



Management of Differentiated Learning in Primary Schools: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Purpose - This study aims to analyze the management of differentiated learning based on the functions of educational management in elementary schools.

Methodology - This research used a qualitative case study approach. This research was conducted at Al Azhar Islamic Elementary School 38 Bantul and Muhammadiyah Bodon Elementary School. The subjects of this study were school principals, vice principals for curriculum, and upper-class teachers. Data were collected through observations, in-depth interviews, and documentation studies. Data analysis was carried out using NVivo software, which included the stages of preparation, expression, coding, processing, data analysis, and report preparation.

Findings - Findings of this study on the management of differentiated learning reveal the following: (a) Planning - Differentiated learning is incorporated into lesson planning through collaborative discussions in learning communities. Teachers design instructional strategies to accommodate diverse student needs, though further development of differentiated teaching modules is needed. (b) Organizing - The implementation of differentiated learning is supported by structured curriculum management and learning communities. These communities facilitate coordination among teachers to ensure alignment with learning objectives and student diversity. (c) Implementing - Differentiated learning is applied by adjusting teaching methods and classroom activities to match students' varying abilities. The focus is primarily on process differentiation due to challenges related to class size and resource availability. (d) Evaluation - Routine evaluations, including supervision, teacher reflections, and collaborative meetings, assess the effectiveness of differentiated learning. The evaluation process also includes teacher development efforts to enhance instructional strategies and improve learning outcomes.

Contribution - This study highlights the importance of differentiated learning management in supporting the Merdeka Curriculum, offering schools insights to enhance educational practices and outcomes.

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INTRODUCTION

The implementation of differentiated instruction under the Merdeka Curriculum requires not only pedagogical competence at the classroom level but also systematic management at the school level. However, in practice, differentiated instruction is frequently approached as an individual teacher strategy rather than as an integrated component of school learning management. This condition creates inconsistencies in planning, coordination, implementation, and evaluation processes, ultimately affecting the sustainability and effectiveness of differentiated practices in elementary schools.

Case studies in primary and secondary schools show that differentiated instruction supports mixed-ability learners in accessing content by enhancing classroom engagement and aligning activities with students' readiness and learning profiles (Cigognini & Nardi, 2024; Gaitas & Alves Martins, 2017; Halim et al., 2022; Putra, 2023; Rahmawati, 2023; Suprayogi et al., 2022). Empirical studies demonstrate its positive impact on academic achievement (Sanchez et al., 2020), reading comprehension (Al-Makahleh et al., 2023), cognitive processes (Kamarulzaman et al., 2022), motivation (Harmini & Effendi, 2018), and self-confidence (Arianto et al., 2023). In Indonesia, the Merdeka Curriculum reinforces this approach by promoting flexible, student-centered learning to develop 21st-century competencies (Kemendikbud, 2022).

Despite its recognized benefits, differentiated instruction continues to face substantial challenges. Teachers often experience difficulties in designing lesson plans and differentiated modules, limited conceptual understanding, resource constraints, and administrative burdens (Gaitas & Alves Martins, 2017; Putra, 2023; Rahmawati, 2023; Suprayogi et al., 2022). These obstacles indicate that the issue extends beyond teacher competence and suggests structural challenges within school systems.

Previous studies have predominantly focused on teachers' classroom practices, pedagogical strategies, and individual competencies in implementing differentiated instruction. However, limited attention has been given to how differentiated learning is managed at the school level as an integrated managerial process. In other words, research has emphasized instructional practice but has not sufficiently examined learning management within the framework of educational management functions. This gap indicates the need to analyze differentiated instruction not merely as a pedagogical method but as a school-level management system.

To address this gap, this study adopts the theoretical framework of educational management, which conceptualizes management as a systematic process encompassing planning, organizing, directing (or actuating), and supervising (or controlling). Within this framework, differentiated instruction is positioned as an institutional program that requires structured planning documents, coordinated teacher collaboration, organized resource allocation, directed instructional implementation, and continuous supervision and evaluation. By using educational management functions as an analytical lens, this study moves beyond technical classroom strategies and situates differentiated learning within a broader organizational and leadership context.

The Indonesian government's Sekolah Penggerak Program provides structural support for implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, including teacher capacity building and school management improvement (Kemendikbud, 2022). Schools such as SD Islam Al Azhar 38 Bantul and SD Muhammadiyah Bodon have implemented differentiated instruction prior to formal designation as Sekolah Penggerak institutions, making them relevant cases for examining how school-level management supports instructional innovation.

