicates that the teacher attempted to provide learning pathways that were suitable for students' different abilities while maintaining the same essential learning goals.

The implementation of differentiated learning also showed a shift in the learning orientation. Islamic Religious Education was not only directed at students' cognitive mastery of religious materials, but also at strengthening religious attitudes and behavior. The learning process encouraged students to participate in discussions, practise worship procedures, reflect on Islamic values, and express their understanding through various activities. This is consistent with the data in the research material, which states that the application of differentiated learning at MI Muhammadiyah Tahuna had a positive impact on students' engagement, understanding of Islamic Education materials, and development of religious character.

The implementation of differentiated learning in Islamic Religious Education can be summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Implementation of Differentiated Learning in Islamic Religious Education

Aspect	Implementation in the Classroom	Indicators Found
Student readiness	The teacher adjusted learning tasks based on students' level of understanding.	High-readiness students received exploratory tasks, while other students received memorization and guided practice.
Learning interest	Learning activities were varied to make Islamic Religious Education more meaningful and engaging.	Students were involved in discussion, worship practice, reflection, and contextual religious activities.
Learning process	The teacher acted as a facilitator who guided students in understanding and practising Islamic values.	Students became more active, responsive, and involved in learning.
Learning objective	Learning was directed not only to cognitive understanding but also to religious character formation.	Students were encouraged to develop responsibility, honesty, worship discipline, and social awareness.

Based on Table 1, differentiated learning in Islamic Religious Education was implemented by adjusting learning activities to students' readiness and learning needs. The teacher provided different levels of task complexity without lowering the main learning objectives. This means that all students were still directed to understand Islamic values, but the process and learning activities were adapted to their abilities. Such implementation is important because students in one classroom may have different levels of religious knowledge, memorization ability, confidence, and learning motivation.

The implementation of differentiated learning also made Islamic Religious Education more student-centered. Students were not only asked to listen to explanations, but were encouraged to participate in learning activities according to their capacity. Students who were more confident could express their ideas through interpretation and discussion, while students who needed more support could learn through guided activities and repeated practice. This classroom practice indicates that differentiated learning can create a more inclusive learning environment in which students are given opportunities to learn according to their needs.

From the perspective of religious character strengthening, the implementation of differentiated learning allowed Islamic values to be internalized through varied learning experiences. Values such as honesty, responsibility, discipline in worship, and social awareness were not merely explained verbally, but were connected to students' activities and daily life. Through this approach, students were encouraged to understand religious teachings in a more personal and applicable way.

Overall, the first finding indicates that differentiated learning in Islamic Religious Education at MI Muhammadiyah Tahuna has been implemented through adaptive learning activities, teacher facilitation, and student-centered practices. This implementation becomes an important foundation for the next finding, namely the strategies used by teachers in developing differentiated Islamic Religious Education learning.

Teacher Strategies in Differentiated Islamic Religious Education Learning

The second finding shows that Islamic Religious Education teachers at MI Muhammadiyah Tahuna applied several strategies to implement differentiated learning effectively. These strategies were reflected in content differentiation, process differentiation, product differentiation, and the teacher's role as a facilitator of religious character. The teacher did not use a single uniform instructional strategy for all students, but adjusted the learning activities according to students' readiness, interests, and learning needs. This strategy made Islamic Religious Education learning more flexible, meaningful, and responsive to student diversity.

The first strategy was content differentiation. In this strategy, the teacher adjusted the learning material to students' level of understanding. Students who had stronger prior knowledge were given

more complex materials, such as interpreting the meaning of short Qur’anic verses, identifying moral messages, and connecting Islamic teachings with daily life. Meanwhile, students who still needed basic reinforcement were given simpler explanations, guided memorization, and concrete examples. This shows that the teacher attempted to maintain the same essential learning objectives while varying the depth and complexity of the material.

