

Research Article

# Rural Schools and the Policy-Practice Gap: Teachers' Struggles with Differentiated Instruction in Eastern Indonesia

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**Abstract.** This study investigates teachers' perceptions, challenges, and institutional support related to the implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) in a rural Indonesian secondary school under the context of the Kurikulum Merdeka reform. While DI is widely recognized as a student-centered pedagogical framework that adapts content, process, product, and learning environment to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2017), its application in rural contexts remains underexplored. Employing a qualitative case study design, data were collected from three English teachers and two school stakeholders at MTs N 2 Manggarai Barat through semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and classroom observations. Thematic analysis revealed that teachers perceived DI as a way to recognize learner diversity and as part of curriculum compliance, but their practices often remained partial and uneven. Stakeholders expressed awareness of DI, though with differing emphases: the headmaster focused on inclusivity, while the curriculum coordinator referred to multiple intelligences and student potential. Teachers faced challenges in three main areas: managing student diversity and curriculum shifts, preparing the Modul Ajar, and addressing students' limited English vocabulary. Institutional support was evident through facilities, monitoring, and professional development, yet remained largely administrative rather than pedagogical. These findings confirm earlier studies that DI in Indonesia is conceptually valued but practically constrained by systemic, contextual, and linguistic barriers. The study recommends sustained, hands-on professional development, leadership mentoring, and reduced administrative burdens to enable DI's transformative potential in rural schools.

**Keywords:** Differentiated Instruction; teachers' perceptions; challenges; institutional support; Kurikulum Merdeka

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## 1. Introduction

Differentiated Instruction (DI) is widely acknowledged as an effective pedagogical framework to accommodate learners' diverse needs in terms of readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Tomlinson (2017; 2001) emphasized that DI allows teachers to vary the content, process, and product of learning so that all students can achieve meaningful outcomes. Studies in different educational contexts have confirmed that DI fosters learner engagement and academic achievement. For example, Aftab (2015) found that English language learners in heterogeneous classrooms became more motivated when teachers applied differentiated strategies. Similarly, Bal (2016) reported that DI significantly improved students' problem-solving skills and classroom participation. In the Indonesian context, Pratiwi (2023) demonstrated that DI could increase students' motivation in learning English by up to 75 percent. These findings illustrate the potential of DI to transform classroom practice in both local and global contexts.

In response to the need for more flexible and student-centered approaches, the Indonesian government introduced the *Kurikulum Merdeka* or Merdeka Curriculum as a replacement for the 2013 Curriculum (K-13). According to the Ministry of Education and Culture (Kementerian Pendidikan, 2021), the new curriculum is designed to empower teachers to adapt learning to students' needs, providing more space for creativity and innovation. However, as Fadhli (2022) argued, the successful implementation of curriculum reform largely depends on teachers' capacity and professional readiness. Without sufficient training and resources, teachers may continue to rely on traditional methods, creating a gap between policy and classroom reality.

This gap is particularly evident in rural schools, where access to infrastructure, professional development, and updated resources is often limited. Yuwono and Harbon (2010) noted that English teachers in rural Indonesia face challenges such as isolation, lack of support, and minimal opportunities for professional learning. More recently, Susanto (2023) highlighted that rural schools struggle to adopt the Merdeka Curriculum due to poor connectivity and insufficient training programs. These studies suggest that rural contexts require special attention, as the challenges are different from those in urban or well-resourced schools.

MTs N 2 Manggarai Barat, a reputable Islamic secondary school located in Eastern Indonesia, exemplifies this problem. Although regarded as one of the better schools in the district, many teachers in this institution continue to rely on the outdated K-13 and demonstrate limited understanding of DI. This indicates that even relatively good schools in rural areas can fall behind in applying curriculum reform. Exploring such a case is important because it not only sheds light on the barriers to DI in rural Indonesia but also contributes to international discussions on equity in education reform.

Based on this rationale, the present study seeks to examine how teachers in a rural Indonesian school understand and practice Differentiated Instruction. The research specifically focuses on examining how teachers in a rural Indonesian secondary school perceive and understand Differentiated Instruction, and identifying the challenges these teachers face in implementing Differentiated Instruction within the context of curriculum reform.

