

Differentiated Learning Strategies by *Guru Penggerak*: Accommodating the Needs of Slow Learner in Primary School

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ABSTRACT

Slow learners are students with below-average cognitive abilities who require more time and support to grasp academic concepts. Their learning challenges often include difficulties in reading, writing, and comprehending instructional content, resulting in delayed task completion and lower academic performance. Addressing these needs is crucial within inclusive classrooms, especially under the Indonesian *Guru Penggerak* (Teacher Leader) program, which aims to foster transformative, student-centered learning. This qualitative study explores how a *Guru Penggerak* implements differentiated learning strategies to support slow learner students in a second-grade inclusive classroom at SDN Kadokan 02. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with the teacher and principal, and analysis of relevant documents. Data triangulation was used to ensure validity, and analysis followed the steps of data reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing. Findings indicate that the teacher implemented two core differentiation strategies: process differentiation—providing guided instruction, visual media, and individualized support—and product differentiation—modifying assessment formats to align with students' readiness levels. Regular students engaged in more independent learning, while slow learners received intensive scaffolding through visual aids, repeated instructions, and individualized feedback. The differentiation approach effectively addressed diverse readiness levels within the same classroom, supporting both slow learners and their peers. The role of the *Guru Penggerak* was critical in designing inclusive and adaptive learning processes. Differentiated instruction, as practiced by *Guru Penggerak*, is an effective strategy to accommodate slow learners in inclusive classrooms. This study offers practical insights for educators aiming to implement equitable teaching strategies.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Teachers serve as the cornerstone of national education, holding the primary responsibility for delivering and facilitating meaningful learning experiences. In fulfilling this critical role, educators must understand and embrace the diversity inherent in every classroom. Every student is a unique individual with distinct interests, talents, learning abilities, and aspirations (Faiz et al., 2022). Recognizing and addressing this diversity is fundamental to ensuring equitable access to quality education for all students, regardless of their background or learning challenges.

To address the diverse educational needs of students, the Indonesian government introduced the Merdeka Belajar (Independent Learning) curriculum. This curriculum represents a significant shift from standardized, rigid educational models toward more flexible, student-centered approaches. Teachers are encouraged to independently select, adapt, and develop curriculum content and learning strategies based on the specific characteristics and needs of their students (Rosmana et al., 2022). This autonomy allows educators to focus on cultivating each student's potential, rather than simply transmitting content. As a key component of the broader educational reform, the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum supports inclusive and differentiated instruction that recognizes student variability.

One of the most prominent programs supporting the implementation of Merdeka Belajar is the *Guru Penggerak* (Teacher Mobilization) initiative, launched under the *Merdeka Belajar Episode 5* by the Ministry of Education and Culture. This program aims to cultivate teachers as agents of change—educational leaders who are capable of transforming school culture and instructional practices (Makarim & Syahril, 2020). Through the *Guru Penggerak* program, teachers are trained to adopt a leadership mindset, champion innovation, and implement student-centered learning strategies in their classrooms. According to the Directorate General of Teachers and Education Personnel, *Guru Penggerak* are expected to play an active role in fostering holistic student development by designing inclusive, empowering learning environments (Makarim & Syahril, 2020).

At the core of the *Guru Penggerak* program is the concept of learning leadership, which focuses on equipping teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to lead pedagogical change. One of the main strategies emphasized in the program is differentiated instruction, a teaching approach that involves modifying content, process, product, or learning environment to accommodate students' diverse learning profiles (Indra et al., 2021). The goal of differentiated learning is to meet students where they are and provide appropriately challenging and engaging learning opportunities for each individual. According to Faiz et al. (2022), *Guru Penggerak* are expected to implement differentiated instruction in a way that reflects their understanding of students' varying readiness levels, interests, and learning styles.

This perspective aligns with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which emphasizes that children's development is influenced by multiple environmental systems, including cultural and social contexts (Faiz et al., 2022). Teachers, therefore, must consider not only academic ability but also the socio-emotional background and lived experiences of each learner. By doing so, they can create learning environments that are engaging, comfortable, and responsive to the diverse needs of all students (Rahmawati et al., 2023). Moreover, the effectiveness of any learning model, including differentiated instruction, is significantly influenced by the quality and competence of teachers (Pradina et al., 2021).