The second strategy was process differentiation. The teacher used varied learning activities, such as discussion, worship simulation, question-and-answer activities, collaborative learning, and contextual examples. Through these activities, students were encouraged to become active participants in the learning process. Students who learned better through verbal interaction were involved in discussion and presentation, while students who needed practical experiences were guided through worship practice and simulation. This strategy allowed students to understand Islamic values not only through explanation, but also through direct experience.

The third strategy was product differentiation. The teacher gave students opportunities to demonstrate their understanding in different forms. Learning outcomes were not limited to written assignments, but also included posters on honesty, Islamic poetry, personal reflections on worship, oral presentations, and simple creative works. This strategy enabled students to express their understanding of Islamic values according to their strengths and interests. The use of varied learning products also helped students internalize religious values more personally and meaningfully.

In addition to content, process, and product differentiation, the teacher also played an important role as a facilitator and moral model. The teacher guided students in understanding Islamic teachings, encouraged them to respect differences in discussion, and provided examples of discipline, responsibility, and polite behavior. The data show that Islamic Religious Education teachers at MI Muhammadiyah Tahuna did not only focus on cognitive achievement, but also attempted to shape students’ religious attitudes through guidance and exemplary behavior. This role is important because religious character is not formed only through instruction, but also through modelling and habituation.

The teacher strategies in differentiated Islamic Religious Education learning can be summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Teacher Strategies in Differentiated Islamic Religious Education Learning

Strategy	Classroom Implementation	Indicators Found
Content differentiation	The teacher adjusted the complexity of materials according to students’ understanding.	Students received different levels of explanation, from basic memorization to interpretation of Qur’anic verses.
Process differentiation	The teacher used varied learning activities such as discussion, worship simulation, and collaborative learning.	Students were more active in discussion, practice, and group activities.
Product differentiation	Students demonstrated learning outcomes through various products.	Learning products included posters, Islamic poetry, personal reflections, presentations, and written assignments.
Teacher as facilitator	The teacher guided, motivated, and supported students during learning activities.	Students received guidance according to their learning needs and were encouraged to participate actively.
Teacher as moral model	The teacher demonstrated discipline, politeness, responsibility, and respect.	Students were encouraged to internalize religious values through examples and habituation.

Based on Table 2, the teacher’s strategy in implementing differentiated learning was not limited to varying learning materials, but also included the variation of activities, assignments, and teacher support. Content differentiation helped students access Islamic Religious Education materials according to their readiness. Process differentiation provided students with different ways to engage with religious values. Product differentiation gave students flexible opportunities to express their

understanding. Meanwhile, the teacher’s role as facilitator and moral model strengthened the affective dimension of learning.

These strategies made Islamic Religious Education learning more inclusive because students with different abilities could participate in the same learning goal through different pathways. Students who were initially passive could participate through simpler tasks, guided practice, or group activities, while students with higher readiness could engage in more analytical and reflective tasks. This indicates that differentiated learning can reduce learning gaps and increase student participation in Islamic Religious Education.

The teacher’s strategies also contributed to the strengthening of religious character. Through discussion, students learned to respect different opinions. Through worship simulation, students practised discipline and responsibility in religious activities. Through creative products and reflection, students expressed Islamic values in ways that were personally meaningful. Therefore, differentiated learning strategies did not only support academic understanding, but also helped students internalize values such as honesty, responsibility, discipline, and social awareness.

Overall, the second finding indicates that the success of differentiated Islamic Religious Education learning at MI Muhammadiyah Tahuna was strongly influenced by the teacher’s ability to design varied learning strategies. The use of content, process, and product differentiation, supported by the teacher’s role as facilitator and moral model, created a learning environment that was adaptive to student diversity and conducive to religious character formation.

The Impact of Differentiated Learning on Students’ Religious Character

The third finding shows that the implementation of differentiated learning in Islamic Religious Education had a positive impact on strengthening students’ religious character at MI Muhammadiyah Tahuna. This impact was reflected in students’ increasing discipline in worship, honesty, social responsibility, confidence in expressing religious understanding, and respect for differences during classroom interaction. The data indicate that differentiated learning did not only improve students’ understanding of Islamic Religious Education materials, but also encouraged them to internalize Islamic values in their daily attitudes and behavior.