## 2. Literature Review

A growing body of research has examined Differentiated Instruction (DI) from multiple perspectives, including its conceptual foundation, practical implementation, teachers' and school stakeholders' perceptions, and its overall effectiveness. Reviewing these studies is essential to position the present research within the broader academic discourse. This section therefore provides an overview of DI as a pedagogical concept, followed by a synthesis of empirical studies related to its classroom application, perceptions, and challenges.

### Differentiated Instruction: Conceptual Overview

Differentiated Instruction (DI) is defined as a teaching philosophy that adapts content, process, product, and learning environment to accommodate students' readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2017; Tomlinson, 2001). The framework encourages teachers to create flexible instruction that ensures all learners achieve meaningful progress. Globally, DI has been associated with improved engagement, motivation, and academic outcomes across different educational levels and subject areas (Aftab, 2015; Bal, 2016). However, the extent to which DI can be successfully applied depends heavily on teachers' understanding, perceptions, and contextual factors within the school setting.

### Practical Implementation of Differentiated Instruction

A number of studies have examined how DI is practically implemented in classroom contexts. Lestari et al. (2024) and Satyarini (2022) found that teachers often attempt to differentiate by modifying classroom tasks or grouping strategies, yet the implementation tends to be inconsistent. Halim et al. (2022) and Suryati et al. (2023) similarly noted that while teachers are aware of the need for flexible approaches, they frequently rely on traditional methods when facing time and resource constraints. Zakiyah (2024) further reported that many teachers perceive DI as theoretically useful but struggle to integrate it systematically into lesson planning. These findings highlight that the practice of DI often remains superficial without adequate institutional support.

### Teachers' and Students' Perceptions

Teachers' and students' perceptions of DI significantly shape how it is enacted in classrooms. Astuti et al. (2023) observed that teachers generally acknowledge the potential of DI but also consider it demanding in terms of preparation and classroom management. Rannu et al. (2024) confirmed that limited teacher understanding contributes to hesitancy in applying DI strategies. Sulistiyaningrum (2023) also emphasized that mixed perceptions often result in partial or inconsistent adoption of DI. On the learners' side, Compen (2025) indicated that students respond positively when tasks are differentiated, as they feel more engaged and supported. These studies suggest that perceptions, whether positive or hesitant, are pivotal in determining the level of DI integration in classrooms.

### Effectiveness of Differentiated Instruction

Research has consistently demonstrated that DI has a positive impact on student engagement and achievement. Jufrianto et al. (2023) reported that differentiated reading instruction increased students' comprehension and motivation. Talaian et al. (2023) found that differentiated strategies promoted collaborative learning and improved academic performance in mathematics. Likewise, Qiuchen Li (2024) showed that DI enhanced active participation in English language learning, while Groenewald et al. (2024) confirmed its effectiveness in multilingual classrooms. Ayuningtias et al. (2023) also highlighted that differentiated approaches encourage student creativity and motivation. Together, these studies reinforce the evidence that DI is effective in improving student outcomes when implemented appropriately.

### Teacher Training and Professional Development

A recurring theme in the literature is the importance of teacher training for effective DI implementation. Sulistiyaningrum (2023) stressed that teachers require systematic professional development to gain the skills and confidence to apply DI. Andriani (2023) echoed this point, showing that untrained teachers often revert to traditional teaching approaches. Compen (2025) concluded that professional development is the most significant factor in bridging the gap between DI theory and practice, particularly in contexts where DI is still a relatively new concept. These studies collectively underscore that without adequate training and ongoing supports, the implementation of DI remains limited.

### Research Gap

While the above studies provide valuable insights into DI practices, perceptions, effectiveness, and the importance of training, most of them were conducted in urban or resource-rich contexts. Little attention has been given to rural schools where teachers face unique challenges such as limited access to training, scarce teaching materials, and inadequate infrastructure (Susanto et al., 2023; Yuwono & Harbon, 2010). This rural disadvantage can create a significant gap between national curriculum policies and actual classroom practices. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by investigating teachers' perceptions and challenges in implementing DI at MTs N 2 Manggarai Barat, a rural school in Eastern Indonesia.

