



Implementation of differentiated instruction in improving students' learning outcomes in aqidah akhlaq at Tarbiyah Mazniyah Islamic Junior high school, Jambi city

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Abstract

This study is motivated by the low learning outcomes of students in the Aqidah Akhlak subject, which are associated with limited variation in teaching methods, low student engagement, lack of concentration, passive participation, and decreased motivation to learn. These conditions indicate the need for a more adaptive and student-centered learning approach. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the implementation of differentiated instruction in improving students' learning outcomes in Aqidah Akhlak learning. This research employed a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design using the Kemmis and McTaggart model, which consists of four stages: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, conducted in two cycles with 33 Grade VIII students at Madrasah Tsanawiyah Tarbiyah Mazniyah Jambi. Data were collected through observation, interviews, and tests, and analyzed using descriptive quantitative and qualitative techniques. The results showed a significant improvement in students' learning outcomes, as indicated by the increase in mastery levels from 55% (18 students) in the pre-cycle to 67% (22 students) in Cycle I, and reaching 100% (33 students) in Cycle II. In addition, student engagement and participation improved during the learning process. These findings indicate that differentiated instruction is effective in improving both learning outcomes and student engagement, and is relevant to be implemented in Aqidah Akhlak learning within the framework of student-centered education.

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INTRODUCTION

Education plays a fundamental role in developing high-quality human resources, encompassing not only intellectual competence but also moral and spiritual dimensions. In the context of Islamic education, the learning process is expected to foster students' holistic development by integrating cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. Particularly in Aqidah Akhlak subjects, learning is not merely oriented toward knowledge transfer but also toward the internalization of Islamic values and the formation of students' character in accordance with religious teachings (Alhamuddin et al., 2022; Anida et al., 2023; Irham et al., 2024; Majid, 2020). Therefore, the effectiveness of learning in this subject is closely related not only to academic achievement but also to students' moral development and behavioral transformation.

However, in practice, learning activities remain predominantly teacher-centered, where teachers act as the main source of knowledge while students function as passive recipients. This condition limits students' active engagement and reduces their ability to construct meaningful understanding (Nisa et al., 2023; Suryati et al., 2023). Furthermore, conventional instructional approaches are often unable to meet the demands of 21st-century education, which emphasize critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication skills (Mustamir, 2025; Roşu & Ionescu, 2024; Sato et al., 2023; Sökmen, 2021). Learning that is dominated by one-way interaction tends to reduce students' motivation and participation, ultimately affecting their learning outcomes. This issue becomes more complex in Aqidah Akhlak learning, which requires not only conceptual

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understanding but also deep internalization of values and moral reasoning (Widiani & Istiqomah, 2021). Another crucial factor influencing the effectiveness of learning is student diversity. Students differ in terms of readiness, interests, learning styles, and prior knowledge. If these differences are not properly accommodated, the learning process may fail to meet individual needs and result in suboptimal learning outcomes (Tomlinson, 2017; Tomlinson et al., 2021; Zitha et al., 2023). Previous studies have demonstrated that student diversity significantly affects engagement and academic achievement, particularly in complex subjects that require higher-order thinking and reflective understanding (Filgona et al., 2020; Kwangmuang et al., 2021). Therefore, learning strategies that are flexible and adaptive are needed to ensure that all students can participate actively and achieve optimal learning outcomes.

Based on preliminary observations conducted in Grade VIII at MTs Tarbiyah Mazniyah Kota Jambi, several problems were identified in the Aqidah Akhlak learning process. Students tended to be passive, less focused, and reluctant to participate in classroom discussions. In addition, there were significant differences in students' learning abilities, particularly in understanding abstract concepts. The results of the pre-cycle test indicated that only 18 out of 33 students (54.5%) achieved the minimum mastery criterion (KKTP) of 73, while 15 students (45.5%) did not meet the required standard. These findings indicate that students' learning outcomes remain relatively low and highlight the need for more adaptive and innovative learning strategies. One approach that can address these challenges is differentiated instruction. Differentiated instruction is a teaching approach that allows teachers to modify content, process, and product based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2017; Tomlinson et al., 2021). Previous studies have shown that differentiated instruction can improve learning outcomes, enhance student engagement, and create more inclusive learning environments (AM et al., 2023a; AM et al., 2023b; Dinana et al., 2024; Hakim & Mu'id, 2024; Nisa et al., 2023; Subban, 2022). In addition, differentiated instruction has been proven to increase motivation and facilitate deeper understanding by providing learning experiences tailored to students' needs (Anggoro et al., 2024; Deunk et al., 2018; Hidayat, 2024; Komara & Sukandar, 2025; Smale-Jacobse et al., 2023; Suprayogi et al., 2022; Wachidah et al., 2025). These findings indicate that differentiated instruction is a promising approach to address the complexity of student diversity in the classroom.