The novelty of this study lies in its analytical focus on differentiated learning management explicitly grounded in educational management functions at the elementary school level. Unlike prior research that concentrates on teacher practices, this study systematically examines how planning, organizing, actuating, and controlling processes are structured and institutionalized to sustain differentiated instruction. The scientific contribution of this research is twofold: (1) it expands the conceptual understanding of differentiated instruction by integrating it with educational management theory, and (2) it provides an empirical model of school-based differentiated learning management that can inform policy and institutional practice within the Merdeka Curriculum framework.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the management of differentiated learning in light of the functions of educational management in elementary schools. More specifically, it seeks to critically examine how planning, organizing, actuating, and controlling mechanisms are designed and implemented to institutionalize differentiated instruction, and how these managerial processes influence the effectiveness and sustainability of differentiated learning practices. By doing so, this research positions learning management as a strategic determinant in realizing inclusive and adaptive education.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative multiple-case study design with an embedded structure (Yin, 2018). The multiple-case design enabled cross-case comparison between SD Islam Al Azhar 38 Bantul and SD Muhammadiyah Bodon, while the embedded structure allowed analysis of different units within each school, including principals, vice principals for curriculum, and upper-grade teachers. Such a design strengthens analytical generalization and provides a comprehensive understanding of complex managerial processes within real-life contexts (Yin, 2018).

The study was conducted from August to October 2024. Both schools were selected because they had implemented differentiated instruction prior to being designated as Sekolah Penggerak schools and had integrated it into the Merdeka Curriculum framework.

Subjects

Research subjects were selected using purposive sampling with criterion-based selection (Creswell & Poth; C. N., 2024). The criteria for school selection included: (1) early adoption of differentiated instruction, (2) active implementation under the Merdeka Curriculum, and (3) structured curriculum management practices. Participants were selected based on their strategic roles in learning management to ensure data were collected from key actors directly involved in planning, organizing, implementing, and controlling differentiated learning. The participants included two principals, two vice principals for curriculum, and six upper-grade teachers from both schools. This study was grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, aiming to understand how school actors interpret and enact differentiated learning management within their institutional contexts. Below is a table of the research subjects:

Table 1. Research Subjects

No.	Position	Subject Code	Education Level
1.	Principal of SDI Al Azhar 38 Bantul	KS1	Master's Degree
2.	Principal of SD Muhammadiyah Bodon	KS2	Bachelor's Degree
3.	Vice Principal for Curriculum at SDI Al Azhar 38 Bantul	WK1	Bachelor's Degree
4.	Vice Principal for Curriculum at SD Muhammadiyah Bodon	WK2	Bachelor's Degree
5.	Class IV Teacher at SDI Al Azhar 38 Bantul	BU1	Bachelor's Degree
6.	Class V Teacher at SDI Al Azhar 38 Bantul	PA1	Master's Degree
7.	Class VI Teacher at SDI Al Azhar 38 Bantul	BS1	Master's Degree
8.	Class IV Teacher at SD Muhammadiyah Bodon	BMD2	Bachelor's Degree
9.	Class V Teacher at SD Muhammadiyah Bodon	BS2	Bachelor's Degree
10.	Class VI Teacher at SD Muhammadiyah Bodon	BR2	Bachelor's Degree

Data Collection

Data were collected through observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. The data collection process followed three systematic stages: (1) preliminary mapping to identify key informants and

institutional structures; (2) in-depth field data collection through observation and interviews; and (3) document verification to corroborate emerging findings.

Observation was conducted using passive participation to examine naturally occurring practices related to differentiated learning management. Observations focused on instructional leadership, teacher collaboration, classroom implementation of differentiated strategies, learning environments, infrastructure utilization, and professional development initiatives. Observation in case study research allows the researcher to capture contextual and behavioral dimensions of the phenomenon under investigation (Yin, 2018).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview protocol aligned with educational management functions (planning, organizing, actuating, and controlling). Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted in multiple sessions when necessary to deepen clarification of emerging themes (Creswell & Poth; C. N., 2024).

Document analysis included the review of school curricula, differentiated lesson plans, diagnostic assessment records, supervision reports, and curriculum coordination meeting minutes. Document analysis served as a triangulation strategy to enhance the robustness of qualitative findings (Yin, 2018).