## 3. Method

This section presents the research methodology employed in the study, outlining the overall approach, procedures, and techniques used to investigate teachers' perceptions and challenges in implementing Differentiated Instruction. It explains how the study was designed, where and with whom it was conducted, how data were collected, and how the data were analyzed to ensure the findings are credible and relevant.

### Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore teachers' perceptions and challenges in implementing Differentiated Instruction (DI) in a rural school context. Merriam and Tisdell (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) stated that a case study approach was considered appropriate because it allows an in-depth understanding of a bounded system, in this case, one secondary school in Eastern Indonesia by focusing on the complexity of teachers' experiences.

### Research Site and Participants

The research was conducted at *Madrasah Tsanawiyah Negeri (MTs N) 2 Manggarai Barat*, a state Islamic junior high school located in a rural area of East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. The school represents a typical rural educational setting, where resources, training, and exposure to new pedagogical practices are limited compared to urban schools. Participants consisted of three English teachers and two school stakeholders who were selected through purposive sampling. The teachers were chosen because they had direct experience in applying (or attempting to apply) DI in their classrooms. The stakeholders were the headmaster and the responsible of the school curriculum.

### Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. Interviews focused on teachers' and school stakeholders' understanding of DI, their implementation practices, and the challenges they encountered. Classroom observations were carried out to verify how DI was (or was not) applied in real teaching practices. Questionnaires provided supplementary insights into teachers' perceptions and attitudes toward DI. To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, peer debriefing was employed, in which colleagues reviewed and discussed the research process and interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### Data Analysis

The data were analysed using a thematic analysis approach. Interview transcripts and questionnaire responses were coded to identify recurring patterns related to teachers' perceptions, classroom practices, and challenges in implementing DI. Themes were then refined and categorized according to the research questions. To ensure reliability, coding was conducted iteratively and cross-checked against the data sources.

## 4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the results discussed thematically to capture teachers' perceptions, classroom practices, challenges, and institutional support in implementing Differentiated Instruction (DI).

### Teachers' Perception on DI

Teachers' perceptions provide the foundation for how effectively DI can be implemented in the classroom. Positive beliefs about DI are often associated with more adaptive practices, while limited or narrow understandings may constrain its enactment (Tomlinson, 2014). In this study, data from questionnaires and interviews to capture how three teachers perceived DI. Their perspectives are presented in five themes: Differentiated Instruction (DI) viewed as an adjustment to accommodate students' diverse characteristics, DI associated with promoting equity and inclusive practices in the classroom, DI perceived as a strategy to help students reach their full potential, DI understood as an approach that places students at the center of the learning process, DI considered as an integral element aligned with curriculum implementation.

#### *DI viewed as an adjustment to accommodate students' diverse characteristics*

Teachers perceived DI as a teaching approach that accommodates the diverse characteristics of students. Questionnaire results show that all three teachers strongly agreed with the statement *"I can determine what each student requires and is interested in"*. This indicates confidence in recognizing learner diversity and highlights the belief that identifying differences is a fundamental step in applying DI.

Teacher 1 emphasized that the essence of differentiation lies in recognizing that *"Setiap kelas pasti berisi siswa dengan karakter dan sifat yang berbeda-beda."* Teacher 2 stressed that DI involves considering whether students are *"audio, visual, or kinaesthetic"* learners when designing lessons. Meanwhile, Teacher 3 acknowledged learner variation but admitted to teaching in a uniform way, stating that *"siswanya ada 20 orang, biasanya saya samakan saja, tidak menyesuaikan dengan keadaan masing-masing siswa, jadi pembelajaran dibuat lebih umum."*

In short, while all teachers agreed that students differ in abilities and characteristics, their interpretations varied: T1 and T2 highlighted individualization based on learner traits, while T3 leaned toward treating the class more uniformly.

### ***DI associated with promoting equity and inclusive practices in the classroom***

Another perspective shared by the teachers was that DI ensures fairness and inclusivity in learning. They expressed confidence in understanding DI conceptually, as seen in their strong agreement with “*I have a clear understanding of differentiated learning.*”

Teacher 2 pointed out that “*Guru menyesuaikan proses belajar sesuai dengan karakteristik siswa*” as part of ensuring fairness in teaching. Teacher 3 emphasized inclusivity through group work, explaining: “*Biasanya dalam satu kelas yang berjumlah 30 siswa, sekitar 10 siswa yang sudah cukup bagus saya sebarkan ke beberapa kelompok agar mereka bisa membantu memberikan pemahaman kepada teman-temannya.*” His approach shows an effort to mix abilities so that all students could learn together.

