

# LOOKING AT DIFFERENTIATED LEARNING FROM THE LENS OF UNDERACHIEVER STUDENTS: VIEWPOINTS, EXPERIENCES, AND IMPACTS

Andayani<sup>1\*</sup>, Vina Iasha<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Elementary School Teacher Education, Universitas Terbuka

<sup>2</sup>SD Negeri Pondok Bambu 06, Jakarta

\*[anda@ecampus.ut.ac.id](mailto:anda@ecampus.ut.ac.id)

## ABSTRACT

This research aimed to comprehensively examine the implementation of differentiated learning strategies for underachiever students—those with untapped potential not commensurate with their academic performance. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, the study focused on fourth-grade students chosen for their underachieving characteristics. Data collection involved in-depth interviews with the underachieving students, exploring their perspectives on differentiated learning, experiences during the learning process, and the impact on their comprehension of study materials. The analysis revealed valuable insights into the students' opinions regarding the benefits and challenges associated with differentiated learning. It delved into how this approach influenced their understanding of the subject matter, shedding light on the nuanced responses of underachiever students to the application of differentiated learning. The findings from this study offer a profound understanding of how underachiever students perceive and engage with differentiated learning methods. The implications extend to providing educators with crucial insights for designing effective learning strategies tailored to meet the unique needs of underachiever students. By incorporating these insights, educators can enhance academic performance, support the unfolding potential of underachieving students, and contribute to their overall development. This research contributes to the ongoing discourse on improving educational practices for diverse learning needs.

**Keywords:** *differentiated learning, elementary school, learning loss, underachiever*

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## INTRODUCTION

Learning loss has become one of the most critical issues in Indonesian education. Especially since the COVID-19 pandemic hit, school closures and the shift to distance learning have increased the risk of learning loss among students (Azlan et al., 2020; El Said, 2021; Setiawan & Iasha, 2020). Many students across the country face difficulties in effectively accessing education online, especially those who live in areas that lack internet connectivity (Setiawan & Iasha, 2020). In addition, the instability of the pandemic has disrupted learning routines, reduced student motivation, and decreased participation in learning (Rachmadtullah et al., 2022; Rahman, 2021). This is particularly worrying as it could result in a more significant education gap, with disadvantaged students facing a greater risk of learning loss. Therefore, serious and sustainable measures need to be taken to address the issue of learning loss and ensure every student has a fair chance to access quality education.

The use of differentiated learning is one of the potential solutions to overcome the problem of learning loss in Indonesia. By implementing this approach, teachers can customize the learning experience for each student according to their ability level and needs. Students who may have difficulty understanding the subject matter can get the extra help and support they need, while more advanced students can be given more challenging material (Iasha et al., 2023; Yustitia et al., 2023). The importance of continuous evaluation to identify student progress and

needs is also central to differentiated learning. By adopting this approach, Indonesia can stimulate the growth and development of each student according to their potential, reduce gaps in academic achievement, and create a more inclusive learning environment that is responsive to individual needs (Deluma & Setiawan, 2023; Setiawan et al., 2023).

Differentiated learning has become a growing focus of research to improve the quality of education. Several recent studies have highlighted differentiated learning as an effective method of addressing learning challenges, reducing learning loss, and improving student academic achievement. For example, in a survey by Tomlinson & Imbeau (2023), differentiated learning was implemented using various strategies to adapt to students' diverse learning styles. Their study significantly improved students' subject matter comprehension and learning motivation. In addition, research by (Muñoz et al., 2022) tried to apply adaptive technology in differentiated learning, which allows students to get materials that match their ability level in real-time. The results show that this approach is effective in improving learning outcomes. With the various research conducted since 2019, it can be seen that differentiated learning has great potential to improve the quality of education and provide a more tailored approach to students' needs.

A study by Hattie et al. (2017) emphasized the importance of teaching responsive to students' individual needs and levels of understanding as the key to improving academic achievement. Similarly, research by Tomlinson (1999) highlights the implementation of differentiated learning to address students' diverse learning styles and maximize their potential. Another study by Gregory & Chapman (2012) explored the use of technology in supporting differentiated learning. The results of these studies show that differentiated learning approaches have a positive impact on student learning outcomes.