Differentiated instruction, as a pedagogical strategy, involves designing and implementing multiple pathways to learning that address student differences. Sugianto (2022) defines differentiated instruction as a flexible teaching method where various instructional approaches are employed to respond to the needs of individual learners. This method allows for a more inclusive educational environment, one that values diversity and provides equitable learning opportunities. Marlina (2019) argues that differentiated instruction is especially valuable in supporting independent learning, as it helps students take ownership of their educational journey and progress at a pace suitable for their abilities.

The implementation of differentiated learning is particularly crucial in inclusive classrooms, which serve both typically developing students and those with special educational needs. One such group of learners is slow learners—students who experience difficulties in academic achievement despite not having intellectual disabilities. These students typically require more time and support to process information and grasp concepts (Pramesti et al., 2023). Amelia (2016) describes slow learners as students who struggle with understanding instructional material at the same pace as their peers, often due to slower cognitive processing or lower working memory capacity. Their learning difficulties may also be influenced by emotional factors such as anxiety, low self-esteem, and difficulty adjusting to classroom norms (Pramesti et al., 2023).

Additionally, slow learners may exhibit challenges in social development, often struggling to interact and communicate effectively with peers and teachers (Triani & Amir, 2013). These social difficulties can further hinder their academic performance and overall well-being. While existing research has explored differentiated instruction broadly, few studies have examined how Guru Penggerak specifically address the needs of slow learners within the framework of Merdeka Belajar. Moreover, limited attention has been given to teacher strategies in both online and offline learning contexts when dealing with this group of students.

Creating a supportive and stimulating classroom environment is essential for the academic success of slow learners. Practical strategies such as strategic seating arrangements, individualized feedback, and scaffolding instruction can significantly enhance student engagement and reduce learning anxiety (Darwanti et al., 2024). This highlights the importance of classroom management techniques in fostering an inclusive learning atmosphere. Unlike previous research that often focuses on singular aspects of learning challenges, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of how teachers can support slow learners through a combination of strategies, including curriculum adaptation, differentiated instruction, and environmental modifications.

Teachers must play an intentional role in identifying and responding to the needs of all learners, including those who progress at a slower pace. As Maulidia and Prafitasari (2023) note, differentiated instruction is a strategic effort to modify the learning process to accommodate diverse student needs and enhance overall learning outcomes. Although differentiated learning has been increasingly promoted as an inclusive strategy, its implementation for slow learners remains underexplored, particularly in the context of primary education and among teachers involved in the Guru Penggerak program.

In conclusion, the evolving landscape of education in Indonesia calls for responsive, student-centered teaching approaches that address the diverse needs of learners. The *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum and *Guru Penggerak* program offer a transformative vision for inclusive education, where differentiated instruction plays a central role. However, further research is needed to examine how *Guru Penggerak* implement these strategies specifically for slow learners and what challenges and opportunities arise in practice. By doing so, educators and policymakers can better support the development of inclusive and equitable education systems.

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research approach, which is suitable for exploring social phenomena in natural settings where variables are not manipulated by the researcher. As stated by Sutama (2019), qualitative research emphasizes understanding meaning from the perspective of research subjects, with the researcher functioning as the key instrument. The context of this research—teachers' strategies in addressing the needs of slow learner students—required an in-depth understanding of natural, unaltered educational environments, making a qualitative approach most appropriate.

The research design used in this study is phenomenological, which focuses on understanding participants' lived experiences in a deep and meaningful way. Phenomenological research begins with the assumption that individuals perceive and interpret their experiences differently depending on their personal, cultural, and situational contexts. This approach allows the researcher to explore how experiences are understood and given meaning by those living them (Setyosari, 2013). Moleong (2019) explains that phenomenological research aims to understand the meaning behind behaviors, perceptions, motivations, and actions experienced by research participants in a holistic manner, using descriptive, non-numerical data rooted in participants' natural settings. Through this method, the researcher aimed to capture the strategies employed by *Guru Penggerak* in supporting slow learners in a real classroom setting without researcher interference.