Overall, the teachers associated DI not only with acknowledging differences but also with creating equal learning opportunities and fostering inclusivity.

### ***DI perceived as a strategy to help students reach their full potential***

Teachers also viewed DI as a means to help students reach their full potential. Teacher 1 highlighted the importance of considering “*Pembelajaran dilakukan dengan mempertimbangkan kemampuan dan karakter siswa.*” Teacher 2 reiterated that adapting to “*mempertimbangkan gaya belajar audio, visual, atau kinestetik*” enables students to perform better.

Teacher 3 provided specific examples of how DI supports students’ progress through remedial and enrichment activities: “*Kalau ada siswa yang belum tuntas, maka diberikan remedial, bisa berupa penjelasan tambahan atau pemberian tugas.*” This reflects his perception that differentiation is not just about fairness but also about extending opportunities for every learner to succeed.

### ***DI understood as an approach that places students at the center of the learning process***

The teachers also associated DI with the philosophy of student-centered learning. They emphasized shifting the focus of instruction from teacher-driven delivery to meeting learners’ needs. Teacher 1 expressed this by saying, “*Pembelajaran diferensiasi berasal dari kata different, artinya dalam satu kelas siswa pasti memiliki karakter dan sifat yang berbeda*” while T2 stated, “*diferensiasi berarti pembelajaran lebih menyesuaikan kebutuhan siswa, bukan hanya berpusat pada guru.*”

Teacher 3 explained how he implemented this orientation by grouping students based on ability or mixing them in blended groups: “*Ada yang dikelompokkan berdasarkan kemampuan, tetapi ada juga yang dicampur atau dibaurkan*” These accounts illustrate that teachers understood DI as placing students at the center of teaching and learning.

### ***DI considered as an integral element aligned with curriculum implementation***

Teachers also recognized DI as part of broader curriculum reforms such as Merdeka Curriculum and 2013 Curriculum (K-13). Their agreement with “*I know and grasp the idea of differentiated learning*” reflected an awareness of DI as both a pedagogical strategy and a curriculum requirement.

Teacher 1 stated, “*Strategi pembelajarannya itu (untuk kurikulum Merdeka). Selain pembelajaran diferensiasi tidak ada, cuma itu saja.*” Teacher 2 also linked DI to Merdeka Curriculum, mentioning, “*Pengalaman saya, tahun lalu mengajar kelas 7 dengan menerapkan Kurikulum Merdeka*” Teacher 3 explicitly noted differences between K-13 and Merdeka Curriculum: “*pembelajaran berdiferensiasi itu Kurikulum Merdeka*” and “*penulisan Modul Ajar juga di kurikulum Merdeka, ya?*”

Together, these perspectives show that teachers placed their understanding of DI within the larger framework of curriculum demands, recognizing that how DI is applied depends on the policies governing their teaching context.