In the context of Islamic education, differentiated instruction is particularly relevant because learning is not only focused on cognitive achievement but also on character development and moral internalization. Aqidah Akhlak learning plays a significant role in shaping students' attitudes and behavior, thus requiring instructional strategies that actively involve students in meaningful learning processes (Anida et al., 2023). In addition, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum supports the application of differentiated instruction by emphasizing student-centered learning and providing flexibility for teachers to design adaptive learning experiences (AM et al., 2023a; Fauzia & Ramadan, 2023). This alignment between curriculum policy and instructional approach strengthens the relevance of differentiated instruction in current educational practices. Despite its advantages, the implementation of differentiated instruction in Aqidah Akhlak learning remains limited. Most previous studies have focused on general subjects, while research in Islamic education contexts, particularly at the MTs level, is still relatively scarce (Maarif et al., 2022; Sambaga, 2024; Sukidal et al., 2022). Furthermore, existing studies have not extensively explored how differentiated instruction can effectively support students in understanding abstract religious concepts, which are often considered challenging and significantly influence learning outcomes.

More importantly, although previous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of differentiated instruction in improving learning outcomes, most of these studies emphasize general cognitive achievement without adequately addressing the integration of moral and spiritual dimensions inherent in Islamic education. This indicates a lack of contextualized research that examines how differentiated instruction can simultaneously support cognitive development and value internalization in Aqidah Akhlak learning. Consequently, there is still limited empirical evidence explaining how this approach operates in real classroom settings within Islamic junior secondary education, particularly in addressing students' diverse characteristics and difficulties in understanding abstract religious concepts.

This condition reveals a critical gap between the ideal expectation of student-centered, adaptive learning and the reality of conventional, teacher-centered practices in Aqidah Akhlak

instruction. In addition, there is a lack of empirical evidence examining the implementation of differentiated instruction specifically in Islamic junior secondary education (MTs), particularly in addressing students' difficulties in understanding abstract religious concepts. Therefore, further research is necessary to bridge this gap by providing contextual and practical evidence of how differentiated instruction can be effectively implemented in Aqidah Akhlak learning.

Based on the above explanation, this study aims to analyze the implementation of differentiated instruction in improving students' learning outcomes in Aqidah Akhlak subjects at MTs Tarbiyah Mazniyah Kota Jambi. Then, this study contributes both theoretically and practically by providing empirical evidence on the effectiveness of differentiated instruction in Islamic education contexts, particularly in Aqidah Akhlak learning at the MTs level. It also offers practical insights for teachers in designing adaptive, inclusive, and student-centered learning strategies that accommodate diverse student characteristics while supporting the internalization of moral and religious values. Furthermore, this study enriches the existing literature by bridging the gap between differentiated instruction theory and its application in Islamic education, particularly in addressing the challenges of teaching abstract religious concepts.

METHOD

This study employed a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design using the Kemmis and McTaggart model, which consists of four iterative stages in each cycle: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Kemmis et al., 2014). The research was conducted at Madrasah Tsanawiyah Tarbiyah Mazniyah, Jambi City, during the even semester of the 2025/2026 academic year, involving 33 eighth-grade students as research participants selected through purposive sampling based on identified learning problems in the Aqidah Akhlak subject. The study was carried out in two cycles, preceded by a pre-cycle stage to establish baseline data on students' learning outcomes. In the planning stage, the researcher prepared lesson plans based on differentiated instruction principles, developed learning materials, and designed observation sheets and test instruments. The acting stage involved the implementation of differentiated instruction through the modification of content, process, and product according to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. The observing stage was conducted using structured observation sheets to monitor teacher performance and student participation during the learning process, while the reflecting stage involved evaluating the outcomes of each cycle to identify strengths and weaknesses as a basis for improvement in the subsequent cycle.