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using a thematic analysis approach guided by the framework of educational management functions. The analysis followed iterative stages of data condensation, coding, categorization, pattern identification, and cross-case comparison (Miles & Saldaña, 2020). All interview transcripts, field notes, and documents were read repeatedly to gain a holistic understanding. Data were coded according to themes derived from planning, organizing, actuating, and controlling processes. Within-case analysis was conducted first to develop a detailed explanation of differentiated learning management in each school. Subsequently, a cross-case analysis was conducted to identify similarities and differences across cases (Yin, 2018). The analysis emphasized interpretative explanation-building to understand how differentiated learning is institutionalized as a managerial system rather than merely describing classroom practices (Yin, 2018).

Data Validation

To ensure trustworthiness, this study applied the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Creswell & Poth, 2024). Credibility was strengthened through source triangulation (principals, vice principals, and teachers) and method triangulation (observation, interviews, and document analysis). Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with selected participants to confirm the accuracy of findings.

Transferability was addressed by providing thick descriptions of school contexts and managerial practices to enable readers to assess applicability in similar settings. Dependability was maintained through an audit trail documenting research procedures and analytical decisions. Confirmability was ensured through researcher reflexivity and a systematic linkage between empirical evidence and the resulting interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2024).

Ethical considerations were also observed throughout the research process. Formal permission was obtained from both schools prior to data collection. Participants provided informed consent and were assured of voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time (Creswell & Poth, 2024). All participant identities were anonymized using coded identifiers, and collected data were stored securely and used solely for academic purposes.

FINDINGS

Differentiated Learning Management at SD Islam Al Azhar 38 Bantul

Planning

At SD Islam Al Azhar 38 Bantul, lesson planning is conducted through a structured, multi-layered system comprising annual strategic planning and weekly pedagogical planning. The annual planning begins with a work meeting (*raker*) held in the first quarter of the academic year.

"The raker starts in January. It is already part of the program for next year... The presentation is done, everything is ready, the program is approved, everything is finished." WK1 (07/08/2024).

Analytically, this annual meeting functions not merely as administrative scheduling but as a strategic alignment mechanism that institutionalizes differentiated learning as a collective vision. Open coding identified terms such as "program approval," "presentation," and "socialization," which were grouped under the axial category of "Vision Institutionalization." This indicates that differentiation is embedded at the policy level before classroom implementation occurs. During the process, teaching modules, academic calendars, and implementation schedules are designed collaboratively and then communicated to parents. WK1 added,

"From the perspective of parents or the community, we socialize, 'What are the school programs?'"

This stakeholder engagement reflects a governance dimension of differentiated learning management, suggesting that differentiation is legitimized socially and pedagogically. The involvement of parents strengthens accountability structures and reinforces transparency in instructional design. Weekly planning takes place through the Learning Community (Kombel), conducted every Thursday.

"Every week, we can also discuss (learning) in the Kombel." PA1 (09/08/2024) further explained, *"In Kombel, we share best practices, share modules, and exchange information related to the teaching modules that will be used."* BU1 (07/08/2024).

Coding analysis categorized these practices under "Collaborative Micro-Planning" and "Professional Knowledge Sharing." Kombel serves not only as a coordination forum but also as a professional epistemic space where teachers collectively reinterpret differentiation strategies in light of classroom realities. This suggests that planning at Al Azhar operates simultaneously at macro (strategic) and micro (instructional) levels.

Teachers explicitly embed differentiation into modules across content, process, and product. WK1 (07/08/2024) emphasized, *"The teachers are encouraged to have a unified vision... The students are grouped based on their conditions, needs, and strategy characteristics."* BS1 (09/08/2024) added, *"We look at differentiation in the process, content, or product."*

This indicates a comprehensive conceptual understanding aligned with multidimensional differentiation frameworks. The selective coding theme emerging here is "Systemic Differentiation Integration," reflecting maturity in instructional planning.

Organization

The organizational structure at SD Islam Al Azhar 38 Bantul integrates hierarchical leadership with collaborative professional culture. KS1 (16/08/2024) described the structure:

"This structure starts with the principal, followed by the vice principal for curriculum, the curriculum coordinator, parallel class coordinators, and then the teachers."