**Table 1.** Teachers' Perception on Differentiated Instruction.

No.	Teachers' Perception	Evidence
1.	Differentiated Instruction (DI) viewed as an adjustment to accommodate students' diverse characteristics	<p>"I can determine what each student requires and is interested in" (T1=5, T2=5, T3=5)</p> <p>"Setiap kelas pasti berisi siswa dengan karakter dan sifat yang berbeda-beda." (Int1/T1)</p> <p>"siswanya ada 20 orang, biasanya saya samakan saja, tidak menyesuaikan dengan keadaan masing-masing siswa, jadi pembelajaran dibuat lebih umum." (Int3/T3)</p>
2.	DI associated with promoting equity and inclusive practices in the classroom	<p>"I have a clear understanding of differentiated learning." (Qsr1/T1=5, T2=5, T3=4).</p> <p>"Guru menyesuaikan proses belajar sesuai dengan karakteristik siswa" (Int2/T2)</p> <p>"Biasanya dalam satu kelas yang berjumlah 30 siswa, sekitar 10 siswa yang sudah cukup bagus saya sebarakan ke beberapa kelompok agar mereka bisa membantu memberikan pemahaman kepada teman-temannya." (Int3/T3)</p>
3.	DI perceived as a strategy to help students reach their full potential	<p>"Pembelajaran dilakukan dengan mempertimbangkan kemampuan dan karakter siswa." (Int1/T1)</p> <p>"mempertimbangkan gaya belajar audio, visual, atau kinestetik" (Int2/T2)</p> <p>"Kalau ada siswa yang belum tuntas, maka diberikan remedial, bisa berupa penjelasan tambahan atau pemberian tugas." (Int3/T3)</p>
4.	DI understood as an approach that places students at the center of the learning process	<p>"Pembelajaran diferensiasi berasal dari kata different, artinya dalam satu kelas siswa pasti memiliki karakter dan sifat yang berbeda" (Int1/T1)</p> <p>"diferensiasi berarti pembelajaran lebih menyesuaikan kebutuhan siswa, bukan hanya berpusat pada guru." (Int2/T2)</p> <p>"Ada yang dikelompokkan berdasarkan kemampuan, tetapi ada juga yang dicampur atau dibaurkan" (Int3/T3)</p>
5.	DI considered as an integral element aligned with curriculum implementation	<p>"I know and grasp the idea of differentiated learning" (Qsr1/T1=5, T2=5, T3=4)</p> <p>"Strategi pembelajarannya itu (untuk kurikulum Merdeka). Selain pembelajaran diferensiasi tidak ada. cuma itu saja." (Int1/T1)</p> <p>"Pengalaman saya, tahun lalu mengajar kelas 7 dengan menerapkan Kurikulum Merdeka." (Int2/T2)</p> <p>pembelajaran berdiferensiasi itu Kurikulum Merdeka" and "penulisan Modul Ajar juga di kurikulum Merdeka, ya?" (Int3/T3)</p>

## Stakeholder Perceptions of Differentiated Instruction

Stakeholders such as school leaders and curriculum coordinators play a crucial role in shaping how teachers interpret and implement DI. Their perspectives influence policy translation, professional development opportunities, and the overall school culture regarding pedagogical innovation (Pratiwi, 2023; Susanto et al., 2023). In this study, interviews with the Headmaster and the school Curriculum Coordinator provided insight into how DI is understood at the leadership level, while teachers' collective perceptions were also considered.

The stakeholders in this study expressed varied but complementary perceptions of differentiated instruction (DI). The headmaster described DI as an approach to teaching that accommodates all students by taking into account their unique characteristics. As he explained, "*Pembelajaran yang mencakup seluruh siswa berdasarkan karakteristiknya masing-masing.*" This perspective emphasizes inclusivity, highlighting the need for instruction to be responsive to the diversity present in every classroom.

The curriculum coordinator, meanwhile, framed DI more specifically as the provision of educational services aligned with learners' individual potential, talents, interests, and multiple intelligences. He defined it as "*Pembelajaran berdiferensiasi... sesuai dengan potensi, bakat, minat, serta kecerdasan majemuk peserta didik.*" This reflects a view of DI not merely as adapting teaching methods, but as a comprehensive strategy that recognizes and nurtures the full spectrum of student capacities.

Teachers also expressed their understanding of DI primarily in connection with current curriculum reforms. They reported that they had already been practicing DI because it was embedded within the implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka. As one teacher put it, "*Sudab, karena kita sudah berlaku kurikulum. Itu kan kurikulum merdeka.*" This suggests that, for teachers, DI was not seen as an optional approach but as a requirement aligned with national education policy.

The findings indicate that while both the Headmaster and the Curriculum Coordinator claim awareness of DI, their conceptualizations differ. The Headmaster frames DI in terms of inclusivity, reaching all students according to their characteristics—reflecting a broad but surface-level view. By contrast, the Curriculum Coordinator presents a more nuanced understanding, mentioning talents, interests, and multiple intelligences, which aligns more closely with Tomlinson's (2017) theoretical model of DI.