Data were collected using three main techniques: observation, tests, and documentation. Observation was used to examine teacher activities and student engagement during the learning process, while tests in the form of 25 validated multiple-choice questions were administered at the end of each cycle to measure students' learning outcomes. Documentation was utilized to collect supporting data, including student score records, attendance lists, and photographs of classroom activities. Quantitative data obtained from test results were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques with the formula $P = (f/N) \times 100\%$ to determine the percentage of students achieving the minimum mastery criterion (KKTP), which was set at 73. Meanwhile, qualitative data from observations and interviews were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The success of this classroom action research was determined based on two indicators: (1) at least 80% of students achieving the KKTP score of 73, and (2) an increase in teacher performance and student participation, as indicated by observation scores reaching a minimum of 80%, categorized as "good" to "very good."

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The pre-cycle stage in Classroom Action Research (CAR) represents an initial phase conducted prior to the implementation of the main research actions. This stage plays a crucial role in establishing a clear foundation for the study and in designing systematic and structured steps to ensure that the research process can be carried out effectively. During this stage, the researcher initiated coordination with the Aqidah Akhlaq subject teacher to discuss the research plan and its implementation. The teacher responded positively to the proposed research activities and expressed

willingness to collaborate in supporting the smooth execution of the study. In addition to coordination, the researcher conducted preliminary interviews with the teacher to obtain deeper insights into the existing teaching and learning process, including instructional methods, levels of student participation, and challenges encountered during classroom instruction.

Furthermore, classroom observations were carried out to identify the actual conditions of the learning process through direct engagement in classroom activities. The researcher positioned themselves in a non-intrusive manner, allowing for comprehensive observation of both teacher and student activities without disrupting the ongoing instructional process. The observations were conducted over two class periods (2 × 40 minutes), focusing specifically on student learning behaviors and the instructional practices employed by the teacher. The results of these observations indicated that many students in Grade VIII at Madrasah Tsanawiyah Tarbiyah Mazniyah, Jambi, frequently obtained scores below the Minimum Mastery Criteria (KKTP). This finding suggests that students' learning outcomes were not yet optimal and required improvement through more effective instructional strategies.

Based on the pre-cycle data collected on January 8, 2026, it was identified that the school had implemented the Merdeka Curriculum, with the Minimum Mastery Criteria (KKTP) set at 73. However, a considerable number of students had not yet achieved this criterion, indicating the need for improvement through more innovative and participatory learning approaches. To provide a clearer overview of students' learning outcomes in the pre-cycle stage, the following table presents the descriptive statistics of students' performance.

Table 1. Pre-Cycle Learning Outcomes of Class VIII Students

Description	Description
Total Score	2604
Number Of Students	33
Mean	78.90909
Median	82
Modus	72
Students Who Passed	55 % (18 Students)
Students Who Did Not Pass	45% (15 Students)

Table 1 illustrates that, although the mean score reached 78.90909, a substantial proportion of students still failed to achieve the required mastery level. Specifically, only 18 out of 33 students (55%) met the KKTP, while 15 students (45%) did not achieve mastery. This indicates that learning outcomes were still unevenly distributed among students. Furthermore, the data reveal that the overall level of achievement in the pre-cycle stage remained relatively low, as reflected in the limited number of students reaching mastery. This condition highlights that students had not yet fully understood the Aqidah Akhlaq material, particularly in topics requiring deeper conceptual comprehension. Consequently, these findings emphasize the need for improvement in the instructional process, particularly by increasing student involvement and engagement in learning activities.

Supporting these findings, the results of interviews with the Aqidah Akhlaq teacher indicated that the teaching process predominantly relied on lecture and question-and-answer methods, which often resulted in low student concentration and limited engagement. Similarly, students reported difficulties in focusing on the teacher's explanations and expressed uncertainty when asked to participate in questioning activities. These responses indicate that the existing instructional approach had not yet effectively facilitated active student participation or meaningful understanding.

To address the weaknesses identified in the pre-cycle stage, the research proceeded to Cycle I. The main objective of this cycle was to improve the shortcomings identified previously and to establish a basis for further evaluation. During this phase, the researcher prepared various data collection instruments, including observation sheets for teacher and student activities, post-test questions administered at the end of each cycle, and lesson plans designed based on the principles of the Differentiated Learning Method.

