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IMPLEMENTATION OF DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION IN ADDRESSING READING ABILITY DISPARITIES AMONG FIRST-GRADE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS: A Study on Literacy Transition from Early Childhood Education to Elementary School

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Abstract. The disparity in reading ability among first-grade elementary school students results from the wide variation in children's literacy readiness upon entering primary education, as reflected in four categories of initial reading ability found within a single class: not yet recognizing letters, recognizing letters but unable to read, beginning to read words, and reading fluently. This study employs Carol Ann Tomlinson's Differentiated Instruction Theory as the primary framework for analyzing how first-grade teachers implement strategies to address this gap, while also drawing on Vygotsky's scaffolding theory and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to deepen the discussion. The study aims to: (1) describe the implementation of differentiated instruction applied by first-grade teachers; (2) identify the forms of content, process, and product differentiation used; and (3) explain the supporting and inhibiting factors of its implementation, including their relationship to children's literacy transition from early childhood education to elementary school. The study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study design, using in-depth interviews with first-grade and kindergarten teachers, classroom observation, and documentation study, analyzed through the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldāna. The results show that teachers implement initial-ability mapping, flexible student grouping, and the provision of tiered instructional materials as forms of content differentiation, along with individual assistance and peer tutoring as forms of process differentiation, while product differentiation was not explicitly identified in the research data. Supporting factors for implementation include school policies that prioritize foundational literacy and the availability of instructional media, while the main inhibiting factors include curriculum demands emphasizing comprehension and critical thinking from the first grade onward, limited time for individual assistance, dependence on parental cooperation, and weak coordination between kindergartens and elementary schools regarding children's literacy-readiness standards. The study concludes that differentiated instruction is an effective mitigation strategy at the classroom level, but its sustainability requires stronger, more integrated early-childhood-to-elementary transition policies.

Keywords: first-grade elementary school; reading ability; learning-readiness disparity; early literacy; differentiated instruction.

INTRODUCTION

Reading ability is a foundational skill that determines students' learning success across nearly all subjects, particularly in the early grades of elementary school. During the transition from early childhood education (kindergarten) to first grade, children face a significant shift in learning demands: from play-based learning oriented toward holistic developmental stimulation to formal instruction that requires a more structured mastery of literacy. A review of the Merdeka Curriculum content shows that reading literacy has been integrated across various subjects from the early grades of elementary school, requiring students not only to read technically but also to understand and process information from the texts they read [1]. This sharp shift in expectations places students who lack adequate literacy readiness at risk of falling behind from their very first day of school.

Field conditions show that the literacy readiness of students newly entering first grade is highly heterogeneous. Preliminary interviews with first-grade teachers confirm at least four categories of initial reading ability found within a single class: students who do not yet recognize letter sounds or shapes at all, students who recognize letters but cannot yet read, students who are beginning to read words, and students who have been reading fluently since their first day of school. Some cases were even reported in which students needed up to a full year to attain adequate reading ability. This finding is consistent with research at

higher grade levels, which shows that without adjustments to instructional strategy, most students can fail to comprehend reading content even though they are technically classified as able to read [2]. Such disparities in initial ability, if not addressed through adaptive instructional strategies, risk widening academic achievement gaps and placing an ongoing burden on students' learning process.

This problem is compounded by the lack of alignment in literacy-learning orientation between kindergarten and elementary school, as well as the limited communication bridge between the two. Several studies on the early-childhood-to-elementary transition in Indonesia have found that many parents and teachers still do not understand the existence of transition policies emphasizing children's holistic readiness, and tend to equate the success of early childhood education solely with calistung skills reading, writing, and arithmetic [3]. In fact, the process of preparing children for elementary school ideally depends on close involvement and communication among the child, family, early-childhood institutions, and elementary schools as a unified transition ecosystem [4]. In practice, kindergarten teachers tend to interpret children's readiness for elementary school holistically encompassing age, emotional maturity, and independence and emphasize letter recognition through play-based activities without a formal target of reading fluency before graduation. On the other hand, the expectations of some elementary schools, including first-grade teachers, demand that incoming students already possess basic reading ability, often forcing kindergartens to add extra learning hours and provide supplementary preparatory instruction outside the core curriculum. As a result, the burden of bridging this gap ultimately falls largely on first-grade teachers, who must manage classes with widely varying reading abilities while still being required to meet established curriculum targets.

