

## Problems in Islamic Religious Education Based on Carol A. Tomlinson's Differentiation Theory at Elementary School

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### Abstract

Islamic Religious Education (IRE) instruction in elementary schools still faces various challenges that affect the effectiveness of the learning process. This study aims to analyze the problems of IRE learning at Sasmita Edukasi Blora Elementary School based on the perspective of Carol A. Tomlinson's differentiated instruction theory, which encompasses differentiation of content, process, products, and the learning environment. This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach using field research and a case study design. The results of the study indicate that the challenges in IRE learning are divided into four elements of differentiation. In content differentiation, there is a mismatch between the taught material and students' readiness, as well as a lack of tiered instructional materials. In process differentiation, there is a dominance of the lecture method, difficulties in managing learning outside the classroom, low student motivation, and the absence of planned differentiated treatment between students with varying learning abilities. In product differentiation, there was a limited selection of tasks given to students, which failed to accommodate their diverse interests and abilities. Meanwhile, in environmental differentiation, there were limitations in classroom space, difficulties in managing nature-based learning, and a lack of learning support facilities such as projectors. This study concludes that the challenges in Islamic Education (IRE) learning at Sasmita Edukasi Elementary School in Blora are not only related to teaching methods but also involve student readiness, learning product variety, and the learning environment. Therefore, the comprehensive implementation of differentiated instruction is a critical need to achieve more inclusive, adaptive, and effective IRE learning.

**Keywords:** Problems in Islamic Religious Education, Differentiation Theory, Elementary School

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## INTRODUCTION

In the context of national education, Islamic Religious Education at the elementary school level is a required subject that holds fundamental significance in shaping students' character and morality. As part of the required curriculum, Islamic Religious Education is not merely oriented toward the transmission of religious knowledge (*transfer of knowledge*), but fundamentally aims to shape students into

individuals of noble character, possessing steadfast faith, and capable of actualizing religious values in daily life (Megawati, 2025). However, in practice, the implementation of Islamic Religious Education in educational institutions often faces various challenges that significantly impact the effectiveness of the teaching-learning process. This phenomenon is triggered by a shift in pedagogical paradigms, specifically from a traditional education model toward a modernity-oriented approach (Aziz & Rahmah, 2024).

Islamic Religious Education (IRE) is an educational process aimed at shaping students to possess faith, piety, and noble character through an understanding of and practice of Islamic teachings (Muhaimin, 2012). In its implementation in elementary schools, IRE requires the use of varied teaching methods to ensure that learning objectives are optimally achieved. One of the main problems faced in religious education in elementary schools is the lack of variety in teaching methods. In addition, research (Sulaiman dkk., 2024) found that the problem with IRE, especially in the 21st century, is the lack of teaching skills among teachers, which then affects the models used. Many teachers still use traditional lecture methods that are one-way, making it difficult to attract students' attention and interest in the material. Research findings (Taabudillah, 2025) indicate that Islamic Education instruction is still dominated by conventional, one-way lecture methods, which result in low levels of student engagement and participation. Another problem is the lack of adequate facilities and infrastructure, which also hinders Islamic religious education at the elementary school level. This certainly affects their understanding of Islamic teachings, which in turn can reduce students' absorption of the material being taught (Mansur & Nursikin, 2025).

In addition, the different characteristics of students also pose a challenge in Islamic Religious Education. At this age, students who are still children tend to prefer playing. In this context, Islamic Religious Education is often viewed as an uninteresting subject or one that is irrelevant to their lives. In addition, differences in student characteristics also pose a challenge for teaching Islamic Religious Education in elementary school. At this age, students are still at a developmental stage characterized by a tendency to play, a high level of curiosity, and a need for engaging and interactive learning. However, Islamic Religious Education is still often viewed as a subject that is uninteresting or irrelevant to students' daily lives (Nisa & Kinanthi Nur Fikriya, 2024).

