Differentiated Instruction in Melayu Islam Beraja: Exploring Teachers' Experiences Through the Lens of Intention, Subjective Norms, and Perceived Behavior Control

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ABSTRACT

In today's evolving education system, there is an increasing demand for teaching approaches that are inclusive and student-centered. A relevant approach is Differentiated Instruction, which aims to meet students' diverse learning needs. However, its implementation in the teaching of Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB) in Brunei Darussalam has not been widely explored. Therefore, this study explores on the implementation of Differentiated Instruction by MIB teachers in their classrooms and the impact it has on their teaching practices. A qualitative, phenomenological approach was employed, involving nine teachers from five government secondary schools, selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, then were analysed using Atlas.ti 9. To ensure validity and reliability of this research, triangulation, participant validation, a pilot study, and supervisor verification were carried out. The findings reveal that the use of Differentiated Instruction in MIB teaching is categorized under three main components: Attitudes towards behavior, Subjective Norms and perceived behavior control. On the whole, the study highlights that Differentiated Instruction is a useful and effective pedagogical approach for the MIB subject. It is recommended that teachers continue to develop their skills in Differentiated Instruction through ongoing professional training. This will help them better meet students' varied learning needs and improve teaching quality within Brunei's education system.

Keywords: Differentiated Instruction, attitude towards behavior, subjectice norms, perceived behavior control

INTRODUCTION

The nation's education system in the 21st century seeks to provide quality education through effective teaching and meaningful student learning, supported by a comprehensive curriculum that meets needs, interests, and abilities. Teachers are expected to practice varied instructional strategies, as no single method is effective in all contexts (Ministry of Education, 2013). Each subject area requires different approaches, and the Ministry of Education therefore advocates the use of diverse pedagogical methods, such as group and pair work, videos, and simulations. Within the SPN21 framework, teachers are expected to serve not only as instructors but also as facilitators of learning, mentors, evaluators, and knowledgeable guides for their students.

Applying diverse and engaging teaching approaches helps motivate students and supports their emotional needs and self-esteem (Ministry of Education, 2013). This is especially important for students who struggle or whose performance falls below their potential, as varied strategies can make learning more accessible. Employing multiple teaching methods and resources can also enhance instructional quality and foster students' critical and creative thinking. Differentiated Instruction, in this regard, is a particularly relevant approach for modern classrooms (Danial Arif, 2020).

Beyond academic goals, the National Education System also seeks to instill positive values and attitudes through the teaching of MIB. This subject is compulsory at both primary and secondary levels under the Department of Curriculum Development, Ministry of Education (Abdul Latif, 2004). It is also taught in the Institute of Brunei

Technical Education and Politeknik Brunei to further strengthen the philosophy of MIB within the Bruneian community.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Theory of Planned Behavior is one of the most widely applied theoretical for examining intentions and attitudes toward behavior, which are generally found to be associated with actual behavior (Teo, 2012; Voet & De Wever, 2020). Understanding behavior highlights that beliefs are the primary factors that determine and influence teaching practices, and these have long been the focus of educational research (Ajzen, 1985; Pajares, 1992; Specht et al., 2016). Beliefs are viewed as psychological constructs, assumptions, or propositions that individuals hold to be true (Richardson, 1996). Beliefs exert a broad influence on one's thinking, attitudes, and behaviors (Pajares, 1992). Given the inclusive scope of beliefs in education, it is essential to differentiate between general and specific beliefs in educational discussions (Pajares, 1992). Azizi (2007) highlighted that behavior reflects values and beliefs, shaping how individuals respond to different situations, while Norhaya (2015) and Nor Hasmaliza (2016) added that behavior involves cognitive, affective, and conative aspects that collectively influence individual responses toward objects or phenomena.