Open coding identified "structure," "monitoring," and "coordination," which were categorized under "Hierarchical Governance." However, axial coding revealed that this hierarchy does not suppress teacher agency; instead, it provides policy coherence while Kombel facilitates horizontal collaboration. WK1 (07/08/2024) emphasized, *"All teachers must understand differentiated learning."*

This statement reflects normative institutional pressure, indicating that differentiation is a cultural expectation rather than a voluntary pedagogical option. The coding theme "Cultural Institutionalization of Differentiation" highlights how organizational norms sustain implementation consistency. Informal consultation practices further strengthen this system. BU1 (07/08/2024) stated:

"We often have informal discussions or consult directly with the vice principal if there are challenges."

Such practices demonstrate relational trust within the organization, reinforcing a Professional Learning Community (PLC) culture that supports continuous pedagogical refinement.

Implementation

The implementation of differentiated learning at SD Islam Al Azhar 38 Bantul reflects alignment between curriculum policy and classroom practice. WK1 (07/08/2024) explained structural differences between lower and upper grades, while emphasizing module-based differentiation.

"Each teacher is required to implement differentiated learning according to the modules that have been prepared."

This requirement demonstrates policy-practice alignment. Coding categories identified "mandatory implementation" and "module-based differentiation" as elements of "Instructional Coherence." Media adaptation further illustrates contextual responsiveness. KS1 (16/08/2024) note:

"The media is tailored to the theme."

This reveals an integrated planning-implementation loop where differentiation is operationalized through instructional media selection. Lesson study activities reinforce reflective practice. BS1 (09/08/2024) stated:

"After that, we conduct lesson study to showcase good teaching practices."

The coding theme "Reflective Professional Cycle" captures this dynamic: Planning → Teaching → Observation → Reflection → Revision. This cyclical model enhances instructional quality and sustains the effectiveness of differentiation.

Facilities also support implementation. WK1 described the provision of classroom equipment and materials. Adequate infrastructure reduces pedagogical barriers, indicating that structural capacity is aligned with pedagogical ambition.

Evaluation

Evaluation is conducted through supervision, follow-up mentoring, and lesson study reflection. WK1 (07/08/2024) explained:

"Supervision is carried out by the principal, vice principal, and fellow teachers." KS1 added, "Supervision involves direct observation of classroom activities."

Supervision explicitly emphasizes differentiated learning, indicating evaluative alignment with instructional priorities. Axial coding categorized this as "Developmental Supervision."

Follow-up includes feedback and mentoring. WK1 stated:

"The principal provides feedback regarding strengths and weaknesses, then designs training if needed."

This demonstrates a capacity-building orientation rather than compliance monitoring, reinforcing sustainable pedagogical transformation.

Differentiated Learning Management at SD Muhammadiyah Bodon

Planning

Planning at SD Muhammadiyah Bodon incorporates the concept of differentiated learning but lacks systematic integration of modules. WK2 (4/10/2024) acknowledged that an in-depth module review has not yet occurred. However, Kombel discussions remain central. BR2 (2/10/2024) stated:

"We discuss the material, student assignments, and adjust tasks according to ability."

Open coding identified "adjust tasks," "student ability," and "discussion," grouped into the axial category "Adaptive Planning." Unlike Al Azhar's strategic institutionalization, Bodon's differentiation emerges primarily from teacher-level adjustments rather than systemic design. Soft skills development is also discussed (BS2, 2/10/2024). This reflects holistic intent but limited structural embedding.

Organization

Organizational roles are clearly divided between curriculum and KBM management. WK2 described curriculum drafting, while KBM management handles scheduling.

Coding analysis identified this as “Administrative Differentiation of Roles,” suggesting operational clarity but limited pedagogical integration compared to Al Azhar’s PLC-driven culture.

Implementation

Structural challenges constrain implementation. BM2 (10/10/2024) admitted:

"The implementation of differentiation is not detailed yet." KS2 explained, "With the large number of students, it is difficult to implement differentiation on content or product, so we focus on the process."

This reveals a tension between pedagogical aspiration and classroom realities. Coding categorized this under “Structural Constraints” (large class size, time limitation, resource scarcity). Differentiation is therefore reduced primarily to process adjustments rather than comprehensive content–process–product adaptation. Teachers also face financial burdens in preparing media. This indicates limited institutional resource allocation, which directly affects instructional innovation.

Evaluation

Evaluation is conducted weekly, monthly, and semesterly. However, first-semester supervision emphasizes administrative compliance. Coding identified “administrative focus” versus “classroom focus” as dual evaluative orientations. Compared to Al Azhar’s developmental supervision model, Bodon’s evaluation remains partially compliance-driven.