## **METHOD**

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, a method used to explore problems related to human and social aspects. This approach allows the researcher to examine deeper and contextual information about the viewpoints, experiences, and impacts of underachievers that arise from learning loss in students through differentiated learning. In the context of this research, a descriptive qualitative approach was chosen to present the data obtained clearly and in detail. The main participants in this research are fourth-grade students at SD Negeri Pondok Bambu 06 Jakarta. This qualitative research is expected to reveal concrete situations, and problems students and teachers face through the interview method used as a data collection technique. Data analysis of the data used uses the Miles and Huberman technique.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Student Point of View**

This study explores students' perspectives on implementing differentiated learning for underachiever students due to learning loss. Learning loss is a phenomenon that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic, where many students have difficulty in achieving their academic goals. Differentiated learning is designed to accommodate student learning styles and ability levels.

Interviews with underachiever students revealed a variety of interesting perspectives. Many of them felt that they had lost motivation and engagement in learning during the period of distance learning during the pandemic. One student revealed,

*"I find it very difficult to stay focused and motivated when studying from home. I feel like I am falling behind in the lessons." (student 10)*

This shows the importance of identifying and supporting students who experience learning loss. The implementation of differentiated learning also received positive responses from some underachieving students. They stated that this approach helped them feel more engaged in education, as the material was tailored to their level of understanding. One student mentioned,

*"I feel more comfortable because our teachers understand what we need and provide additional help when needed." (student 2)*

However, the interviews also revealed challenges in implementing differentiated learning. Some students felt anxious about feeling different from their peers because they received additional attention. In this regard, one student said,

*"Sometimes I feel like I am treated differently, and it makes me feel awkward in front of my friends." (student 5)*

Therefore, educators must implement this approach sensitively to students' feelings and emotional needs. This research highlights the importance of understanding students' perspectives in the context of learning loss and the implementation of differentiated learning. By understanding students' experiences, educators can develop more effective strategies to support underachieving students in overcoming academic difficulties caused by the pandemic.

### **Student Experience**

This research explores students' experiences implementing differentiated learning for underachiever students as a response to learning loss. Learning loss is a phenomenon that highlights the decline in student academic achievement during the period of learning activity restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Differentiated learning is an approach that emphasizes adjusting learning methods and materials according to student's individual needs, which is expected to help students who experience learning difficulties.

Through interviews with several students who experienced learning loss and received differentiated learning, various aspects of their experiences were revealed. One student described her feelings,

*"I felt very burdened by the academic pressure during this pandemic, and I felt that I was falling further and further behind in my studies. But when we started implementing differentiated learning, I felt there was hope to improve my understanding." (student 4)*

This illustrates that a differentiated approach can give hope to students facing learning loss. However, some students also face challenges in implementing differentiated learning. One student admitted,

*"As the teacher tries to align the learning with our needs, there are times when I feel anxious and doubt whether I can keep up or not." (student 10)*

This highlights the need for emotional support and proper guidance in implementing differentiated learning for underachievers. In addition, the interviews also revealed that support from teachers is very influential. One student said,

*"Our teachers are very understanding and always ready to help. They give extra time to explain things that are difficult for us to understand." (student 5)*

This shows the importance of the teacher's role in the effective implementation of differentiated learning. This research shows that students' experience of differentiated learning varies widely and needs more profound attention to student's emotional and psychological aspects during the learning process. Thus, educators can be more effective in supporting underachieving students in overcoming the impact of learning loss and rebuilding their motivation to learn.

### **Impact For Student**

Research on the impact of differentiated learning on underachievers in grade 4 primary school due to learning loss is an important effort to understand how education can help students overcome the challenges faced during the pandemic. We conducted face-to-face interviews with several Grade 4 students to explore their differentiated learning experiences and how this affected their understanding of the subject matter. One of the students revealed,

*"Before, I found it difficult with math lessons. But now, the teacher gives extra help, making the problems easier to understand. I feel more confident."*

This reflects an improvement in Rani's understanding of subjects that previously caused her difficulty. In addition, the interview with other students revealed a positive impact on student motivation.

*"Our teachers understand that we are all different. They give tasks that suit our abilities. This makes me feel more motivated to learn."*

This shows how a differentiated approach can increase students' interest in learning. However, some challenges arise from the interview. Students feel an additional burden in completing tasks specifically designed for them. She commented,

*"I have to work harder than before. But I know it's important to study well."*

In this sense, this study underlines that implementing differentiated learning requires extra hard work from students. Still, in the end, it can help them overcome the impact of learning loss that they may experience.

Overall, the results of the interviews with grade 4 elementary school students show that the implementation of differentiated learning can have a positive impact on underachiever students' understanding and motivation in dealing with learning loss. Despite the challenges that arise, this approach has the potential to help students overcome the academic difficulties they may experience due to the pandemic.