One method that can be applied to address these issues is differentiated instruction. Therefore, a teaching approach is needed that can accommodate the diversity of students' characteristics, needs, and abilities. One approach that can be implemented is differentiated instruction. According (Carol A. Tomlinson, 2014) differentiated instruction is an approach based on the understanding that each student has different levels of readiness, interests, and learning profiles; therefore, teachers need to adapt the learning process, materials, and outcomes so that every student can develop to their full potential. The theory of differentiated instruction is based on four key elements that teachers can adapt: content (what is being learned), process (how students learn), product (how students demonstrate their learning), and environment (how the classroom atmosphere functions and feels) (Carol A. Tomlinson, 2014). These four elements are designed based on an assessment of students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. In other words, this approach does not require teachers to create individual learning plans but rather to provide diverse learning pathways within a single classroom so that every child can access the material according to their capacity. It is

this principle that makes differentiation relevant for addressing the issues outlined, ranging from monotonous teaching methods, limited resources, to the need to accommodate the diverse characteristics of students.

These conditions align with initial observations and interviews with Islamic Religious Education teachers at Sasmita Edukasi Elementary School in Blora. Based on initial observations, Islamic Religious Education instruction at the school remains dominated by lecture-based methods and assignments. Teachers have not designed activities that accommodate differences in students' readiness, interests, or learning styles. This results in students with lower comprehension becoming passive, while high-ability students do not receive appropriate challenges. Furthermore, teachers revealed that managing student attention poses a significant challenge, particularly because the school implements a nature-based learning system with 50% of instruction taking place outdoors. (Mufida, 2025) In this context, students are actually harder to manage due to their strong inclination to play. Initial observations also revealed disparities in classroom conditions, where grades 1 and 2 felt cramped due to accommodating more than 20 students, while grades 3 through 6 had fewer than 15 students. In this regard, this aligns with Noviana's view that limited classroom space has the potential to affect learning comfort and effectiveness (Noviana, 2014).

Previous research by Aly Mansur (Mansur & Nursikin, 2025) shows that the main problems in Islamic religious education are the diverse characteristics of students, low motivation, limited facilities and infrastructure, difficulties in assessment, teachers' workload, and limited learning time. In addition, another study (Malziyah dkk., 2024) found several problems in Islamic religious education in elementary schools, including a lack of variety in teaching methods, academic backwardness among students, limited teaching materials, and the use of ineffective learning models, strategies, and methods. Furthermore, there are still obstacles in the use of learning media and a school environment that does not support the learning process. These conditions further highlight the importance of innovation, including the application of differentiated learning, so that Islamic religious education becomes more relevant and able to adapt to the needs of today's students.

(Wulandari, 2021) points out that the time available in class is often insufficient for the amount of material that needs to be covered, resulting in a suboptimal learning process. In line with these findings, by (Amma, 2018) notes that one of the main challenges in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) instruction is students' low interest in learning, as well as the use of teaching methods that tend to be monotonous and lack adequate instructional media. Furthermore, (Ahyun Rofiah dkk., 2022) explain that the quality of IRE instruction is also influenced by the management of facilities and infrastructure, as well as the accuracy of learning assessments. This condition shows that teachers are required to be able to maximize limited facilities so that the learning process can continue to run effectively.

The five previous studies have provided a broad overview of the problems of IRE learning in elementary schools, such as the findings of (Wulandari, 2021) regarding limited learning time, (Amma, 2018) findings on students' low interest in learning and the use of monotonous teaching methods, and (Ahyun Rofiah dkk., 2022) regarding learning management, as well as research by Mansur & Nursikin, 2025) and (Malziyah dkk., 2024) which revealed various obstacles in the implementation of IRE learning, indicate that learning problems do not stem from a single aspect but are interrelated,

but there has been no in-depth discussion examining the problems from the perspective of Carol A. Tomlinson's differentiated learning integrated with its solution strategies. The five previous studies generally focused on only one aspect, such as teaching methods or infrastructure. Thus, this study aims to fill the gap in previous studies by providing a more integrative and comprehensive analysis to understand and overcome the problems of IRE learning in elementary schools.

This study will discuss the analysis of problems in Islamic Education learning in elementary schools from the perspective of Carol A. Tomlinson's theory of differentiated learning. This theory was chosen because it emphasizes the importance of tailoring instruction based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. This perspective is relevant to the diverse characteristics of elementary school students, making it suitable for analyzing various learning challenges while offering alternative solutions that are better suited to the needs of each student. The primary focus lies on how the three elements of differentiation—content, process, and product—can be applied in Islamic Education learning, along with practical examples in the field, particularly at the elementary school level. This study is expected to contribute to the development of more inclusive and effective learning methods in Islamic education and to provide consideration for teachers in determining the teaching methods to be used during the learning process.