Following the implementation of learning activities in Cycle I, a post-test consisting of 25 multiple-choice questions was administered to 33 students in Grade VIII. Students were considered

to have achieved mastery if their scores met or exceeded the KKTP, which was set at 72. The results showed that 67% of students (approximately 22 students) achieved mastery, while 33% (11 students) did not meet the required standard. These findings indicate a notable improvement compared to the pre-cycle stage, although the overall learning outcomes had not yet reached the expected success criterion.

To evaluate the quality of learning outcomes, the following assessment criteria were used:

Table 2. Assessment Criteria

Assessment Criteria	
85%–98%	Very Good
71%–84%	Good
57%–70%	Fairly Good
43%–56%	Poor
29%–42%	Very Poor

The calculation of students' learning outcomes was conducted using the formula:

$$\text{Students learning outcomes} = \frac{\text{Students achieving mastery}}{\text{Total number students}} \times 100\%$$

$$\text{Students learning outcomes} = \frac{22}{33} \times 100\%$$

$$\text{Students learning outcomes} = 67\%$$

These results indicate that although there was an improvement, further enhancement was still required to achieve optimal learning outcomes. In the second meeting of Cycle I, learning activities were conducted using the material "Ananiyah (Selfishness) and Its Negative Impacts." The instructional procedures were similar to those implemented in the first meeting, with the main difference being the evaluation conducted at the end of the session to measure improvements in learning outcomes. Observations were conducted using structured observation sheets to assess both teacher and student activities during the learning process. To provide a comparative overview of student learning outcomes from the pre-cycle to Cycle I, the following table is presented.

Table 3. Comparison of Students' Learning Outcomes from the Pre-Cycle to Cycle I

Pre-cycle	Cycle 1	Description
2604	2604	Total Score
33	33	Number Of Students
78.90909	80.0909	Mean
82	83	Median
72	72	Modus
55 % (18 Students)	67% (22 Students)	Students Achieving Mastery
45% (15 Students)	33% (11 Students)	Students Not Achieving Mastery
12 % (4 Students)		Increase Percentage

Source: Analysis of Students' Learning Outcomes in the Pre-Cycle and Cycle I

Table 3 demonstrates a clear improvement in student learning outcomes from the pre-cycle to Cycle I. The percentage of students achieving mastery increased from 55% to 67%, indicating a positive impact of the implemented learning strategy. In addition, the mean score increased from 78.90909 to 80.0909, reflecting an overall improvement in students' academic performance. However, despite this progress, a portion of students still did not achieve mastery, indicating the need for further refinement of the instructional approach in the next cycle. The research then proceeded to Cycle II, which aimed to further improve both teacher performance and student learning outcomes. The observation results recorded during Cycle II are presented in the following table.

Table 4. Comparison of Teacher Activities from the Pre-Cycle, Cycle I, and Cycle II

Pra-cycle	Cycle I	Cycle II	Description
2604	2643	2855	Total Score
33	33	33	Number Of Students
78.90909	80.0909	86.5152	Mean
82	83	87	Median
72	72	90	Modus
55 % (18 Students)	67% (22 Students)	100% (33 Students)	Students Achieving Mastery
45% (15 Students)	33% (11 Students)	0%	Students Not Achieving Mastery
12 % (4 Students)		33% (11 Students)	Increase Percentage

Table 4 indicates a significant improvement in teacher performance and student learning outcomes across the research cycles. Teacher activity showed continuous progress, reflecting improved classroom management and more effective instructional practices. The percentage of students achieving mastery increased substantially, reaching 100% in Cycle II, indicating that all students successfully met the KKTP.

To further illustrate this improvement, the following figure presents a visual representation of teacher activities across cycles.