Teachers, however, tended to associate DI with compliance to the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, rather than as a pedagogical philosophy requiring active differentiation. This suggests that teachers' perceptions are shaped more by curricular mandates than by an intrinsic understanding of DI. Similar patterns have been documented in other Indonesian studies, where DI is acknowledged in theory but reduced to curriculum-related obligations in practice (Astuti et al., 2023; Zakiyah, 2024)

In sum, the leadership discourse at the school shows partial alignment with international DI frameworks but lacks consistent translation into classroom practices. This underscores the policy–practice gap: while stakeholders voice support for DI, teachers often reduce it to curriculum compliance, leaving its transformative potential underutilized.

**Table 2.** Stakeholder Perceptions on Differentiated Instruction (DI).

Participant	Perception on DI	Evidence (Interview Statements)
Headmaster	DI is teaching that accommodates all students based on their characteristics.	" <i>Pembelajaran yang mencakup seluruh siswa berdasarkan karakteristiknya masing-masing.</i> " (Int4/Hm)
Curriculum Coordinator	DI means providing educational services tailored to students' potential, talents, interests, and multiple intelligences.	" <i>Pembelajaran berdiferensiasi... sesuai dengan potensi, bakat, minat, serta kecerdasan majemuk peserta didik.</i> " (Int5/WK)

## Teachers' Challenges in Implementing Differentiated Instruction

Understanding the challenges faced by teachers is essential to explain why DI often remains underdeveloped in practice. Although teachers may value DI conceptually, its implementation is shaped by both internal and external constraints such as workload, curriculum demands, and resource availability (Susanto et al., 2023; Yuwono & Harbon, 2010). Data from interviews, observations, and documents revealed a complex set of barriers that influenced how teachers at MTs N 2 Manggarai Barat enacted DI in their classrooms.

The challenges teachers faced in implementing differentiated instruction (DI), revealed through interviews and questionnaires. The challenges are categorized into three main themes: (a) difficulties in implementing differentiated instruction, (b) challenges in developing or designing the *Modul Ajar*, and (c) obstacles related to language use and comprehension.

### ***Difficulties in implementing differentiated instruction.***

Although teachers acknowledged the importance of differentiated instruction, they encountered considerable obstacles in putting it into practice. Questionnaire data revealed variations in difficulty levels: Teacher 1 reported low difficulty (score = 2), Teacher 2 moderate difficulty (3), and Teacher 3 higher difficulty (4).

Teacher 1 highlighted student diversity—particularly differences in character and learning styles—as the main challenge, noting that this aspect was more demanding than technical or structural issues. She stated: “*Tantangan utamanya ada pada perbedaan karakter siswa, sementara untuk hal lain tidak ada.*” Teacher 2 mentioned: “*Ya, memang ada kesulitan untuk beradaptasi kembali, dan itu juga akan berpengaruh pada siswa. Namun, tidak ada salahnya untuk mencoba.*” He emphasized the difficulty of adapting to new instructional approaches, admitting that the process was challenging both for herself and her students, though she remained willing to improve. In contrast, Teacher 3 pointed to curriculum-related issues, criticizing the frequent policy shifts such as the transition from K-13 to the *Merdeka Curriculum*. He said: “*Pertama, dari sisi kurikulum, dengan adanya Kurikulum Merdeka guru justru lebih banyak disibukkan oleh urusan perangkat dibandingkan fokus mengajar.*” He argued that these changes burdened teachers with administrative work instead of classroom practice and created disparities between well-equipped schools in Java and those in eastern Indonesia with fewer resources.

In summary, Teacher 1 struggled with student diversity, Teacher 2 with instructional adaptation, and Teacher 3 with systemic barriers such as curriculum instability and unequal school readiness. Together, these perspectives show how challenges in DI arise from both classroom-level and policy-level factors.

### ***Challenges in developing or designing the Modul Ajar***

Another challenge was preparing the *Modul Ajar*. Teacher 2 in particular admitted frequent difficulties in this area. He often struggled to determine appropriate learning models and assessments, to align learning objectives (TP and ATP) with time allocation, and to organize lesson components effectively. He described the process as step-by-step and demanding, particularly in sequencing objectives with limited lesson hours. His statements reveal three main difficulties: (1) selecting suitable models and methods, (2) managing time in relation to objectives, and (3) deciding on assessments and components: “*Biasanya saya mengalami kesulitan dalam menentukan model pembelajaran yang tepat beserta asesmennya. Tantangan lain adalah menetapkan jumlah jam yang diperlukan serta merumuskan tujuan pembelajaran (TP). Setelah TP selesai, barulah bisa disusun ATP. Selain itu, saya juga sering kesulitan memilih metode, menentukan asesmen, dan menyusun komponen yang akan dimasukkan ke dalam bahan ajar.*” While He understood the importance of structured preparation, translating it into practice remained a demanding task.