Based on the research material, students who participated in differentiated Islamic Religious Education learning showed improvement in religious character through observation and questionnaire results. The learning process allowed students to understand religious values according to their individual learning styles, making the internalization of Islamic values more personal and meaningful. Students became more active in discussions, more responsive in learning activities, and more confident in expressing their opinions about religious teachings. The material also notes that approximately 75% of students felt more confident in expressing their opinions after the implementation of differentiated learning.

The impact of differentiated learning on students’ religious character can be summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. The Impact of Differentiated Learning on Students’ Religious Character

Aspect of Religious Character	Evidence Found in Learning Activities	Interpretation
Discipline in worship	Students were involved in worship simulations and guided religious practices.	Differentiated learning helped students practise worship more regularly and consciously.
Honesty	Students created learning products such as posters and reflections on honesty.	Religious values were internalized through creative and reflective activities.
Responsibility	Students completed tasks according to their abilities and participated in group activities.	Students learned to take responsibility for their own learning and group work.

Social awareness	Students interacted through discussion, collaboration, and peer learning.	Learning activities encouraged empathy, cooperation, and concern for others.
Respect for differences	Students learned in groups with different levels of ability and expressed opinions in discussion.	The learning environment helped students appreciate different ideas and abilities.
Confidence	Students became more confident in discussions and presentations.	Differentiated tasks gave students opportunities to participate according to their strengths.

Based on Table 3, differentiated learning contributed to religious character formation because it provided varied learning experiences that connected Islamic values with students’ real activities. Worship discipline was strengthened through practical activities and simulations. Honesty and responsibility were developed through reflective assignments, personal tasks, and group work. Social awareness and respect for differences emerged through collaborative learning, discussion, and peer interaction. These findings show that religious character can be strengthened more effectively when students are actively involved in learning rather than merely receiving verbal explanation.

The positive impact of differentiated learning was also visible in students’ classroom participation. Students who were initially passive became more willing to engage in discussions and presentations. This change occurred because differentiated learning provided learning tasks that were more suitable for students’ abilities and interests. Students who were not confident in written tasks could express their understanding through oral presentations, creative products, or guided activities. Meanwhile, students with higher readiness were challenged through more analytical and exploratory tasks. This flexibility helped students experience success in learning and increased their confidence.

In terms of religious value internalization, differentiated learning created opportunities for students to connect Islamic teachings with daily life. Values such as honesty, responsibility, discipline, and respect were not only taught as concepts, but practised through learning activities. For example, when students created posters about honesty or wrote reflections on worship, they were encouraged to think about how Islamic values could be applied in their behavior. This process made Islamic Religious Education more meaningful because students were guided to understand religion as a way of life, not only as a subject to be memorized.

The finding also shows that differentiated learning fostered a classroom environment that respected diversity. Students learned that each person has different abilities, learning speeds, and ways of understanding religious materials. This environment encouraged empathy and mutual respect among students. In the context of Islamic Religious Education, such an environment is important because religious character formation requires not only individual piety, but also social virtues such as tolerance, cooperation, and care for others.

Overall, the third finding indicates that differentiated learning had a positive contribution to strengthening students’ religious character. Through varied learning activities, flexible learning products, and teacher guidance, students were able to understand and practise Islamic values more meaningfully. Differentiated learning therefore became not only a pedagogical approach, but also a strategy for character formation in Islamic Religious Education.

Supporting Factors and Constraints in Implementing Differentiated Learning

The fourth finding shows that the implementation of differentiated learning in Islamic Religious Education at MI Muhammadiyah Tahuna was influenced by several supporting factors and constraints. The supporting factors included the commitment of Islamic Religious Education teachers, support from the head of the madrasah, and students’ enthusiasm in participating in varied learning activities. Meanwhile, the main constraints included limited learning facilities, large class size, limited learning time, and teachers’ difficulty in designing different learning materials for students with diverse needs. These findings indicate that differentiated learning has strong potential to

strengthen students' religious character, but its implementation requires adequate institutional, pedagogical, and technical support.