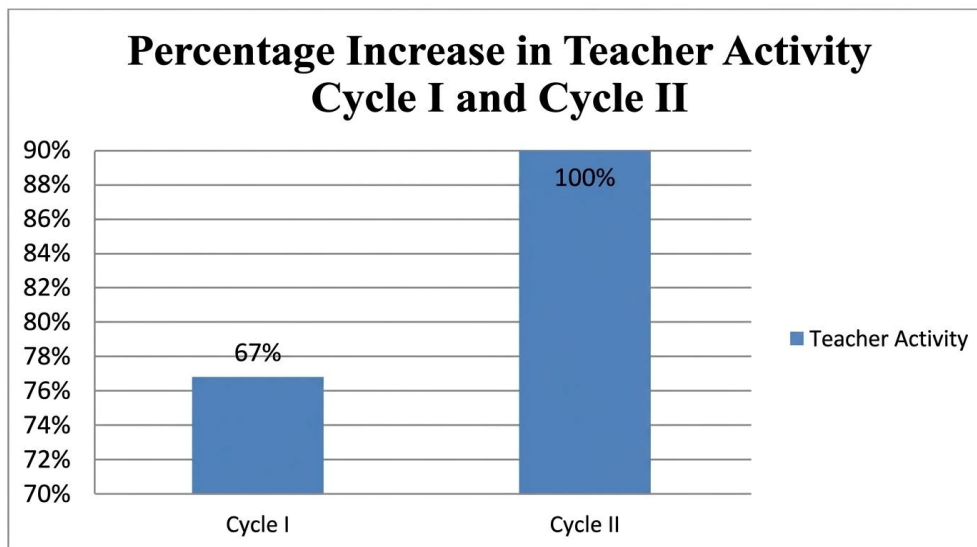


Figure 1. Diagram of Teacher Activities from Cycle I to Cycle II

Source: Teacher Activities in Cycle II

The figure shows a clear upward trend in teacher performance from Cycle I to Cycle II. This improvement indicates that the teacher has developed a stronger capacity to implement the Differentiated Learning Method more effectively. As the teacher becomes more skilled in adjusting instructional strategies to meet diverse student needs, the overall quality of instruction also improves. This progress contributes to the creation of a learning environment that is not only more structured but also increasingly engaging and interactive for students.

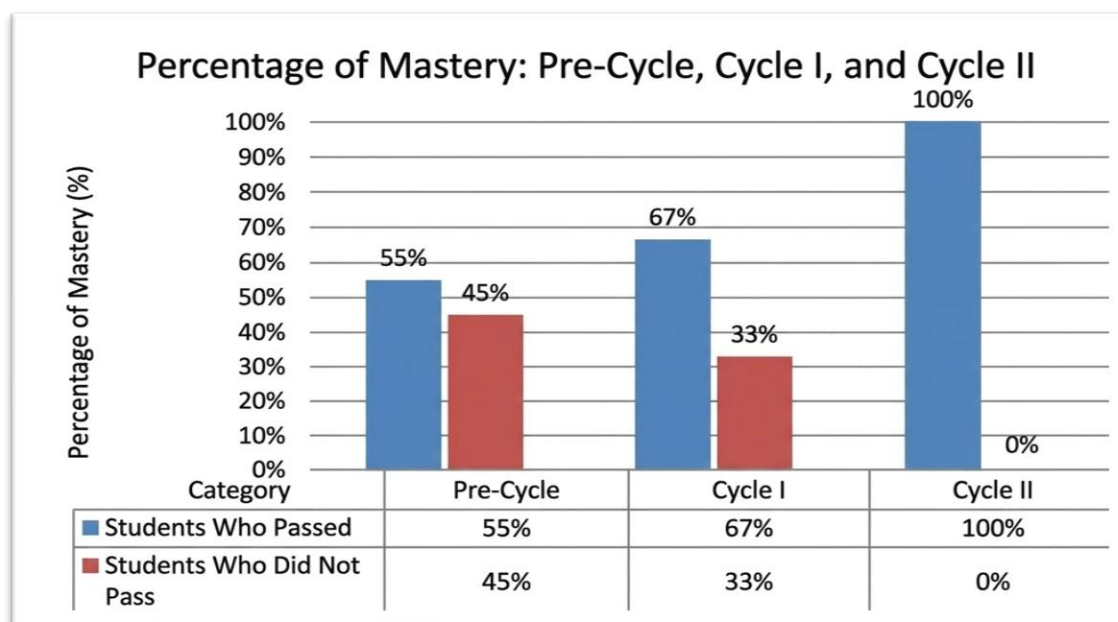
In addition, student participation increased significantly throughout the implementation process. Students demonstrated higher levels of activeness, confidence, and enthusiasm during learning activities, suggesting that the applied method successfully encouraged their involvement. The improvement in participation reflects a positive response to the learning approach, where students feel more supported and motivated to engage. A comprehensive comparison of learning outcomes across all stages is presented in the following table.