### ***Obstacles related to language use and comprehension***

A key challenge for all three teachers was students’ limited English vocabulary. Teacher 1 noted that students’ lack of vocabulary made speaking practice especially difficult, as she stated: “*Secara umum, kesulitan paling sederhana adalah anak-anak masih sangat minim kosa kata, sehingga ketika saya mengajak mereka berbicara, banyak mengalami kesulitan.*” (Int1/T1). Teacher 2 mentioned: “*Siswa masih kekurangan kosa kata untuk speaking, sehingga beberapa menit sebelum memulai pelajaran biasanya saya memberikan kosa kata baru terlebih dahulu.*” He stressed that vocabulary was the foundation of all language skills—reading, writing, and speaking—and explained how she introduced five new words in every lesson and checked students’ retention in subsequent sessions. Teacher 3 also identified limited vocabulary as a challenge, especially in speaking, and often used code-switching between English and Indonesian to facilitate understanding, as he said: “*Dalam kegiatan speaking, saya kadang menggunakan dua bahasa, sedikit dalam bahasa Inggris lalu dilanjutkan dengan bahasa Indonesia.*”

Overall, the language barrier stemmed largely from students’ insufficient vocabulary, which directly affected their performance in speaking and writing. Teachers attempted to address this issue through vocabulary drills (T2), oral practice (T1), and code-switching (T3).

However, it remained a consistent obstacle to effective implementation of differentiated instruction.

**Table 3.** Teachers' Challenges in Implementing Differentiated Instruction (DI).

Challenge Area	Evidence
Difficulties in implementing differentiated instruction	<p>"I experience challenges in applying differentiated learning in the classes I teach." (Qsr11/T1=2, T2=3, T3=4)</p> <p>"Tantangan utamanya ada pada perbedaan karakter siswa, sementara untuk hal lain tidak ada." (Int1/T1)</p> <p>"Ya, memang ada kesulitan untuk beradaptasi kembali, dan itu juga akan berpengaruh pada siswa. Namun, tidak ada salahnya untuk mencoba." (Int2/T2)</p> <p>"Pertama, dari sisi kurikulum, dengan adanya Kurikulum Merdeka guru justru lebih banyak disibukkan oleh urusan perangkat dibandingkan fokus mengajar." (Int3/T3)</p>
Challenges in developing or designing the Modul Ajar	<p>"Biasanya saya mengalami kesulitan dalam menentukan model pembelajaran yang tepat beserta asesmennya. Tantangan lain adalah menetapkan jumlah jam yang diperlukan serta merumuskan tujuan pembelajaran (TP). Setelah TP selesai, barulah bisa disusun ATP. Selain itu, saya juga sering kesulitan memilih metode, menentukan asesmen, dan menyusun komponen yang akan dimasukkan ke dalam bahan ajar." (Int2/T2)</p>
Obstacles related to language use and comprehension	<p>"Secara umum, kesulitan paling sederhana adalah anak-anak masih sangat minim kosa kata, sehingga ketika saya mengajak mereka berbicara, banyak mengalami kesulitan." (Int1/T1)</p> <p>"Siswa masih kekurangan kosa kata untuk speaking, sehingga beberapa menit sebelum memulai pelajaran biasanya saya memberikan kosa kata baru terlebih dahulu." (Int2/T2)</p> <p>"Dalam kegiatan speaking, saya kadang menggunakan dua bahasa, sedikit dalam bahasa Inggris lalu dilanjutkan dengan bahasa Indonesia." (Int3/T3)</p>

### Institutional Support for Differentiated Instruction

Institutional support plays a decisive role in shaping how teachers interpret and practice Differentiated Instruction (DI). Support from leadership, facilities, and professional development opportunities can either strengthen or constrain teachers' classroom practices (Fadhli, 2022). At MTs N 2 Manggarai Barat, interviews with the Headmaster and Curriculum Coordinator highlighted several dimensions of institutional assistance.