This study is a field research project that employs a descriptive qualitative method using a case study approach. This approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the challenges in Islamic Religious Education at Sasmita Edukasi Elementary School in Blora. In this study, the theory of differentiated instruction proposed by Carol A. Tomlinson was used as an analytical framework to examine various challenges in Islamic Religious Education that occur in the field. The analysis focused on the four main elements of differentiated instruction—content differentiation, process differentiation, product differentiation, and environmental differentiation—to understand the forms of challenges that arise in efforts to accommodate the diverse learning needs of students. This study was conducted at Sasmita Edukasi Blora Elementary School. The school was chosen because of its diverse student population and unique nature-based learning model. The school also features classrooms designed to meet student's learning needs (Isnailul Destiyah Luthfia Hanifah, 2022). These characteristics make this school relevant for study in the context of issues in Islamic Religious Education through the perspective of Tomlinson's differentiation theory.

Research data were collected through structured interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation. The research informants were Islamic Religious Education teachers who were purposively selected based on the research needs for or Research on Issues in Islamic Religious Education in Elementary Schools at Sasmita Edukasi, Blora. Interviews were used to collect data on issues in the teaching of Islamic Religious Education; observations were conducted to directly observe the learning process; and documentation was used as supporting data to supplement the data obtained from interviews and observations, as well as to verify the information provided by informants. Data analysis followed the Miles and Huberman model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. Data validity was tested through temporal triangulation by verifying the data at different times via interviews. This technique was used to enhance the credibility of the data, thereby providing a comprehensive picture of the challenges in Islamic Religious Education at Sasmita

Edukasi Elementary School in Blora from the perspective of Carol A. Tomlinson's theory of differentiation.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Differentiated instruction is a teacher's effort to respond to differences among students in the classroom. Generally, Tomlinson explains that at the most basic level, differentiation consists of a teacher's effort to respond to variations among learners in the classroom. Whenever a teacher reaches out to an individual or small group to vary their instruction to create the best learning experience, that is when the teacher is implementing differentiated instruction. More specifically, Tomlinson defines differentiated instruction as a teaching approach that addresses the needs of each student based on three key aspects: readiness, interest, and *learning* profile. Teachers can differentiate at least four classroom elements based on these three aspects: *First*, content (what students need to learn or how students access information); *second*, process (activities students engage in to understand or master the content); *third*, product (a capstone project that requires students to practice, apply, and expand upon what they have learned in a unit); and *fourth*, the learning environment-how the classroom functions and feels (Carol A. Tomlinson, 2000).

This definition emphasizes that teaching cannot be done uniformly but must be tailored to the characteristics of each individual. In line with this, Kurnia Fitra (Kurnia Fitra, 2022) adds that the essence of differentiated instruction lies in the effort to teach according to each student's learning style while identifying their talents. In other words, every student is a unique individual requiring different treatment; therefore, educators are obligated to provide support tailored to each student's specific needs.

Based on the results of interviews and observations conducted at Sasmita Edukasi Elementary School in Blora, various issues were identified in Islamic Religious Education instruction, which were subsequently analyzed using Carol A. Tomlinson's theoretical framework for differentiated instruction. The analysis focused on four main elements: content differentiation, process differentiation, product differentiation, and environmental differentiation.

### 1. Issues with Content Differentiation

The challenges regarding the content element stem from the fact that Islamic Religious Education includes fixed materials that must be studied by all students. Content differentiation requires teachers to vary how students access information; however, not all Islamic Religious Education materials can be presented in diverse versions without altering their essence. Teachers face the challenge of providing tiered learning resources that remain scientifically accurate within the Islamic context, while students' readiness levels within a single class can vary significantly (Irwansyah Suwahyu, 2025), (Carol A. Tomlinson, 2000).

Tomlinson provides examples of content differentiation at the elementary school level, including: a) using reading materials with varying levels of readability, b) using vocabulary lists appropriate to students' readiness levels, c) presenting ideas through auditory and visual methods, d) using reading partners, and e) holding small-group sessions to re-teach skills to students facing difficulties or to expand the thinking of students who are already proficient (Carol A. Tomlinson, 2000).