Table 5. Comparison of Scores from the Pre-Cycle, Cycle I, and Cycle II

Pra-Cycle	Cycle I	Cycle II	Description
2604	2643	2855	Total Score
33	33	33	Number Of Students
78.90909	80.0909	86.5152	Mean
82	83	87	Median
72	72	90	Modus
55 % (18 Students)	67% (22 Students)	100% (33 Students)	Students Archieving Mastery
45% (15 Students)	33% (11 Students)	0%	Students Not Archieving Mastery

Source: Comparison of Scores from the Pre-Cycle, Cycle I, and Cycle II

The table clearly demonstrates a consistent and significant improvement in students' learning outcomes across all stages. The percentage of mastery increased progressively from 55% in the pre-cycle to 67% in Cycle I, and finally reached 100% in Cycle II. Similarly, the mean score improved steadily, indicating enhanced overall academic performance. To provide a clearer visualization of this trend, the following figure illustrates the improvement in students' learning outcomes.

**Figure 2.** Diagram of Students' Learning Outcomes from the Pre-Cycle to Cycle II

The figure highlights a consistent upward trend in students' learning outcomes across the research cycles. This trend indicates that the implementation of the Differentiated Learning Method had a substantial positive impact on students' academic achievement.

In Cycle II, learning activities were conducted with 33 students focusing on the topic "Ananiyah (Selfishness) and Its Negative Impacts." The results showed a significant improvement, with all students achieving mastery. Compared to Cycle I, where 67% of students achieved mastery, Cycle II demonstrated a substantial increase to 100%, indicating that all students successfully met the KKTP. In addition, teacher performance improved significantly, reaching the "Very Good" category, while student participation increased markedly. Students became more actively involved in discussions, showed greater enthusiasm, and demonstrated improved confidence in expressing their opinions.

Overall, the results indicate that the implementation of the Differentiated Learning Method was highly effective in improving students' learning outcomes, enhancing teacher performance, and increasing student engagement. The approach created a more interactive, inclusive, and student-centered learning environment, enabling students to better understand the learning material and actively participate in the learning process.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that students' learning outcomes in Aqidah Akhlak prior to the implementation of differentiated instruction were relatively low, with only 18 students (55%) achieving mastery above the minimum mastery criterion (KKTP), while 15 students (45%) did not meet the required standard. This condition indicates that the learning process had not yet effectively facilitated students' understanding, particularly in grasping abstract religious concepts. Based on classroom observations, this limitation was closely associated with the dominance of conventional teaching methods, particularly the lecture approach, which positioned students as passive recipients of information. Such conditions led to low engagement, reduced participation, and a lack of interaction during the learning process, ultimately affecting students' motivation and learning outcomes. This finding is consistent with previous studies indicating that teacher-centered learning tends to limit student involvement and reduce learning effectiveness, especially in subjects requiring critical thinking and value internalization (Sato et al., 2023; Sökmen, 2021; Widiani & Istiqomah, 2021). Furthermore, in the context of Islamic education, ineffective instructional approaches may hinder the development of students' character and moral understanding, which are central objectives of Aqidah Akhlak learning (Alhamuddin et al., 2022; Irham et al., 2024; Majid, 2020). Therefore, the need for more adaptive and student-centered learning strategies becomes essential.

The implementation of differentiated instruction in this study demonstrates a significant transformation in both teacher performance and student engagement throughout the learning cycles. Teacher activity improved from 77.5% in Cycle I (categorized as "Good") to 88.75% in Cycle II (categorized as "Very Good"), indicating a substantial enhancement in instructional quality. This improvement reflects the teacher's ability to design and implement more flexible learning strategies that accommodate students' diverse needs, including differences in readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Such findings align with the theoretical framework of differentiated instruction, which emphasizes the importance of adapting content, process, and product to support effective learning (Subban, 2022; Tomlinson et al., 2021). Moreover, the increase in teacher performance suggests that continuous reflection and evaluation within the Classroom Action Research (CAR) cycles contribute significantly to improving instructional practices. This is in line with previous studies indicating that reflective teaching practices can enhance instructional effectiveness and promote more meaningful learning experiences (Hidayat, 2024; Suprayogi et al., 2022).