The first supporting factor was the teacher's commitment to developing innovative Islamic Religious Education learning. The teacher showed willingness to adjust learning materials, activities, and assignments according to students' readiness and interests. This commitment was reflected in the use of varied strategies, such as discussion, worship simulation, collaborative learning, reflection, and creative learning products. The research material also states that Islamic Religious Education teachers at MI Muhammadiyah Tahuna attempted to implement content, process, and product differentiation to make learning more meaningful for students.

The second supporting factor was institutional support from the head of the madrasah. The head of the madrasah provided flexibility for teachers to innovate in learning. This support was important because differentiated learning requires teachers to design varied activities, use flexible grouping, and provide different types of learning products. Without institutional support, teachers may find it difficult to implement differentiation consistently, especially when they need additional time, learning media, or classroom management flexibility.

The third supporting factor was students' enthusiasm. The use of varied learning activities made students more interested and more willing to participate in Islamic Religious Education learning. Students who were initially passive became more active in discussion and presentation. The research material notes that students showed improved participation and confidence after the implementation of differentiated learning, including increased confidence in expressing opinions. This indicates that student enthusiasm became an important factor that strengthened the effectiveness of differentiated learning.

However, the implementation of differentiated learning also faced several constraints. The first constraint was limited learning facilities. Differentiated learning requires learning media, teaching resources, and classroom arrangements that support varied activities. When facilities are limited, teachers may have difficulty providing diverse learning experiences for students. The second constraint was large class size, which made it more difficult for teachers to identify students' individual needs and provide appropriate learning support. The third constraint was limited learning time. Differentiated learning requires teachers to plan, guide, monitor, and evaluate students through different learning pathways, which cannot always be done optimally within limited lesson hours.

Another constraint was the teacher's difficulty in designing different materials for different groups of students. The research material states that some teachers experienced challenges in preparing varied materials according to students' learning needs. This challenge shows that differentiated learning requires not only teacher creativity, but also sufficient pedagogical competence and training. Without adequate training, teachers may understand the concept of differentiation but still struggle to apply it consistently in classroom practice.

The supporting factors and constraints in implementing differentiated learning can be summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Supporting Factors and Constraints in Implementing Differentiated Learning

Aspect	Findings	Interpretation
Teacher commitment	Teachers attempted to develop innovative learning through varied activities and differentiated tasks.	Teacher commitment became the main driver of differentiated Islamic Religious Education learning.
Support from the head of the madrasah	The head of the madrasah provided flexibility for teachers to innovate.	Institutional support enabled teachers to apply more adaptive learning strategies.

Student enthusiasm	Students were more active, confident, and involved in discussions and presentations.	Varied learning activities increased students' motivation and participation.
Limited facilities	Learning media and supporting resources were not always sufficient.	Facility limitations affected the optimization of differentiated learning activities.
Large class size	Teachers faced difficulties in providing individual attention to all students.	Classroom management became more complex in differentiated learning.
Limited learning time	Teachers needed more time to plan, guide, and evaluate different learning activities.	Time limitation reduced the opportunity for deeper differentiation.
Teacher technical difficulty	Teachers experienced difficulty designing different materials for different student groups.	Further training and mentoring are needed to strengthen teacher competence.

Based on Table 4, differentiated learning in Islamic Religious Education was supported by internal and external factors. Internally, the teacher's commitment and students' enthusiasm played a significant role in making learning more active and meaningful. Externally, support from the head of the madrasah provided space for teachers to innovate. These supporting factors indicate that differentiated learning can be implemented effectively when teachers, students, and school leadership work together to create an adaptive learning environment.

At the same time, the constraints show that differentiated learning cannot be implemented optimally without sufficient support. Limited facilities and learning time may restrict the variety of activities that teachers can provide. Large class size may also make it difficult for teachers to monitor students' progress individually. In addition, the difficulty of designing varied materials indicates the need for professional development programs that focus specifically on differentiated instruction in Islamic Religious Education.