Based on interviews with Islamic Education teachers, several issues related to content differentiation were identified. Teachers acknowledged that some first-

grade students had not yet memorized the Arabic alphabet. As a result, when teaching long verses from the Qur'an or hadiths, teachers face difficulties because they must repeat the material and it takes a considerable amount of time. Additionally, observations noted that teachers rarely provide materials with varying levels of difficulty, although they have implemented this approach in the past. However, teachers utilize a variety of media and learning resources, such as textbooks and materials sourced from the internet or other sources.

From these findings, two main problems were identified:

- a. First, there is a mismatch between the material presented (long verses) and the students' readiness level (they have not yet memorized the Hijaiyah letters). Ideally, according to Tomlinson (Carol A. Tomlinson, 2000), students at who have not yet mastered the Hijaiyah letters—as a prerequisite—should first be provided with remedial material in the form of an introduction to the Hijaiyah letters, rather than being immediately given material consisting of long verses. This finding aligns with the results of a study by Farisia et al. (Farisia et al., 2025), which revealed that one of the main challenges in implementing differentiation in Islamic elementary schools is teachers' lack of skills in identifying and assessing students' learning progress, making it difficult for teachers to adapt the material to students' readiness levels. This study confirms that without accurate identification of learning progress, differentiation practices fail to meet students' learning needs. Research at SD Inpres 3 Talise also identified that students' low level of independent learning is one of the main challenges in implementing differentiation, which results in students' inability to follow material that does not match their readiness level. Wiata & Mangunsong (Wiakta Putri & Mangunsong, 2024), in their study of 330 elementary school teachers from 14 provinces in Indonesia, found that although teachers have a good understanding of differentiated instruction, implementation in the area of product differentiation remains low, and there is a significant gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. This aligns with the situation at Sasmita Edukasi Elementary School, where teachers understand the importance of differentiation but have not yet been able to implement it optimally.
- b. Second, teachers rarely provide materials with varying levels of difficulty, even though the availability of tiered materials is a key requirement for content differentiation to accommodate differences in student readiness. This aligns with Tomlinson's (Carol A. Tomlinson, 2000) who states that the availability of tiered materials is a key requirement in content differentiation because it serves to accommodate differences in students' readiness levels. Without tiered materials, proficient students do not receive sufficient challenges, while students who are struggling do not receive adequate support. This is consistent with research by Devi Anom Sari et al. (2024), which found that barriers to implementing differentiated instruction in elementary schools include teachers' limited understanding of the concept of differentiated instruction and a lack of creativity in designing lessons tailored to students' needs. This study also identified that teachers' limited skills in utilizing technology and time constraints in preparing materials are significant barriers. These findings indicate that the successful implementation of

differentiated instruction heavily depends on improving teacher competencies, technological support, and the availability of sufficient time for the lesson planning process.

## 2. Problems with Process Differentiation

From a process perspective, challenges arise when teachers must design a variety of activities to help students understand the material in ways that align with their interests and learning profiles. This diversity of activities requires more time for planning as well as complex classroom management skills. Meanwhile, the limited allocation of Islamic Religious Education class hours often poses a challenge in implementing a variety of activities simultaneously. Furthermore, the objectives of Islamic Religious Education-which are not only cognitive but also affective and psychomotor-add another consideration when designing the differentiation process (Irwansyah Suwahyu, 2025).

Furthermore, Tomlinson provides examples of process differentiation at the elementary school level, including: a) using tiered activities where all students work on the same material but with varying levels of support or complexity, b) providing interest centers that encourage students to explore topics that interest them, c) developing personalized schedules that include both collaborative work and tasks tailored to individual needs, d) offering visual aids or direct support to students who need them, and e) allowing students varying amounts of time to complete tasks (Carol A. Tomlinson, 2000).

Based on interviews with Islamic Religious Education teachers, several issues related to process differentiation were identified. The teacher acknowledged that they frequently use the lecture method, particularly at the beginning of lessons or when introducing new material. The teacher themselves assessed that the methods used may not yet be very varied, although they always try to find methods that make students more active and focused, especially for lower-grade classes.