In addition to improvements in teacher performance, student engagement also increased significantly during the implementation of differentiated instruction. Students became more active, participated more confidently in discussions, and showed greater interest in completing learning tasks. This shift from passive to active learning behavior indicates that differentiated instruction successfully created a more interactive and inclusive learning environment. These findings support previous research demonstrating that differentiated instruction can enhance student participation and engagement by providing learning experiences that are tailored to individual needs (Deunk et al., 2018; Nisa et al., 2023; Zitha et al., 2023). Furthermore, the increased engagement observed in this study can be linked to the principles of student-centered learning promoted in the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes active student involvement and flexible instructional design (AM et al., 2023a; Fauzia & Ramadan, 2023). In the context of Aqidah Akhlak learning, this active engagement is particularly important as it facilitates deeper understanding and internalization of moral and religious values (Anida et al., 2023; Sukidal et al., 2022).

The most significant finding of this study is the substantial improvement in students' learning outcomes following the implementation of differentiated instruction. The percentage of students achieving mastery increased from 55% in the pre-cycle to 67% in Cycle I and reached 100% in Cycle II, indicating that all students successfully met the minimum mastery criterion. In addition, the average score improved significantly from 70 in Cycle I to 86.52 in Cycle II, demonstrating a notable enhancement in students' cognitive achievement. This result confirms that differentiated instruction is effective in addressing learning disparities and supporting students in achieving optimal learning outcomes. These findings are consistent with previous studies showing that differentiated instruction can significantly improve academic achievement by accommodating diverse student characteristics and providing appropriate learning support (AM et al., 2023b; Anggoro et al., 2024; Dinana et al., 2024; Hakim & Mu'id, 2024).

More importantly, the improvement in learning outcomes observed in this study is not only related to cognitive achievement but also reflects a deeper understanding of the learning material. Differentiated instruction enables teachers to present learning content in various ways, allowing students to engage with the material according to their learning preferences. This approach is particularly effective in Aqidah Akhlak learning, where abstract concepts often require contextual and reflective understanding. Previous research has highlighted that differentiated instruction can reduce misconceptions and improve conceptual understanding by providing meaningful and personalized learning experiences (Komara & Sukandar, 2025; Smale-Jacobse et al., 2023; Wachidah et al., 2025). In addition, the flexibility offered by differentiated instruction supports the development of higher-order thinking skills, which are essential for understanding complex and abstract concepts in religious education (Kwangmuang et al., 2021; Mustamir, 2025).

Overall, the findings of this study provide strong empirical evidence that differentiated instruction is an effective approach to improving both learning outcomes and student engagement in Aqidah Akhlak learning. The results also support the broader educational perspective that adaptive and student-centered learning strategies are essential for addressing student diversity and enhancing the quality of education. This is further reinforced by the concept of visible learning, which emphasizes the importance of instructional strategies that actively involve students and provide clear learning impact (Roşu & Ionescu, 2024). Therefore, the implementation of differentiated instruction not only addresses the gap identified in the introduction but also contributes to the development of more effective and inclusive learning practices in Islamic education contexts, particularly at the MTs level (Maarif et al., 2022; Sambaga, 2024).

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, the implementation of differentiated instruction in Aqidah Akhlak learning has been proven to effectively improve students' learning outcomes and engagement, as indicated by the increase in the percentage of students achieving the minimum mastery criterion (KKTP) from 55% in the pre-cycle stage to 67% in Cycle I and reaching 100% in Cycle II. The application of differentiated instruction, which involves the adaptation of content, process, and product, successfully enhanced students' participation, motivation, and active involvement during the learning process, enabling them to better understand both conceptual and abstract material. These results confirm that differentiated instruction is an effective and relevant approach for Aqidah Akhlak learning, particularly within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes student-centered learning. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers adopt differentiated instructional strategies to create more inclusive, adaptive, and engaging learning environments, while future research is encouraged to examine the implementation of this approach in broader Islamic education contexts and across different educational levels to strengthen its generalizability and long-term impact on students' cognitive and character development.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

DA and H conceived and designed the research. DA collected the data and conducted the classroom implementation. H analyzed the learning outcomes and supervised the study. DA and H wrote and reviewed the final manuscript.

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