The research was conducted at SDN Kadokan 02, a public elementary school where a *Guru Penggerak* is actively teaching. This school was selected as the research site because it presented a relevant context for investigating differentiated instructional strategies aimed at supporting slow learner students. The study specifically focused on two slow learner students in Grade II, identified through teacher records and academic performance data. These students, referred to by the initials AY and VA, consistently experienced academic difficulties and received the lowest scores in their class. They demonstrated challenges in processing and understanding learning material, required repeated instructions, and often struggled to complete assignments without additional guidance. Such characteristics are consistent with those described in the literature as indicative of slow learners (Pramesti et al., 2023).

The main informants in this study included Mrs. RA, the Grade II classroom teacher and a *Guru Penggerak*, and Mrs. SM, the school principal, who served as the key informant. Data were gathered through the active presence of the researcher in the field. In qualitative research, the presence of the researcher is central, as they serve as both observer and primary instrument for data collection. Observational and interview techniques were used to gain a comprehensive understanding of how the *Guru Penggerak* implemented differentiated instruction to meet the learning needs of the two slow learner students.

Three primary data collection techniques were employed: interviews, observation, and documentation, in accordance with Akhmad (2015), who states that the documentation method helps in obtaining data in the form of written materials, photographs, and institutional records. Interviews were conducted with both the teacher and principal, using a semi-structured format. Open-ended questions were designed to explore differentiation strategies, challenges encountered, and observations of student progress. These interviews allowed the researcher to probe deeper into the thought processes and instructional planning of the teacher.

Observations were carried out during class activities to directly witness how differentiation was implemented in real-time. The researcher utilized an observation sheet to systematically record instructional interactions, student responses, and classroom modifications. As Gulo (2022) notes, observation in qualitative research involves a careful process of seeing, listening, feeling, and recording phenomena as they naturally occur. These observations helped the researcher to validate and contextualize the information gathered during interviews.

Documentation was also a key source of data. The researcher collected relevant documents including student profiles, learning outcomes, initial assessment data, lesson plans (RPP), instructional modules, and photographs of learning activities. These materials served to triangulate and corroborate findings from interviews and observations. Documentation is particularly valuable in qualitative research as it provides stable, non-reactive sources of data that support the credibility of the findings (Akhmad, 2015).

Regarding instructional strategies, Mrs. RA implemented both process and product differentiation. For process differentiation, she provided additional instructional support to AY and VA using visual aids such as pictures and videos to reinforce concepts. She also posed scaffolded questions tailored to the students' comprehension levels to help them make connections between new material and prior

knowledge. In terms of product differentiation, she used customized student activity sheets that allowed students to demonstrate understanding in simpler formats. For students in the “not yet understanding” category, such as AY and VA, she provided guided instruction to help interpret task directions and make sense of visual prompts in the learning materials.

Data were further strengthened through source and methodological triangulation. Triangulation is an essential aspect of qualitative research used to enhance the validity and trustworthiness of findings. In this study, triangulation involved comparing data obtained through interviews, observations, and documentation. Source triangulation was conducted by interviewing multiple stakeholders, including the teacher (*Guru Penggerak*), the principal, and the students themselves. According to Alfansyur and Mariyani (2020), triangulation through multiple data sources and techniques enables researchers to draw more reliable and comprehensive conclusions.

The process of data analysis followed the model developed by Miles and Huberman, as cited in Sugiyono (2010). The analysis was conducted in an interactive and iterative manner, encompassing three key activities: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. During data reduction, the researcher filtered and coded raw data to focus on key themes relevant to the research questions. This was followed by organizing the data into meaningful categories and presenting them visually for further interpretation. Finally, conclusions were drawn based on the synthesis of data across the three collection methods, and these conclusions were continuously verified against the raw data to ensure consistency and validity.