Faced with this situation, teachers are required to design and implement instructional strategies that deliberately accommodate differences in learning readiness (*readiness*), interest, and learning profile of every student within the same class. One pedagogical framework relevant to addressing this challenge is differentiated instruction (*differentiated instruction*) developed by Carol Ann Tomlinson, which emphasizes adjusting the content, process, and product of learning based on students' differing levels of readiness, interest, and learning profile [5]. This approach has been empirically shown to improve elementary school students' reading comprehension literacy through the mapping of reading readiness and the provision of tiered reading materials suited to each student's ability [2]. Nevertheless, most studies on differentiated instruction in the context of literacy have focused on upper grades (grades IV-VI), while research specifically examining its implementation in addressing reading ability disparities in first grade—particularly research explicitly linked to the dynamics of literacy transition from early childhood education to elementary school—remains relatively limited. This gap at the point of transition underlies the urgency of the present study.

Based on the description above, this study aims to: (1) describe the implementation of differentiated instructional strategies applied by first-grade teachers in addressing students' reading ability disparities; (2) identify the forms of content, process, and product differentiation used by teachers in reading instruction for students with differing levels of readiness; and (3) analyze the supporting and inhibiting factors in the implementation of this differentiated instruction, including their relationship to the dynamics of children's literacy transition from early childhood education to elementary school.

METHODS

Research Design and Approach

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive method to provide an in-depth account of how first-grade elementary school teachers implement differentiated instruction to address students' reading ability disparities during the transition from early childhood education to elementary school. A qualitative approach was chosen because the phenomena under study instructional strategy, teachers' pedagogical decision-making processes, and the dynamics of interaction among teachers, students, and parents are contextual in nature and cannot be reduced to numerical data alone, thus requiring a holistic understanding grounded in the direct experience of the actors involved. This study uses a case study design, with a first-grade elementary school class as the primary unit of analysis.

Research Location and Time

This study was conducted at SD Unggulan Muhammadiyah Lemahdadi, selected on the consideration that the school has first-grade students with heterogeneous characteristics in terms of pre-school educational background (regular kindergarten as well as supplementary tutoring/BIMBA), making it relevant for examining the implementation of differentiated instruction. As comparative data from the preceding educational level, the study also involved PAUD Uwais Al Qarni to obtain a picture of the early literacy learning process before students enter elementary school. Data collection was carried out from 1 February to 6 August 2026.

Research Subjects and Data Sources

The research subjects consisted of two main groups of informants. First, first-grade elementary school teachers who directly designed and implemented differentiated instructional strategies to address students' reading ability gaps. Second, kindergarten/early-childhood teachers as supporting informants, providing insight into the process of introducing early literacy and perceptions of children's readiness for elementary school. Subjects were selected using purposive sampling, based on the consideration that informants had direct teaching experience in classes with varying levels of student reading ability. In addition to data from these two groups of informants, the study also used instructional documents (teaching modules, tiered reading materials, and initial reading assessment results) as supporting data sources.

Data Collection Procedure

Classroom Observation

Observations were conducted using a passive-participant approach in the first-grade classroom during reading instruction, to directly observe the forms of content, process, and product differentiation applied by the teacher, including student grouping, the use of tiered reading materials, and teacher–student interactions involving students with differing reading abilities. Observations were conducted over three sessions.

In-Depth Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with first-grade and kindergarten/early-childhood teachers to gather information on differentiated instructional strategies, the mapping of students' initial abilities, challenges encountered, and the supporting and inhibiting factors of implementation. The interview guide was developed based on Tomlinson's indicators of content, process, and product differentiation [5], [6].

Documentation Study

Instructional documents including teaching modules, tiered reading materials, initial reading assessment results, and photographs of learning activities were collected as supplementary data to strengthen and triangulate the findings from observations and interviews.

Data Analysis Technique

Data were analyzed using the interactive analysis model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldāna, which consists of three stages: (1) data reduction the process of selecting, simplifying, and focusing data from observations, interviews, and documentation in accordance with the research focus; (2) data display organizing data into descriptive narrative form and thematic matrices to facilitate the identification of patterns of content, process, and product differentiation; and (3) conclusion drawing and verification an ongoing process of data interpretation until credible findings are obtained [7]. Data validity was established through source triangulation comparing the results of interviews with first-grade teachers and kindergarten teachers, classroom observation results, and instructional documents to ensure the consistency and validity of the research findings [8].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Disparities in First-Grade Students' Initial Reading Ability