The teacher also mentioned challenges in maintaining students' concentration and discipline. Sasmita Edukasi Elementary School is a nature-based school with 50% of learning taking place inside the classroom and 50% outside. The challenges in both the classroom and outdoors are similar: maintaining students' concentration and discipline poses a significant challenge. This is especially true during outdoor learning, as children tend to prefer playing and are difficult to manage. Teachers have tried having students learn in the classroom courtyard, and the result was that students were more comfortable and engaged; however, some students required special attention because they were more inclined to play than to pay attention.

Regarding student motivation, the teacher found that there are still students who come to school with low motivation to learn. This can be identified by characteristics such as a lack of focus during the learning process, failing to keep a schedule, and not completing assignments. The teacher also acknowledged that they do not differentiate treatment between students who grasp concepts quickly and those who do not, though there is guidance or a special approach for students who struggle to understand. For lower grades, such as first and second grade, the teacher frequently uses play-based or singing methods, for example, the "tepuk wudhu" game to memorize the movements of wudhu and songs to memorize the names of the 10 angels.

The observation results noted that for lower grades, the teacher frequently uses *game-based learning* or learning through play. The teacher also divides students into small groups to complete tasks. Additionally, the observation noted that the teacher utilizes the surrounding environment (the schoolyard) as a learning medium because Sasmita Edukasi Blora Elementary School is a nature-based school, so learning often takes place outside the classroom.



**Figure 1.** Islamic Education Learning

From these findings, four main issues were identified.

- a. First, the dominance of the lecture method in IRE instruction.

Interview data indicate that teachers frequently use the lecture method, particularly at the beginning of a lesson or when introducing new material. The teachers themselves acknowledge that the methods they use are not yet very varied. However, according to Tomlinson (Carol A. Tomlinson, 2000), differentiated instruction requires teachers to provide a variety of activities so that students can process their understanding according to their individual learning styles. Ideally, teachers should not rely on just one method but should vary activities such as tiered activities, interest centers, or individual assignments.

These findings are consistent with the research by Koela et al. (2026) at SD Inpres 3 Talise, which identified that students' low level of independent learning is one of the main challenges in its implementation. In fact, differentiated instruction requires teachers to provide a variety of activities so that students can process their understanding according to their individual learning styles. This study also confirms that teachers have not formally implemented differentiated assessment rubrics, revealing a significant gap between assessment and instruction.

- b. The second issue: difficulties in managing learning outside the classroom.

Interview data indicates that Sasmita Edukasi Elementary School is a nature-based school with a 50% in-class and 50% out-of-class learning ratio. However, when learning takes place outside the classroom, children prefer to play and are difficult to manage. Teachers also acknowledge that while

students feel more comfortable and engaged when learning on the playground, some students still tend to play rather than pay attention. Observations confirm that teachers utilize the surrounding environment (the schoolyard) as a learning medium, but this has not been accompanied by adequate management strategies. In fact, according to Tomlinson (Carol A. Tomlinson, 2000), a differentiated learning environment should support student diversity, including the ability to accommodate students who need to move around to learn. Ideally, teachers need to develop clear routines and guidelines for outdoor learning, such as designating play zones and study zones.

This aligns with research by Devi Anom Sari et al. (2024), which found that most teachers have not received adequate training on differentiated instruction, while others who have undergone training have not been able to implement it effectively in the classroom. Adaptive classroom management skills, including those for outdoor learning, are competencies that need to be developed systematically. Thus, the second issue is the lack of structured strategies and routines for managing outdoor learning, which makes it easier for children to play and harder for them to stay focused.

c. Third issue: Low student motivation.

Based on interviews with Islamic Religious Education teachers, the researcher found that there are still students who come to school with low learning motivation. This is evident from characteristics such as a lack of focus during the learning process, failing to schedule tasks (being disorganized in their studies), and not completing assigned tasks. This issue is a major obstacle to differentiated instruction, as students with low motivation require a fundamentally different approach compared to those with high motivation. They need not only adapted materials but also emotional support, relevance of the material to their lives, and a reward system that fosters intrinsic interest. Without specific strategies to boost low-motivation students' engagement, differentiated learning will not be effective, as these students will continue to fall behind.

These findings align with the research by Farisia et al. (2025), which indicates that the practice of differentiated instruction in Islamic elementary schools has not yet been able to optimally meet students' learning needs due to limited technological support and inadequate teacher training. Research on differentiated instruction in the context of Islamic Religious Education indicates that this strategy significantly increases students' active participation and intrinsic motivation driven by spiritual awareness. Findings at Sasmita Edukasi Elementary School show that the aspect of motivation has not been a primary consideration in instructional planning, so students with low motivation do not receive appropriate interventions.

d. Fourth issue: There is no differentiation in treatment among students.