Through this rigorous methodological approach, the study sought to provide an in-depth, contextualized understanding of how *Guru Penggerak* teachers implement differentiated instruction to accommodate the learning needs of slow learner students in primary school settings. The phenomenological lens allowed the researcher to capture the nuances of teaching practices and student experiences, contributing to a deeper understanding of inclusive education implementation at the classroom level.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study on the implementation of differentiated learning strategies by a *Guru Penggerak* at SDN Kadokan 02 to accommodate slow learner students. Data were obtained through interviews, observations, documentation, and initial student performance assessments. The findings are organized thematically under key subheadings to reflect the structure and process of differentiated learning, students’ characteristics, and the role of the teacher in supporting inclusive learning.

SDN Kadokan 02, located in Sukoharjo Regency, is under the leadership of Mrs. SM, S.Pd., who serves as the definitive principal. The school recognizes that the quality of educational personnel plays a vital role in ensuring the success of the teaching and learning process. Therefore, the institution places strong emphasis on maintaining and improving the professional competence of its teachers. This commitment is reflected in the qualifications of its teaching staff, as nearly all teachers at SDN Kadokan 02 hold undergraduate degrees in Primary School Teacher Education (*Pendidikan Guru Sekolah Dasar* or PGSD). Currently, the school employs a total of 12 teachers and education personnel. A distinctive feature of SDN Kadokan 02 is the presence of a *Guru Penggerak* (Teacher Mobilizer) among its faculty members—an educator who successfully completed the fourth cohort of the *Guru Penggerak* professional development program in 2022.

Tabel 1. Results of interviews with class II teachers at SDN Kadokan 02

Indicator	Question	Description of interview results
Slow Learner	1. How do you identify students who fall into the slow learner category in class?	Usually, I identify students who are slow learners through several indicators, such as difficulty understanding the instructions given, slowness in completing assignments, frequent need for additional help, and barriers to reading and writing abilities. In addition, their academic assessment results are usually below average compared to their classmates. In my class, there are two children who experience obstacles, namely AY and VA.
	2. What methods or strategies do you use to help slow learners as a teacher mover?	Through applied learning, Guru Penggerak can respond or respond to the learning needs of slow learner students and regular students. The teacher mover makes a learning adjustment plan to meet the student's learning needs, namely using different sources, different methods, and different assignments and assessments.
	3. How mothers apply differentiation learning?	I implement differentiation learning by conducting an initial assessment to determine students' learning readiness as a basis for determining differentiation in learning. Differentiation learning for class II students uses process and product differentiation. Differentiated learning for regular students with complete understanding categories and some are given reading in the form of texts in books to study independently. Then slow learner students are given special assistance from the teacher based on videos and pictures of the rules at home. The process that differentiates the two is independent learning for regular students and guided learning for slow learner students.

3.1 Profile and Characteristics of Slow Learner Students

The study focused on two Grade II students identified as slow learners, referred to as AY and VA. Based on student academic performance data and teacher interviews, these students consistently demonstrated the lowest scores in class, struggled to complete assignments, and required repeated instructions to understand learning content. This aligns with Utami (2019), who noted that slow learner students often exhibit difficulties in core academic skills such as reading, writing, and arithmetic, and typically lag behind their peers.

AY displayed specific learning difficulties, particularly in reading and writing. Though he faced challenges in literacy, he exhibited relatively strong numeracy skills and was able to complete math-related tasks with appropriate support. AY processed information more slowly and benefited from auditory learning methods. He responded well to dictation and teacher-led instruction, although he struggled with letter formation, often reversing letters such as "b," "d," "n," and "u." Despite these academic limitations, AY demonstrated no difficulties in social interaction and was able to participate effectively in group activities, particularly those involving practical or hands-on tasks.

VA, on the other hand, experienced more profound learning and social difficulties. She was unable to read or write fluently, often forming letters slowly, one at a time, and exhibited limited vocabulary. Her responses during class were brief, and she showed minimal verbal engagement. Additionally, she demonstrated poor focus, often disengaging from classroom activities, and had difficulty socializing with peers. Nonetheless, similar to AY, she was able to participate in practical learning activities and expressed a preference for visual materials. These characteristics correspond to the findings of Triani and Amir (2013), who noted that slow learners often exhibit both academic and social-emotional delays.