DISCUSSION

Planning

Annual Planning

The annual learning planning at SDI Al Azhar 38 Bantul and SD Muhammadiyah Bodon reflects the principles of management. Both schools implement the planning function by conducting work meetings ("raker") as a forum to develop strategic programs, such as creating teaching modules, academic calendars ("kaldik"), and the School Operational Curriculum ("KOSP"). This function embodies situation analysis, goal setting, and formulation of steps to achieve them, as recommended in Terry's (2021) planning theory.

At SDI Al Azhar 38 Bantul, the "raker" is conducted within the first three months of the academic year, where teachers and school staff collaboratively design key programs, including the development of teaching modules, the academic calendar, and learning communities ("kombel"). The outcomes of the "raker" are detailed in the "kaldik," which organizes the schedule of all activities. These programs are then disseminated to various stakeholders, including parents, foundations, students, and the surrounding community. This dissemination occurs through parent meetings, providing opportunities for stakeholders to offer input and suggestions for program refinement. This aligns with the research by Tony, Bush, and Derek Glover (2014), which states that stakeholder involvement in planning enhances the effectiveness of school-based management.

Meanwhile, at SD Muhammadiyah Bodon, annual planning also begins with a work meeting at the start of the academic year. In this meeting, teachers and the curriculum team collaboratively develop various learning programs, including the School Operational Curriculum (KOSP), teaching modules, learning achievement targets (CP), and the learning objectives flow (ATP). The planning process at SD Muhammadiyah Bodon is based on the school's education quality report, evaluations of previous programs, and the needs of the surrounding community. After these programs are developed, drafts of the KOSP and other programs are presented to all teachers to receive input and suggestions. The KOSP is also publicly reviewed by involving school supervisors, school committees, staff, and student representatives to ensure broad participation in curriculum development. These processes align with the school-based management approach, which emphasizes school autonomy and stakeholder collaboration to improve educational quality (Amon & Bustami, 2021)

Additionally, both schools have monitoring and evaluation "monev" mechanisms conducted in the middle and at the end of the semester to assess the extent to which the planned curriculum has been

implemented. At SDI Al Azhar 38 Bantul, programs established in the "raker" are evaluated and refined based on feedback from various stakeholders. Similarly, at SD Muhammadiyah Bodon, "monev" involves the community in gathering useful feedback for evaluation and further development.

Thus, both SDI Al Azhar 38 Bantul and SD Muhammadiyah Bodon have adopted a data-driven assessment approach with input from various parties. According to Johnson, E., and Thompson, L (2019), a data-driven approach strengthens the validity of "monev" results and provides clearer direction for future program development. Furthermore, structured data analysis is essential for informed decision-making and for the design of targeted interventions to elevate educational quality (Schildkamp, 2019). This systematic use of data ensures that interventions are not merely reactive but are strategically aligned with the institution's unique pedagogical needs (Bertrand & Marsh, 2021).

Weekly Planning

Weekly learning planning at SDI Al Azhar 38 Bantul and SD Muhammadiyah Bodon is conducted through learning community activities ("kombel"), which serve as an implementation of the organizing and commanding functions as formulated by Fayol (2016).

SDI Al Azhar 38 Bantul has a well-structured "kombel," with the Curriculum Commission as the primary director, to ensure that differentiated teaching modules align with students' needs. Adjustments to teaching methods and learning materials based on student needs have been shown to increase student engagement and improve learning outcomes (Koimah et al., 2024). This approach also considers diverse student characteristics, creating a more inclusive and responsive learning environment (Hidayat et al., 2024).

SD Muhammadiyah Bodon utilizes "kombel" to identify student issues and develop life skills and soft skills. However, the teaching modules developed have not undergone an in-depth review, resulting in suboptimal implementation of differentiation. Research suggests that teacher collaboration can be enhanced through professional development focused on differentiated instruction, increasing teachers' efficacy in educating students with diverse needs (Dixon, David N., & Yssel, Nina, 2024). Furthermore, technological skills are crucial in primary education, supported by a curriculum aligned with global demands (Mabić, Mirela et al., 2024). Thus, SD Muhammadiyah Bodon may consider enhancing teacher training to create more effective teaching modules that cater to individual student needs and develop their life skills.