Interview data with first-grade teachers reveal that the initial reading ability of students newly entering elementary school is highly heterogeneous and can be mapped into four achievement categories: (1) students who do not yet recognize letter sounds or shapes at all; (2) students who recognize letters but cannot yet read; (3) students who are beginning to read at the word level; and (4) students who have been reading fluently since their first day of school. Teachers explained that this variation correlates strongly with the pre-school educational pathway children have followed: students who attended supplementary tutoring (BIMBA) outside of kindergarten showed considerably faster literacy acceleration than students who only attended regular kindergarten, which places greater curricular emphasis on social development than on formal literacy. This gap is even reflected in the time required for achievement: some students needed up to a full year to attain adequate reading ability, while others were already reading fluently from the start of school. This finding confirms that a first-grade class, in practice, encompasses an extremely wide range of literacy readiness, meaning that a uniform instructional approach (*one-size-fits-all*) risks being ineffective for most of the students within it.

Initial-Ability Mapping and Flexible Student Grouping

As an initial step in implementing differentiated instruction, first-grade teachers carried out initial reading-ability mapping through three complementary methods: an initial assessment prepared by the school, direct observation of student behavior during play or literacy-based classroom activities, and communication with parents regarding their child's ability prior to entering school. The results of this mapping were used to group students flexibly and dynamically not based on fixed ability-tracked groups, but on levels of reading

achievement that can change as students develop. This approach is consistent with Tomlinson's core idea of differentiation, which asserts that grouping within a differentiated classroom must be purposeful and continually adjusted to students' current learning readiness [4], [5], [6], [8], [9], [10]

Content Differentiation: Tiered Instructional Materials

First-grade teachers consistently postponed the use of standard textbooks during the first semester, replacing them with tiered literacy (calistung) books consisting of four difficulty levels. Students who could already read fluently were given level-three or level-four books, while students who did not yet recognize letters started from level-one books, beginning with the introduction of vowels and consonants before progressing to word mastery. This form of content differentiation is consistent with empirical findings at higher grade levels, which show that mapping students' reading levels and providing tiered reading materials significantly improves reading comprehension [2]. The use of tiered instructional materials also shows that content differentiation in this study did not merely involve giving students different materials, but rather adjusting the complexity of the materials to students' actual reading ability. Students who did not yet recognize letters required materials focused on symbol and sound recognition, while students who could already read words required materials that gradually built toward fluency and comprehension. Differentiated materials can thus be viewed as an effort to provide different *learning pathway* pathways toward increasingly complex literacy goals. [11] Table 1 summarizes the forms of differentiation identified across all interview data.

Table 1. Forms of Content, Process, and Product Differentiation in First-Grade Reading Instruction

Differentiation Aspect	Form of Implementation	Source of Finding
Content	Tiered literacy books (levels 1–4) adjusted to students' achievement	First-grade teacher interview
Process	Routine morning reading sessions, intensive repetition for beginner students, peer tutoring, individual assistance	First-grade teacher interview
Process	Phoneme introduction through songs and letter-block games from the kindergarten level	Kindergarten teacher interview
Product	Tiered achievement targets: reading words vs. reading fluently, according to the book level used	First-grade teacher interview
Learning Environment	Availability of storybooks, literacy games, and audiovisual media in the classroom	First-grade teacher interview

Process Differentiation: Individual Assistance and Peer Tutoring

Process differentiation is reflected in a number of consistent practices among first-grade teachers: setting aside dedicated time each morning before lessons begin for reading sessions, appointing students who already read fluently as tutors for classmates who do not, and intensively repeating material with students starting entirely from scratch until they master basic reading ability. Data from kindergarten teachers reinforce this picture from the preceding level: letter-sound (phoneme) introduction is carried out through songs and repetition packaged as games, without requiring children to read formally. Kindergarten teachers also apply a simple form of differentiation by providing additional stimulation for children who are slower to recognize letters, through the same singing and play activities but with greater intensity and repetition. This indicates that process-differentiation practices actually begin as early as the kindergarten level, although they are not yet carried out systematically and are not explicitly linked to elementary teachers' strategies at the next level. [12] This pattern is consistent with recent systematic reviews showing that differentiation strategies in elementary reading instruction can be implemented through *tiered instruction*, *flexible grouping*, and the adjustment of instructional processes based on student needs. [13]

Root Cause of Disparity: The Gap in Literacy-Learning Orientation between Kindergarten and Elementary School