Interview results indicate that teachers do not significantly differentiate their treatment of students who grasp concepts quickly from those who grasp them more slowly. Although there are specific guidelines or approaches for students who struggle to understand, these are implemented on an ad hoc basis rather than as part of a differentiated learning plan. As a result, students

who grasp concepts quickly tend to feel bored because they have to wait for their slower peers, while students who struggle to understand feel overwhelmed because the pace of learning does not match their abilities. Ideally, in process differentiation, teachers should provide tasks with varying levels of difficulty, flexible learning time, and diverse support (e.g., scaffolding for slower learners and enrichment for faster learners). The absence of this planned differentiation hinders both groups of students from fully realizing their potential.

These findings align with the research by Rofiqi et al. at SDN X in Mojokerto Regency (Rofiqi et al., 2025), which found that the implementation of differentiated instruction in an inclusive setting faces structural barriers, including the absence of specialized support teachers and an inclusive education team, as well as suboptimal collaboration between schools and parents through the Individual Education Program. In this regard, the findings at Sasmita Edukasi Elementary School in Blora indicate that teachers have not implemented planned process differentiation, resulting in both groups of students not receiving an optimal learning experience. This study also recommends strengthening structural support through the provision of special education teachers and enhancing teacher capacity.

Furthermore, consistent findings were also reported in the study by Koela et al. (2026), which identified three main challenges in implementing differentiated instruction: limited instructional time, large class sizes, and low levels of student autonomy in learning. These findings are relevant to the conditions at Sasmita Edukasi Elementary School in Blora, where teachers face difficulties with classroom management and a lack of strategies to accommodate students with varying levels of learning autonomy. Amanulah & Ramadhan (Amanulah & Ramadhan, 2025) also found that difficulties in managing the classroom are a major challenge, as there are many aspects that must be prepared, such as diagnostic assessments and mapping students' learning needs.

### **3. Issues with Product Differentiation**

According to Tomlinson (Carol A. Tomlinson, 2000), outcome differentiation relates to how students demonstrate their learning outcomes. Issues related to outcomes are typically assessed based on how well students' understanding and internalization of Islamic values can be measured through various student works. Conventional and uniform assessment systems may not sufficiently accommodate the diversity of student work. This poses a challenge in maintaining objectivity and assessment standards (Irwansyah Suwahyu, 2025).

Tomlinson provides several examples of product differentiation at the elementary school level. Teachers can offer students choices regarding how to express the learning required by the National Curriculum, such as putting on a puppet show, writing a letter, or creating a mural with labels. Teachers can also use rubrics appropriate for students' varying skill levels, allow students to work independently or " " in small groups, and encourage students to design their own product assignments (Carol A. Tomlinson, 2000).

Based on interviews with Islamic Religious Education teachers, several issues related to product differentiation were identified. The teachers revealed that student

assignments are entirely determined by the teacher on the basis of "fairness." This means that teachers do not give students the freedom to choose the type of assignment they wish to complete. However, one positive example of product differentiation was found. In a second-grade prayer practice lesson, the teacher treated students differently. Students who were already proficient in reading and memorizing the prayer movements practiced directly in front of the class and were challenged to lead the prayer movements or correct their classmates' recitations. Meanwhile, students who had not yet memorized the movements could practice the movements and create step-by-step cards for prayer practice.

The observation results showed that the teacher provided options for students to demonstrate their understanding; specifically, students could choose between illustrated materials or videos related to the lesson content.

From these findings, one main issue was identified: the limited variety of tasks assigned to students. Interview results showed that the teacher determined student tasks independently, citing the need for "fairness." However, observational data noted that the teacher provided choices in the form of visual aids or videos. These two sets of data need not be viewed as contradictory. The selection of visual aids or videos provided by teachers remains very limited. Teachers have not offered a wider variety of other assignment formats, such as posters, oral presentations, memorization, or art projects. As a result, teachers generally feel that assignments are entirely determined by them, since the options provided are considered inadequate. However, according to Tomlinson (Carol A. Tomlinson, 2000), product differentiation should provide students with diverse choices so they can demonstrate their understanding in ways that best align with their interests and learning strengths. Thus, the identified issue is the limited range of assignment options provided by teachers, leaving students with few alternatives to demonstrate their learning outcomes.