At SDI Al Azhar 38 Bantul, "kombel" takes place every Thursday, involving teachers grouped by grade level (upper, lower, or parallel) and subject areas such as sciences and languages. "Kombel" is led by a coordinator working under the Curriculum Commission's supervision. During meetings, teachers discuss lesson plans for the upcoming week, share teaching modules, best practices, and instructional strategies. The resulting weekly plan includes details on teaching materials, media, and learning strategies, which are then shared with parents to support structured student learning. The Curriculum Commission plays a crucial role in ensuring that teaching modules are designed with appropriate differentiation to match students' needs and characteristics. Teachers collaborate, receive guidance, and align teaching modules with the curriculum before they are finalized.

Meanwhile, at SD Muhammadiyah Bodon, "kombel" also takes place weekly for at least 60 minutes, where parallel teachers gather to plan lessons for the following week. "Kombel" is organized by parallel grade levels and involves subject teachers handling relevant classes. The primary focus of these meetings is planning learning materials, learning achievements (CP), learning objectives (TP), teaching modules, and developing students' life and soft skills. Additionally, "kombel" is used to discuss student issues and determine necessary assignments. Teachers across classes, using the phase model in the "Kurikulum Merdeka," also discuss lesson planning. Meeting results are documented in attendance lists and minutes, which are then reported to the facilitator of the "Sekolah Penggerak."

Overall, learning planning at both schools aligns with contemporary educational management functions. Annual planning reflects well-structured planning processes, while weekly 'kombel' meetings demonstrate effective organizational command and professional collaboration (Özdemir et al., 2024). However, SD Muhammadiyah Bodon needs to strengthen its implementation of differentiated teaching modules to better align with the principles of responsive school-based management and instructional

leadership. By conducting in-depth reviews of teaching modules and implementing data-driven monitoring and evaluation (monev), both schools can further optimize learning quality through evidence-based interventions (Pozas et al., 2020; Schildkamp, 2019).

Organization

At both schools, SDI Al Azhar 38 Bantul and SD Muhammadiyah Bodon, discussions on the curriculum and learning communities (Kombel) are crucial to ensuring a coordinated and effective educational process. Although both institutions share the goal of improving learning quality, their approaches to and structural implementation of the curriculum and Kombel differ.

Curriculum

At SDI Al Azhar 38 Bantul, the curriculum team is formed around competencies, in line with Terry's (2021) organizational concept. The curriculum team consists of the principal, vice principal for curriculum affairs, curriculum coordinator, parallel class coordinators, subject coordinators, and teachers with expertise in curriculum matters. This team collaborates to develop and design the curriculum and to plan various curriculum-related events, including teacher supervision and guidance on classroom implementation. The formation of the curriculum committee is based on teachers' competencies, ensuring that teachers specializing in certain fields join the corresponding committee. The primary function of the curriculum team is to integrate all components of the School Curriculum Framework (KSP) and ensure that every teacher receives proper guidance in implementing the curriculum. Research findings by Porath (2023) indicate that competency-based curriculum teams in schools with effective management can enhance student learning outcomes by 15% compared to schools without a well-organized organizational structure.

At SD Muhammadiyah Bodon, the curriculum team is more structured, with a clear division between curriculum affairs and teaching and learning activities (KBM). The vice principal for curriculum affairs is responsible for drafting the School Operational Curriculum (KOSP) in consultation with teachers. In contrast, the vice principal for KBM oversees scheduling and managing vacant teaching hours. In this context, the curriculum team is responsible for designing the overall curriculum framework and ensuring effective learning through efficient scheduling. A study by Johnson (2020) found that schools with separate curricula and KBM management systems have an advantage in addressing sudden challenges in teaching and learning, such as unexpected class vacancies.

Learning Community (Kombel)

Once the curriculum is established, Kombel becomes an essential part of its implementation at both schools. At SDI Al Azhar 38 Bantul, Kombel is held every Thursday, with teachers grouped by class level (upper, lower, parallel) and subject area. In these sessions, teachers plan lessons for the upcoming week, share teaching modules, and discuss best practices and relevant teaching strategies. Additionally, Kombel serves as a platform for discussing topics such as differentiated instruction and learning media. These activities enable teachers to collaborate and innovate in developing teaching materials that meet students' needs. Apart from formal Kombel meetings, informal discussions can also take place to address teaching challenges and find solutions openly with the principal and coordinators.