Another important finding of this study is the gap in literacy-learning orientation between kindergarten and elementary school, which constitutes one of the root causes of first-grade students' reading ability disparities. Kindergarten teachers explicitly state that a child's readiness for elementary school is not measured by reading ability alone, but also by age (ideally around seven years old), maturity, and independence; learning in kindergarten is deliberately not directed toward the formal target of 'reading fluently before graduation,' but rather toward developmental stimulation through play. In contrast, first-grade teachers hold the view that ideally, kindergarten graduates should already be able to read, so that they are ready for instruction that requires students to comprehend reading content from the very start of first grade, in line with the demands of the Merdeka Curriculum [14]. This difference in orientation is compounded by the absence of routine communication or coordination between kindergartens and elementary schools regarding jointly agreed literacy-readiness standards a condition also confirmed by other research on parents' and teachers' perceptions of the early-childhood-to-elementary transition program in Indonesia, which found that the misconception equating school readiness solely with calistung ability is still widespread among both parents and teachers at both levels [3], [15]. In response to parental pressure for children to read fluently before graduating from kindergarten, kindergartens even extended learning hours from 07:00 10:00 to 07:00–

11:00 in the form of additional preparatory activities ahead of elementary school an indication that the burden of bridging the literacy gap is ultimately borne separately and uncoordinatedly by the two educational levels. This condition has implications for first-grade instruction. When children enter elementary school with widely varying literacy experiences and there is no adequate mechanism for exchanging information between kindergarten and elementary school, first-grade teachers must conduct fresh assessments and design instructional strategies for an extremely wide range of abilities. As a result, differentiated instruction becomes increasingly important as a classroom-level adaptation mechanism. However, if differentiation is used merely to address the impact of disparity after children have entered elementary school, the burden of adjustment continues to fall mainly on first-grade teachers. **The implementation of the early-childhood-to-elementary transition, meanwhile, needs to be supported by initial assessment and cross-level collaboration so that children's foundational abilities can be built continuously from early childhood education through elementary school.**[11], [15]

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in the Implementation of Differentiated Instruction

Supporting factors for the implementation of differentiated instruction in first grade include: (1) foundation/school policies that explicitly prioritize calistung ability over standard textbook achievement during the early semester; (2) the availability of diverse instructional media in the classroom, including storybooks, literacy games, and audiovisual media; and (3) the existence of a tiered book system already structured from level one to level four. Meanwhile, the inhibiting factors identified include: (1) the cognitive load and demands of the Merdeka Curriculum, which require first-grade students not only to read but also to comprehend and think critically, leaving teachers overwhelmed by the extremely wide range of abilities within a single class; (2) insufficient time for additional assistance outside regular school hours; (3) dependence on parental cooperation in supporting children's learning at home, which cannot always be relied upon, particularly regarding supervision of device use, which also affects children's literacy development and social skills; and (4) the absence of a formal transition and communication mechanism between kindergartens and elementary schools regarding students' reading-readiness standards.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that the implementation of differentiated instruction by first-grade teachers does not fully represent a complete and systematic application of Tomlinson's differentiation model with equally strong content, process, and product dimensions, but rather resembles a contextual adaptation arising from practical needs in the field. The content dimension (tiered instructional materials) and process dimension (individual assistance, peer tutoring, routine reading sessions) appear to be applied consistently and deliberately, consistent with Tomlinson's principle that teachers need to proactively adjust materials and instructional strategies based on each student's readiness, interest, and learning profile [11] [6] In contrast, the product dimension variation in the form of assessment or learning output according to student achievement was not explicitly identified in the interview data, so this finding should be interpreted cautiously and explored further through direct observation of classroom assessment practices.

The practice of peer tutoring and intensive assistance for students 'starting from scratch' can be understood through the lens of Vygotsky's scaffolding theory, which asserts that optimal learning achievement occurs when students receive help from a more competent adult or peer, within a range referred to as the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD) the distance between what a student can accomplish independently and what they can achieve with the help of others [16]. Appointing students who already read fluently as tutors for their peers structurally places lagging students in a position to receive support from a more capable peer, while also giving the student tutors an opportunity to deepen their own understanding through the process of re-teaching. The effectiveness of this strategy depends heavily on how teachers determine pairings or groups, provide guidance to tutors, supply appropriate reading materials, and carry out monitoring and feedback.[17] Chang and Mauer emphasize that *cross-age tutoring* must be implemented in a structured manner, including through tutor preparation, appropriate pair selection, the use of suitable reading strategies, and teacher supervision throughout the tutoring process.[18], [19]. Thus, the peer-tutoring strategy identified in this study is not merely a practical solution to teachers' time constraints, but is also consistent with well-established socio-constructivist learning principles.