Research by Wiakta & Mangunsong (Wiakta Putri & Mangunsong, 2024) specifically revealed that the implementation of product differentiation is the aspect with the lowest level of application compared to other aspects. Findings at Sasmita Edukasi Elementary School in Blora indicate that teachers have not yet offered a wider variety of task formats, such as posters, oral presentations, memorization, or art projects.

Furthermore, research by Hanik et al. (Hanik et al., 2025) on the implementation of differentiated instruction in madrasah ibtidaiyah indicates that effective product differentiation allows students to express their understanding through various methods aligned with their interests and learning strengths. This study also emphasizes that differentiated instruction in elementary madrasahs serves not only as an adaptive pedagogical technique but also as an instrument for the conscious and humanistic internalization of values.

Furthermore, teachers need to be provided with training to design various types of assignments. Research by Lailiyah & Mas'ud (Lailiyah & Mas'ud, 2024) confirms that the proposed solutions to address the challenges of implementing differentiated instruction include regular training for teachers and further support from the government in providing adequate educational resources. Another study by Devi Anom Sari et al. (Devi Anom Sari et al., 2024) also found that systematic support

through continuing education and intensive mentoring is essential to enhance teachers' capacity to effectively implement differentiated instruction.

#### 4. Issues with Environmental Differentiation

Environmental differentiation, according to Tomlinson, relates to how the classroom atmosphere functions and feels. A differentiated learning environment must be able to support student diversity, both in physical terms (spatial layout, lighting, air circulation) and psychological terms (a sense of safety, comfort, and acceptance). Tomlinson provides examples of implementing environmental differentiation at the elementary school level, such as providing spaces for quiet work as well as spaces that encourage collaboration, establishing clear guidelines for independent work, developing routines that allow students to get help when the teacher is busy, and helping students understand that some students need to move around to learn while others learn better by sitting quietly (Carol A. Tomlinson, 2000).

Based on interviews with Islamic Religious Education teachers, issues related to environmental differentiation were identified. Teachers stated that the classrooms are generally adequate, but classrooms with more than 20 students feel too cramped. The ideal number of students per class, according to the teachers, is 15. Meanwhile, grades 1 and 2 have more than 20 students, while grades 3 through 6 have fewer than 15 students.

When classrooms feel cramped and are not conducive to learning, teachers address this by holding classes in the prayer room or on the school grounds. Teachers also noted that the greatest challenge in implementing instruction that accounts for individual student differences is the large number of students in a single class, which makes it difficult for teachers to provide equal individual attention and guidance. Facilities available to support Islamic Religious Education include an LCD projector, a prayer room, and a government-provided Smart TV. There are two LCD projectors available for use, provided they are not being used by another teacher at the same time. If no projector is available, teachers use the Smart TV.

Observations noted that grades 1 and 2 felt cramped because there were more than 20 students, while grades 3 through 6 did not feel cramped because there were fewer than 15 students. Additionally, the layout of the desks and chairs made it somewhat difficult for teachers to move around to reach students in the back of the classroom in grades 1 and 2.

Based on these findings, three main problems were identified. The identification of these three problems is based on empirical data obtained from interviews and observations, in which all three problems emerged consistently from both data sources. The author limited the analysis to these three issues because field findings indicated that only these three aspects were truly identified as obstacles to environmental differentiation at Sasmita Edukasi Elementary School in Blora, while other aspects of environmental differentiation (such as lighting, air circulation, and psychological factors) were not found to be significant issues based on the collected data.

- a. The first issue is the limited classroom space due to the mismatch between the number of students and the room's capacity.

Interview data indicate that the ideal number of students per class is 15, yet first and second-grade classes have more than 20 students. The teachers

themselves acknowledged that classrooms feel too crowded when there are more than 20 students. Observation data confirmed that the first- and second-grade classrooms felt cramped, teachers had difficulty moving to reach students in the back, and the second-grade classroom, with 28 students, felt stuffy. As a result, teachers struggled to provide personalized guidance equitably.