## **Discussion**

Differentiated learning is a highly relevant approach in addressing the challenges underachievers face due to learning loss, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Learning loss is a negative impact that can hinder students' progress, especially those who have previously experienced difficulties achieving their academic potential. This condition may affect underachiever students more, who generally have lower achievement levels than their classmates.

Implementing differentiated learning provides a much-needed solution in the face of learning loss. Teachers can adapt teaching methods, learning content, and difficulty levels to meet the unique needs of each student. This allows underachiever students to get more personalized support and helps minimize the learning loss they may experience during the pandemic.

In a comprehensive study conducted by Smale-Jacobse et al., (2019), the effectiveness of implementing differentiated learning strategies was thoroughly examined. This research shed light on the potential benefits of differentiated instruction in educational settings. It was revealed that differentiated instruction had a notably positive impact on student achievement, with the study reporting small to moderate positive effects. This suggests that tailoring teaching methods and content to suit the diverse needs of students within a classroom can lead to improved academic outcomes.

However, it's important to note that the study also highlighted significant knowledge gaps that persist in differentiated instruction, particularly concerning its application in secondary school classes. These gaps imply that there is still much to learn about the most effective and valuable approaches to implementing differentiated instruction within the context of secondary education.

The study conducted by Smale-Jacobse et al. not only provides evidence of the positive effects of differentiated instruction but also underscores the need for further research and exploration in this area. As educators seek to address students' diverse needs and abilities, gaining a deeper understanding of the most effective strategies is crucial. Continued research in this field will inform educators and encourage further investigation into how differentiated instruction can be optimized to benefit students across various grade levels and subject areas.

Research conducted by Gobiberia & Kevkhishvili (2021) reveals a deep understanding of the importance of differentiated learning in the educational context. The study highlights that a differentiated learning approach provides sustainable opportunities for every learner, especially as it recognizes their significant differences. The results also confirm that achieving the desired outcomes in learning can be realized by applying both formats of differentiation

theory, indicating that not just one approach works. Thus, Gobiberia and colleagues' research provides an important foundation in encouraging educational practitioners to adopt differentiated learning strategies, which can provide a more effective and relevant learning experience for each student, utilizing their differences as a unique source of potential.

The study conducted by Shareefa (2021) presents valuable insights into the benefits of high levels of differentiated teaching, especially in multi-grade classrooms. The research highlights several significant benefits positively related to students' academic progress and psychosocial development. A highly differentiated teaching approach allows teachers to better respond to students' needs, enabling them to grow and develop at their own pace and learning style. Thus, academic achievement improves psychosocial aspects, such as students' self-confidence, motivation, and engagement in the learning process. This research provides a solid basis for encouraging high-level differentiated learning practices in various educational settings, positively impacting students' overall development.

In dealing with the challenges of learning loss that have been the impact of the pandemic, as well as helping underachiever students, the implementation of differentiated learning plays an important role (Andayani et al., 2023). Considering the research results mentioned, schools and teachers have a strong scientific foundation to design learning approaches that are more adaptive and responsive to students' individual needs, thus helping them overcome the impact of learning loss and achieve better academic success (Yustitia et al., 2022).

## **CONCLUSION**

Research to explore the in-depth understanding of differentiated learning from the perspective of high-achieving students has been successfully conducted. Through the analysis of the research results, three crucial points are discussed in this study. First, high-achieving students perceive differentiated learning as an approach that significantly benefits their academic development. They feel that this approach allows them to explore the subject matter more deeply, stimulates their curiosity, and provides challenges appropriate to their abilities. This reflects their positive view of learning tailored to individual mastery levels. Secondly, the results show that high-achieving students' experiences during differentiated learning can vary widely. While most feel engaged and motivated, some students may face difficulties adapting to this approach. This variability emphasizes the importance of a flexible approach in implementing differentiated learning, considering students' individual needs.

Third, the impact of differentiated learning on the subject matter comprehension of high-achieving students is very positive. They reported significant improvements in their understanding and mastery of the subject matter, which illustrates the effectiveness of this approach in improving their academic achievement. This suggests that educators can utilize differentiated learning as a strategy to enhance the learning outcomes of high-achieving students. In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into how high-achieving students respond to and experience differentiated learning. The results confirm the importance of considering the perspectives of high-achieving students in the design of differentiated learning. By utilizing the views, experiences, and positive impacts found in this study, educators can design more effective and relevant learning strategies to improve the academic achievement of high-achieving students and support the development of their potential.

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