Previous studies have revealed that teachers who had positive beliefs and attitudes toward the use of Differentiated Instruction are highly expected to implement it effectively (Said, 2019; Hsiang et al., 2020; Yu & Cho, 2022; Magableh & Abdullah, 2020; Klepsch & Seufert, 2020; Nychkalo et al., 2020). Nevertheless, several studies have reported teachers' negative attitudes toward Differentiated Instruction, particularly among those who were skeptical or uncertain of its effectiveness, leading to low levels of implementation (Klepsch & Seufert, 2020; Hsiang et al., 2020). Gheyssens et al. (2023b) further emphasized that some teachers felt incapable of implementing Differentiated Instruction in their teaching and questioned the adequacy of their abilities and efforts. Casey and Gable (2011) reported that novice teachers often encounter challenges in implementing Differentiated Instruction, resulting in lower levels of adoption due to insufficient conceptual knowledge and limited classroom management skills. Such challenges hinder the comprehensive and in-depth application of Differentiated Instruction.

In addition, teachers' adherence to traditional teaching methods often conflicts with the principles of Differentiated Instruction, which further constrains its effective implementation in the classroom. Brevik et al. (2018) found that although teachers acknowledged the importance of Differentiated Instruction, they still require confidence in implementing it. This is consistent with Whitley et al. (2019), who discovered that teachers spoke concerns about their ability to implement Differentiated Instruction due to inadequate professional training and restricted access to resources. According to Whitley et al. (2019), the effectiveness of Differentiated Instruction depends heavily on the level of support provided by schools, as well as by social and institutional stakeholders. Without systematic support, teachers face difficulties in implementing Differentiated Instruction effectively and comprehensively. Despite these challenges, several studies stressed that teachers' self-efficacy plays a vital role in the implementation of Differentiated Instruction. Wan (2015) reported that teachers who are confident in their beliefs and pedagogical principles are more likely to adopt new pedagogical practices, including Differentiated Instruction. Said (2019) found that teachers' positive attitudes toward Differentiated Instruction in English language teaching enhanced student collaboration and increased the relevance of learning to 21st-century needs.

Furthermore, teachers' beliefs in the effectiveness of Differentiated Instruction have been associated with instructional strategies, student motivation, and academic achievement (Midgley et al., 1989; Thoonen et al., 2011; Holzberger et al., 2013; Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019; Reis et al., 2011; Valiandes, 2015). Holzberger et al. (2013) argued that teachers with high self-efficacy are more likely to adopt student-centered teaching approaches, implement flexible instructional designs, and maintain a commitment to providing ongoing learning support. This finding is supported by King-Sears and Baker (2014), who observed that teachers with high confidence are able to sustain motivation and consistency even when working with high-needs students. Nonetheless, recent studies (Gheyssens et al., 2020; Gheyssens et al., 2023b) reveal that while teachers grasp the concept of Differentiated Instruction, many struggle to implement it consistently due to difficulties in translating pedagogical understanding into classroom practice.

From the students' perspective, Mavroudi's (2016) study revealed that 87% of respondents expressed positive attitudes toward tasks adjusted to their achievement levels, while 93.2% agreed that teachers should adapt question difficulty according to student abilities. The study also found that Differentiated Instruction was chosen by 41.7% of respondents as the most effective strategy, compared to collaborative learning (22.7%) and student grouping (22.7%).

Overall, research on teachers' beliefs and attitudes in teaching indicates that these factors play a pivotal role in determining the extent to which Differentiated Instruction is applied. Teachers with positive attitudes are more likely to employ a range of student-centered strategies and resources (Yu & Cho, 2022; Lei & Marešová, 2018). Maruf (2023) confirmed a strong relationship between teachers' beliefs about Differentiated Instruction and the frequency of its implementation in classrooms, a finding consistent with Shareefa et al. (2021), Schwab et al. (2019), and Letzel et al. (2020). Moreover, Differentiated Instruction not only benefits student achievement but also enhances teachers' instructional performance, including their reflective observation of their own teaching practices (Aranda & Zamora, 2016).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach to explore the implementation of Differentiated Instruction in the teaching of MIB in Brunei Darussalam. According to Creswell (2008), qualitative research allows researchers to generate patterns, categories, and themes from data obtained through close interaction with participants. Bogdan and Taylor (1975) emphasized that this approach produces rich, descriptive data expressed through words and observations, while Kirk and Miller (1986) described it as a social science tradition that relies on language, interaction, and human experiences.