3.2 Learning Challenges Observed in the Classroom

Observational data confirmed that AY and VA struggled to participate meaningfully in class when instruction was delivered uniformly to all students. Their limitations in reading, writing, and focus made it difficult to keep pace with peers. This reinforced the need for instructional differentiation, as uniform content delivery often neglects the learning needs of students with lower academic readiness (Utami, 2019).

Classroom observations also revealed that AY could follow auditory instructions with teacher assistance, whereas VA required instructions to be repeated and simplified, accompanied by visual cues. While regular students were able to work independently, AY and VA needed more direct guidance. These differences underscored the importance of adjusting teaching approaches based on student readiness levels, as highlighted in Tomlinson's (1999) theory of differentiated instruction.

3.3 Initial Assessment and Planning for Differentiation

Before implementing differentiated learning, the classroom teacher (*Guru Penggerak*), Mrs. RA, conducted an initial assessment to determine students' learning readiness. This assessment revealed significant variation in student understanding, particularly with AY and VA, who demonstrated below-average literacy and cognitive processing skills.

AY had partially developed writing skills, although he still struggled with letter recognition and sequencing. VA had not yet mastered basic writing skills and required explicit guidance and modeling. These initial assessments were essential for planning process and product differentiation, ensuring that instructional strategies were aligned with each student's capabilities (Andani et al., 2023).

3.4 Process Differentiation Strategies

Process differentiation was implemented by tailoring the instructional methods used during class. Regular students with higher learning readiness were provided with reading materials and encouraged to study independently. Meanwhile, AY and VA received special assistance during lessons. For instance, while teaching about home rules, Mrs. RA played educational videos, supplemented with verbal explanations and visual aids to enhance understanding.

AY responded positively to this method and could answer questions with short responses after listening to teacher instructions. VA required more intensive support. Mrs. RA often had to repeat instructions, offer simplified language, and use illustrative descriptions to elicit responses from VA. This is in line with Fitriyah and Bisri (2023), who highlighted that differentiated instruction allows educators to accommodate students' varying readiness levels by adjusting the learning process to suit individual learning profiles.

In the classroom, process differentiation was evident in the way Mrs. RA provided additional prompts and scaffolding to slow learners. Rather than isolating them, she integrated AY and VA within the same learning environment as their peers, while providing more intensive and guided instruction. This inclusive approach is supported by Andini (2000), who emphasized that students requiring support should not be separated, but instead guided within collaborative learning settings.

3.5 Product Differentiation Strategies

Product differentiation was employed during evaluation and assessment activities. All students were provided with student activity sheets as formative assessments. However, while regular students were able to complete the tasks independently, AY and VA required ongoing assistance. For instance, AY was guided in interpreting images and responding to prompts, while VA was supported in understanding instructions and completing simple checklist-based responses due to her writing difficulties.

This strategy aligns with Tomlinson's (1999) model, which recommends providing differentiated products or tasks that reflect students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. It ensures that all students can demonstrate learning progress without being held to a single standard of evaluation. Furthermore, it reinforces inclusive assessment practices, as suggested by Dewi (2016), who emphasized the need for adaptive evaluation tools in inclusive classrooms.

3.6 Student Response and Engagement in Differentiated Learning

Throughout the implementation of differentiated learning, AY demonstrated higher receptivity compared to VA. He could understand and respond to instructions with relative ease and occasionally engaged in independent work. In contrast, VA's cognitive and linguistic limitations necessitated continuous support. To stimulate VA's engagement, Mrs. RA used visual prompts and structured questions, guiding her through the learning tasks step-by-step.

VA expressed a preference for learning through visuals rather than text-based materials. This finding echoes Yuni Yati et al. (2023), who found that students with visual learning styles benefit more from image-rich instructional content. Thus, differentiated learning not only addressed students' academic abilities but also their preferred modes of learning.