Meanwhile, at SD Muhammadiyah Bodon, Kombel operates under the supervision of the Learning Committee, which oversees and manages these learning communities. Kombel is divided into two types: phase-based Kombel (A, B, C) and parallel Kombel. Each Kombel is led by a chairperson who reports to the Learning Committee coordinator. The activities within Kombel at this school include coordination, planning, implementation, and evaluation of learning, conducted on a weekly and monthly basis. Furthermore, teachers also participate in inter-school Kombel through professional clusters, allowing collaboration among teachers from different schools to enhance learning quality on a broader scale.

Thus, the curriculum and Kombel complement each other in both schools. The curriculum team is responsible for designing and structuring a curriculum that aligns with students' needs. At the same time, Kombel serves as a platform to strengthen its implementation through teacher collaboration, lesson

planning, and collective evaluation. Kombel not only functions as a coordination space but also as a forum for sharing experiences, challenges, and solutions within a learning context that emphasizes teacher professionalism. Learning communities facilitate the exchange of ideas among teachers, ultimately enhancing pedagogical practices and providing innovative solutions in education (Ampanon, Kant et al., 2024; Martínez & Vecchia, 2022).

Implementation

The implementation of learning at SDI Al Azhar 38 Bantul and SD Muhammadiyah Bodon demonstrates both similarities and differences in the application of the *Merdeka Curriculum* and the distinct instructional approaches adopted by each school. Both institutions have embraced a learning model centered on meeting students' needs and on fostering continuous improvement in educational quality.

At SDI Al Azhar 38 Bantul, the teaching approach varies by grade level. In the lower grades (Grades 1–3), a single teacher covers multiple subjects, whereas in the upper grades (Grades 4–6), subject-specific teachers facilitate learning to better prepare students for the ASPD exam. This approach aligns with the differentiated learning concept proposed by Pozas et al. (2020), which emphasizes tailoring instruction to students' needs and learning styles to enhance academic outcomes.

Differentiated learning is also implemented through engaging, theme-based instructional media, such as videos, to enhance student comprehension. The school mandates differentiated instruction, which is reflected in the development of teaching modules tailored to students' needs. Additionally, every Friday, the school organizes meetings, capacity-building sessions, and lesson study activities to maintain teaching quality and provide opportunities for teachers to share best practices. The school also provides essential facilities and infrastructure, including LCD projectors, speakers, stationery, and textbooks, to ensure smooth learning processes. This aligns with research by Hasanah & Zalnur (2024), which indicates that implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum* can improve student understanding through a more flexible and structured approach.

At SD Muhammadiyah Bodon, upper-grade learning is conducted by assigning teachers to specific subjects. Grade 6 teachers coordinate with Grade 5 teachers to align learning activities with the *Merdeka Curriculum* phases, particularly Phase C, which encompasses Grades 5 and 6. Although differentiated instruction has not been fully implemented at this school—mainly due to the large number of students—the school prioritizes differentiation in the learning process, even if it is not yet fully applied to learning content or products. While challenges in implementing differentiation persist, intensive teacher training can accelerate its integration into daily teaching practices (Mabić, Mirela et al., 2024).

Parental involvement in learning activities is facilitated through regular meetings held at the beginning of each month and every three months. During these meetings, homeroom teachers, subject teachers, and the principal engage with parents to strengthen their understanding of the school's learning activities. School facilities such as projectors, sound systems, and computer labs help support learning activities despite classroom space limitations. Daulay, S.H. et al. (2022) emphasize the importance of adequate facilities for ensuring effective and sustainable learning.

Although both schools encounter similar challenges in implementing differentiated learning, their approaches complement each other in efforts to enhance educational quality. Parental involvement in learning activities is also a key aspect in both schools, contributing to a more conducive learning environment and supporting student development. With the availability of essential facilities and infrastructure, and with collaboration among various stakeholders, both schools remain committed to achieving effective and optimal educational goals.

Evaluation

The evaluation of learning at SDI Al Azhar 38 Bantul and SD Muhammadiyah Bodon is conducted to ensure effective and sustainable educational quality, albeit with different approaches and frequencies. Both schools prioritize structured evaluations involving various stakeholders to enhance the quality of education.

SDI Al Azhar 38 Bantul implements evaluation through three main activities: supervision, follow-up, and lesson study/reflection. Supervision is conducted every semester and involves the principal, vice principal, subject coordinators, and the school committee. According to Özdemir et al. (2022), instructional leadership must transcend supervision to become a distributed practice that fosters teacher professional learning. Supervision is divided into two main areas: administrative supervision, which includes document management and lesson planning, and instructional supervision, which focuses on monitoring and improving classroom learning.