Research Design and Approach

The specific design employed is phenomenology, which focuses on participants' lived experiences regarding a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 1998; Smith, 2003). Specifically, a descriptive phenomenological approach based on Edmund Husserl was chosen to explore teachers' experiences in applying Differentiated Instruction. This approach highlights describing participants' experiences as they are lived, without the researcher's preconceptions or interpretations (Husserl, 1963; Gearing, 2004). To maintain this focus, the researcher implemented bracketing, setting aside personal beliefs and assumptions about Differentiated Instruction to ensure findings reflect participants' genuine experiences (Tufford & Newman, 2010; Giorgi, 2009).

Phenomenological procedures involve identifying the phenomenon, selecting participants, conducting data collection, analysing data, and reporting findings (Creswell, 2015). Through in-depth interviews, the researcher uncovers implicit meanings in teachers' experiences and explores their implications for teaching practice (Farid, 2018; Bertens, 2006). This approach emphasizes the close connection between experience, interpretation, and shared meaning among participants.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collected through interviews were organized and analysed using Atlas.ti 9 software to categorize research findings. Using Atlas.ti 9, the researcher conducted thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization with the data, initial coding, generating themes, checking the validity and reliability of themes, defining and naming themes, and interpreting and reporting findings.

Therefore, phenomenology is considered the most suitable approach for achieving the objectives of this study, namely to explore teachers' experiences in implementing Differentiated Instruction in MIB teaching. The data obtained are expected to provide comprehensive insights into how educational policies promoting diverse instructional strategies are enacted, aligned with the goals of SPN-21 and the Ministry of Education's Strategic Plan 2023–2027.

Data Collection Phases

To address the research questions, the study was conducted in two phases:

Phase One – Semi-structured interviews to explore teachers' understanding, practices, influences, and needs regarding Differentiated Instruction.

Phase Two – Classroom observations and document analysis to support and validate the interview findings.

Ethical Considerations

All information collected in this study was kept confidential and in accordance with ethical standards. Participants were informed that data would be used solely for research purposes, and consent was obtained through a signed Participant Consent Form. Written permission was also secured from the Department of Planning, Development, and Research, Ministry of Education. To protect identities, pseudonyms were used for all participants and schools involved.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that the preparation of MIB teachers prior to implementing Differentiated Instruction was primarily influenced by their understanding of students' cognitive abilities and learning potential. This finding aligns with the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), which suggests that an individual's behavior is guided by their attitudes toward the behavior, social norms, and perceived behavioral control. In this context, teachers' intentions to implement Differentiated Instruction were shaped by their understanding, experience, and evaluation of its effectiveness, as well as the social and institutional expectations placed upon them.

Theme 1: Teacher Beliefs and Attitudes.

Attitude toward behavior reflects the teachers' positive or negative evaluation of Differentiated Instruction. This showed that teachers recognized Differentiated Instruction as an instructional approach that enables activities, strategies, and exercises to be adapted to the diverse needs of students, including higher-ability, middle-ability, and lower-ability learners. Teachers emphasized that understanding students' abilities is essential for effective implementation. When teachers perceive Differentiated Instruction as beneficial for enhancing student engagement, learning outcomes, and inclusivity, they are more likely to develop a positive attitude toward applying it in their classrooms. This finding aligns with previous studies, which indicate that teachers with positive attitudes toward differentiated approaches demonstrate greater motivation and consistency in their implementation (Said, 2019; Hsiang et al., 2020).

Theme 2: Organizational Requirements.

Findings from this study indicate that expectations imposed by schools and educational institutions were instrumental in motivating teachers to implement Differentiated Instruction. Participant 1 stated, *"Integrating Differentiated Instruction in our lesson plans is a must. Since it is a requirement, we have no choice but to prepare it,"* while Participant 2 noted, *"It is always emphasized that Differentiated Instruction must be included, especially because it is directed by the Head of Cluster."* Similarly, Participant 3 remarked, *"Actually, this is a demand from the Ministry of Education, so we are expected to implement it."* Taken together, these excerpts demonstrate that institutional mandates significantly influenced the incorporation of Differentiated Instruction into teachers' lesson plans.