3.7 Teacher's Role and Instructional Support

The role of the *Guru Penggerak*, Mrs. RA, was pivotal in ensuring that differentiation was effectively implemented. She continuously assessed student progress, adjusted teaching methods, and provided emotional support and encouragement. She also incorporated principles of appreciation and reinforcement to maintain student motivation. These efforts reflect the educational philosophy of Ki Hajar Dewantara, particularly the "among" system, which emphasizes guiding students according to their individual needs and nature (Fitriyah & Bisri, 2023).

In line with the philosophy of *Guru Penggerak*, the teacher maintained a positive classroom culture, encouraged student independence, and fostered a collaborative environment where slow learners were not marginalized. Instead, their learning differences were accommodated through intentional, well-planned strategies that honored their unique developmental trajectories.

3.8 Triangulation of Findings

The validity of the findings was reinforced through data triangulation involving interviews with the principal and teacher, direct classroom observations, and document analysis. There was strong consistency across all data sources. The principal emphasized the importance of inclusive teaching and acknowledged the need for differentiated strategies to support students with diverse learning needs. Similarly, documentation of lesson plans, student work samples, and assessment results confirmed that process and product differentiation had been implemented effectively.

The triangulated data demonstrated that the differentiation strategy employed at SDN Kadokan 02 aligned with best practices for inclusive education. Differentiation based on learning readiness allowed students like AY and VA to participate meaningfully in class, despite their learning challenges. This approach aligns with the work of Andani et al. (2023), who reported that teachers who employ differentiation are better able to address the needs of slow learner students by offering specialized support within the general classroom setting.

3.9 Implications for Practice

The findings suggest that differentiation—both in process and product—is an effective instructional strategy for accommodating slow learner students in inclusive primary school settings. The experience at SDN Kadokan 02 exemplifies how differentiation can be implemented in a practical and meaningful way without segregating students or compromising the learning of regular students.

Moreover, this case reinforces the critical role of *Guru Penggerak* as change agents in education. By leveraging professional development and applying innovative strategies in the classroom, teacher leaders like Mrs. RA demonstrate that inclusive education is achievable through commitment, creativity, and continuous reflection.

These findings also support the broader literature on differentiated instruction. Tomlinson (1999) and Yuni Yati et al. (2023) emphasized the need for instruction that adapts to student readiness, interest, and learning preferences. This study contributes further evidence that such differentiation is particularly essential when teaching students with learning delays, such as slow learners, who often require extended time, tailored materials, and guided support.

In conclusion, the implementation of differentiated instruction by a *Guru Penggerak* at SDN Kadokan 02 effectively addressed the diverse learning needs of slow learner students. Through process and product differentiation, the teacher was able to support AY and VA in overcoming academic and cognitive barriers, fostering their engagement and gradual progress. The findings highlight the importance of initial readiness assessment, flexible teaching strategies, and inclusive classroom practices in enhancing educational outcomes for students with learning difficulties.

The strategies observed in this study underscore that differentiation is not merely a set of instructional modifications but a mindset grounded in equity, empathy, and commitment to student growth. As inclusive education continues to be a national priority, the experience of SDN Kadokan 02 provides a valuable model for how *Guru Penggerak* can lead the transformation of teaching practices in Indonesian primary schools.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the *Guru Penggerak* at SDN Kadokan 02 implemented an effective differentiation strategy to support slow learner students, using process differentiation through guided learning for slow learners and independent learning for regular students, as well as product differentiation in the form of varied difficulty levels and critical thinking stimuli aligned with students' readiness. These strategies were grounded in the results of initial assessments and tailored to accommodate individual learning needs within a single classroom setting. However, the scope of the research was limited to only two slow learner students and one teacher in a specific primary school context, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study focused solely on face-to-face learning and did not explore differentiated strategies in online or hybrid settings. Future research is encouraged to expand the sample size, include diverse school contexts, and examine how differentiated instruction can be adapted for various learning environments, including remote learning. Such studies would contribute to developing more comprehensive and scalable models for inclusive education, supporting teachers in becoming more innovative and responsive to diverse student needs.

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