Overall, the fourth finding indicates that the implementation of differentiated learning at MI Muhammadiyah Tahuna was supported by teacher commitment, institutional support, and student enthusiasm, but was also constrained by facilities, time, class size, and teacher technical readiness. Therefore, the sustainability of differentiated learning requires continuous teacher training, improvement of learning resources, and institutional policies that support adaptive Islamic Religious Education learning.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that differentiated learning in Islamic Religious Education at MI Muhammadiyah Tahuna has been implemented as an adaptive instructional approach to respond to students' diverse readiness, abilities, interests, and learning needs. The implementation was reflected in the teacher's effort to adjust learning materials, vary learning activities, and provide different forms of learning products. This finding confirms that differentiated learning is not merely a technical variation in teaching, but a pedagogical strategy that enables students to access Islamic Religious Education according to their individual characteristics. In the classroom context, students with higher readiness were given exploratory tasks, such as interpreting short Qur'anic verses and connecting Islamic values with daily life, while students who needed more support were guided through memorization, repetition, and basic religious practices. This pattern is consistent with Tomlinson's concept of differentiated instruction, which emphasizes the adjustment of content, process, product, and learning environment based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2001, 2014).

The implementation of differentiated learning also shifted the role of the Islamic Religious Education teacher from a mere transmitter of religious knowledge to a facilitator of learning and religious character formation. Teachers guided students through discussion, worship simulation, collaborative learning, reflection, and creative products. This finding is important because Islamic

Religious Education is not only directed toward cognitive mastery, but also toward the internalization of Islamic values in students' daily behavior. In this sense, differentiated learning provides a meaningful space for students to understand religious teachings through learning experiences that are suitable for their abilities and interests. The research material also shows that Islamic Religious Education teachers at MI Muhammadiyah Tahuna applied content, process, and product differentiation through varied strategies such as discussion, worship simulation, collaborative learning, posters, Islamic poetry, and personal reflection.

Theoretically, this finding can be justified through the principle of student-centered learning. Differentiated learning recognizes that students are not homogeneous learners; they bring different levels of prior knowledge, learning pace, confidence, motivation, and religious experiences into the classroom. Therefore, learning should provide multiple pathways for students to understand, practise, and demonstrate mastery. In Islamic Religious Education, this approach is particularly relevant because religious character is not formed through verbal explanation alone. Values such as honesty, responsibility, worship discipline, respect, and social awareness require habituation, modelling, reflection, and contextual practice. This aligns with the view that Islamic Religious Education should support the formation of students' faith, piety, noble character, and religious behavior, not merely the memorization of religious concepts.

The findings further show that differentiated learning contributed positively to strengthening students' religious character. Students became more disciplined in worship, more confident in expressing opinions, more active in discussion, and more respectful of differences. The material also indicates that approximately 75% of students felt more confident in expressing their opinions after the implementation of differentiated learning. This improvement suggests that differentiated learning can create a psychologically safer and more inclusive learning environment. Students who previously tended to be passive were given opportunities to participate through learning activities that matched their strengths, while students with higher readiness were challenged through more complex tasks. Thus, differentiated learning did not only improve learning participation but also supported the development of religious values through interaction, responsibility, and reflection.

This finding is consistent with previous studies showing that differentiated learning can increase student engagement, motivation, and responsiveness in learning. (Ryan, 2020) found that learning approaches that consider individual differences can increase students' engagement and motivation. (Idowu, 2024) also reported that students who receive learning tailored to their needs tend to be more active and responsive in the learning process. In the context of Islamic Religious Education, (Hakim & Mu'id, 2025) emphasized that differentiated learning can strengthen the internalization of Islamic values through contextual and enjoyable learning experiences. Therefore, the findings of this study support previous research by showing that differentiation is not only effective for academic understanding, but also relevant for religious character formation.