This aligns with previous studies signifying that institutional expectations and school leadership strongly influence teachers' intentions to implement differentiated practices (Teo, 2012; Whitley et al., 2019). Within the Bruneian MIB context, top-down directives reinforced adherence to Differentiated Instruction and highlighted the role of subjective norms in shaping classroom practices.

Theme 3: Competence and Implementation Barriers.

Perceived behavioral control refers to teachers' perceptions of their competency to perform a specific behavior, influenced by their confidence, skills, experience, and available resources. This study discovered that teachers face challenges in adapting Differentiated Instruction to accommodate students with diverse abilities. Some participants reported difficulties in managing higher-, middle-, and lower-ability learners, which negatively affected their perceived behavioral control, as perceived obstacles may hinder effective teaching. Participant 4 explained, *"Adapting Differentiated Instruction to different students is challenging; some learn faster, and others need more time."* Participant 5 elaborated, *"Differentiated Instruction is a requirement in our lesson plan. Every lesson plan must show differentiation, so we make sure we do it. That is why we are always looking for ideas. Sometimes we Google; other times we check what others are doing or ask teachers from other subjects, like Maths and Science. They often have many resources, even from abroad. Then we figure out how to adapt those activities to MIB."*

In contrast, teachers who had sufficient knowledge, experience, and support demonstrated a positive influence on perceived behavioral control, expressing confidence in planning and implementing Differentiated Instruction effectively. The use of formal and informal assessment data, along with academic support from colleagues and peers, was found to enhance teachers' control over Differentiated Instruction implementation, facilitating more effective differentiated teaching practices. Consistent with previous studies, these findings indicate that perceived behavioral control, encompassing teachers' confidence, skills, and access to resources, is essential for the successful implementation of Differentiated Instruction (Holzberger et al., 2013; King-Sears & Baker, 2014).

By integrating attitude, subjective norms, and perceived control, the study illustrates that teachers' intentions to implement Differentiated Instruction are the result of a dynamic interplay between personal evaluations, social expectations, and perceived control over instructional practices. Teachers with positive attitudes toward Differentiated Instruction, who perceive institutional support, and who are confident adapting instruction to diverse learners, are more likely to implement Differentiated Instruction successfully and consistently. This integration highlights the applicability of Theory Planned Behavior in understanding teachers' instructional behaviors and provides a theoretical lens for interpreting the factors influencing the adoption of differentiated pedagogy in MIB classrooms.

Overall, the study confirms that effective preparation, supportive school norms, and confidence in instructional capability collectively determine the successful implementation of Differentiated Instruction, thereby promoting inclusive, meaningful, and student-centered learning environments in line with the objectives of the National Education System and SPN-21 curriculum.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the implementation of Differentiated Instruction by MIB teachers in Brunei, guided by the Theory of Planned Behavior. Findings indicate that teachers' attitudes, including their knowledge, understanding, and experience, strongly influence the use of Differentiated Instruction, while subjective norms—such as expectations from school leaders and the Ministry of Education—shape teachers' intentions to integrate Differentiated Instruction into lesson plans. Perceived behavioral control also plays a critical role, as teachers' confidence, skills, and resources affect their ability to implement Differentiated Instruction effectively for students with diverse abilities.

Culturally, Differentiated Instruction aligns with MIB's philosophical emphasis on holistic development, nation-building, and inclusive education. From a policy perspective, formalized training in Differentiated Instruction and its integration into professional standards are essential for strengthening teachers' competencies. Additionally, teachers' educational or professional programs, along with structured support mechanisms—such as mentoring and peer collaboration—can further enhance their confidence and ability to implement Differentiated Instruction effectively.

By linking the empirical findings to the Theory of Planned Behaviour, this study offers valuable insights into how teacher beliefs, social expectations, and perceived behavioral control interact to shape instructional and pedagogical practices. Strengthening teacher readiness, providing systematic training, and incorporating culturally responsive pedagogies are therefore critical for fostering inclusive, student-centered classrooms within Brunei's MIB framework.

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