These findings align with the research by Koela et al. (2026) at Inpres 3 Talise Elementary School, which identified large class sizes as one of the main barriers to implementing differentiated instruction. According to Tomlinson (Carol A. Tomlinson, 2014), a differentiated learning environment should allow teachers to move freely and provide a comfortable space for students. Consequently, the mismatch between the number of students (more than 20) and the ideal classroom capacity (15 students) results in a cramped classroom, makes it difficult for teachers to move around, and leads to less-than-optimal personalized instruction.

- b. The second issue is the difficulty in managing learning outside the classroom.

Interview data indicate that Sasmita Edukasi Elementary School is a nature-based school with a 50-50 split between indoor and outdoor learning. However, when learning takes place outdoors, children tend to prefer playing and are difficult to manage. Teachers also acknowledge that while students feel more comfortable and engaged when learning on the school grounds, some students still tend to play rather than pay attention. Observation data confirms that teachers utilize the schoolyard as a learning environment, but no specific strategies for managing students have been observed.

This finding aligns with the research by (DeviSari et al. 2024), Anom which found that most teachers have not received adequate training on differentiated instruction, while others have attended training but have not been able to implement it effectively in the classroom. This is relevant to the findings at Sasmita Edukasi Elementary School, where outdoor learning has not been accompanied by adequate management strategies. Research by Farisia & Santoso (Farisia et al., 2025) identified that a lack of professional training in technology-assisted learning is a major challenge. According to Tomlinson (CarolAnn Tomlinson, 2000), a differentiated learning environment should support student diversity, including the ability to accommodate students who need to move around in order to learn. Ideally, teachers need to develop clear routines and guidelines for outdoor learning. As noted by , the lack of structured strategies and routines to manage outdoor learning makes it easier for students to play and harder for them to stay focused.

- c. The third issue is the limited availability of projectors.

Interview data indicate that there are only two projectors available for the entire school. Teachers can only use a projector if no other teacher is using it at the same time. Observation data confirm that the projectors are available and functioning properly, but they cannot be used simultaneously by other teachers. However, projectors are a crucial tool for presenting visual materials, especially for lower-grade classes whose learning profiles are more visually oriented. This limitation hinders teachers' ability to provide varied

learning media. Thus, the third issue is the limited number of projectors (only 2 units) available for the entire school, forcing teachers to take turns using them.

This finding confirms the results of a study by Farisia & Santoso (Farisia et al., 2025), who, in their research at five Islamic elementary schools in East Java, found that challenges in implementing differentiated instruction include a lack of professional training in technology-assisted learning, a lack of teacher skills in assessing and identifying student learning progress, and a lack of technology-based learning resources. This study emphasizes that without adequate technological support, the practice of differentiated instruction in Islamic elementary schools fails to meet students' learning needs. Research by Lailiyah & Mas'ud further notes that limited facilities and infrastructure, along with minimal support from the school administration, are major challenges to differentiated instruction implementation (Lailiyah & Mas'ud, 2024). Projectors are essential tools for presenting visual materials, especially for lower-grade classes where students' learning profiles are more visually oriented. This limitation hinders teachers from providing a variety of learning media. Consequently, the limited number of projectors (only 2 units) available for the entire school forces teachers to take turns using them.

## CONCLUSION

Based on an analysis of the four elements of Tomlinson's differentiation, it can be concluded that the challenges in Islamic Religious Education at Sasmita Edukasi Elementary School in Blora encompass these four elements. In content differentiation, two challenges were identified: the mismatch between the material and students' readiness-where students who have not yet memorized the Hijaiyah alphabet are still given long verses-and the rarity of teachers providing tiered material appropriate to students' readiness levels. In process differentiation, four issues were identified: the dominance of the lecture method, which does not accommodate diverse learning styles; difficulties managing learning outside the classroom because students are hard to manage and tend to play; low learning motivation among some students; and the absence of planned differentiation in treatment between fast-learning and slow-learning students. In product differentiation, one issue was identified: the limited variety of assignments provided by teachers. Teachers determine the assignments themselves under the rationale of "fairness," and the available options are limited to visual media or videos. Regarding environmental differentiation, three issues were identified: cramped classrooms due to class sizes exceeding 20 students-surpassing the ideal capacity of 15 students-difficulty managing learning outside the classroom without structured strategies, and the limited availability of projectors, with only two units available for the entire school.

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