The role of the teacher as a moral model also becomes a crucial aspect in the successful implementation of differentiated Islamic Religious Education learning. In this study, teachers strengthened religious values not only through instructional activities but also through exemplary behavior, such as discipline, politeness, responsibility, and respect. This is important because religious character formation requires consistency between what is taught and what is modelled. Students are more likely to internalize Islamic values when they see those values reflected in the teacher's behavior. Therefore, differentiated learning in Islamic Religious Education should be understood not only as a method of adapting instruction, but also as a character-building approach that combines pedagogy, moral modelling, and habituation.

However, the study also found several constraints in the implementation of differentiated learning. These constraints included limited learning facilities, large class size, limited learning time,

and teachers' difficulty in designing different learning materials for diverse groups of students. The research material notes that some teachers experienced difficulty in preparing varied learning materials, and that limited facilities, large class sizes, and limited time became challenges in the field. These constraints indicate that differentiated learning requires strong pedagogical competence, adequate preparation time, institutional support, and sufficient learning resources. Without these supports, differentiated learning may become difficult to implement consistently and sustainably.

These challenges are in line with previous findings by (Lavania & Nor, 2020), who noted that difficulties in implementing differentiated learning are often caused by limited teacher training and insufficient understanding of differentiation techniques. Therefore, teacher professional development becomes essential. Teachers need practical training on how to conduct diagnostic assessment, map students' readiness and interests, design tiered tasks, organize flexible groups, prepare varied learning products, and assess students' progress fairly. In Islamic Religious Education, training should also include how to connect differentiated learning with religious character indicators, such as worship discipline, honesty, responsibility, and social concern.

The findings imply that differentiated learning can become an effective strategy for strengthening Islamic Religious Education in diverse classrooms. For teachers, the implication is the need to design learning that accommodates student diversity without lowering essential religious learning outcomes. For madrasah leaders, the implication is the need to provide institutional support, including learning facilities, teaching resources, time allocation, and professional development programs. For curriculum development, the findings suggest that Islamic Religious Education should integrate differentiated learning principles with character education objectives so that students are not only able to understand religious teachings, but also practise them in everyday life.

Overall, this study confirms that differentiated learning in Islamic Religious Education at MI Muhammadiyah Tahuna has the potential to strengthen students' religious character through adaptive, reflective, and student-centered learning. The approach helps students learn Islamic values through pathways that suit their abilities and interests, while also encouraging active participation, confidence, responsibility, and respect for others. Nevertheless, the sustainability of differentiated learning depends on teacher competence, institutional support, adequate facilities, and continuous evaluation. Therefore, differentiated learning should be developed not only as an instructional technique, but as a comprehensive strategy for strengthening Islamic values and religious character in primary Islamic education.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of differentiated learning in Islamic Religious Education at MI Muhammadiyah Tahuna shows that this approach can strengthen students' religious character through adaptive, meaningful, and student-centered learning. Differentiated learning was applied by adjusting learning activities to students' readiness, abilities, interests, and learning needs. Through content, process, and product differentiation, students were given different pathways to understand Islamic teachings, practise religious values, and express their learning outcomes. As a result, Islamic Religious Education was not limited to cognitive understanding, but also encouraged the internalization of values such as honesty, responsibility, worship discipline, respect, and social awareness.

This study also found that the success of differentiated learning was strongly influenced by the teacher's role as a facilitator and moral model. Teachers guided students through varied activities such as discussion, worship simulation, collaborative learning, reflection, and creative assignments. These activities helped students become more active, confident, and respectful of differences. However, the implementation of differentiated learning still faced several constraints, including

limited facilities, large class size, limited learning time, and teachers' difficulty in designing varied learning materials for different student groups.

Based on these findings, differentiated learning is recommended as an alternative strategy for Islamic Religious Education, especially in primary Islamic schools with diverse student characteristics. Teachers need continuous training in designing differentiated content, process, products, and assessments that are aligned with religious character indicators. Madrasah leaders also need to provide institutional support through learning facilities, teaching resources, flexible classroom management policies, and professional development programs. Future research is recommended to examine the long-term impact of differentiated Islamic Religious Education learning on students' religious character and to involve more madrasahs in different contexts.

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