On the other hand, the kindergarten teachers' approach to introducing letter sounds (phonemes) through songs and games, without requiring children to read formally, is consistent with the findings of the *National Reading Panel* that phonemic-awareness instruction (*phonemic awareness*) is in fact most effective when delivered to preschool and early-grade children in an engaging, imaginative, and entertaining format, rather than through rigid formal instruction. This kind of enjoyable phonemic-awareness instruction is an important foundation that should serve as a natural bridge toward formal reading ability in elementary school. However, the findings of this study show that this foundation has not been systematically followed up at the elementary

level, owing to the absence of a mechanism for transferring information about each child's phonemic achievement from kindergarten teachers to first-grade teachers.

This lack of coordination between kindergarten and elementary school can be understood through Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems framework, particularly at the mesosystem level the web of relationships and communication between microsystems (in this case, the kindergarten and elementary-school environments) that directly influences child development [10] [20]. The weak mesosystem between kindergarten and elementary school in this study is clearly evident in the absence of a shared agreement on literacy-readiness standards, causing each level to formulate its own response separately: kindergartens extend learning hours in response to parental pressure, while elementary schools rely on first-grade teachers' differentiation strategies as a patchwork classroom solution. This condition reinforces the arguments of earlier studies on the early-childhood-to-elementary transition in Indonesia, which consistently found that misconceptions about school readiness and weak inter-level synergy constitute a more fundamental structural barrier than mere classroom teaching-method issues [2][15].

This study thus confirms that first-grade elementary students' reading ability disparity cannot be understood merely as an internal classroom pedagogical issue, but also as a structural issue at the level of inter-educational-level transition. The differentiated instruction implemented by first-grade teachers has proven to function as an effective mitigation strategy at the classroom level consistent with empirical evidence of improved reading literacy through similar approaches at other grade levels but its long-term sustainability and effectiveness would be far more optimal if supported by a strengthened kindergarten–elementary mesosystem through integrated transition policies, rather than relying solely on the individual adaptive capacity of first-grade teachers [2].

CONCLUSION

This study draws three main conclusions in line with its stated objectives. First, first-grade teachers' implementation of differentiated instruction to address reading ability disparities was carried out through three interrelated steps: mapping initial reading ability through assessment, observation, and communication with parents; flexibly grouping students based on readiness levels that can change over time; and postponing the use of formal textbooks in the early semester to prioritize the mastery of basic literacy. Second, content differentiation was manifested in the form of tiered calistung materials from level one to level four; process differentiation was manifested through routine reading sessions, individual assistance for lagging students, and the use of peer tutoring as a form of scaffolding; while product differentiation was not explicitly identified in the research data and requires further investigation. Third, supporting factors for implementation include school policies that prioritize foundational literacy and the availability of tiered media and instructional materials, while the main inhibiting factors include the burden of curriculum demands requiring comprehension and critical thinking from first grade onward, limited time for assistance, dependence on parental cooperation, and most fundamentally the absence of formal coordination between kindergartens and elementary schools regarding children's literacy-readiness standards.

These findings confirm that differentiated instruction is an effective and practical pedagogical approach as a classroom-level mitigation strategy for addressing reading ability disparities in the early grades of elementary school. However, this study also shows that the root of this disparity is not entirely pedagogical-internal in nature, but is also shaped by the weak mesosystem between kindergarten and elementary school two microsystems that should be interconnected in supporting children's literacy development. Therefore, the effectiveness and sustainability of differentiated instruction in first grade would be further optimized by strengthening integrated early-childhood-to-elementary transition policies, including shared agreements on literacy-readiness standards and a mechanism for transferring information on children's achievement from kindergarten teachers to first-grade teachers.

This study has limitations that warrant attention in future research. The research data were drawn from interviews at a single elementary school and a single kindergarten, so the findings cannot yet be broadly generalized to school contexts with different socio-economic characteristics or curriculum policies. In addition, empirical evidence regarding the product-differentiation dimension remains limited, as this study did not involve direct observation of classroom assessment practices or an in-depth analysis of student learning-outcome documents. Future research is recommended to supplement the data through more systematic classroom observation and analysis of instructional documents, to expand the scope of research subjects to several schools with different backgrounds, and to specifically examine models of early-childhood-to-elementary transition communication and coordination that could be replicated as policy at the institutional or regional level..

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