During supervision, the implementation of differentiated learning, in line with the *Merdeka Curriculum*, is one of the key assessment criteria. Following supervision, the principal provides follow-up in the form of feedback and training to enhance teaching quality. Weekly *lesson study* sessions, particularly for new teachers, involve peer and senior teacher evaluations to ensure continuous improvement.

Meanwhile, SD Muhammadiyah Bodon employs a more tiered approach to learning evaluation. Weekly evaluations are conducted through learning communities (*Kombel*), where teachers share experiences, coordinate, and monitor learning activities, including differentiated instruction (Johnson, Susan M., 2019). Additionally, the principal holds a briefing every Monday to provide staff with reflections and motivation. Monthly evaluations take place on *Kamis Pon*, focusing on reviewing completed activities and planning future initiatives. Semester-based evaluations are conducted through supervision, with administrative supervision in the first semester and instructional supervision in the second semester. These supervisions involve the principal, foundation representatives, school supervisors, the Learning Committee, and senior teachers to ensure comprehensive quality improvement in education.

Overall, the evaluation processes in both schools reflect a strong commitment to improving educational quality. SDI Al Azhar 38 Bantul emphasizes collaboration and the integration of differentiated learning. At the same time, SD Muhammadiyah Bodon adopts a multi-tiered evaluation approach—weekly, monthly, and semester-based—to ensure continuous improvements in the learning process. Both schools collaborate with various stakeholders to achieve optimal educational goals, ensuring that every aspect of learning is well-monitored and sustainably enhanced. A multi-level evaluation model enables clearer and more effective assessments by linking data across different management levels to evaluate both individuals and groups simultaneously (Mohammad, Alhaj et al., 2020). Meanwhile, monitoring and evaluation processes that focus on core competencies—such as pedagogical, personal, professional, and social skills—can help schools identify specific areas for teacher competency improvement (Luthfi, Alfiah et al., 2023).

Overall, the findings across planning, organization, implementation, and evaluation demonstrate that SDI Al Azhar 38 Bantul and SD Muhammadiyah Bodon have systematically aligned their management practices with educational management theories and the principles of school-based management. Annual and weekly planning processes reflect structured goal-setting and stakeholder involvement; organizational structures through curriculum teams and learning communities (*Kombel*) strengthen coordination and teacher collaboration; implementation practices indicate progressive adoption of differentiated learning aligned with Pozas et al. (2020) and the *Merdeka Curriculum*; and evaluation mechanisms demonstrate multi-level supervision and reflective improvement consistent with Özdemir et al. (2022) and Alhaj et al. (2020). However, several limitations must be acknowledged. This study employed a qualitative multiple-case design based on interviews, observations, and document analysis, which, while enabling in-depth and contextualized insights, remains interpretive and is influenced by participants' perspectives and the researcher's analytical framework. Furthermore, the study examined only two elementary schools, thereby limiting the diversity of institutional characteristics, leadership capacities, resource availability, and socio-cultural contexts represented. The relatively small number of cases constrains broader comparative variation and reduces the scope of institutional representation. Consequently, the findings cannot be statistically generalized to all elementary schools implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum* or similar management models. Instead, the conclusions provide analytical rather than statistical generalization, meaning that their applicability depends on contextual similarity and careful adaptation to other educational environments.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the coherence between planning, organization, implementation, and evaluation processes strongly influences the management of differentiated learning in primary schools. The comparative case analysis of SDI Al Azhar 38 Bantul and SD Muhammadiyah Bodon reveals that structured curriculum oversight, systematic lesson study, and adaptive instructional supervision significantly strengthen the institutionalization of differentiated learning practices. The findings contribute to the conceptual understanding of differentiated learning management by illustrating that effective differentiation is not merely a classroom-level strategy but a systemic managerial process that requires alignment among leadership, teacher collaboration forums (Kombel), instructional design, and reflective evaluation mechanisms. Practically, the study implies that primary schools seeking to optimize differentiated learning should prioritize structured module development, sustained professional development, and supervisory models that integrate collaborative reflection rather than relying solely on routine coordination meetings. However, this study is limited by its case study design, which restricts causal inference; the limited number of cases examined; and the contextual specificity of the two primary schools, which constrains broader generalization to different institutional settings. Future research is therefore recommended to involve a larger number of schools across diverse socio-educational contexts and to integrate mixed-methods approaches to strengthen analytical generalization and refine the emerging model of differentiated learning management in primary education.

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