The institution provided several forms of support to facilitate the implementation of differentiated instruction (DI). In terms of facilities, the headmaster explained that the school had supplied essential resources such as LCD projectors, CCTV, and other basic learning media. As he stated, "*Sarana perasa renai seperti LCD, CCTV.*" These tools were intended to enhance teaching delivery and classroom monitoring, although their use was still limited to fundamental instructional purposes.

Support was also given through professional development opportunities. The curriculum coordinator noted that teachers were regularly involved in workshops, MGMP activities, DIKLAT, and assistance from the curriculum team. He highlighted, "*Pelatihan, workshop, asistensi, supervisi administrasi, supervisi kelas.*" Such programs aimed to build teachers' capacity in applying DI while also strengthening their administrative and classroom practices.

The institution further emphasized monitoring and evaluation as a way to sustain DI implementation. Supervisory visits, classroom observations, and semester evaluations were conducted to assess teachers' performance and progress. This was reinforced through the practice of "*Supervisi langsung oleh Kepala Madrasah... evaluasi setiap akhir semester.*"

Finally, the leadership role of school leaders was seen as crucial in supporting DI. Leaders provided ongoing motivation, supervision, and assistance in problem-solving. Their role was described as "*Perannya sangat penting... melakukan supervisi secara berkala, mendengar keluh guru.*" This indicates that beyond formal procedures, leadership support was also exercised through listening and responding to teachers' concerns, thereby fostering a more supportive environment for differentiation. The data suggest that institutional support is visible yet more administrative than pedagogical. Facilities such as projectors and CCTV are

available, and monitoring systems are consistently implemented. Leadership involvement is also evident, with the Headmaster playing both supervisory and motivational roles. Professional development opportunities exist in the form of workshops and MGMP activities, but these are irregular and often administrative in focus rather than tailored to DI pedagogy.

This pattern reflects what Fadhli (2022) observed in other Indonesian schools: support is structurally present but not consistently oriented toward building teacher pedagogical competence. The result is that while teachers are monitored and equipped with basic resources, their capacity to meaningfully differentiate instruction remains underdeveloped. Sustained, hands-on professional learning is therefore required to bridge the gap between institutional provisions and classroom realities.

**Table 4.** Institutional Support for Differentiated Instruction (DI).

Area	Reported Practice	Evidence
Facilities	Providing LCD projectors, CCTV, and basic learning media.	"Sarana prasarana seperti LCD, CCTV." (Int54/Hm)
Professional Development	Workshops, MGMP, DIKLAT, assistance from curriculum team.	"Pelatihan, workshop, asistensi, supervisi administrasi, supervisi kelas." (Int5/WK)
Monitoring & Evaluation	Supervisory visits, observations, semester evaluation.	"Supervisi langsung oleh Kepala Madrasah... evaluasi setiap akhir semester." (Int4/Hm)
Leadership Role	Motivation, supervision, problem-solving.	"Perannya sangat penting... melakukan supervisi secara berkala, mendengar keluhan guru." (Int5/WK)

## 6. Conclusion

This study highlights that although teachers and stakeholders at MTs N 2 Manggarai Barat conceptually value Differentiated Instruction (DI) as part of the Kurikulum Merdeka, its classroom implementation remains partial and inconsistent. Teachers perceive DI as a means to recognize learner diversity, promote inclusivity, and align with curriculum demands, yet their practices are constrained by curriculum shifts, difficulties in preparing the *Modul Ajar*, and students' limited English vocabulary. Stakeholders also acknowledge DI, but their perspectives vary, with leadership discourses often reduced to administrative compliance rather than deep pedagogical support.

These findings reinforce the existence of a policy–practice gap: while DI is officially recognized, teachers face structural, contextual, and linguistic barriers that hinder its transformative potential. The study contributes to knowledge by shedding light on how rural school settings in Indonesia struggle to operationalize DI, thereby emphasizing the need for hands-on professional development, leadership mentoring, and reduced administrative burdens.

However, the research is limited to one rural secondary school and a small sample of teachers and stakeholders. Future research could adopt a longitudinal or comparative design to explore DI implementation across rural and urban contexts, and to examine how professional learning interventions may bridge the gap between policy and practice.

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